Working Together
Resource Teachers and Paraeducators

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ABSTRACT

Paraeducators have become vital contributors to service delivery in special education programs. The duties of paraeducators and their performance of those duties are much discussed but not well documented. The supervision of paraeducators falls largely on the shoulders of special education teachers who are relatively unprepared to assume this supervisory role. This study served as an initial exploration into (a) the relationship between 18 matched pairs of teachers and paraeducators assigned to resource programs, (b) the duties that these paraeducators performed, (c) their preparation for the job, (d) the quality of their work, and (e) the thinking of the teachers who held supervisory responsibility. Results indicated that the paraeducators served primarily in instructional roles and that their performance was satisfactory. Teachers were divided in their beliefs about the fundamental role of paraeducators—whether they were assistants to the teacher or assistants to the student. Teachers said, in many different ways, that they were reluctant to provide supervision, and preferred to think of paraeducators as peers rather than supervisees.

HALF A MILLION PEOPLE WORK IN NONPROFESsional instructional roles in U.S. schools (Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996; Pickett, 1996; U.S. Department of Education, 1987). Specific titles for nonprofessional instructional personnel include *teacher aide, instructional assistant,* and *paraprofessional.* Pickett (1989) preferred the term *paraeducator,* just as their counterparts in law and medicine are designated paralegal and paramedic. Gerlach (1994) reported that more than 15 different titles were used in Washington state. Hofmeister (1993) preferred instructional assistant as the term that best described their duties. Jones and Bender (1993)

observed that the literature generally fails to distinguish among job titles. In this article, I use various terms interchangeably, always referring to noncertified personnel who perform instructional tasks.

The literature from 1962 through 1997 has included a variety of non–data-based articles such as (a) opinion pieces about the roles of paraeducators (e.g., Miramontes, 1990), (b) advice-to-teacher articles regarding paraeducators (e.g., Boomer, 1977, 1980, 1982; Courson & Heward, 1988; McKenzie & Houk, 1986), and (c) program descriptions (e.g. Blalock, Rivera, Andreson, & Kottler, 1992; Kaplan, 1977, 1980; Wallace, 1996). Reports of training needs assessment surveys have also appeared (Passaro, Pickett, Latham, & HongBo, 1991; Pearman, Suhr, & Gibson, 1993). Survey research has documented attitudes and opinions about paraeducator roles, training needs, and supervisor training needs (e.g., Escudero & Sears, 1982; Frith & Lindsey, 1982; Hennike & Taylor, 1973), and some survey research has established competencies required for particular job titles and settings (DeFur & Taymans, 1995). There are only a few reviews of the literature on paraprofessionals (Hofmeister, 1993; Jones & Bender, 1993; Salzberg & Morgan, 1995).

Paraeducators once functioned largely in clerical roles (Turney, 1962) and in some places this clerical emphasis persists (Lamont & Hill, 1991). However, many contemporary authors agree that there has been a shift in the paraprofessional's role to include greater responsibility for instruction (Miramontes, 1990; Pickett, 1996; Stahl & Lorenz, 1995). Some contend that the paraeducator is vital to the delivery of services to students in special education programs, early childhood programs, programs for students with limited English proficiency, and Title I programs (Innocenti, 1993; Miramontes,

1990; Pickett, Vasa, & Steckelberg, 1993; Striffler, 1993). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997 have placed a renewed focus on the use and preparation of paraprofessional personnel throughout parts B, C and D of the act. Part B, section 612 (a)(15) allows paraprofessionals who are adequately trained and supervised to assist in the delivery of special education and related services. Part C, section 635 (a)(8) specifies that paraprofessionals must be trained, and part D, section 653 (c)(3)(D) requires states to ensure that paraprofessional personnel have the necessary skills and knowledge (National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 1997).

The 1997 IDEA Amendments provide the strongest statutory language regarding paraprofessionals so far, but the training of paraprofessionals has concerned special education program administrators for some time. Training needs assessments have produced descriptive statistics showing the most desired training topics (Evans & Evans, 1986; Passaro et al., 1991; Pearman et al., 1993; Pickett, 1989; Vasa, Steckelberg, & Ulrich-Ronning, 1983). 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 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.

Issues associated with paraeducator effectiveness have been considered. In a survey of 288 Iowa teachers, Frank, Keith, and Steil (1988) found that teachers were generally satisfied with the performance of paraeducators. Others have claimed that there is no documentation in the literature that demonstrates that paraeducators enhance student performance (Jones & Bender, 1993; Rubin, 1994). However, Hofmeister (1993), in a review of the literature on nonprofessional teaching assistants, cited Ellson (1975) regarding the efficacy of nonprofessional personnel working with children with disabilities. Ellson reported that he had located more than 20 comparative studies in which the presence of nonprofessional teaching assistants resulted in an improvement factor of 2 or more compared to conventional teaching. Although the definition of improvement factor was not clear from this report, Ellson specified that in each study some important teaching function was delegated to someone other than the teacher. Another early synthesis of research on the use of nonprofessional personnel in special education programs for children with severe disabilities by Reid and Johnston (1978) included a warning:

> Using nonskilled assistants, however well-meaning they may be, is not sound if we are to meet our obligation to provide educational and

developmental programming. . . . The answer, then, is the provision of paraprofessional personnel who have been trained in the methodology of learning and management. (p. 84)

Cohen, Kulik, and Kulik (1982) in their synthesis of the literature on tutoring found a positive relationship between student achievement and the level of training of the nonprofessionals serving as tutors. Studies conducted in residential facilities have explored the level of training and supervision required for paraprofessional staff to perform certain narrowly defined tasks (e.g., Gladstone & Spencer, 1977; Reinoehl & Halle, 1994). For example, Reinoehl and Halle taught 6 paraprofessionals to use certain instructional techniques for teaching social greetings to clients. They concluded that training alone was insufficient and that close monitoring was necessary for paraprofessionals to perform appropriately.

According to Vasa et al. (1983), teachers hold de facto supervisory responsibility for paraeducators who work in special education programs, but the majority of special education teachers have had no formal preparation for a supervisory role (Lindeman & Beegle, 1988; Logue, 1993; May & Marozas, 1986; Vasa et al., 1983). In an advice article, Boomer (1977) recommended that (a) the teacher and the paraeducator should meet at least weekly, (b) they should use a team approach, and (c) they should communicate quickly and effectively. Others have specified that teachers are ultimately responsible for the development and implementation of lesson plans (Boomer, 1980; Miramontes, 1990; Pickett et al., 1993). In one study, 297 Kansas teachers reported that they held planning meetings with paraeducators (Adams, 1991). Morgan (1997) found significant relationships between teachers' education levels and their perceived self-adequacy of supervising skills and between teachers' inservice training and their perceived self-adequacy of supervising skills.

METHOD

This pilot study explored these issues in greater depth with a small sample and examined the feasibility of gaining information about school-based practices through multiple data sources. It attempted to clarify teachers' perceptions of paraeducators' roles, preparation, and performance and to compare those perceptions to self-reports of paraeducators. It also intended to examine the nature of teacher–paraprofessional relationships as they worked together, as well as teachers' views of their own roles as supervisors. Five questions were formulated to guide the data collection and analysis.

1. What are the characteristics of the paraeducator–teacher working relationship?

2. What do paraeducators assigned to resource programs do on a weekly basis?

3. Have paraeducators been prepared to perform their assigned duties?

TABLE 1.   Education Levels and Prior Training of Teachers and Paraeducators

	Highest Formal Education Level			Paraprofessional Inservice	Teacher Inservice	On-the-Job Learning to Meet Obligations
	MA/MS	BA/BS	Some College			
Paraeducators (n = 18)	0	4	4	9	4	11
Teachers (n = 18)	16	2	0	0	6	18

4. Are paraeducators effective in the performance of their duties?

5. How do teachers think about their own supervision of paraeducators?

Participants

Eighteen matched pairs of teachers and paraeducators who worked together in resource programs in a single major urban school district participated in the study. The district served about 60,000 students and was divided into 10 high school articulation areas, each of which had a special education manager. These managers provided names of schools in which resource programs were located to which paraprofessionals were assigned. In total, 48 schools were recommended. I contacted the special education resource teachers in the recommended schools to introduce the study and to request their participation. Twenty-eight resource teachers initially agreed to participate. Two of the 28 teachers were unable to participate in the interview. After repeated visits and requests, 45 individuals (26 teachers and 19 paraprofessionals) returned complete, usable sets of materials. However, only 18 matched pairs of teachers and paraeducators remained; the remaining data were set aside. Every sector in the district was represented to attain good geographic representation. Participants who returned a full set of materials were awarded a small stipend.

Twelve teacher–paraeducator pairs worked in elementary schools, 3 in high schools, and 3 at middle schools. All but three participants (one teacher and two paraeducators) were women. The male teacher worked at a middle school, and the two male paraeducators worked in elementary schools.

Paraeducators reported a range of experience from 1 to 22 years, all of which had been gained in their current school district. Eight of the paraeducators had worked in other buildings, but none had worked in other school districts. The experience of these paraeducators was consistent with the widely held belief that paraeducators tend to work in their home neighborhood, and—if satisfied with their work conditions—tend to stay (Logue, 1993; Pickett, 1989).

Two thirds of the teachers reported 10 or more years of teaching experience, and thus may be considered highly experi-

TABLE 2.   Content of Paraeducator and Teacher Questionnaire Items

1. Frequency of formal, planned meeting or planning sessions.

2. Effectiveness of communications.

3. Paraprofessional use of *written* lesson plan.

4. Amount of detailed information contained in lesson plans.

5. Length of time working as a paraeducator/supervising paraeducators.

6. Education in preparation for working as a paraeducator/with a paraeducator.

7. Title of person that evaluates paraeducator performance.

8. Additional training desired by paraeducators/for paraeducators.

9. How well paraeducator skills are being used.

enced in their work with children. In contrast to the geographic permanence of the paraeducators, half the teachers had held previous positions in other districts and all the teachers had changed school assignments within the district. Five teachers were in their 1st year of supervising a paraeducator, whereas the others ranged from 2 to 9 years of supervising experience.

Table 1 shows the educational levels of teachers and paraprofessionals. None of the paraprofessionals held teaching certificates. Although 16 of the 18 teachers held master's degrees, all teachers reported that their preparation to supervise paraprofessionals developed primarily through on-the-job experience.

Data Collection and Instruments

Paraeducators contributed three types of information. First, they completed a brief questionnaire that covered all the topics relevant to the study. The items on the Paraeducator Questionnaire and the parallel Teacher Questionnaire are listed in Table 2. Wording of the questionnaires varied slightly to accommodate differences in perspective.

Activity		1/23 Mon	1/24 Tues.	1/25 Wed.	1/26 Thurs.	1/27 Fri	Total
Playground Supervision	Events	2					
	Time	40					
One-to-One Instruction	Events	4					
	Time	130					

FIGURE 1. Time/Activity Log example. Instructions: Record the number of specific events for each activity in the upper half of the box under the day. Record the time by rounding to the nearest 10-minute block in the lower half of the box. This example indicates that on Monday, January 23, the paraprofessional did playground supervision two times for a total of 40 minutes and completed four different events of one-to-one instruction for a total of 130 minutes.

Second, they completed a self-evaluation form, adapted from the work of Vasa et al. (1983). Finally, paraeducators charted their daily activities by 10-minute intervals for two 1-week periods, using an adaptation of the *Paraeducator Time and Activity Log* developed by Vasa et al. (1983). The log consisted of a grid alongside a list of 28 duties taken from the survey literature, with open lines for additional tasks to be written in (see Figure 1 for an example). Questionnaires, time–activity logs, and evaluation forms were hand-delivered by the researcher to the teams at their school buildings. At that time the researcher provided directions for the completion of the materials and responded to questions.

Teachers also provided three types of information. First, they responded to parallel questionnaire items. Second, teachers completed an evaluation of the paraeducators' performance, using a form parallel to the one paraeducators used for their own self-evaluation. Finally, I conducted personal interviews in the schools by appointment with the teachers. The interview was conducted in the teachers' classrooms and consisted of eight open-ended prompts regarding the assignment of duties to paraeducators, the teachers' notions about the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators, the teachers' perspectives on the preparation and performance of paraeducators,

and their own supervision of paraeducators. The interview prompts are listed in Table 3. At the end of each interview, teachers were invited to discuss the items on their questionnaires to add explanations or details. Interviews were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed. I also took notes during the interviews to record my perceptions of the tone and attitudes of the teachers.

RESULTS

Characteristics of the Paraeducator–Teacher Relationship

Four aspects of the working relationships between paraeducators and teachers were specifically examined: (a) the existence of written lesson plans, (b) the level of detail of the written plans, (c) the frequency of team meetings, and (d) the overall effectiveness of communication. Questions about these particular aspects of the paraeducator–teacher relationship were selected because each aspect either represented a recommendation to supervising teachers from the advice literature (Boomer, 1977, 1980, 1982; Frith & Lindsey, 1982; Pickett et al., 1993) or was implied in the definition of supervision (Adams, 1991). The full wording of these four questions from the Teacher Questionnaire and the Paraprofessional Questionnaire is shown in Table 4.

Written Lesson Plans. Boomer (1980) recommended that the teacher provide written lesson plans to the paraeducator. Lesson plans also are a clearly delineated part of the professional responsibility of the teacher (Pickett et al,. 1993). Written plans provide accountability within the team and to others outside the team. Seven teachers reported that they provided written plans for the paraeducator. However, 9 paraeducators reported that they worked from written plans. Two paraeducators added handwritten notes that said that they wrote their lesson plans themselves.

The 11 teachers who did not provide lesson plans indicated in the interview that they preferred to work with paraeducators who just "followed along." Several of them explained

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TABLE 3. Teacher Interview prompts

I feel that the main reason for having a paraeducator is . . .

I think the role of the paraeducator should be to . . .

I think that the most important thing my paraeducator does is . . .

I think that the least important thing my paraeducator does is . . .

If I had additional paraeducator time I would use it to . . .

I predict that my paraeducator's time–activity log will show that the majority of his or her time is spent in . . . because . . .

The tasks that I assign to my paraeducator are primarily of the following types . . .

The reason(s) I have him or her do those particular tasks is (are) . . .

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that they had so little planning time that writing plans for the paraeducator was an undue burden. One teacher commented, "I just follow along with what needs to be done and I expect her to do it, too." Only 1 teacher indicated that she provided daily plans to paraeducators.

Specificity of Plans. The specificity of written plans may also affect the communication of the team (Boomer, 1980). Four teachers and 6 paraeducators who used written plans said that the plans only provided the steps to follow, but didn't explain the purpose or goal of the lesson. Thus, even those teachers who made the effort to provide written plans may have been unwittingly undermining the potential effectiveness of the plans by failing to provide either enough information or the right information to the paraeducator.

Formal Sit-Down Meetings. Planning sessions or meetings are one tangible indicator of the working relationship between two people (Adams, 1991; Boomer, 1977). Conceivably, planning sessions could include stand-up, spur-of-the-moment conversations that occur in halls, restrooms, and cafeterias as well as more formal, systematic, sit-down meet-

ings. The data gathered in this study indicate that formal, sit-down, pre-planned meetings were the exception rather than the rule. Teachers' interview comments regarding sit-down meetings were consistent with the comments about writing lesson plans. Overall, they believed that there was no time to meet formally. Several teachers explained that paraprofessionals often arrived at the same time that students arrived at school or shortly thereafter, and that their workday ended when the students' day ended or earlier. Thus, no before-school or after-school times were available to meet. Planning times during the day often were filled with other high-priority tasks. None of the teachers indicated an unwillingness to meet, but none had thought about negotiating an individualized flexible schedule for the paraprofessional to arrange a before- or after-school meeting time.

Effectiveness of Communications. Teachers were a little less satisfied with the effectiveness of their communications than paraeducators were. Although all the paraeducators reported that their communication with teachers was very effective, 4 teachers perceived their communication with paraeducators as less effective. The 4 teachers who gave

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TABLE 4. Sample Paraeducator and Teacher Questionnaire Items

Questions for Paraprofessionals	Questions for Teachers
1. Do you follow a *written* lesson plan most of the time? Yes ____ No ____	1. Do you provide a written lesson plan for your paraprofessional to follow most of the time? Yes ____ No ____
2. If yes, how much detailed information does it typically give you? ____ It includes objectives, purposes of the lesson, detailed steps of what the student should be able to do, and how I should do it. ____ It gives the end goal for the student. ____ It gives the specifics of what I should do. ____ It is usually pretty vague, leaving most decisions up to me.	2. If yes, how much detailed information does it typically give him or her? ____ It includes objectives, purposes of the lesson, detailed steps of what the student should be able to do, and how the paraprofessional should do it. ____ It gives the end goal for the student. ____ It gives the specifics of what the paraprofessional should do. ____ It is usually pretty vague, leaving most decisions up to the paraprofessional.
3. How often do you have a formal, planning meeting or planning session with your supervising teacher? ____ Every day ____ 3–4 times per week ____ 1–2 times per week ____ Every other week ____ About once a month ____ Once in a while ____ We don't ever have formal, planned meetings	3. How often do you have a formal, planning meeting or planning session with the paraprofessional you supervise? ____ Every day ____ 3–4 times per week ____ 1–2 times per week ____ Every other week ____ About once a month ____ Once in a while ____ We don't ever have formal, planned meetings
4. How effective is your communication with your supervising teacher? ____ Very effective ____ Somewhat effective ____ Not very effective ____ Very poor	4. How effective is your communication with the paraprofessional you supervise? ____ Very effective ____ Somewhat effective ____ Not very effective ____ Very poor

lower ratings to their communication with paraeducators were among those who failed to provide written plans and never held formal, planned meetings.

Weekly Activities of Paraeducators Assigned to Resource Programs

Two information sources explored this question. First, quantitative information from the Time/Activity Log provided information about the amount of paraprofessional time spent in various duties. Second, teachers' interview statements confirmed the nature of paraprofessional duties and explained how the activities of the paraprofessionals were tied to teacher beliefs about the roles and responsibilities of the paraprofessionals in resource programs.

Time/Activity Log. The Time/Activity Log consisted of a grid in which paraeducators noted the number of events or instances when they engaged in a particular task, with just below the amount of time spent on the task, rounded to the nearest 10-minute interval. An example of a Time/Activity Log entry with the directions provided to paraeducators is shown in Figure 1. Table 5 lists the top ten activities in which paraeducators engaged.

The paraeducators worked an average of 5 hours and 54 minutes per day, 5 days per week, but their specific assignments ranged from 2 hours and 50 minutes per day to 7½ hours per day. Six paraeducators worked 5½ hours or less per day and had no lunch period. All others had lunch periods ranging from 22 minutes to 60 minutes. Ten paraeducators reported that they took no break during their working hours, 7 of them took a 15-minute break and 1 who worked a 7½ hour day took two 15-minute breaks. All paraprofessionals agreed that their activities were typical of the types of duties they normally performed.

The range of activities in which paraeducators engaged was great, in spite of the fact that all the paraeducators were assigned to similar settings. One-to-one instruction was common to all cases and accounted for about 5½ hours per week. Seventeen paraeducators provided small group instruction, accounting for over 5 hours per week. Eleven paraeducators documented an average of nearly 2 hours per week in large group instruction. Although 13 paraeducators reported engaging in the production of instructional materials, the amount of time spent on clerical tasks averaged less than 1 hour per week. These data are consistent with reports that paraeducators serve primarily in instructional capacities (Vasa et al., 1983; Harrington & Mitchelson, 1986).

Themes From Interviews. Interview transcriptions were searched for "patterned regularities in the data" as Wolcott (1994, p. 33) advised. As pattern groups (themes) emerged from the data, each theme was assigned a color. I considered each statement as a possible example of each theme and used highlighters to color-code the transcribed words. Some statements were identified as members of multiple pattern groups. After multiple readings, each statement was limited to membership in only one pattern group.

The strongest theme to emerge from the interview data was that the paraeducators provided a fundamental and crucial role in the delivery of instruction to students receiving special education services. Clearly, these participants held the firm conviction that the overarching purpose for having paraeducators in special education programs was to provide additional assistance in meeting the educational needs of their students. However, teachers approached this purpose from two distinct perspectives.

TABLE 5. Top Ten Activities Recorded

Activities	Events/week		Minutes/week		
	M	σ	M	σ	n
One-to-One Instruction	10.79	9.6	339.47	375.35	18
Small Group Instruction (2–4)	9.42	9.38	309.9	315.11	17
Large Group Instruction	4.42	6.06	114.58	161.72	11
Data Collection/Observation	2.26	4.16	66.53	143.61	7
Preparation/Planning	2.58	2.34	63.74	72.13	11
Typing/Reproducing Instructional Material	3.06	3.67	57.42	81.63	13
Playground/Hall/Lunch/Bus Supervision	1.9	3.07	53	84.79	8
Attend Meeting/Inservice	0.32	0.75	52.63	135.39	4
Behavior Management	2.37	4.39	47.16	138.07	6
Storytelling/Reading Aloud	2.32	4.28	35.16	79.41	8

One perspective framed the paraeducator as an *assistant to the student*. Typical statements that distinguished this perspective included "to work with kids," "to help the pupils meet their individual objectives and goals," and "to help the students by stepping in where I had to leave off." One teacher said the paraeducator's ideal role was "to be a helpmate to the kids."

The second approach framed the paraeducator as an *assistant to the teacher*. Comments that typified this angle included "to help me meet my students' needs" and "to help the teacher in any way." One teacher explained that the ideal paraeducator would "teach the kids exactly the way I want them to be taught, be patient, and get all the paperwork done. . . . To be able to fill in all the gaps . . . not necessarily the academic things." Another said, "Most of the paperwork has to be considered by me. Sometimes she does more individual instruction with the kids than I do."

Some teachers failed to differentiate the roles of highly educated teacher/supervisors and less educated paraeducators. One teacher identified the ideal paraeducator as a teammate:

> Ideally I think to have a paraeducator be a teammate and not somebody to work for somebody else. Somebody whom you could sit down with and discuss the day's activities and . . . discuss the different individual kids and their problems and what kinds of things we need to work on together as a team.

Another expressed a similar sentiment: "kind of like being a team teacher with me . . . helping me out as much as possible." One even minimized the importance of teacher preparation when describing the paraeducator role:

> Her job is to teach. That's how we use our paraeducators. Our paraeducators are teachers. They don't do any clerical work at all. We do all of that. So, a paraeducator would be like having another teacher in the room. Just because a paraeducator does not have a college degree and has not taken the dumb education courses that we all have to take does not mean that he or she cannot teach.

Another said, "I think the role of the paraeducator should be almost like a second teacher, in many ways. I think he or she should have the confidence, the ability to work with the students, to understand lessons, to understand sequencing of skills, and that sort of thing." Still another said that the ideal paraeducator's role was "to be a teacher when I'm not there, . . . to take the role of the teacher. My expectation is that she use that skill and adapt and use the best judgment. She's teaching where I've left off."

Only one teacher clearly distinguished between the teacher's role and that of the paraeducator:

> [The paraeducator] helps the students to meet their goals and objectives that have been written for them. Not necessarily directly involved with writing the goals, or finding the materials to meet the goals, but to help carry out the education plan that was written for them.

The issue of paperwork created some disequilibrium in the views of most of these teachers and was the most frequently mentioned task in response to the "'least important thing" prompt. All but 4 teachers initially indicated that they did not ask the paraeducator to do paperwork or clerical tasks. Nearly all of those teachers who claimed that paperwork was the least important part of the paraprofessional's role hedged on the issue later in the interview by adding that whenever the paraeducator could be spared from instructional tasks they would ask him or her to fill in the time with paperwork or other clerical duties. This is consistent with the reports of paraeducators that they were engaged in clerical tasks for less than 1 hour per week.

Those teachers who framed the paraeducator's position from the assistant to the student perspective expressed more discomfort with the paperwork dilemma. A response typical of this group of teachers was: "Making copies . . . I guess you could say that's least important, because it's not really working directly with the child and it's something that I really could do myself. It would just take more of my time."

Those who framed the paraeducator's role as assistant to the teacher had less difficulty with assigning clerical work. One teacher who clearly came from this perspective said, "The least important thing is clerical work. It's ridiculous, but it needs to be done. And in my classroom I would never make anyone do anything I'm not willing to do." Another teacher who also took the perspective of paraeducator as assistant to the teacher stated:

> I think that the ideal role of the paraprofessional would be to assist the teacher in getting all the materials prepared, running off papers, typing the minutes, being able to help with the bulletin boards, with projects, and with sending out materials to parents about meetings—be able to make telephone contact for setting up guest speakers.

Preparedness of Paraeducators to Fulfill Job Duties

This question was examined from the paraeducator's perspective through information generated from three items on the questionnaire. First, paraeducators were asked, "What training have you had that specifically helps you in working as a paraprofessional in special education?" To this, 11 paraeducators responded that on-the-job experience was the best preparation they had for performing their duties. Second, paraeducators were asked what specific inservice training they

had had, and, finally, what additional training they wanted. Fourteen paraprofessionals replied that they had taken some training on behavior management, but 9 of them wanted more.

Teachers responded to a similar question about additional training. Fifteen teachers agreed that more training of paraeducators in behavior management would be desirable. Teaching techniques was the only other area in which many teachers indicated a need for training. Overall, the paraprofessionals reported more prior training than expected from reports in the literature. They also wanted training on more topics than teachers wanted for them. Table 6 lists these topics, the number of paraprofessionals who had taken training on each topic, the number who wanted additional training on that topic, and the number of teachers who wanted additional training for the paraeducator with whom they worked.

Teachers also provided their perspective on preparation of paraprofessionals during interviews. One teacher emphasized the need for training in behavior management and mentioned preservice training in a wistful way.

> It would be very nice to have a paraprofessional come in trained, knowing how to deal with kids and behavior problems. The paraprofessional is covering a lot of behavior problems because the main emphasis now is for the special education teachers to get into the classrooms and . . . that slack is taken up by the paraprofessional. She or he has to be aware of behavior modifications, how to do behavior charts, and how to react. If I had a paraprofessional . . . coming ideally trained, she or he would know how to do everything!

Another teacher reflected on a previous experience working with a highly competent paraeducator who had been a certified teacher. She explained, "She just took over the class. Cer-

tain subjects, certain students at certain times of the day, so we kind of rotated teaching."

One teacher reflected on the ideal by describing a former negative situation, "I've had to deal with paraeducators before that weren't very good in math and they weren't very good in reading either. They didn't know how to read themselves, so. . . I had to read it myself. Someone like that, . . . I wouldn't need . . . except to run off papers. Not worth it." Another described a bad experience with a 70-year-old male paraeducator who wanted to "sit around all day and smoke cigarettes. He didn't want to do anything. He couldn't spell, he couldn't do anything, so I ended up doing. . . [everything] myself."

Teachers were clear that they needed real assistance from paraeducators who had basic knowledge and skills, as well as teaching and behavior management skills. They also wanted to work with people who had the motivation to perform their duties as assigned.

Effectiveness of Paraeducators

Three data sources contributed to answering this question. First, the questionnaire included a question asking whether the paraeducator's skills were being used well. Overall, paraeducators indicated that they believed that their skills were being used well. Most said that their work was challenging but not beyond their capabilities. Teachers, on the other hand, were divided. Although 7 teachers agreed with the paraeducators, 11 said that they limited the tasks they assigned to paraprofessionals based on their perceptions of the individual's competencies and performed any other tasks themselves.

Teacher interviews provided another source of information about the effectiveness of paraeducators. One teacher indicated, "I only ask her to do things I know she's good at. I asked her to make a bulletin board once, but she did such a

TABLE 6. Prior and Desired Paraeducator Training

Topics	Paraeducators		Teachers
	Prior training reported	Future training wanted	Future training wanted
History of Special Education	1	5	1
Child Development	6	10	2
Roles and Responsibilities	7	7	4
Legal Responsibilities/Liabilities	4	3	4
Behavior Management	14	9	15
Teaching Ideas	4	10	11
Communication Skills	4	4	4
Health and Safety Procedures	6	2	1
Child Abuse	7	8	4

bad job, I never asked her again." Another commented about the performance of the paraprofessional as follows:

> The one that I have now is not a teacher. . . . She doesn't know how to do certain skills. . . . My ideal would be a person who was trained. . . . Maybe they don't have to be certified but just trained.

The third source of information about paraeducators' effectiveness was obtained through self-evaluations completed by paraeducators and evaluations conducted by teachers using the same form. The form included 6 main headings: (a) rapport/interpersonal skills, (b) personal characteristics, (c) general assistance to the professional, (d) technical assistance in instruction, (e) instructional assistance to students, and (f) general observations.

Generally, the paraeducators rated their own performance higher than the teachers did on 4 of the 6 dimensions. This was consistent with the findings of Passaro et al. (1991), who reported that teachers rated paraprofessional skills lower than did the paraprofessionals themselves. Teachers rated specific subitems related to tutoring, small group instruction, large group instruction, and behavior management lower than paraeducators. These performance assessments are consistent with the reported desire of teachers that paraeducators obtain more preparation in behavior management and instructional methods.

How Teachers Perceive Their Own Supervision

Three sources of information contributed to exploring this question. First, one item on the questionnaire asked teachers to tell how they had been prepared to supervise paraprofessionals. To this, 14 teachers responded that they had learned it all on their own. The others had taken inservice courses that provided some preparation. Second, another item on the questionnaire asked who held responsibility for evaluating the paraprofessionals—a function that is frequently associated with supervision. Eight of the teachers held sole responsibility for paraeducator evaluations; 10 shared the responsibility with the principal. Interview data provided the third source of information about teacher perceptions of their own role as supervisors. These data revealed that teachers shared evaluation responsibility by completing evaluation forms and taking them to the principal to be signed. In only a few cases, teachers discussed their ratings with the principal. In fact, the teachers performed the evaluation because they knew the work of the paraprofessionals. The signing of a form was a formality required by district policy.

The interviews also clearly revealed that teachers were reluctant to supervise in a traditional manner. In nearly every case, the ideal paraeducator was seen as a person who required very little supervision or direction. A typical statement was, "The ideal paraeducator . . . can carry out the things that you want him or her to do, and doesn't have to be supervised. Get it to the point that they know pretty much what the responsibility is, and they can do it without [supervision]." The comments most frequently volunteered concerned their lack of preparation for supervision. One teacher described the district as a "with-it kind of district." Yet she went on to say,

> There really isn't any training out there. You know, when you go through teacher training . . . nobody even approaches the subject, and then you're put in a situation and you tend to learn it by doing, and things hopefully get better after a year or so. It's nice to know that higher education might be looking at a workshop or something on how to supervise—or eventually put it into teacher training.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study confirm that paraeducators serve in instructional roles and that teachers value this role. Furthermore, these data show that paraeducators do perform clerical tasks, but in small proportions to their overall work week. The reported shift in paraeducator responsibilities toward greater amounts of instruction (Miramontes, 1990; Pickett, 1996; Stahl & Lorenz, 1995) is evident here. However, the teachers were divided in their opinions about who should be responsible for tasks such as typing, filing, and copying. Teachers who expressed the belief that the paraeducator was an *assistant to the teacher* reported less discomfort assigning clerical tasks than those who characterized the paraeducator as an *assistant to the student*. Evidence of this variation in the thinking of supervising teachers is not found elsewhere in the literature. The shift toward greater instructional responsibilities for paraeducators may be related to teachers' perceptions of the paraeducator as assistant to the student. Recently, Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, and MacFarland (1997) reported that instructional assistants "hovered" over students labeled as deaf–blind in general education classrooms and in effect separated these students from classroom teachers and peers without disabilities. The study did not examine teachers' perceptions of paraeducator roles, but it might follow that paraeducators who were perceived as assistants to students, rather than assistants to teachers, would be permitted to take over full responsibility for a student's education.

Some teachers in this study failed to distinguish between the ethical and legal responsibilities of the professional teacher and those tasks appropriately delegated to a paraeducator, describing the paraprofessional as a peer rather than a supervisee. This finding is consistent with the incidental findings of others who have studied coteaching (Cessna, K. K., & Adams, L., personal communication, October, 1993). Although paraeducators clearly have a legitimate place on the special education team, the nature of the role differences precludes parity with the professional teacher—just as the nature of a paramedic's role precludes parity with the emergency room physician.

Teachers expressed relative satisfaction with the work of these paraeducators, as did the teachers in Frank, Keith, and Steil's (1988) study, but they also expressed the clear desire that paraeducators would come to the workplace with greater preparation. The teachers identified instructional skills and behavior management as most important for further paraeducator skill development, just as many others had done in training needs assessments (Evans & Evans, 1986; Passaro et al., 1991; Pearman et al., 1993; Pickett, 1989; Vasa et al., 1983). Paraeducators rated their own performance higher than the teachers did. Nevertheless, teachers clearly indicated that they held high levels of trust for the paraeducators, and compensated for individual weaknesses by only assigning tasks that they knew these paraeducators could perform successfully.

These data show that communications between teachers and paraeducators are generally good. However, teachers that did not write lesson plans for the paraeducator or hold formal, sit-down meetings also reported that they were less satisfied with communications. Although no statistical relationship can be established in such a small sample, there is reason to believe that a relationship exists between the presence of written plans, meetings, and effective communication (Boomer, 1977). Many of the teachers described the ideal paraeducator as one who didn't need written plans and didn't require much direction, training, or daily supervision.

In spite of clear agreement in the literature that teachers have de facto responsibility for the supervision of paraeducators (Lindeman & Beegle, 1988; Vasa et al., 1983), these teachers engaged in the supervisory process with some reluctance. They did not feel prepared to supervise paraeducators, nor did they welcome the role. In fact, they favored paraeducators that allowed them to avoid supervision—paraeducators who could operate with nearly total independence, either because of prior training or because of good intuitive sense. Several teachers expressed a longing for colleagues—peer relationships rather than supervisory roles. Some said that they had had bad experiences in the past with paraeducators who were unable to carry out their duties and that those bad experiences made them reluctant to embrace the supervisory role. Overall, these findings provide more detail to the findings of Vasa et al. (1983) that few teachers are prepared to supervise.

Teachers found the paperwork and time management aspects of their jobs problematic and were ambivalent about delegating clerical tasks to paraeducators. Several were proud that they did not ask paraeducators to do clerical work—that they themselves would do all the clerical work. These teachers were unclear as to the roles for which they, as the professional, should take responsibility (e.g., planning for students, assessing progress, and determining program goals) and those that ethically could be shared or delegated (e.g., instruction, clerical tasks). That teachers are unclear regarding the ethics of sharing and delegating responsibilities is not surprising. For years, authors have warned that teacher preparation programs provide little instruction or information about professional expectations, liability issues, and ethical decisions

(Handelsman, 1986; Howe & Miramontes, 1992; Stephens, 1985). More recently, Heller (1997) specified a recommendation for preparation in professional ethics for "professionals with responsibilities for the supervision and management of paraeducators in education. . ." (p. 220).

Limitations of the Study

This study sought to verify certain conditions described in previous studies and to explore actual practices and beliefs of teachers and paraeducators as they work together. The sample was small. Fewer than half of the pairs of teachers and paraprofessionals that were initially contacted completed all aspects of the study. The small rewards offered were evidently inadequate to persuade greater numbers of participants. In general, the teachers who participated seemed rushed and harried. Although participants came from all sectors of the school district, from neighborhoods with different socioeconomic circumstances, and represented elementary, middle, and high schools, there may be some unidentified bias caused by self-selection. Moreover, the small sample size made it difficult to employ certain statistical analysis techniques that depend on larger numbers for power.

Recommendations for Further Research and Practice

Several implications for special education teacher preparation emerged from these results in spite of the limitations. Better role management preparation for future teachers seems important. We need to provide future teachers with effective and appropriate ways to handle the time and paperwork demands placed on them. Knowledge of ethical decision making and skills in time management seem obvious recommendations. Topics that might better prepare teachers to supervise paraeducators include: (a) knowledge of the legal limits of paraeducator authority, (b) liability issues regarding the delivery of IEP services, (c) skills in task delegation, (d) conflict management and negotiation, and (e) creative problem solving. For example, the teachers who were less satisfied with their communications with the paraprofessional seemed to be unaware that solving the problem was within their ability. None of them spoke of ways they had tried to improve communications, nor had they considered that written plans or sit-down meetings might help. They had not considered negotiating different schedules for paraprofessionals that might allow for meetings and thus ease the communication problem.

The longing-for-colleagues sentiment expressed by some teachers seems misplaced on the role of the paraprofessional. It also raises the question of whether we are doing enough to help teachers know how to engage in collaborative relationships with their professional colleagues from special education, general education, and related services.

These data suggest some possible courses of action. First, we need to help inservice teachers to refine their own

"homegrown" supervisory skills and to engage in appropriate supervision with less reluctance. Second, we need preservice preparation so that future teachers acknowledge their role as supervisor and are better prepared to supervise than our current workforce. Finally, we must continue to gather information, on a much larger scale, about the working relationships of teachers and paraeducators as well as the supervisory skills and practices of teachers.

Systematic paraeducator training programs exist or are being installed in many locations throughout the United States (e.g., Colorado, Kansas, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Utah, Vermont, Washington). Yet the literature reports little about the effectiveness of such programs. Although pioneering research work concluded that adequate preparation does affect paraeducator performance as well as student outcomes (Cohen, Kulik, & Kulik, 1982), there has been no verification in more than 20 years. It is important to continue to examine the performance of paraeducators who receive various types and amounts of preparation relative to the satisfaction of those who supervise them, as well as to student outcomes.

Finally, the distinction between the role definitions of paraeducator as *assistant to the teacher* and as *assistant to the student* may be explored further to determine the implications for teacher supervision of paraeducators as well as for the performance of paraeducators in special education. Information about teacher perceptions and role distinctions may be vitally important in the development of policies regarding paraeducator employment. ∎

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