



## Paraprofessionals in Educational Settings

Source: Giangreco, M.F., Edelman, S.W., & Broer, S.M. (2001). Respect, appreciation, and acknowledgement of paraprofessionals who support students with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 67(4), 485-498.

Giangreco, M.F., Edelman, S.W., Broer, S.M., & Doyle, M.B. (2001). Paraprofessional support of students with disabilities: Literature from the past decade. *Exceptional Children*, 68(1), 45-63.

Wallace, T., Shin, J., Bartholomay, T., & Stahl, B.J. (2001). Knowledge and skills for teachers supervising the work of paraprofessionals. *Exceptional Children*, 67(4), 520-533.

The number of paraprofessionals (classroom aides) providing support and direct services to students with disabilities in educational settings has increased greatly over the past decade. Despite widespread employment, little research exists to describe the roles, training, supervision, and support of paraprofessionals and no research has been conducted on paraprofessional impact on student outcomes. These three articles from recent issues of the journal, *Exceptional Children*, offer a review of the literature on paraprofessionals, as well as data on attitudes toward paraprofessionals and teacher skill in paraprofessional supervision.

### Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle:

The authors of this article conducted a review of the literature from the past 10 years pertaining to paraprofessional support of children with disabilities. The review included databased (i.e., from searchable indexes containing published materials that frequently present empirical data) as well as nondatabased (less widely disseminated) articles that were published between 1991 and 2000, for a total of 43 articles. The authors coded sources according to six categories related to the work of paraprofessionals: (a) acknowledging, (b) orientation and training, (c) hiring and assigning, (d) interactions with students and staff, (e) roles and responsibilities, and (f) supervision and evaluation.

The majority of both the databased and nondatabased articles were descriptive and focused on the roles, responsibilities, and training of paraprofessionals. Nearly all the studies had small sample sizes and the five articles that were experimental all had single subject designs. Themes indicate that paraprofessionals are frequently assigned to students with the most challenging behaviors and learning characteristics, and that paraprofessionals often have multiple roles for which they receive inadequate training. The literature also indicates that it has become difficult to attract and retain paraprofessionals, a problem which may be related to issues such as low pay, unclear job descriptions, lack of training, and lack of respect. Role confusion was a particularly frequently cited issue, with disagreement about whether paraprofessionals should be considered assistants to students or to teachers, and about the appropriateness of paraprofessionals for roles such as lesson planning and student testing. Concerns were raised in some cases that paraprofessionals may detract from the amount of time students spend with more highly trained teachers.

The authors note "gaps in the literature [on] topics such as acknowledging the work of paraprofessionals, guidelines for hiring and assigning them, interactions with school staff and students, and supervision" (p. 57). In addition, they note the need for more outcome research "and its relationship to paraprofessional supports" (p. 59), including research that provides the perspectives of students. The authors recommend that educational teams clarify roles for paraprofessionals and incorporate clear training, supervision, and recognition procedures.

### Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer:

This article presents data about respect and appreciation of paraprofessionals from the perspectives of paraprofessionals, teachers, and administrators in four Vermont schools. Based on research indicating a relationship between low levels of job satisfaction and employee role ambiguity, as well as research on the difficulties many districts are having attracting and retaining paraprofessionals, the authors hypothesized that paraprofessionals have unclear job



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*Summaries of research on mental health services for children and adolescents and their families*



descriptions and are not well-respected. Qualitative data were collected from 103 teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators throughout the 1998-1999 school year. Results revealed participants' recognition of the need for more acknowledgement and respect for paraprofessionals than has been previously demonstrated. The authors coded responses into six themes: (a) nonmonetary signs and symbols of appreciation, (b) compensation, (c) being entrusted with important responsibilities, (e) wanting to be listened to, and (f) orientation and support. Taken together, results indicate that paraprofessionals need more than the "occasional pat-on-the-back or annual appreciation luncheon" (p. 493). Proposed methods for demonstrating respect include clear role delineation and thorough training and support for paraprofessionals. Clarity of roles between educational staff also emerged as an important element. That is, paraprofessionals are more likely to feel respected and appreciated if their view of their roles is congruent with that of teachers' and administrators'.

### **Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl:**

The authors of this article surveyed 92 administrators, 266 teachers, and 211 paraprofessionals about competencies needed to supervise the work of paraprofessionals and the extent to which these competencies have been demonstrated. Data was collected with an author-created survey that assessed participant opinions about the importance of various competencies for teachers who direct the work of paraprofessionals (communication with paraprofessionals, planning and scheduling, instructional support, modeling for paraprofessionals, public relations, training, and management of paraprofessionals). In addition administrators and paraprofessionals were asked to rate the frequency of teachers' demonstration of competencies, while teachers rated their own demonstration. Overall, results revealed that teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals all rated the competencies as very important, although paraprofessionals rated the public relations and training subscales significantly higher than the other two groups. Comparison among groups on the demonstration of teacher competencies in paraprofessional supervision was significantly different on all subscales; paraprofessionals consistently rated teacher demonstration of competencies lower than administrators rated teacher competencies and lower than teachers rated themselves. These findings are encouraging to the extent that they provide evidence that there is a high degree of agreement between educational employees on important competencies needed by those who supervise paraprofessionals. Less clear is the reason for differences between groups on the demonstration of competencies. Based on results, the authors suggest the need for greater preservice and inservice training to educators on supervision of paraprofessionals.

Together, these articles demonstrate the ambiguity of many aspects of paraprofessional employment. The literature is relatively sparse and there is no outcome data regarding differences between classrooms with and without paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals seem to suffer from inconsistent and unclear role expectations that can alternate between too much responsibility on the one hand and a focus on menial tasks on the other. Lack of clear roles, with what is often inadequate training, support, and recognition seems to be leading to difficulty finding and retaining paraprofessionals. Many of the issues related to paraprofessional employment are more philosophical than empirical in nature. Nevertheless, consistent and clearly delineated policies and greater formal training of educators who work with paraprofessionals are needed to increase the satisfaction and effectiveness of paraprofessionals. Subsequent research following the implementation of clear philosophical guidelines could focus on the collection of empirical outcome data.

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