

Alternative Certification Teachers: Building Partnerships with Paraprofessionals

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There were 282 special education teachers enrolled in an alternative certification program in education at a university in southern California who were surveyed over the course of two years to determine the extent of their training in working with paraprofessionals and the professional development they received on how to successfully work with the paraprofessionals. The survey revealed limited or no training in this area. In response to these findings, the university hired national experts to provide materials and supports and to conduct a trainer-of-trainer model that could be embedded in the university training program. This article gives practical suggestions on how to embed paraprofessional training into an alternative certification program.

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Partnerships are important in any profession. One of the most important partnerships in education is the working relationship between the special education teachers and their assigned paraprofessionals. Carter, O'Rourke, Sisco and Pelsue (2009) recently reported that paraprofessionals comprise a large portion of the education workforce - about 312,000 across the United States. Due to the increasing challenges with staff relationships, it is critical that special education teachers learn effective ways to supervise and foster what Giangreco (2003) termed *an engaged teaching partnership*. In contrast to the co-teaching relationship, teams of teachers and paraprofessionals work together to support the education of the children in their classrooms or programs. In these partnerships the teacher supervises the paraprofessional(s) work as they collaborate; this is different than the parity seen in co-teaching partnerships between licensed teachers (Friend, 2011).

Paraprofessionals are school employees who work under the supervision of teachers to assist in the implementation of teacher-planned instructional programs and to evaluate student performance in relation to the education programs and services provided (Heller & Gerlach, 2003; Pickett, 2007). This relationship was discussed in the 1990 reauthorization of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In accordance with state laws and regulations, a state may allow paraprofessionals, who are appropriately trained and supervised in meeting the requirements, to be used to assist in the provision of special education and related services to children with disabilities under Part B of the Act. [34 CFR §300.136(f)].

When the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 was reauthorized with the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, every local education agency receiving assistance under the act was required to ensure that all paraprofessionals hired after the date of enactment and working in a program supported with funds under Title I, Section 1119/b of NCLB (2001) had the following qualifications: (a) completed at least two years of study at an institution of higher education; (b) obtained an associate's degree (or higher); or (c) met a rigorous standard of quality, demonstrating through a formal state or local academic assessment, a knowledge of and an ability to assist in reading, writing, and mathematics readiness as appropriate (Title I, Section 1119/b). According to NCLB, appropriate roles for paraprofessionals included providing one-on-one tutoring for eligible students and assisting with classroom management, such as organizing classroom space. Additionally, tasks such as providing assistance in a library or media center, conducting parental involvement activities, and/or instructional services were cited as appropriate goals. Perhaps the most commonly associated role of the paraprofessional is providing instruction or behavior support under the direct supervision of a teacher (Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2001). That is, the teacher plans the paraprofessional's instructional activities and evaluates the achievement of the students with whom the paraprofessional works (ERIC/OSEP Special Project, 2003). Hill and Barth (2004) reported that the intent of NCLB was to close achievement gaps in areas where student test scores were low and paraprofessionals were used as a resource for closing the gap.

Multiple studies have confirmed that it is critical to provide paraprofessionals with ongoing on-the-job training as well as appropriate and documented supervision (Gerlach, 2001; Giangreco, 2003; Pickett & Gerlach, 2007). Most commonly, these tasks are delegated to the classroom teacher, despite the fact that most teachers are not trained in these tasks, play no formal role in their hiring, assigning, and releasing, and are not provided with information on the paraprofessionals' skills, strengths, experiences, or other qualifications (Jones & Bender, 1993;

National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1999). Several studies have found that paraprofessionals report being “responsible” for the instructional program of a student even though that should be the responsibility of the teacher (Carnahan, Williamson, Clarke, & Sorenson, 2009; Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Marks, Schrader, & Leving, 1999). Furthermore, paraprofessionals indicated a high level of responsibility in other areas of their jobs such as decisions regarding adaptations, behavioral support, and interacting with team members including parents (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000). This is clearly cause for concern if the least trained staff members (i.e., the paraprofessionals) are working with students with the greatest learning needs (i.e., those with disabilities) (Carter et al., 2009; Giangreco, 2003).

As the authors began to investigate the discrepancy between appropriate and actual paraprofessional utilization, the distinction between the roles of the teacher and the paraprofessional, as well as the related challenges our interns were facing on the job, it became clear that we needed to evaluate whether our program was effectively helping teachers address these issues. As such, we added a brief inquiry to a yearly survey and discovered great need for professional development around the topic of working with paraprofessionals, as well as training and supervising them.

Method

Participants

The participants were 282 special education teachers enrolled in a post-baccalaureate program in education at a university in southern California. All were teaching in preschool through twelfth grade classrooms as the instructor of record as intern teachers. In California’s alternative certification system, intern teachers take coursework toward certification while teaching full time. The participants were enrolled in one of three Education Specialist internships: Early Childhood Special Education ($N = 72$), Mild/Moderate ($N = 145$), or Moderate/Severe ($N = 65$). There were 126 males and 156 females. The ethnicity of the group included 45% Caucasian, 35% Hispanic, 12% Asian, 5% African American, and 3% Pacific-Islander. There were 148 interns in their first year of a two year program and there were 134 interns in year two. The interns taught in 38 different school districts in four counties in southern California. Interns had at least one paraprofessional directly working with them, and in some cases they were the assigned supervisors for up to four paraprofessionals.

Instrument and Procedure

The research instrument was a survey asking the teachers to indicate if they had received any training and/or professional development in working with paraprofessionals. If so, interns were asked to describe the type of training received and who provided the training. The questions were asked as part of a 20 question yearly program survey. Interns were given the confidential survey at the end of each year of their program to evaluate the alternative certification program’s effectiveness and to plan for improvements during the next school year.

The specific questions related to this study were:

1. Have you received any training/professional development in working with paraprofessionals? If yes, please describe the type of training.

2. Was the training provided by the University or the employing school district?

Results

In the first year 148 interns were surveyed. The participants all responded favorably to their support and development in all areas surveyed with the exception of the paraprofessional professional development questions. Overall, 80% of the interns expressed that they had the training/development in the above areas at least in a limited way.

Only 28 interns indicated they had any professional development in working with paraprofessionals and surprisingly only 25 interns indicated they had any discussion of how to work with paraprofessionals in their university certification program. None of the interns stated they had received training at the school district level. The second year cohort of 134 interns was surveyed and again the interns reported limited experiences specifically designed to provide professional development in the area of working with paraprofessionals. Only 56 of the 134 interns reported any specific professional development related on how to work with paraprofessionals in their university certification program and only two interns reported a brief reference in a district sponsored training to the topic of working with paraprofessionals. Due to these results, the decision was made to research and create several professional development opportunities for the interns to address this area of need.

Discussion

The survey results indicated a clear need for additional professional development working with and supervising paraprofessionals. Utilizing funding from a state sponsored grant program, the university brought in leading experts in special education who specialize in paraprofessional-teacher relationships to support professional development. A national expert in this arena, Kent Gerlach, Professor at the School of Education at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington, was contracted to provide a series of trainings. Gerlach has developed participant training workbooks focusing on roles, responsibilities and ethical issues, teamwork, and the supervision of paraprofessionals. He provided professional development for the interns once a year for three consecutive years and the materials were purchased for interns to use in their public school classrooms. The content Gerlach taught encouraged the faculty to successfully write a federally funded grant to support paraprofessionals.

In addition to the yearly professional development provided by Gerlach, the interns participated in an annual university hosted autism conference in which one of the developed strands is related to paraprofessional teams, relationships, and trainings. Each year there are different speakers, but experts in the area, Giangreco and Doyle, have both presented their research to further enhance the development of the teacher-paraprofessional relationship. In addition, the faculty hired a faculty member with experience in providing professional development in the area of paraprofessionals. Because of this added expertise, after interns graduated from the program many of the principals commented on their rich experiences and supports for paraprofessionals.

Shared Learnings

As a result of this journey, the university has implemented much of what was learned from the various trainings and materials in the newly developed credential program. One of the primary areas of focus is developing and supporting partnerships between the teacher and the paraprofessional. Teachers must understand their role as supervisors and take time to build a strong partnership that will ultimately enhance the education of the children with whom the teacher works. Due to these findings, the university implemented a trainer-of-trainers model whereby the faculty have used the materials and information learned over the past five years to provide extensive training to interns and other credential candidates in the area of paraprofessional relationship development; thus, impacting the working relationships of teacher-paraprofessional teams all across southern California and subsequently the education of numerous students with disabilities.

Recommendations

1. Take time to explain the history of “aides” in the classroom and the transformation of the role from clerical to instructional. Many of our interns recalled the assistants in their own classrooms as children and did not realize the importance of the role of a paraprofessional. They learned from Gerlach that by definition, the word “para” means “to walk beside.” After an initial training, one intern wrote, “Instead of asking my paraprofessional to make copies, I sat down with her to discuss how she can assist with the classroom instruction – I already feel like we have made great strides toward a true partnership.”
2. Review the requirements found in the IDEA and NCLB reauthorizations. Much of the information shared in the literature review section of this article was presented by Gerlach during his trainings. One administrator wrote, “Thanks for keeping us accountable. I recently located our district policies on requirements for the hiring of paraprofessionals and asked our superintendent to update our policies.”
3. Use Gerlach’s professional development materials to support teachers and paraprofessionals working as colleagues in a team environment. Gerlach has a series of training materials as well as a supervision textbook (Pickett & Gerlach, 2007). The materials were distributed during training and each site was provided with two copies of *Let’s Team Up! A Checklist for Paraeducators, Teachers, and Principals* (Gerlach, 2001).
4. Use Pickett and Gerlach’s (2007) suggestions to compare the roles of teacher and paraprofessional in the areas of classroom organization, assessment, setting objectives, teaching, behavior management, working with parents, lesson planning, and building classroom partnership. This textbook has many excellent activities and exercises. One intern wrote, “My paraprofessional is twenty years older than me. At first, this worried me. Now that I have the materials, I have been able to build a partnership where I feel like I am the supervisor instead of the daughter!”
5. Encourage teachers to ask questions and discuss practical solutions for dealing with issues in paraprofessional development and training. Topics may include the following:

Have the team leadership and supervisory roles been identified and the knowledge and skill competencies developed to prepare the professionals for these roles? Does the training content demonstrate respect for children and youth with disabilities and their families, as well as for those who come from diverse ethnic, cultural, and language backgrounds?

Conclusions

This research demonstrated that interns in this alternative certification program were not trained in the area of paraprofessional development and support. By focusing on strategies to assist successful working relationships between interns and paraprofessionals, classrooms will be run more efficiently and students will receive more support. The data showed strong evidence of their increasingly successful partnerships, which support student learning. Strategies presented by Gerlach in 2001 were highlighted and were a primary focus of all teacher-paraprofessional professional development. Specific strategies include awareness of skills and knowledge that each team member brings to the classroom or program, short- and long-term goal development, successful communication strategies, and establishing policies and procedures to eliminate any role confusion among the team members. As Gerlach stated, "Teamwork doesn't happen by accident, it requires effort and commitment" (2001, p. 24).

Anecdotal research confirms that interns have benefited from this professional development. As stated by one of the interns, "It has been fantastic to learn strategies and research in this area. My district has done no training in this area. I know our team makes a difference in the lives of our students with disabilities."

In conclusion, universities and districts should ensure that training in the area of paraprofessional relationships and effective strategies for managing a complex classroom are a part of their alternative certification programs. Interns will be more successful in their jobs if they have practical research-based strategies for strengthening their relationships with their paraprofessionals.

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