SPECIAL EDUCATION PARAPROFESSIONALS: PERCEPTIONS OF PRESERVICE PREPARATION, SUPERVISION, AND ONGOING DEVELOPMENTAL TRAINING

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Many studies have investigated the adequacy of the preservice preparation of special education teachers but few studies have investigated the preparation of special education paraprofessionals. This study investigated one rural state that does not have an identified system of formal preservice training programs for special education paraprofessionals. Special education paraprofessionals in Maine were queried regarding their perceptions of (1) the adequacy of their training, (2) the effectiveness of their supervision, and (3) their current training needs in order for them to successfully meet their mandated role responsibilities to serve students with disabilities. Findings indicated that most respondents perceived that they were inadequately prepared for their duties and received minimal supervision. Findings also suggested that a very high level of consistency existed among the respondents with respect to their current most critical training needs. Findings further suggest that a major need exists for states and individual school districts (1) to develop and enforce competency based requirements for the employment of special education paraprofessionals, (2) to provide opportunities for quality professional development for these individuals, and (3) to ensure that special education teachers are adequately trained to fulfill their mandated supervisory responsibilities with respect to paraprofessionals..

Economic factors during recent years have forced many school systems to consider alternative cost effective service delivery models to meet the needs of students with disabilities. For many systems this has contributed to the increased utilization of paraprofessionals (also referred to as *paraeducators, teacher aides or educational technicians*) in their efforts to meet these challenges (Deardorf, Glasenapp, Schalock, & Udell, 2007; Downning, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; Fenner, 2005; Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2003; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). It has long been believed that when properly trained and supervised, paraprofessionals could provide an efficient and cost effective way for supporting students with disabilities (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2006; Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; Etscheidt, 2005). Few would disagree that the increased demands for special education services, lack of certified special education teachers, emphasis on regular classroom placement (inclusion), and accountability factors driven by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) have influenced the ever-increasing role that paraprofessionals play in the delivery of educational services to students with disabilities (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark 2000; Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer 2003; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). This is especially evident in rural areas where cost-effective service delivery models and the dynamics of the efficiency of scale as it relates to student/teacher ratios when dealing with low incidence disabilities are unusually demanding (Bugaj 2002, as cited in Deardorf, 2007). Regrettably, prior research has shown that many paraprofessionals have not had much formal training in instructing students with disabilities, and further, contrary to IDEA requirements, they generally have received minimal supervision (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; Etscheidt, 2005; Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2002

The reauthorization of IDEA 2004 requires that states ensure that all personnel needed to provide special education services are adequately prepared and trained and, in addition, that paraprofessionals be appropriately supervised (IDEA 20 U.S.C. 1412(a) (14**).** IDEA addresses the issue of personnel standards by requiring states to address identified needs for inservice and preservice training to ensure that personnel, including paraprofessionals, possess the skills and knowledge necessary to meet the needs of students with disabilities. How this requirement was to be met was essentially left up to the

individual states. Picket (1999) reported that although IDEA required that states ensure that paraprofessionals are appropriately trained and supervised most states had not adequately addressed this issue. Picket further reported that IDEA regulations offer minimal guidance and direction as to what constitutes appropriate training and supervision to local schools. Some states have initiated standards for paraprofessionals (Education Commission of the States, 2006). However, many others have not.

States such as Minnesota, Utah, Vermont and Wisconsin have developed exemplary models for preservice and inservice training as well as for the supervision of paraprofessionals. However, no research could be found in the professional literature which suggests that training and supervisory practices for paraprofessionals has significantly changed within most states since the implementation of IDEA in 2004.

A number of states have been proactive and have developed extensive competency based programs supporting paraprofessionals, some going so far as mandating the completion of a formal certification programs as a condition for licensure. Other states have standards which are not as clear and are not necessarily competency based. As an example, Maine has certification standards for three levels of special education paraprofessionals who are called *Educational Technician I, II, III* (State of Maine. n.d.). All three levels contain education requirements, permitted responsibilities, and supervision requirements. See Figure 1.

Figure 1
Maine Department of Education
Educational Technician Requirements, Permitted Responsibilities, Required Supervision

Requirements	*Permitted Responsibilities*	*Required Supervision*
Educational Technician I: Hold a high school diploma or GED.	a) Review and reinforce learning previously introduced by the classroom teacher or appropriate content specialist, or assist in drill or practice activities; b)Perform non-instructional, non-evaluative functions; c)Assist in the preparation of instructional materials; and d)Provide classroom management functions.	a) Be assigned instructional duties that are directly supervised by the classroom teacher or appropriate content specialist in the classroom; or b) Serve under general administrative supervision when performing non-instructional student-related duties.
Educational Technician II: document a minimum of 60 credits of approved study in an educationally related field; or, for career and technical education authorization, document a minimum of two years of paid applied employment within the field of assignment.	a) Perform all of the duties of an Educational Technician I; and b) Introduce new learning preplanned in collaboration with the classroom teacher or appropriate content specialist.	a) Meet with the classroom/program teacher or appropriate content specialist and receive direction on a regular basis, whenever possible on a daily basis; b) Perform short-term instruction in small groups under the direct supervision of the teacher or appropriate content specialist in the classroom; or c) Conduct one-on-one or small group instruction with indirect supervision.
Educational Technician III: document a minimum of 90 credits of approved study in an educationally related field; or, for career and technical education authorization, document a minimum of three years of paid applied employment within the field of assignment.	a) Perform all of the duties of an Educational Technician I or II; b) Introduce new learning preplanned in consultation with the classroom teacher or appropriate content specialist; and c) Supervise small groups of students in community-based programs.	a) Meet with the classroom/program teacher or appropriate content area specialist and receive direction, whenever possible on a twice weekly basis; or b) Perform short-term instruction in small classes or in community-based programs with indirect supervision.

As the information contained in Figure 1 illustrates, each level of paraprofessional certification has specific educational requirements, permitted duties within that level of certification, and required supervision in the performance of those duties. Supervisory requirements range from direct supervision for an Educational Technician I to indirect supervision on a twice-weekly basis for an Education Technician III. However, none of the educational requirements stipulate any knowledge or competencies in the area of special education which could lead one to conclude that often the least qualified personnel are in a position of providing the majority of instruction and related services to

students presenting the most complex learning challenges (Brown, Farrington, Zeigler, Knight, & Ross, 1999; Etscheidt, 2005; Riggs & Mueller, 2001).

The use of paraprofessionals in the education of students with disabilities has not been without its controversies (Giangreco et al. 2002) questioned if it were not a double standard when regular education students receive instruction from certified teachers while, at the same time, many students with disabilities receive their instruction from paraprofessionals. Few would argue that special education paraprofessionals are being utilized as a key service delivery model for educating students with disabilities and that they are being given a high level of responsibility in this process -- frequently without much training or support.

As a result of this situation many legal issues and ethical concerns have emerged concerning the adequacy of paraprofessionals' supervision and training (Etscheidt, 2005). Among the most prominent of these concerns expressed in the literature include:

- Least qualified individuals, paraprofessional, often have primary teaching responsibilities for the most challenging students;
- The most complex teaching strategies often are implemented by untrained or poorly trained paraprofessionals;
- Paraprofessionals often lack academic qualifications and competencies for the performance of their duties;
- Special education teachers often are untrained, undertrained, or are hesitant to direct or supervise paraprofessionals (Brown, Farrington, Ziegler, Knight, & Ross, 1999; Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2001; Giangreco & Broer, 2003; Marks, Shrader & Levine, 1999; Mueller 2002; Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay & Stahl, 2001).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of paraprofessionals in a rural state, Maine, relative to (1) the adequacy of their past training, (2) the preparation for the instruction of current students, (3) the adequacy of their supervision, (4) the effectiveness of that supervision and, (5) their perceived training needs.

Method

Initial Preparation:

A review of the literature was conducted to identify factors, issues and concerns of special education paraprofessionals with respect to their roles, responsibilities, preparation, supervision and perceived training needs. In addition several interviews were held with practicing paraprofessionals, special education teachers, and special education directors to solicit their opinions and suggestions regarding the current status and condition of paraprofessionals in Maine public schools. Paraprofessionals were queried as part of an ongoing staff development program delivered by the author as well as the special education teachers and directors from the 7 school districts in which they were employed. Based upon that information a draft survey instrument was developed.

The draft instrument was reviewed by University of Maine faculty members for clarity, relevancy, and improvements relative to construction. Upon completion of this review and the changes that resulted from such, a further revised instrument was developed and sent to 25 practicing paraprofessionals as part of a *pilot study*. All 25 participants in the pilot phase completed and returned the instrument. Upon review of all comments and suggestions provided by these participants a 91 item instrument was developed and titled *Maine Special Education Technicians Survey (SETS)* (Breton, 2009)

Participants

In the fall of 2008 the Maine Department of Education listed 5,430 paraprofessionals (called *education technicians*) endorsed as working in Maine public schools. These educational technicians were classified in three categories: *Education Technician I* (n=1,368), *Education Technician II* (n=1,776), and *Education Technician III* (n=2,286). A mailing list of the public school K-12 *Educational Technicians* was obtained from the Maine Department of Education. In January 2009 the survey instrument (SETS) was mailed to a random stratified sample of 750 individuals who were listed as holding a paraprofessional (*education technician)* endorsement.

Instrumentation

The instrument developed for this study (*Special Education Technicians Survey (SETS)* consisted of

four major parts: (1) basic demographics including training, experience, and current role and responsibilities; (2) perceptions of the extent and usefulness of supervision and performance evaluation by regular education and special education teachers; (3) perceptions regarding current knowledge level required to perform their duties; and (4) perceptions regarding recent training, and perceptions of current training needs.

The ten page SETS instrument solicited responses to 91 objective items. Major portions of the instrument utilized a 5-point Likert- type scale to assess respondents' perceptions. It also provided the opportunity for respondents' commentary and recommendations regarding topics for additional training and recommendations for improving services to their students with special needs. Potential respondents were guaranteed that their responses would be treated with total confidentiality and that only aggregate data would be reported. However, all potential respondents were given the *opportunity* to include their names and contact information on the bottom of the survey form should they wish to receive a copy of the final study report.

Results

Procedures for Reporting and Analyzing Data:

Of the 750 *SETS* questionnaires that were sent to special education technicians throughout Maine, two hundred and sixty (260) survey forms were returned. Two survey forms were rejected due to lack of sufficient information. Thus, the final study sample consisted of 258 respondents, representing a return rate of 34 percent (34%). Returned questionnaires were coded, tabulated, and entered into a program written utilizing the *SPSS* (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) system at the University of Maine at Presque Isle.

Since the information gathered from the *SETS* was essentially descriptive in nature it was decided that simple and combined percentage presentations and rank ordering, where appropriate, would most efficiently and effectively portray the significance of collected dated. Also, it was determined that this particular format chosen to present the data would allow for the most meaningful understanding and reflection of the information by readers. Data from the survey were computed with alpha set at .05. Mean scores were computed and group means were analyzed using *ANOVA* to test differences among subgroups. The percentage values reported throughout this article reflect the percent of responses actually provided for a given variable *(valid percent).* A respondent's blank response was recorded as *missing data.*

In attempting to analyze and report the data (e.g., response patterns, trends, etc.) in the most meaningful manner, certain arbitrary decisions were made by the researcher. For example, rather than simply report respondents' responses in terms of raw data, certain Likert-scale items were combined in constructing various tables. As an illustration, in the section asking respondents to assess *how helpful* they perceived the consultation that they received from the special education teacher regarding direct student instruction, the *not helpful* and *somewhat helpful* categories were combined and treated as one category. Thus, the total percentage of paraprofessionals who viewed a specific variable in either of these two categories was combined and *rank orders* were established upon this procedure.

Limitations of the Study:

As with most survey research, the issue of *generalization of the findings* is posed. In this study, for example, the question arises, *how generalized are the perceptions of the study sample respondents to the population of the education technicians in Maine?* It should be noted that the sample return approximated the total population percentage in regard to the level of certification Tech I-II-III with a higher percentage return rate for Tech III. Also, even though the response rate for this study (34%) was considered very good, given the length and complexity of the survey instrument, the fact remains that approximately two-thirds of those who were sent the survey did not respond.

Finally, as suggested by some, *attitudinal research* can be somewhat suspect given that the results obtained might be considered to be reflective of respondents' biases, hidden agendas, and/or lack of accurate or inadequate information rather than representing reality. Much of the information contained in this study reflects *perceptions* of the respondents and it is recognized that they *may* not necessarily represent the reality of situations. The limitations cited above are recognized by the investigator as possibly existing in this study, and readers are cautioned against attempting to over-generalize its results.

Personal, Professional, and Demographic Data:
Information was compiled into several categories to help provide a description of the study participants. These categories include, gender, age, level of education, level of certification, and years of experience as a paraprofessional. This information is contained in Table 1.

Table 1
Personal and Professional Profile of Respondents

Category	Number	Percentage of Respondents
Gender		
Male	40	15.5%
Female	218	84.5%
Total	258	100%
Age		
20-29	24	9.3%
30-39	38	14.9%
40-45	86	33.3%
50+	110	42.7%
Total	258	100%
Level of Education		
High School	29	11.2%
Non Degree College	62	24.0%
Associate Degree	60	23.3%
Bachelor Degree	98	38%
Graduate Degree	9	3.5%
Total	258	100%
Type of Credential		
Technician I	57	22.1%
Technician II	59	22.9%
Technician III	142	55%
Total	258	100%
Years of Experience		
1	18	7.0%
2	31	12.0%
3	19	7.4%
4-6	51	19.8%
7-9	55	21.3%
10+	84	32.6%
Total	258	100%

An inspection of the information contained in Table 1 reveals that: (1) females by far outnumbered males in the sample population (females' n= 218, males n=40); (2) seventy-six percent (76%) of the respondents were over the age of 40; (3) 34.2% did not have a post-high school degree. In addition it was found that the majority of respondents (55.5%) were credentialed as an *Education Technician III*; and 73.7 % had more than four years of experience as an education technician.

Table 2
Gender Differences Between Education Technicians' Age, Education, Certification Level and Experience

Category	*Male*	*Female*
Age: 20-29	6 (15.0%)	18 (8.3%)
30-30	6 (15.0%)	32 (14.7%)
40-49	11 (27.5%)	75 (34.3%)
50+	17 (42.5%)	93 (42.7%)
Total	**40 (100%)**	**218 (100%)**
Education: High School	0 (0%)	29 (13.4%)
Non Degree College	9 (22.5%)	53 (24.3%)
Associate Degree	7 (17.5%)	53 (24.3%)
Bachelor Degree	23 (57.5%)	75 (34.4%)
Graduate Degree	1 (2.5%)	8 (3.6%)
Total	**40 (100%**	**218 (100%)**
Current Maine Certification	3 (7.5%)	54 (24.8%)

No discernable difference in age were found between the genders, but when looking at other variables some gender differences were evident: (1) males (77.5%) were more likely to hold a post-high school degree than were females (62.3%); (2) females (28.4%) were far more likely to hold an Education

Technician I certification than were males (7.5%); and (3) males (72.5%) were more likely to hold an *Education Technician III* credential than were females (51.8%). *See Table 2 previous page.*

Frequency and Effectiveness of Supervision and Instructional Consultation:
Both federal and state regulations mandate that special education paraprofessionals be appropriately supervised in the performance of their duties. As a component of this study respondents were asked to respond to how often they were evaluated by the special education teacher, how often they received consultation from the special education teacher regarding the direct instruction of students, and how helpful were those activities with respect to their job performance. Participant responses to these questions are presented in Tables 3, 4, and 5).

Table 3
Frequency of Performance Evaluation of Technicians by Special Education Teacher

Frequency	*Technician I*	*Technician II*	*Technician III*	*Total*
Weekly	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.7%)	1 (0.4%)
Twice Monthly	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.7%)	1 (0.4%)
Monthly	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Quarterly	1 (1.8%)	1 (0.7%)	1 (0.7%)	3 (1.2%)
Semi-Annually	4 (7.0%)	5 (8.5%)	9 (6.3%)	18 (7.0%)
Annually	29 (50.9%)	33 (55.9%)	71 (50.0%)	133 (51.6%)
Never	23 (40.4%)	20 (33.9%)	59 (41.5%)	102 (39.5%)
Total	57 (100%)	59 (100%)	142 (100%)	258 (100%)

As the information contained in Table 3 shows, a substantial percentage (39.5%) of education technicians in all certification categories report that they *never* are evaluated by the special education teacher (Tech I - 40.4%); Tech II - 33.9%; and Tech III- 41.5%.). One might infer from this finding that those education technicians with the *least* amount of training (Education Technicians I and Education Technicians II) receive the *least* amount of evaluation with respect to their job performance. One could argue that these are the individuals who should be receiving the most feedback regarding their job performance.

How often do education technicians receive consultation from their special education teachers regarding the *direct* instruction of their students? Respondents' perceptions regarding this question are contained in Table 4.

Table 4
Frequency of Special Education Teacher Consultation Regarding Direct Student Instruction by Type of Education Technician Certification

Frequency	*Technician I*	*Technician II*	*Technician III*	*Total*
Daily	16 (28.1%)	21 (35.6%)	37 (26.1%)	74 (28.7%)
Weekly	21 (36.8%)	18 (30.5%)	43 (30.3%)	82 (31.8%)
Twice Monthly	0 (0%)	3 (5.1%)	13 (9.2%)	16 (6.2%)
Monthly	6 (10.5%)	4 (6.8%)	6 (4.2%)	16 (6.2%)
Quarterly	5 (8.8%)	1 (1.7%)	7 (4.9%)	13 (5.0%)
Semi-Annually	1(1.8%)	2 (3.4%)	4 (2.8%)	7 (2.7%)
Annually	1(1.8%)	1(1.7%)	7 (4.9%)	9(3.5%)
Never	7 (12.3%)	9 (15.3%)	25 (17.6%)	41 (15.9%)
Total	57 (100%)	59 (100%)	142 (100%)	258 (100%)

As can be seen from the information represented in Table 4, the frequency of special education teacher and paraprofessional consultation with respect to direct student instruction activities appears quite high

(60.5% of the respondents indicated that they had interaction with their special education teacher at least on a weekly basis). Nevertheless, a further inspection of Table 4 reveals a finding that could be considered as quite disturbing. Forty-one respondents (15.9%) indicated that they *never* received consultation regarding the direct instruction of their students. In analyzing whether or not any differences existed among the *certification levels* of respondents with respect to the frequency of consultation, no *substantial* difference were found with approximately 65% (64.9%) of Education Technicians I reported receiving consultation regarding direct student instruction on a *weekly* or *daily* basis, while 66.1% of Education Technicians II and 56.4% of Education Technicians III respondents reported receiving this type of consultation on either a weekly or daily basis.

How helpful did the study participants perceive the consultation that they received from their special education teacher regarding direct instruction activities for their students? Their responses to this question are included in Table 5.

Table 5
Education Technicians Perceptions: Helpfulness of Special Education Teacher Consultation Regarding Direct Student Instruction

Degree of Helpfulness	*Technician I*	*Technician II*	*Technician III*	*Total*
Not Helpful	2 (4.0%)	1 (2.0%)	5 (4.3%)	8 (3.7%)
Somewhat Helpful	5 (10.0%)	3 (6.0%)	17 (14.5%)	25 (11.5%)
Helpful	19 (38.0%)	17 (34.0%)	45 (38.5%)	81 (37.3%)
Very Helpful	14 (28.0%)	17 (34.0%)	34 (29.1%)	65 (30.0%)
Extremelly Helpful	10 (20.0%)	12 (24.0%)	16 (13.7%)	38 (17.5%)
Total	50 (100%)	50 (100%)	117 (100%)	217 (100%)

* Table includes responses from only those participants who indicated they had received consultation regarding Direct Student Instruction

As the information in Table 5 shows, the 217 respondents who did receive some sort of consultation involving direct instruction with their assigned students, 33 (15.2%) indicated that this consultation was *less than helpful*. Overall, of the 74 respondents (41 who did not receive consultation at all and the 33 whose consultation was viewed as less than helpful) over a quarter of them (28.7%) reported that they had *unsatisfactory* or *no* consultation regarding the direct instruction activities for their students that they received from their special education teachers. Conversely, on a much more positive note, the majority of respondents (84.8%) who did receive consultation on direct instruction judged this activity to be *helpful* to *extremely helpful* (Education Technicians I - 86%; Education Technicians - II 92%; and Education Technicians III - 80.5%).

Preparation and Perceived Training Needs

In a previous study, Trautmen (2004) reported that the preservice preparation and ongoing development of special education paraprofessionals was inadequate. In general, special education paraprofessionals obtained their preparation for their occupation through limited preservice activities, on the job training, and inservice programs. This study investigated the extent and perceptions of the value of prior preparation and training of respondents as well as their perceived needs regarding current training.

Table 6
Perceptions of Respondents Regarding Adequacy of their Preservice Preparation by Level of Certification

Level of Adequacy	*Technician I*	*Technician II*	*Technician III*	*Total*
Very Poor	3 (5.3%)	1 (1.7%)	12 (8.5%)	16 (6.2%)
Poor	9 (15.8%)	10 (16.9%)	22 (15.6%)	41 (16.0%)
Fair	18 (31.6%)	13 (22.0%)	31 (22.0%)	62 (24.1%)
Good	19 (33.3%)	19 (49.2%)	45 (31.9%)	93 (36.2%)
Excellent	8 (14.0%)	6 (10.2%)	31 (22.0%)	45 (17.5%)
Total	57 (100%)	59 (100%)	141 (100%)	257 (100%)

Study participants were asked to assess their level of satisfaction with their previous training regarding their ability to carry out the duties and responsibilities of their current position. Respondents were asked to assess the adequacy of their previous preparation on a scale from (1) *very poor* to (5*) excellent*. Responses to this query are presented in Table 6 above.

As can be seen from information contained in Table 6, when asked about the adequacy of their prior training activities, 46.3 percent of the respondents indicated that their perception of the adequacy of their training to instruct their students was *very poor* to *fair*. The greatest levels of dissatisfaction with their previous training were reported by Educational Technicians I (52.7%). Education Technicians II (40.6%) and Education Technicians III (46.1%) reported a lesser degree of satisfaction with their previous training. Nevertheless, it is suggested that these overall results provide evidence that almost one-half (46.3%) of the participants assessed their previous preparation as being only *fair* or better.

When asked if they had received the necessary on the job training to work with their students 75 (29.0%) indicated that they were uncertain to strongly disagree with that statement. This was fairly consistent among the three level of certification with Technician I's (26.4%) indicating minimal training, Technician II's (22.1%) and Technician III's (33.1%).

Participants were asked to indicate how many clock hours of professional inservice development training that they received during the past 12 months. Their responses to this question are summarized in Table 7.

Table 7
Number of Clock Hours of Training Received by Respondents During Past 12 Months by Level of Certification

Clock Hours of Inservice	*Technician I*	*Technician II*	*Technician III*	*Total*
None	3 (5.3%)	4 (6.8%)	22 (15.6%)	29 (11.3%)
1-2 hours	10 (17.5%)	8 (13.6%)	19 (13.5%)	37 (14.4%)
3-6 hours	8 (14.0%)	9 (15.3%)	13 (9.2%)	30 (11.7%)
7-9 hours	5 (8.8%)	7 (11.9%)	16 (11.3%)	28 (10.9%)
10+ hours	31 (54.4%)	31 (52.5%)	71 (50.4%)	133 (51.8%)
Total	57 (100%)	59 (100%)	141 (100%)	257 (100%)

As an examination of the information contained in Table 7 shows, 133 Education Technicians (51.8%) reported receiving ten or more hours of in-service training. However, what is particularly disturbing is that 37 Education Technicians (14.4%) indicated that they received only one-two hours of training while another 29 Education Technicians (11.3%) reported that they hadn't received any training at all.

These findings were surprising in that Maine school systems have 3-5 days each year dedicated to professional staff development. Upon further investigation, however, it was discovered that many school districts do not pay their paraprofessionals to attend staff development sessions as they do for the professional teaching staff. Clearly, this may explain why so many Education Technicians did not participate in in-service training programs even if they were in fact offered.

Perceived Current Training Needs
Respondents were provided with an opportunity to reply to the following open ended question: *The two most important topics in which I currently would like more training are the following:* Responses consisted of 378 items which were clustered, categorized and tabulated.

Overwhelmingly, the single topic for current needed training that was most frequently cited by Education Technicians was *dealing with student behavior, emotional, and social challenges.* One hundred and sixty-four (164) respondents (43.4%) cited this topic.

The second most cited topics were *issues dealing with special education rules and regulations* and the *use of technology and adaptive equipment* (n= 30; 7.9%) for each of these topics. *Reading instruction* was mentioned by 27 respondents (7.2%), while the topics: *information about autism* and *math*

i*nstruction* each were cited by 26 respondents 6.9%). Twenty-one (21) respondents (5.5%) mentioned *communication skills* as a topic for needed inservice training

It is clearly evident that the *primary* concern of Education Technicians who responded to the open-ended training was *how to work with students displaying behavioral, emotional, and/or social challenges.* This finding is not surprising if one takes into account that Education Technicians are typically assigned to work with students with the most challenging behaviors. This particular finding was further verified in another study question in which 63.5 per cent of the respondents indicated either a *major* (39.9%) or *critical* need (23.6%) when asked '*What are your training needs in assisting students with behavioral difficulties?*

In terms of personal*/professional demographics*, the profile characteristics of special education paraprofessionals have not appreciably changed since 2001 when a national survey conducted by SPeNSE found that the typical special education paraprofessional was a 44-year-old female with 6.5 years of experience in special education. The findings in this study of Maine paraprofessionals indicated 84 percent are female; 76 percent are age 40 or above; with 53.9 percent having more than 6 years of experience. One could speculate that for many of these individuals the position of paraprofessional represents a secondary income for the family and complements the schedule of mothers with school age children.

With respect to the issue of *evaluation and supervision*, it is implicit in the requirements of both NCLB and IDEA that paraprofessionals be formally supervised by qualified credentialed professionals. Results of this study indicated that a substantial number of participants (39.5%) stated that they never have had a performance evaluation. These findings are similar to those of Gerber et al. (2001) and Wallace (2003) suggesting that even with the strong wording contained in both NCLB and IDEA that little has changed with respect to the supervision of special education paraprofessionals during the past seven years.

With the current emphasis on teacher and student accountability regarding instruction, it is imperative that paraprofessionals, as key players in the academic programs for students with disabilities, be closely supervised in the performance of those duties. This might be particularly important in those schools in which the principle of full inclusion of students is practiced and in which the special education teacher functions *essentially as a case manager* overseeing the activities of many paraprofessionals who work with students in the regular classroom.

Special education paraprofessionals must not only be supervised in the performance of their duties but they also must be guided and consulted in the nuances of instruction for students with disabilities. Findings of this study indicate that 39.5 % of the respondents had a direct interaction with the special education teacher on a *less than weekly basis* and further that 15.9% reported that they *never* had received consultation on the direct instruction of students from their special education teacher. This finding leads one to conclude that many Education Technicians are essentially left on their own to perform their instructional duties with students.

In their review synopsis of relevant court and procedural guidance, Katsiyannis, Hodge, and Lanford (2000) found that only *appropriately* trained paraprofessionals *supervised* by *certified* trained special education personnel may assist in the provision of special education services to students. Thus, given this stipulation, one then, could reasonably raise the question, *are those students who are receiving much of their educational program from paraprofessionals who have been minimally supervised or evaluated by the special education teacher receiving an* appropriate *educational program?*

Training

IDEA 2004 stipulates that paraprofessionals may assist in the provision of special education only if they are *appropriately trained and supervised* (20 U.S.C. § 1412(a) (14)(b) (iii). Unfortunately IDEA does not provide specific guidance in what is deemed appropriate. IDEA states that *the qualifications must be consistent with any state approved or state-recognized certification, licensing, registration, or other comparable requirements that apply to the professional discipline in which those persons are providing special education or related services* (20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(14(b)(ii). Many states have established competency guidelines for entry level certification and continued training for paraprofessionals while other states have minimal qualifications which often are associated with post secondary courses or passing a standard examination such as PARAPRO.

Neither of these strategies indicate competency in instructing students with disabilities. This study found that 46.3 per cent of the respondents indicated that their perceptions of the adequacy of their initial training to instruct students with disabilities was within the *fair* to *very poor* range. When asked about additional training 29.1 per cent of the participants indicated that they were either *uncertain or strongly disagreed* that they had received the necessary training to work with their current students.

Findings of this study suggest that many special education paraprofessionals are not receiving adequate preservice and/or inservice training and supervision in order for them to perform their duties successfully. These findings are not especially new, having been reported in previous research conducted during the 1990s (e.g., French & Picket, 1997; Giangreco et al. (1997); Marks et al, 1999; Picket (1999). Among the major questions that these researchers asked in their investigations were the very same ones that were raised in this study – with the answers to these questions essentially being the same.

1. Do all state licensing agencies have standards to insure that special education paraprofessionals have the skills and competencies required to work with students with disabilities? *[No]*
2. Do special education paraprofessionals have adequate and appropriate preservice and inservice training opportunities? *[No]*
3. Are special education teachers adequately prepared to supervise and perform adequate and appropriate supervision with paraprofessionals? *[No]*

The public education community cannot deny that special education paraprofessionals have become an increasingly important part of the educational service delivery system for students with disabilities. However, as the findings in this study confirm, paraprofessionals frequently are given responsibilities for which they have not received adequate training. Thus, one could continue to argue that the least qualified school instructional personnel frequently are being used to provide primary instructional supports for students with the most complex educational needs and challenges.

This is a fundamental issue that must be addressed. The need for competent special education paraprofessionals presumably will become even greater as the requirements of NCLB and IDEA 2004 for increased student academic accountability become more entrenched within our educational systems. Similar to special education teachers, special education paraprofessionals increasingly will be required to demonstrate basic instructional competencies as determined by clearly defined standards.

All states currently have specific certification standards for special education teachers regarding clear mechanisms for demonstrating instructional competencies as well as regulations for their ongoing professional development. Yet, many states presently have very loose practices for paraprofessionals with respect to these same standards. Thus, it is suggested that, at the very minimum, the education credentialing agencies in *all states* develop specific basic entry level competencies for paraprofessionals that are based upon standards similar to those cited in *The CEC paraeducator standards workbook* developed by the Council for Exceptional Children (2004). In addition, it is recommended that state and local school agencies establish ongoing professional development opportunities for special education paraprofessionals. **S**tates such as Iowa, North Dakota, Utah and Wisconsin have established such training opportunities for paraprofessionals and it is suggested that other states might want to follow their lead in this regard.

Although IEP teams are responsible for the identification, placement, planning, and program design for students with disabilities, it is the special education teacher, as the professional, who is responsible for the instruction, assessment, and accountability factors in the students' educational programs. However, as these responsibilities increase and become more complex and time consuming for the special education teacher, it appears only reasonable to assume that special education paraprofessionals will be expected to play even a greater role than they do now with respect to the overall instructional service delivery system for students with disabilities. Thus, states and local education school districts must take the necessary steps to assure that special education paraprofessionals receive the appropriate and quality levels of supervision that will be required of them to perform their duties. Findings in this study confirmed previous research findings, indicating that many paraprofessionals receive minimal, or no, supervision and that the quality of that supervision frequently is inadequate.

Perhaps, as has been reported in several previous studies (Drecktrah, 2000; Etscheidt, 2005; French, 1998) the problem lies with the lack of knowledge and skills that many special education teachers

possess with respect to the supervision of paraprofessionals. If as French (2003) asserts, special education teachers have not been adequately trained in supervision, they should learn those strategies as part of their preservice training program. Although it is likely that preservice special education teacher preparation programs include components of supervision in their courses, it is evident from the results obtained in this study (and supported by other studies) that special education teachers either do not accept that role or are uncomfortable with performing that important function.

In conclusion, as the cost of special education services continue to increase rural school districts will be challenged in finding ways to cut costs and continue to offer equitable services. Few would disagree that in most rural school districts paraprofessionals will continue to play an ever-increasing role in the education of students with disabilities. Although many states have been proactive in developing programs and standards related to the professional qualifications of special education paraprofessionals findings of this and other studies suggest that many small rural states and local education agencies should take a vigorous proactive role in assuring that these vital personnel are qualified and supported by; (1) establishing and mandating competency based qualification standards; (2) ensuring the ongoing availability of quality pre-service and continuing inservice training opportunities; and (3) assuring that consistent appropriate and useful supervision mechanisms are in place. In order to insure that students with disabilities receive services from highly qualified paraprofessionals' state and local education agencies not currently having comprehensive standards will have to review the status quo relative to the role and function of special education paraprofessionals in their relative jurisdictions and make a commitment of resources necessary for change to occur. In these economic times this will indeed be a challenge. However, it is suggested that the end result of these efforts will justify the financial commitment by improving the quality and efficacy of special education paraprofessionals which will unquestionably improve the educational programming for all students with disabilities.

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