

No Child Left Behind and Paraprofessionals: Are They Perceived To Be Highly Qualified?

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Abstract

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 introduced new requirements for paraprofessionals, specifying criteria for them to achieve “highly qualified” status. This article describes a study which explored the perceptions of teachers and paraprofessional teams as to whether the paraprofessionals would be considered “highly qualified” and more specifically whether they were trained for and competent in carrying out various instructional duties. The results of the study suggest that the NCLB requirements may be poorly understood; even by some of those who already meet the requirements. Furthermore, results indicate that teacher-paraprofessional pairs do not necessarily agree on the extent to which the paraprofessionals are considered trained and competent.

Paraprofessionals and NCLB: Are They Perceived To Be Highly Qualified?

With Public Law 107-110 or the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) the federal government for the first time set hiring requirements for paraprofessionals working in federally funded schools (Magnuson, 2003). NCLB specified that all instructional paraprofessionals, except those working as translators or solely in parent involvement activities, must be able to demonstrate that they are “highly qualified to assist in teaching reading, writing and math. Three routes to “highly qualified” status are offered: completion of at least two years of post-secondary education; holding an associate degree, or higher; or be able to demonstrate through a rigorous assessment the knowledge and ability to assist in teaching reading, writing, and math. These requirements took immediate effect for new hires; those already in post had until July 2006 to comply.

Although the federal government set the requirements, it is the responsibility of the States to develop and implement an accountability plan certifying the intersection of federal and state standards. School principals operating a program under NCLB sections 1114 and

1115 must submit written notice of compliance to the federal government. However, this method of data collection only measures compliance, and does not indicate whether paraprofessionals truly are adequately prepared (highly qualified) to assist in instruction. Congress acknowledged the insufficiency of this type of data in the 21st Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2003):

Lack of accurate data affects the capacity of State Education Agencies and Local Education Agencies to plan and implement policies and systems to improve the quality of paraeducator performance and to develop comprehensive cost-effective education programs for their paraeducator workforce that recognize the similarities in the skills required by all paraeducators. (sec. III)

Although the NCLB requirements apply firstly to paraprofessionals working in Title I programs, they also apply to all paraprofessionals working in Title I funded programs, whether they have been hired and funded by Title I or not. Thus, for example, paraprofessionals working in Title I school-wide programs (but employed in such programs as special education) must meet the same requirements as those hired and funded through Title I.

This article summarizes the results of a study examining the perceptions of a group of teachers and paraprofessionals relative to the paraprofessionals' qualifications and skills, and in light of the NCLB requirements. The broad questions asked were:

1. Do paraprofessionals meet the requirements of NCLB for "highly qualified" status? (or are they working towards that status?)
2. Have paraprofessionals received training in various aspects of instruction (related to the roles specified as appropriate in NCLB)?
3. Do paraprofessionals have the knowledge, understanding and skills to carry out a variety of instructional tasks relative to the NCLB approved roles?

More specifically, the study investigated teacher and paraprofessional perceptions of whether the paraprofessionals met the requirements of NCLB, had received relevant training, and had the requisite knowledge and skills to carry out assigned tasks. The results of the survey are reported in the context of the several ways in which States have elected to comply with the NCLB requirements for paraprofessionals. Results are also linked to the standards that the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) has set for paraprofessionals, as these are consistent with the NCLB listing of appropriate roles for paraprofessionals: one-on-one tutoring, assisting with classroom management, and providing instructional services to students under the direct supervision of a highly qualified teacher (NCLB, 2001).

State compliance with the NCLB requirements for paraprofessionals

According to NCLB, paraprofessionals should have at least an associate degree. All States recognize as highly qualified those paraprofessionals who have obtained an associate degree (or higher) or accumulated the requisite number of hours for two years of higher education credit. This route to compliance is relatively uncomplicated, the only

potential difficulty for paraprofessionals being the differing number of credit hours equating with two years of college in different States. However, lawmakers apparently recognized that not all paraprofessionals would be able to meet the higher education standard, particularly in the stated time frame, and offered the third option of a “rigorous assessment” to measure the paraprofessional’s ability to assist in instruction. NCLB allowed the assessment to be locally developed, but stipulated that it had to be valid and reliable. The decision as to the assessment to be used could be made at State level, or States could allow school districts to make the choice. The focus of debate in State departments of education since the enactment of NCLB has been on which “rigorous assessment” should be adopted under the third option. We first look at the various assessments that have become available for paraprofessionals, and then provide some detail of which of these assessments (or other alternative) States have selected.

Assessments

When NCLB was first enacted in 2001, no formal validated test existed specifically to measure paraprofessionals’ competence in instructing reading, writing, or math. In short order, however, three paper and pencil assessments were developed:

- *WorkKeys Proficiency Certificate for Teacher Assistants*. Developed by the American College Testing Program (ACT) *WorkKeys for Teacher Assistants* is an adaptation of ACT’s *WorkKeys* job profiling measure, with a broad skill base suited to career and educational decisions. ACT added Reading for Information, Writing or Business Writing, and Applied Mathematics to the basic test battery, reflecting NCLB’s focus on numeracy and literacy. Unique to *WorkKeys* is a supplementary structured observation to be completed by a “knowledgeable observer,” assessing the paraprofessional’s instructional skills in an education setting.
- *The ParaEducator*. Created by the Master Teacher ParaEducator Learning Network, the *ParaEducator* consists of two modules. Module 1 provides training and assessment material, and Module 2 (which is optional) contains course work that can be downloaded from the internet and placed into a portfolio. Module 1 is subdivided into Instructional Support, and Knowledge and Application.
- *ParaPro*. Developed by Education Testing Services (ETS), *ParaPro* is an extension of the *Praxis I*, designed for use with college students, and measures reading, writing and math skills. *ParaPro* was developed specifically for paraprofessionals and therefore aims to measure both the paraprofessional’s knowledge base and his or her ability to implement that knowledge in an instructional setting. The *ParaPro* is taken as a paper and pencil test, or can be taken on computer. Some States have opted to use the basic Praxis rather than *ParaPro*.

Table 1 provides a comparison between the basic elements and features of ParaPro, WorkKeys and ParaEducator assessments.

Table 1. Content of the Paraprofessional Assessment

Section	Contents	Detail
I	Demographics	Age, gender, ethnicity, level of education, years of experience, classroom and school setting, class size, enrollment in professional organizations
II	NCLB Compliance	Understanding of and compliance with requirements of NCLB
III	Instructional Ability	Statements relating to CEC performance based standards 1, 4, 5 and 7: training, instructional knowledge and applied skills.

As of 2005, thirty-seven education authorities (at state or school district level) had adopted *ParaPro*, and in-line with NCLB Non-Regulatory Guidance established a minimum cutoff score. These scores range from 450 to 467.

Other assessment interpretations

Four states chose to use locally developed assessments under the third option offered by NCLB:

- Florida opted to use the Florida Teacher Certification Examination Knowledge Test (FTCE),
- Kentucky opted for its own paraprofessional assessment - the Kentucky Paraprofessional Assessment, already in existence;
- Michigan opted for the Michigan Test for Teacher Certification - Basic Skills (MTTC)
- Oklahoma opted for the Oklahoma General Education Test (OGET).

Six States-Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, and Utah—opted to measure paraprofessionals’ skills and knowledge through the presentation of a portfolio, an interpretation allowed by NCLB. The States that chose the portfolio as an assessment have developed their own criteria and standardized guidelines to ensure fairness and rigor in portfolio presentation and approval. Note that Utah – the state in which the reported study was conducted – has approved portfolios as a viable third option for paraprofessionals who were employed before the enactment to show highly qualified status.

CEC Standards for Paraprofessionals

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) has long recognized the need for standards for the work of paraprofessionals in special education settings. In conjunction with the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals (NRCP), CEC developed, validated, and approved the first set of national guidelines for paraprofessionals in 1998. Each of the ten

CEC standards outlines the knowledge, content, and skill applications needed for paraprofessionals to a) assist in the instruction of students with exceptionalities, and b) work with instructional team members (teachers, therapists, consultants, and administrators).

The CEC standards refer to the following:

1. State core curriculum, and education foundations,
2. the development and characteristics of learners,
3. individual learning differences,
4. instructional strategies,
5. learning environments and social interactions,
6. language,
7. instructional planning,
8. assessment,
9. professional and ethical practices, and
10. collaboration.

(See also Figure 1.)

Standards 1, 4, 5, and 7 (Foundations, Instructional strategies, Learning environments/social interactions, and Instructional planning, respectively) focus on the knowledge and skills paraprofessionals need in order to assist a teacher in the instructional process. These four standards are consistent with the NCLB listing of appropriate roles for paraprofessionals: one-on-one tutoring, assisting with classroom management, providing instructional services to students under the direct supervision of a highly qualified teacher (NCLB, 2004).

Figure 1 CEC Standards for Paraeducators

Standard*	
Knowledge	Skills
Standard 1: Foundations	
1. Purposes of programs for individuals with exceptional learning needs 2. Basic educational terminology regarding students, programs, roles and instructional activities	None in addition to the Common Core
Standard 2: Development and characteristics of learners	
Standard 3: Individual learning differences	
Standard 4: Instructional Strategies	
1. Basic instructional and remedial strategies and materials 2. Basic technologies appropriate to individuals with exceptional learning needs	1. Use strategies, equipment, materials and technologies, as directed, to accomplish instructional objectives. 2. Assist in adapting instructional strategies and materials as directed. 3. Use strategies as directed to facilitate effective integration into various settings. 4. Use strategies that promote the learner's independence, as directed. 5. Use strategies as directed to increase the individual's independence and confidence.
Standard 5: Learning Environments/Social Interactions	
1. Demands of various learning environments. 2. Rules and procedural safeguards regarding the management of behavior of individuals with exceptional learning needs	1. Establish and maintain rapport with learners. 2. Use universal precautions and assist in maintaining a safe, healthy learning environment. 3. Use strategies for managing behavior as directed. 4. Use strategies as directed in a variety of settings to assist in the development of social skills.

Standard 6: Language	
Standard 7: Instructional Planning	
None in addition to Common Core	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Follow written plans, seeking clarification as needed. 2. Prepare and organize materials to support teaching and learning as directed.
Standard 8: Assessment	
Standard 9: Professional and Ethical Practice	
Standard 10: Collaboration	

* Note: Details of knowledge and skills are given here only for the four standards addressed in this study (1, 4, 5 and 7).(Council for Exceptional Children, 2004.)

Method

Instrumentation

Two survey instruments were created to collect data samples of teachers and paraprofessionals relative to the paraprofessionals' knowledge and skills. Survey items targeted:

- Demographic data (section I),
- Perceptions of paraprofessionals' compliance with NCLB requirements for paraprofessional qualifications (section II), and
- Perceptions of paraprofessionals' ability to assist in providing instruction (section III - see also Table 1).

Surveys were completed by paraprofessionals and their supervising teachers, which questioned the individual paraprofessional's qualifications and skills, rather than asking for general perceptions of paraprofessional qualifications and skills. This allowed for comparisons between individual teachers and their paraprofessionals, as well as group trends. Comparisons were also made between responses from paraprofessionals with two years or more of higher education, and those with only a high school diploma or equivalency.

The two instruments were essentially the same, except that one asked for the teacher's opinion of the paraprofessional's compliance and abilities, and the other investigated the paraprofessional's opinion of his or her own compliance and abilities. For example, where the teacher responded to the statement, "The paraprofessional I supervise implements lesson plans with the guidance of a teacher," the corresponding statement for paraprofessional response was phrased as, "I implement lesson plans with the guidance of a teacher." Tables 2 and 3 detail sections II and III of the survey (paraprofessional version), which address these perceptions. Responses to items in these sections were based on a Likert-type scale. However, a 4-point rather than the usual 5-point scale was used, to force respondents to choose on one side of the question or the other. Each item was a statement, and the four response options were Agree, Partial agree, Partial disagree and Disagree. There were no open-ended responses.

Table 2 Survey Items, Section II (Paraprofessional Version)

Section II. Defining highly qualified paraprofessionals		Yes	No
12*. I understand the requirements for me to be considered highly qualified as a paraprofessional according to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001			
13. I am highly qualified according to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001	Agree	Partial Agree	Partial Disagree
If you answered YES to question 13 skip questions 14 and 15.			
14. If no, I am working on meeting the highly qualified requirements according to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.			
15. I agree/disagree with No Child Left Behind paraprofessional requirements. (Mark the box that fills in the blank)			
16. I am working on the following requirements to meet the No Child Left Behind paraprofessional requirements.	ParaPro	Portfolio	Associate Degree / 2 Years Higher Education

*Numbering matches the survey given to teachers and paraprofessionals.

The five items in Section II examined perceptions of whether the paraprofessional was highly qualified (or working towards that status). The twenty-one items in Section III explored perceptions of whether paraprofessionals had received training in the various areas covered by the four CEC standards, which were the focus of the section. For each area, there were questions on:

- whether training had been received,
- whether the paraprofessional had sufficient skills, knowledge or understanding in that area, and
- whether the paraprofessional was able to implement appropriate strategies or demonstrate appropriate behaviors in that area.

Questions relating to any one area were intermingled with questions from other areas rather than group together.

Table 3 Survey items, Section III Paraprofessional Version)

Section III. Roles and responsibilities
17. I have received training in how to implement curriculum programs and instructional activities for students with special needs
18. I implement lesson plans with the guidance of a teacher.
19. I have the skills to use instructional strategies to increase the individuals' independence and confidence.
20. I have a basic understanding of the educational programs and instructional activities utilized during instruction.
21. I feel that I have adequate knowledge of the subject matter to assist in instruction.
22. I have received training in basic instructional and remedial strategies, materials, and technologies to assist in the instruction of students.
23. I prepare and organize materials to support teaching and learning as directed by a teacher.
24. I have the skills to assist in adapting instructional strategies and materials as directed by a teacher.
25. I have been trained in how to follow lesson plans and how to prepare and organize materials to support teaching and learning.
26. I have the skills to use instructional strategies to integrate the instructional objectives into various settings.
27. I have adequate knowledge of the curriculum to assist in instruction.
28. I plan and arrange lesson materials as directed by a teacher.
29. I have the skills to apply behavioral strategies in managing student behavior.
30. I have received training on the rules and procedural safeguards regarding the management of behaviors of individuals with exceptional learning needs.
31. I have the skills to use instructional strategies that promote the learner's independence.
32. I have received training on implementing strategies to assist in the development of social skills in various learning environments.

33. I have the skills to promote social skills in a variety of settings.

34. I have the skills to implement behavioral strategies to maintain a safe, healthy learning environment for students.

35. I have the skills to use instructional/remedial strategies in adapting instructional objectives as directed by a teacher.

36. I follow written lesson plans and seek clarifications from a teacher as needed.

37. I have the skills to use strategies in a variety of settings, to assist in the development of social skills as directed by a teacher.

Initially, each instrument was field-tested with paraprofessionals and teachers who were not included as part of the data collection phase of the study. Feedback received from the first field-test indicated that only a few minor changes needed to be made to add clarity. First field-test surveys were also examined for agreement between responses from teacher-paraprofessional pairs. Agreement was at a 70% level or higher, which was felt to be a sufficiently rigorous standard to assume clarity of intent for each question. A second field test with the revised survey confirmed the results from the first field test and allowed an estimate to be made of average completion time: eight minutes.

Participants

Participants were selected from a list of 225 Title I schools in Utah. These were school-wide Title I programs (TI-SWP), with forty percent or more of students qualifying for free or reduced school lunch, as per Title I requirements (Title I, sec. 1114). Within these schools, all students - regardless of socio-economic status - are eligible for Title I services. A stratified random sample generated twelve TI-SWPs, six elementary and six secondary. Within each of those schools, participants were selected who worked in a variety of special education settings (resource, self-contained, inclusion, or general education with special education support). This totaled thirty participants (fifteen paraprofessionals and their fifteen supervising teachers). Participant demographics are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4 Demographics of Survey Respondents

	Number of teacher respondents	Number of paraprofessional respondents
Gender		
Male	2	2
Female	13	13
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	15	14
Hispanic	0	1
Age range		
18 - 35	7	4
36 - 55	7	7
56 or older	1	4
Highest level of education		
High School Diploma/equivalent		9
2 years of higher education*		2
Associate degree	15	1
Bachelor degree or higher (Masters degree)	(5)	3
Years of classroom experience		
0 - 5 years	6	7
6 - 10 years	3	2
11 or more years	6	6
In-service training per school year		
0 - 10 hours		4
11 - 20 hours		8
21 or more hours		3

Training received as supervisor of paraprofessionals		
Yes	13	
No	2	

* defined as 48 semester credit hours in Utah.

Table 5 Understanding of and Compliance with the Paraprofessional Requirements of NCLB

Question 12. Respondent understands NCLB requirements				
	Paraprofessional Group 1	Supervising Teacher (Group 1)	Paraprofessional Group 2	Supervising Teacher (Group 2)
Yes	4 (45%)	6 (67%)	5 (83%)	4 (67%)
No	5 (55%)	3 (33%)	1 (17%)	2 (33%)
Question 13. Paraprofessional is highly qualified				
Yes	3	3*	5	4
No	6	5*	1	2
Question 14. Paraprofessional is working towards meeting highly qualified status				
Agree	5	4		
Partial Agree	0	1		
Partial Disagree	1	1		
Disagree	0	0		
Question 15. Respondent agrees with NCLB requirements for paraprofessionals				
Agree	1*	0*		
Partial Agree	3*	5*		
Partial Disagree	1*	0*		
Disagree	1*	1*		
Question 16: Route selected by paraprofessional to meet highly qualified status				
ParaPro	2*	1*		
Portfolio	4*	4*		
Associate degree/ 2 yrs of higher ed.	2*	1*		

- Where the number of responses to any one item does not add up to the expected figure, this denotes instances of “no response” or multiple responses.

Results

Section 2: Compliance with NCLB

The participating paraprofessionals were divided into two groups according to the level of their qualifications: Group 1 - High School diploma or equivalency; and Group 2 - at least 2 years of higher education. This allowed examination for possible differences in perception between groups of paraprofessionals according to levels of qualification. Four questions in this section of the survey queried the paraprofessional's current status in relation to NCLB (see Table 5).

As table 5 shows, approximately half of Group 1 paraprofessionals and all but one of Group 2 paraprofessionals felt that they understood the requirements of NCLB (Question 12). Teachers in Group 1 were somewhat more confident of their own understanding than that of their paraprofessionals; those in Group 2 somewhat less confident than their paraprofessionals. This difference would have been masked the results if they had been combined and reported for Groups 1 and 2.

With regard to whether the paraprofessional would be considered "highly qualified" according to NCLB requirements (question 13), thirty-three percent of both teachers and paraprofessionals in Group 1 perceived the paraprofessional to be highly qualified. In Group 2, the majority of paraprofessionals and two-thirds of teachers saw the paraprofessional as highly qualified as per NCLB. Questions 14 to 16 were to be answered only by those who considered that the paraprofessional did not meet the requirements for highly qualified status. Of the six paraprofessionals in Group 1 who responded in this way, five stated that they were working towards status (Question 14), as did four of their teachers. Question 15 asked respondents whether they agreed with the requirements of NCLB. The majority of paraprofessionals (67%) in Group 1 did agree, although this agreement was largely "partial;" eighty-four percent of their teachers also expressed partial agreement with the NCLB requirements. The last question, question 16, in this section asked Group 1 participants which route they were using to meet highly qualified status. Of the paraprofessionals who responded, four stated that they had opted for the portfolio, and two each for the *Parapro* test, and the higher education route. Thus, some respondents were using more than one route. Of the teachers who responded, four stated that their paraprofessional had opted for a portfolio, one that the paraprofessional had opted for the *ParaPro*, and one for the higher education route.

Section 3: Instructional abilities

Responses to items in this section were all on a 4 point Likert-type scale (Agree, Partial agree, Partial disagree, Disagree). Results for section 3 items report the agreements between paraprofessionals and their supervising teachers. To measure agreement between teachers and paraprofessionals in the sample, responses were subjected to the following formula: $\text{agreements} / (\text{agreements} + \text{disagreements}) \times 100$. However, percentage agreement is calculated for pairs (a paraprofessional and his or her supervising teacher). Table 6 shows the percentage agreements for each of the items in this section.

Table 6. Percentage agreement between teachers and their paraprofessionals on items in Section III.

Survey questions and CEC standards	Agreement between teacher and associated paraprofessional
Standard 1: Foundations	
17. Training on how to implement curriculum programs and instructional activities	60%
21. Has knowledge of subject matter	60%
27. Has knowledge of curriculum,	66%
Standard 4: Instructional strategies	
22. Training in basic instructional and remedial strategies	33%
26. Use instructional strategies to integrate instructional objectives into various settings	46%
31. Use instructional strategies to promote learner independence	73%
19. Use instructional strategies to increase learner independence	66%
35. Use instructional/remedial strategies to adapt instructional objectives	60%
24. Assist in adapting instructional strategies	
Standard 5: Learning environments/social interactions	
32. Training on implementing strategies to assist in the development of social skills	53%
30. Training on the rules/ procedural safeguards re. the management of behaviors	26%
33. Promote social skills	73%
37. Use strategies to develop social skills	73%
34. Implement behavioral strategies	60%
29. Apply behavioral strategies	40%
Standard 7: Instructional planning	
25. Trained in how to follow lesson plans and how to prepare	60%

and organize materials	
18. Implement lesson plans with guidance of a teacher	80%
36. Follow written lesson plans and seek clarification	66%
23. Prepare and organize teaching materials	80%
28. Plan and arrange lesson materials	73%

Of the twenty statements to which paraprofessionals and their supervising teachers responded on the 4-point Likert-type scale, 70% agreement or higher was evident for only 6 of the pairs' responses. Four of these represented two sets of paired questions (i.e. questions that investigated the same issue but were phrased differently): one relating to promoting social skills, the other relating to the preparation of lesson materials. The other two responses that met or exceeded the 70% level related to two separate issues, i.e. the level of agreement between teachers and their paraprofessionals was inconsistent on these issues, with 70% or higher for one of the paired questions but lower for the associated paired questions. Thus, although agreement on responses to question 19 (use of instructional strategies to promote learner independence) exceeded the 70% level, agreement for its partner question (31) was only 33%. Likewise, although agreement for question 18 (implement lesson plans with guidance of a teacher) was at 80%, agreement for its partner question (question 36) was only at 66%. Responses to questions relating to CEC Standard 1 (Foundations) all failed to meet the 70% level.

Discussion

The questions of broad interest for this study were:

1. Do paraprofessionals meet the requirements of NCLB for "highly qualified" status? (or are they working towards that status?)
2. Have paraprofessionals received training in various aspects of instruction?
3. Do paraprofessionals have the knowledge, understanding and skills to carry out a variety of instructional tasks?

These questions were translated into a survey investigating the perceptions of paraprofessionals and their supervising teachers, as to whether the individual paraprofessionals met the requirements and had the necessary training and skills. Of particular interest was the level of agreement between teachers and paraprofessionals on these points. We will discuss each of the sections of the survey in light of the reported results and the issues they raise.

Section I: Demographics

Gender and ethnicity distribution for survey respondents present few surprises as the majority of paraprofessionals in the US are female, and in Utah, as with all states, few ethnic minority groups are as yet represented in the teaching profession despite a growing minority population. In these aspects, this sample can therefore be taken as representative of the larger population of teachers and paraprofessionals in Utah.

Section II: Defining highly qualified paraprofessionals

In Table 6, thirty-three percent of both teachers and paraprofessionals in Group 1 perceived the paraprofessional to be highly qualified according to NCLB requirements. This is a direct contradiction to their placement in Group 1, and to the NCLB "highly qualified" standards. They were placed in Group 1 because they had no post-secondary education (although this grouping was of course unknown to them and only used for data

analysis). In Group 2, only two-thirds of teachers and not all paraprofessionals considered that the paraprofessional met the NCLB requirement even though all of these paraprofessionals had at least two years of higher education (the requirement for highly qualified status as well as the criterion for being included in Group 2). Of course, responses to Question 12 provide a context for these and other questions relating to NCLB. Only 45% of Group 1 paraprofessionals and 67% of their teachers claimed to understand NCLB; paraprofessionals and teachers from Group 2 were more optimistic about their understanding. However, for both groups this understanding must be questioned, given their responses to the question of whether the paraprofessional met the requirements.

Responses to question 14 suggest that teachers may not be aware of steps which their paraprofessionals may be taking to enhance their qualifications and status. This is supported by the differential responses to Question 16, regarding the methods that the paraprofessionals were using to try and meet NCLB requirements. If a paraprofessional is working on a portfolio, it is likely to be quite evident to the supervising teacher, as the paraprofessional would be collecting physical evidence from her work in the classroom, and would need the teacher's input for items such as evaluations and work samples. However, if the paraprofessional were attending college classes in the evenings, this would not be as obvious to her supervising teacher. It is interesting to note that the paraprofessional respondents appear to be hedging their bets by pursuing more than one option. This may reflect indecision in relation to career paths, or a lack of confidence in their ability to meet a particular requirement within the given period. The large proportion of respondents using the portfolio route may presumably be explained by the fact that Utah recognizes the portfolio as a valid option for meeting NCLB, with the ParaPro test also being considered a valuable portfolio item.

Question 15 – limited to Group 1 respondents – investigated whether respondents agreed with the requirements of NCLB, although the word “agree” was open to interpretation. The majority of paraprofessionals did agree, but not whole-heartedly; the teachers who agreed were more numerous. The publication of NCLB requirements in 2001 caused considerable consternation among paraprofessionals and school administrators because of the practical difficulties inherent in requiring a low-paid workforce, often with family responsibilities, to pursue higher education, largely at their own expense. Although the third option of a “rigorous assessment” was allowed, the fact that no such assessment existed for paraprofessionals when NCLB was enacted did not appear particularly helpful. The swiftness with which several such assessments were produced and the extent to which States have adopted them is indicative of the perceived difficulty of meeting NCLB requirements in any other way. We speculate that the lack of full agreement with NCLB may be due to the related difficulties, as research evidence suggests that paraprofessionals were anxious to increase their skills and knowledge prior to the enactment of NCLB requirements and with little or no monetary incentive, (Morgan, Ashbaker and Allred, 2000)

Section III: Roles and responsibilities

Survey items in this section were based on the CEC Standards for Paraeducators, in particular standards 1,4, 5 and 7 which deal with Education foundations, Instructional strategies, Learning environments and social interactions, and Instructional planning. Results were reported in terms of agreement between individual teachers and their paraprofessionals on each of the items. Teachers and paraprofessionals typically work closely together, and all respondents worked in some form of special education setting, although these did range from self-contained units to support given in general education classrooms. Thus, not all pairs will have been working in close physical proximity. Percentage agreement on items in this section ranged from a low of twenty-six percent to a high of eighty percent, although as Table 6 shows a full two-thirds of items have an agreement rate of sixty percent or more.

Each item in Section III related to one of the four CEC Standards, but the several items associated with any one Standard were intermingled with items relating to other Standards. This allowed the researcher to address issues more than once, and to verify understanding by asking what was essentially the same question—re-phrased. Thus the five questions relating to Standard 7 (Instructional planning), for example, do not appear consecutively in the survey (being questions 18, 23, 25, 28 and 36). Within this group, the questions are also paired, with 18 and 36 relating to implementation of lesson plans, 23 and 28 relating to planning and organizing lesson materials. This pairing however is not evident from the percentage agreements between teachers and paraprofessionals on the extent to which the paraprofessionals meets the standard.

The items for which there is the closest match between agreements on such paired questions relate to the paraprofessional's ability to promote or help students develop social skills. Indeed, the percentages are not only identical but relatively high at seventy-three percent. Helping students to develop social skills is often an area of emphasis in special education settings, and some paraprofessionals may spend almost as much time on this as on their strictly instructional duties. This may account for the consistency and extent of agreement between teachers and their paraprofessionals. The paired questions with the largest discrepancy in agreement levels are those relating to the paraprofessional's ability to use instructional strategies to promote learner independence (questions 19 and 31). This can be tricky for paraprofessionals, whose work is based on the concept of supporting student learning. The extent to which they succeed in supporting the learning process without over-supporting the student (and therefore maintaining student dependence) naturally varies, as does the extent to which student independence is promoted and valued by individual teachers and paraprofessionals.

Of particular interest are the percentage agreements between teachers and their paraprofessionals on whether the paraprofessionals had received training in the various areas addressed by the four CEC standards:

- how to implement curriculum programs and instructional activities - 60% agreement;
- basic instructional and remedial strategies - 33% agreement;
- implementing strategies to assist in the development of social skills - 53% agreement;

- rules and procedural safeguards regarding the management of behaviors - 26% agreement; and
- how to follow lesson plans and how to prepare and organize materials - 60% agreement.

This re-visits an issue which has been raised elsewhere (Morgan and Hofmeister, 1997): that administrators must make training for paraprofessionals obvious and transparent, not only in terms of content, but also in the fact of its having taken place. Too often paraprofessionals receive mentoring or other on-the-job training from a teacher or other professional, and accord it little credibility, recognizing only off-site, formal training events as worthy of note. In light of the increasing number of due process hearings and OCR investigations relating to the adequacy of paraprofessional training and supervision (see Ashbaker & Minney, 2005) and the potential dire consequences to school districts and their students of complaints being upheld, paraprofessionals must be taught to recognize training when it is given. The true extent of the training received by these respondents was not ascertained. Nevertheless, the fact that they and their teachers could not agree on whether they had been trained or not should be of concern, particularly in these areas that are typical of the paraprofessional role. Of especial concern is the very low rate of agreement (26%) on whether the paraprofessional had received training in rules and procedural safeguards, a critical area for paraprofessionals working in special education settings.

Conclusion

The re-authorization in 2001 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, while not primarily focused on the qualifications of paraprofessionals, nevertheless included new and significantly higher levels of qualification for paraprofessionals working in Title I programs and schools. With No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the federal Government has for the first time set hiring requirements for paraprofessionals working in Federally funded schools. Paraprofessionals already employed prior to NCLB requirements were given until July 2006 to comply with the aforementioned requirements. The aim of this study was to investigate whether paraprofessionals do, indeed, meet the “highly qualified” status; are working towards such status; have received training in various aspects of instruction; and whether such paraprofessionals have the knowledge, understanding and skills to carry out a variety of instructional tasks. Furthermore, the study investigated the perceptions of teachers and paraprofessionals in order to ascertain whether they felt that they met the requirements of NCLB; whether they had received relevant training; and whether they felt they had the knowledge and skills requisite to carry out their assigned tasks.

The results of the study found that; paraprofessionals and teachers alike are unclear in their understanding of the requirements of NCLB; not all teachers and paraprofessionals agree with the requirements set forth by NCLB; not all paraprofessionals meet the requirements for ‘highly qualified’ status; some paraprofessionals are still working towards achieving such status; some paraprofessionals are utilizing more than one route to enable them to qualify; some teachers may not be aware of the steps which their

paraprofessionals may be taking to enhance their qualifications; there is discrepancy between some teachers and their paraprofessionals as to whether paraprofessionals are, indeed, “highly qualified” or not; and there is a discrepancy between teachers and paraprofessionals as to the instructional abilities of paraprofessionals.

The implications of these findings are, firstly, that there is clearly confusion between teachers and paraprofessionals as to what the requirements entail, exactly. Furthermore, there is discrepancy as to how to go about attaining the standards set forth by the Federal Government. Also, there is discrepancy between teachers and paraprofessionals as to how qualified the paraprofessionals actually are at present. In addition, most schools and school districts may not even be aware that their paraprofessionals may still need additional training. Indeed, some paraprofessionals did not know about the law to begin with.

Although, in accordance with NCLB, the time limit of July 2006 for paraprofessionals to be fully qualified has expired, the fact remains that the status of most paraprofessionals currently remains the same as before the NCLB law was enacted. Much confusion still remains as to the status of paraprofessionals with regards to their preparation and completion of the aforementioned requirements. Moreover, there does not seem to be a governing body responsible for ensuring that paraprofessionals are working towards, or, indeed, have completed the requirements.

Most paraprofessionals did not know about the law and few actually met the requirements to be considered under the appointed ‘highly qualified’ status – neither did they have sufficient time to meet such qualifications within the allotted timeframe. Clearly, many paraprofessionals are still struggling to qualify. Moreover, they are unsure as to whether they are on the right track in doing so. Teachers themselves are unclear as to the status of their paraprofessionals, thus, the question begs as to what is to be done to remedy this situation.

What does remain clear is the fact that much confusion still abounds between teachers and their paraprofessionals. Clearly, there should be a governing body accountable to see that the necessary requirements are met. Furthermore, that such a body should also be available to address, and to clarify for teachers and paraprofessionals any questions pertinent to qualification status.

Indeed, every effort should be made to assist paraprofessionals in their endeavour to meet the requirements necessary. Paraprofessionals are often unsung heroes who, while in the shadow of the teacher, are the teacher’s eyes, ears and right hand. They are in the classrooms, alongside the teachers, rendering essential and valuable assistance and support to both teachers, and their students.

The ultimate goal of schools is to provide a superior quality of education for all children and to prepare them to enter the wider world equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to sustain themselves and their families, and to be productive and contributing members of society. This is a lofty goal, thus, every effort should be made to ensure that

all school personnel are fully qualified to assist in this noble endeavour. Priority, therefore, must be given to the training and support of all personnel.

For the scope and purpose of this study, we present the needs of paraprofessionals. It is our hope that, as a result of this study, more assistance may become available for, and that better clarity will ensue for paraprofessionals. Failing this, we suggest that more research needs to be done in order to determine what is being done to assist paraprofessionals meet their training obligations. In addition, research needs to be done as to whom paraprofessionals should be accountable to, and, to whom they can turn for guidance and assistance in their training, and in reporting their progress.

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