

## **The Paraprofessional Perspective**

### **Abstract**

*This qualitative report examines the role of the paraprofessional. The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, explains that paraprofessionals who are appropriately trained and supervised (in accordance with state law, regulation, or written policy) are recognized as personnel who may assist in the provision of special education and related services to students with disabilities [20 U.S.C. 1412(a)(14)]. The study was originally conducted for the practical purpose of examining the support structure of a specific school. However, the information that was garnered from the internal study can be applied to other school programs that have paraprofessionals who work with special needs students. A questionnaire was presented to 23 paraprofessionals at an alternative 1<sup>st</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade school that serves both day and residential students with emotional and/or behavioral disabilities. The following themes emerged throughout the analysis of the responses: the role of the paraprofessional, the healthy classroom, from paraprofessional to teacher, and paraprofessional professional development. The study begins with a literature review on paraprofessionals and explores quotes directly from the paraprofessional's perspective that was derived from the survey. Suggestions for training and other recommendations for strengthening the current supports for paraprofessionals were explained in the report.*

Keywords: emotional disability, behavioral disability, paraprofessional, paraprofessional, teacher aide, special education, professional development

### **Review of Literature on the Paraprofessional Role**

Increasingly, paraprofessionals (also known as teacher aides, instructional assistants, and behavior supports) are most frequently being utilized as support in assisting a range of special needs students (Minondo, Meyer, & Xin, 2001; Riggs & Mueller, 2001; French, 2003). The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, explains that paraprofessionals who are appropriately trained and supervised (in accordance with state law, regulation, or written policy) are recognized as personnel who may assist in the provision of special education and related services to students with disabilities [20 U.S.C. 1412(a)(14)]. According to the 22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Report to Congress (OSEP, 2000), 238, 127 paraprofessionals provided services to students with disabilities. Thus, paraprofessionals are more than half of the non-teaching personnel who provide assistance to help with students with disabilities.

Giagrecio, Edelman, and Broer (2003) studied the use of a process of planning for paraprofessional supports, with the perspectives of 331 individual team members from 46 schools in 13 states over two school years. The information that was collected reflected the utilization and outcomes of the process towards improving paraprofessional support to help the education of students with disabilities.

Marks, Schrader, and Levine (1999) found through their interviews that paraprofessionals believed that their job responsibilities included: (1) keeping students with disabilities from “bothering” general education classroom teachers, (2) creating all modifications and adaptations for the child, and (3) maintaining responsibility for all aspects of the child’s education. Hall, McClannahan, and Krantz (1995) concluded that the paraprofessionals believed that their primary role is providing support and assistance.

Due to their positive experiences working in the assistant role, many paraprofessionals are pursuing teaching as a career (Bernal & Aragon, 2004; Recruiting New Teachers Inc., 2000). White (2004) commented on the fact that many paraprofessionals have a strong desire to become special education teachers, yet they face obstacles:

When given the financial support and opportunity, most succeed in teacher education, especially if they can weather the initial reentry into higher education. They succeed with much grit, taking night classes while teaching and usually supporting families. When they complete licensure, they teach, and their service to students is sustained over time. The years of paraprofessional employment have made them resilient to issues of inadequate teacher pay and poor working conditions that contribute to high attrition of other teachers in special education. (p.217).

French (2003) provided the following recommendations on improving paraprofessional responsibilities: (a) assure appropriate supervision by trained teachers, (b) provide appropriate training, and (c) clearly define the role and responsibilities.

Most paraprofessionals receive on the job training that is limited. According to Carroll (2001), the paraprofessionals typically receive a few handouts and get a verbal explanation of special education prior to beginning in the classes. Also, paraprofessionals do at some schools shadow other paraprofessionals with the hope of more specific training in the future.

### **Need for the Study**

The administration team at St. Stephen's Lutheran Academy at Glade Run, an alternative school for students with emotional and behavioral needs, set out to determine what the role of the paraprofessional/behavior support is and what makes a healthy classroom. The assistant-teaching staff recently became even stronger due to: professional development during in-services, regular evaluations and feedback, and team meetings that encourage collaboration, the administrative team was driven to ask the following questions from the viewpoint of paraprofessional:

1. What is your role in the classroom?
2. What makes a healthy classroom?
3. Do you have any interest in pursuing a teaching career in the future? If so, please explain why you would be suited for a position as a teacher and what you are doing to reach this goal.
4. What types of training would help you in the classroom?
5. Describe the relationship that you have with your partner in the classroom.
6. Rate the most important aspect of your role.

By establishing the paraprofessional beliefs and needs, it was the author's hypothesis that through the survey the school would be provided with insights into how to better support and guide the paraprofessionals in their daily work.

### **Methodology**

The sample for the qualitative study was based on 23 paraprofessionals at St. Stepehn's Lutheran Academy. At this private academic school for 1<sup>st</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students with emotional and behavioral disabilities "paraprofessionals" fall under three headings based on whether or not they work in the residential or day program, their experience,

and credentials. The titles of the positions that are in the assistant role are Paraprofessional, School Based Behavior Support (SBBS), and Mental Health Worker School Based Behavior Support (MHWSBBS). For the sake of the study all of the titles will fall under the title of “paraprofessional” based on the title that is predominant in the literature review.

St. Stephen’s Lutheran Academy is located in Zelienople, PA. The day school provides services for students from over forty school districts that need a more restrictive environment to succeed. The students in the residential facility on Glade Run Lutheran Services campus benefit from the therapeutic programming at the school that include horticulture, horseback and art therapy. All of the students are engaged in an extensive outdoor education program that utilizes the 325 acres with a greenhouse, animal program, habitat preservation, and an outdoor classroom. The school’s curriculum and resources meets the Pennsylvania Department of Educations’ standards.

The methodology that was employed in this study was qualitative in nature. The questionnaire was created by the author of the study, looked over by the principal and director, and then presented at the in-service. The questionnaire was based on the literature review and the questions that were suggested by the governing board at the agency.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

After the questionnaires were returned to the author of the study, it was determined if specific themes could be established due to a pattern. Upon careful examination of the surveys, there were commonalities that were revealed through the paraprofessional’s responses.

## **The Role of the Paraprofessional**

There were four paraprofessionals that simply wrote what their role was when they were asked what their role is in the classroom. Most of the paraprofessionals responded to the question with insight into their role in the classroom. When asked to rank the four most important aspects of their role their response was: (1) providing one-on-one emotional/behavioral support for students with special needs, (2) working as a partner with the teacher in the school, (3) providing one-on-one academic guidance for students with special needs, and (4) leading small group instruction. The following themes emerged from the open-ended question responses to what their role is in the classroom: supporting, assisting, managing, and teaching.

### Supporting

- Monitoring behaviors, helping with class work, and teaching when needed. All communication classes. Supporting my teacher. Daily progress notes on MTP Goals. Clinical reports. Mentoring new staff. Making others smile.
- To support the primary educator in instruction, therapy, and discipline of students.
- Care giver-supporting the teacher-teacher listener-food supplier (comfort food)- Friend-Advocate for the children- Supplier of gloves, hats, slippers and blankets.

### Assisting

- To assist the kids on pushing through crisis, frustration, distraction, and put forth effort in the classroom. To encourage the kids to maintain safe behaviors so that the teacher can teach materials.
- Divide every day in every way.

- To help assist the teacher in instructional studies. To develop and manage communications classes. To monitor students behaviors and control behavior to provide an educational environment.
- Behavior support/assistant teaching
- Assist with the teacher with lessons. Assist with the disruptive behaviors in the classroom. Support other classrooms.
- Behavior first and education second. Monitor behaviors so kids can learn and assist with the education process. Provide emotional, social, behavioral, and educational supports with the students.
- My role in the classroom is to maintain a “therapeutic learning environment” by assisting the teacher and encouraging the children to do their best.
- Assist in keeping my room stable and quiet. Teach skills that kids can use to be successful with careers and life skills.

#### Managing

- Behavior management, emotional support, education guidance, provider of goals (treatment) based instruction & implementer of IEP transition goals, careers, independent living skills
- Keeping the kids safe and making sure that the students are learning.
- Facilitate the teacher by providing behavior support. Helping students to remove themselves to resolve situations they are dealing with.
- Behavior management, help students with any type of problem that may arise, help students with work they do not completely understand, listen to students, teach them skills on how to deal with certain situation.

## Teaching

- I help with the behaviors in the classroom. I also teach communication classes and teach a career class.
- Behavior monitor, crisis intervention, conduct communications classes for five enhanced classrooms.
- Organize activities that are suited for all age groups. Taught communication and social studies and worked with students on behavior.
- I teach, sew clothes, assist in behavior, plan activities, do lesson plans for groups, keep day to day observation of students, counsel students, keep the environment clean.
- To work in partnership with my teacher to educate our students. I can help with certain assignments, by taking one or two individuals or a small group and emphasize the lesson. I also help in providing a second disciplinary source for the room.
- Team teacher and behavior support. I teach Social Studies and Spanish.

## **The Healthy Classroom**

When faced with the question regarding what make a healthy classroom, the paraprofessionals reflected on the needs of their students to feel safe and secure in a positive learning environment. The themes that arose from the healthy classroom answers were: respect/communication, structure, safe environment, and learning.

### Respect/Communication

- Patience, guidance, honesty and respect. Learning everyday, something. Encouragement not ridicule.

- Respect.
- Mutual respect between the student and the instructor.
- A loving, caring attitude. With some empathy of where the child is coming from and endurance.
- Cleanliness, caring atmosphere, kindness, willingness to let children be children, ability to put education 2<sup>nd</sup> if need be.
- Communication between staff, students and administration.
- Mutual respect between teachers and students. Keeping students interested in subject matter.
- Clean, students ready to learn, efficient teachers prepared to teach, good relationship between teachers, communication
- One in which the staff have an understanding of each other and the needs of the students we service.
- When the teaching team shows the class that they care about them by role modeling respect, responsibility, and consistency.

#### Structure

- Accountability. Good working team. Laughter. A set schedule that the students can follow daily. They know what to expect when they enter the class.
- Knowledge of expectations, consistency, structured fun, positive reinforcement, stimulating learning material, supportive staff.
- Giving the clients a preset organized set of daily activities and routine events. To constantly reinforce and encourage positive behaviors.
- Two teachers on the same page. A good routine that does not change.

- Structure/Routine/Fun learning environment
- Safe environment for learning
- Positive learning environment, safe, controlled, structured
- A healthy classroom is developed by structure, commitment, and follow through.  
It needs to be a place where the students feel safe and encouraged always.
- Structure and support from others as well as keeping the students interested.

### Learning

- Kids who want to learn and are interested in getting an education. The behaviors have to be managed.
- Clear concise instruction techniques.
- Keeping the kids safe and making sure that the students are learning.
- Set boundaries/guidelines and diligent follow through with the focus on teaching/learning.
- A room that promotes education, socialization and a supportive and safe environment.
- A healthy classroom is one where students are learning and enjoying what they are being taught. It is also a safe environment.

### **From Paraprofessional to Teacher**

As the literature review mentioned, many of paraprofessionals find the position to be a stepping stone into the teaching role. At St. Stephen's Lutheran Academy there is an assortment of years in the position (from a few months to over eighteen years) and credentials (from high school diplomas to master's degrees). Some of the

paraprofessionals are even certified teachers, yet their specific certification warrants a position that has already been filled at the school.

#### Aspiring Teacher

- I'm more than ½ way there-just need more schooling-guess who?
- I have always thought of myself as a teacher. I have often thought about going back for 26 credits.
- I hope to teach full time at a community college.
- Yes. By striving to be an individual of high moral character and remaining constant in my own learning, I believe it is possible to become a good teacher.
- Yes. I went to school for it and I have not had an opportunity to teach in my area for an entire year.
- Yes, I have an education degree in Biology as well as Middle School Science. I have always loved science and enjoy teaching it.
- Yes, I do. In fact, I am taking 3 classes each semester to obtain a degree.
- Yes, because I do a lot of teaching now and the students respond great with me. I start school in June 2005 for special education.
- Yes. My ability to communicate and hopefully make subjects interesting to students. I can also use my life experiences to enhance lessons.
- I am currently enrolled in BCCC in the elementary education dept. I will then attend Slippery Rock for dual certification in special/elementary education. We all teach regardless of job title, but I am striving for the title.
- I am almost finished with my Master's degree at Carlow for certification.

#### Possible Teacher

- I am really good at keeping the students busy and occupied. I'm not really doing anything to further my education. I am waiting for someone to kick me in the butt.
- I am not sure about this question.
- I'm not sure if I want to be a teacher. I'm not currently pursuing that.
- Possibly.

#### Content in Position

Four paraprofessionals stated that they did not want to pursue teaching as a goal.

A few of the paraprofessionals who responded chose to not respond to this question, which could be interpreted as not wanting to become a teacher.

#### **Paraprofessional Professional Development**

Paraprofessionals can flourish by adding to the skills that they currently have. Because many paraprofessionals are striving towards the goal of becoming a teacher, it can benefit them for the school to provide them with added trainings. The paraprofessionals at St. Stephen's Lutheran Academy currently are receiving multiple trainings that include but are not limited to: Therapeutic Crisis Intervention, First Aid/CPR, Policies and Procedures, Mission and Values, HIV/AIDS, Infectious Control and Suicide Prevention. The paraprofessionals would like to see the following top ten training topics addressed:

1. Knowledge of specific disabilities
2. Behavior management
3. Instructional techniques for special needs students
4. Learning styles and child development

5. Team planning for instruction
6. Cultural diversity
7. Special education process and laws
8. Arts in the classroom (visual and performing)
9. Individual and small group instruction
10. Special interventions for the classroom

### **Paraprofessional Partnerships**

When asked to describe the relationship that the paraprofessional has with his/her partner in the classroom all responses were positive. The partnerships are based on respect and trust. Their descriptions included:

- Love, respect, friendship
- We are a team, which is essential to function in the classroom. We are able to openly discuss what went “right” and what “could” have gone smoother during the day. We play off of each other.
- I have or at least attempt to have an open and honest relationship with my partner. I always attempt to have our management approach be a joint venture.
- Cohesive-work together effectively-instructional-often informing my partner about the Lutheran way. It’s her first year here. I always get a first year partner.
- I feel that we are a great team. We seem to know how our kids behave and we communicate everyday about how our kids are doing.
- I have five teachers to partner with every day. I am very fortunate to have been given these talented and caring teachers as immediate co-workers. When I came on-site I basically let them know what I felt my role should be and asked what

they needed in addition. In my perception we have all done well together in rounding out the children's learning experience.

- We converse about planning and process each day as well. Behaviors of students and our own forms of management are discussed as well as possible improvements.
- Being able to be flexible in helping out with each others roles and duties. Being able to support each others discussions as they apply to both academics and behaviors.
- A lot of my partners this year I have gotten along with.
- We have a very caring and trusting relationship. We work hard at teaching each of our students lessons both in academics and life skills. When she has problems I help her. When I have problems she helps me. No matter if it is personal or work related. When she can't function because of whatever I take over and the same for me in this situation.
- Excellent.
- Wonderful... She picks up where I leave off and I pick up where she leaves off.
- I think that I have an excellent relationship with my partner. We have been able to develop some non-verbal communication skills. I also believe our backgrounds and personalities are different enough that we create a good teaching and learning environment.
- We work as a team, picking up where the other leaves off. We are in constant communication about the student's needs and areas of concern.

- We work very well as a team. She supports and I support her. When I am teaching she supports with behavior and vice versa.
- I have a very good relationship with my partner. We talk on a daily basis about better ways to teach and get through to the students as well as goals and we believe our kids need to meet. We are truly a team.
- The teacher and I have a mutual relationship. We both take on a role as an educator and assist each other with everyday tasks. We work together to devise the best approach for our own students.
- We have a good relationship on and off the job.
- I have a positive and open relationship. I am able to talk with her about problems or ideas I may be having.
- One of mutual respect and support.
- I have a good relationship with my partner. We have similar behavioral ideas and are usually on the same page. We help each other out as much as we can and communicate well. I feel a good relationship with your partner is essential to a healthy classroom.
- My relationship with my partner can be described as supportive and positive. Both of us are very open with each other. We both work as a team in all respects.
- We have a great relationship. Keep each other informed of all areas. Work compatibly as a team.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This year the supports that were put into place to help the paraprofessionals in their role at St. Stephen's Lutheran Academy were clear job descriptions, multiple

trainings, mentoring program, team meetings, and partners chosen by the administration team based on potential compatibility. When paraprofessional, Barb Kubala was asked why the paraprofessional teams are working so well she commented:

It comes down to respect. I have respect for the teachers and the gift that they bring and they understand my role. It's very supportive. There is no underlying animosity between the co-workers. This is a good bunch of people. The kids understand that this is a safe place for everyone to learn. We are all willing to do what it takes for the kids. It's all for the kids. (personal communication, April 27, 2005)

The recommendation for the administration team in moving the paraprofessional team forward began with nurturing the supports that are currently in place. The trainings that are topic specific which are being requested should be incorporated into the in-service day schedules. The roles and responsibilities of the position must be clearly defined for the paraprofessional by the school administration. The addition of a program such as the *Caring Habits of the Month Adventure* would benefit the paraprofessionals by supplying them with proven lesson plans for teaching character education skills. Paraprofessionals should be invited to IEP meetings and parent conferences because they often know the students needs well. Keeping the lines of communication open for collaboration between the administrators, teachers, and the support staff is vital for this quality program.

The information that was garnered in this study can benefit school leaders, teachers and other paraprofessionals in a variety of school settings. It is important to examine and understand the needs of the paraprofessional staff because they provide a

profoundly important service to the students by supporting the teacher in the classroom setting.

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