What Do Paraeducators in Inclusive Classrooms Say About Their Work? Analysis of National Survey Data and Follow-up Interviews in California

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Abstract

What advice do paraeducators offer regarding the work they do in inclusive classrooms? What barriers and benefits do paraeducators face? In this study, over 200 paraeducators from 38 different states in the USA volunteered to respond to a national survey. Their responses were corroborated in follow-up interviews with 27 different paraeducators at five California school sites in San Diego County. Recommendations for professional development are offered.

Keywords

paraeducators, k-12 students with disabilities, socio-economically and ethnically diverse schools, inclusive classroom strategies, mixed methods design

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Many paraeducators are working in classrooms that include students with disabilities, students who speak languages other than English, students who are at-risk for school failure, and students from culturally and ethnically diverse heritages. In this study, the term *paraeducators* refers to school employees who provide instructional support services under the direct supervision of a qualified teacher. The term has been used by Pickett and Gerlach (2003) who speak from the perspective of paraeducators themselves. We define *inclusive classroom* as a classroom where two or more educators have responsibility for teaching students with and without disabilities. Nevin, Villa, and Thousand (2008) emphasized that inclusive education is "a process where schools welcome, value, support, and empower all students in shared environments and experiences for the purpose of attaining the goals of education" (p. 2). However, not much is known about the role of paraeducators who work in inclusive classrooms.

What Do Researchers Say About Paraeducators in Inclusive Classrooms?

The authors searched for studies which related to paraeducators and inclusive education. One type of support that general education teachers have identified as essential for special education students in their classrooms has been extra classroom support in the form of paraeducators (Marks, Schrader, & Levine, 1999; Mueller & Murphy, 2001; Piletic, Davis, & Aschemeier, 2005; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). Other researchers have reported on university teacher preparation programs that recruit paraeducators with experiences in inclusive classrooms to complete special education certification programs (e.g., Littleton, 1998; Rueda & Monzo, 2002.)

Doyle (2002) suggested that paraeducators and their teachers should clearly articulate roles for 5 areas: lesson planning, delivery of instruction, proactive and reactive responses to students' behaviors, strategies to promote ongoing communication, and methods of student evaluation.

Pickett and Gerlach (2003) emphasized the supervisory needs of paraeducators in inclusive settings, especially within a collaborative team approach. With the steady movement toward general education being the preferred primary placement for students with disabilities, the paraeducator's role has transformed to being primarily instructional in nature, especially when supporting students in the general education setting (Giangreco, Smith, & Pinckney, 2006).

If you are a paraeducator, you may know that more and more paraprofessionals join the ranks every day. National statistics on paraeducators in the classroom indicate more than 525,000 are currently employed in full-time positions nationwide (NCES, 2000). Of that number, approximately 290,000 or 55% are employed in inclusive general and special education programs, self-contained or resource rooms, transition services, and early childhood settings serving children and youth with disabilities. Approximately 130,000 (nearly 25%) are assigned to multi-lingual, Title I, or other compensatory programs. The remaining 20% work in pre-school and elementary classrooms and other learning environments including libraries, media centers, and com-

puter laboratories.

The Survey and Interview

The survey was comprised of five sections: definitions of terms (i.e., paraeducator, inclusive classroom); demographics (items related to age, gender, ethnicity, linguistic diversity, preparation, prior experience in inclusive classrooms, prior employment or skills, classroom information on number of students with disabilities and socio-economic status of the neighborhood); items related to attitudes, beliefs, and actions to be rated on a five-point Likert scale; a series of open ended questions; and a section to solicit volunteers to be interviewed which was addressed separately from the survey to protect anonymity of respondents. (See Table 1 for sample items.)

Table 1: Sample Survey Items

Sample of Demographic Items

- What is your gender?
- In what state do you work?
- What is your ethnicity?
- Do you speak a language other than English?
- What is your preparation in working in inclusive classrooms?
- What are the types of disabilities that you work with?

Sample of Items to be Rated (1, not at all, to 5, a great deal)

To what extent have you used the following strategies in the inclusive classroom?

- Cooperative learning groups
- Individual tutoring
- Giving corrective feedback on assignments

Sample of Attitude Items to Rate (1, not at all, to 5, a great deal)

- I think that all students must do the same activity the same way.
- I know how to use flexible grouping in the inclusive classroom.

Sample of Items Related to Issues (yes, no)

- I have adequate time to plan with the teacher(s) that I work with.
- I need more training in order to be more effective with children with disabilities.
- When I work in inclusive classrooms, I receive supervision.

Sample of Open Ended Questions

- The most important part of the work that I do in inclusive classrooms is:
- To be a successful paraeducator in the inclusive classroom, you must know about:

Three things that I think other paraeducators should know about inclusive classrooms are:

A draft of the survey was field tested with a group of paraeducators who attended the 26th annual conference of the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Albuquerque, NM in May of 2007. The final survey instrument was available on a secure website and disseminated widely through the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals Newsletter (first in the summer and fall of 2007 and again in the spring of 2008). In ad-

dition, co-principal investigators in California and Florida supported in the dissemination of the survey to paraeducators known to work in inclusive classrooms.

To augment and substantiate the data from the national survey, a semi-structured open-ended interview process described by Bogdan and Biklen (1998) was implemented with California paraeducators. As shown in Table 2, interview questions asked paraeducators about (a) their belief system for inclusive education, (b) students and staff they worked with, (c) experiences they enjoyed, (d) strategies and methods they used, (e) benefits and barriers, and (f) advice.

Table 2: Interview Protocol

[Interviewers will thank the paraeducator, ask the paraeducator to sign the informed consent, ask permission to tape record the interview, and assure that anonymity will be provided in reporting interview results.]

1. Will you please tell a little about yourself and how you decided to become a paraeducator?
2. During your paraeducator experience this year, what assignments have you enjoyed the most?
3. What types of children with disabilities are in the inclusive classroom where you serve as paraeducator?
4. What strategies and methods have you found to be most helpful?
5. What does the concept 'inclusive education' mean to you?
6. In what ways do you practice inclusive education?
7. In your opinion, what facilitates you when you work with students with disabilities?
8. What are the major barriers that you face as a paraeducator?
9. What are the benefits that you have experienced as a paraeducator?
10. Is there anything else you want the research team to know?

The interviews were conducted by special education master's degree candidates at the convenience of the paraeducators (e.g., on their respective school sites). Interviews took approximately 15-20 minutes from the paraeducators' busy days, and were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

How were the Data Analyzed?

Survey responses from the paraeducators were assigned a code in order to protect individual anonymity. During data analysis, researchers tracked the paraeducators' responses on the surveys, collated the ratings as well as the open-ended questions, and checked the transcripts of the interviews with the interviewees so as to verify their comments. Using a recursive process, the research-

ers continuously analyzed the data collected from the national survey items, responses to open-ended questions on the survey, and interviews. To identify common themes regarding the role of paraeducators in inclusive classrooms, the analytic induction approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) was used to compare findings from the two sources (interviews and surveys). The process of constant comparison of data led to the gradual emergence of patterns.

Who Participated?

A total of 202 paraeducators responded to the national survey. The majority of survey respondents were females between 29-38 years of age from 38 of the 50 states in the USA. Respondents came from diverse regions of the United States: the Northeast (e.g., Connecticut, Vermont), Southeast (e.g., Florida, Louisiana), the Northwest (e.g., Washington, Wyoming), the Midwest (Kansas, Michigan, Wisconsin, South Dakota), the Southwest (Arizona, New Mexico), and the West Coast (California). Although the 68% of respondents reported their ethnicity as white (non-Hispanic), 11% were African Americans, 9% were Hispanic, and 1% identified themselves as American Indian/Native Alaskan (Dakota Sioux, Laguna, Navajo). Nearly 20% reported they could speak a language other than English, predominantly Spanish, although others spoke German, Swahili, Creole, and Portuguese. Fifty-four percent of respondents reported they had a friend or family member with a disability (for example, one person specified her son and another, her friend's daughter).

The California interviewees

The focus of the California-based research team was to (a) develop action research skills of masters degree candidates in special education and (b) develop partnerships between university and local school districts to create initial preparation and career ladder options for paraeducators. The follow-up interviews were conducted at school sites of the participating student researchers. Thus, the California interviewees comprised an interview sample. For the California sample, a total of 27 paraeducators were interviewed. The interview participants were comprised of a convenience sample who worked at the same schools as members of the research team. All California interviewees were women who had at least five years experience in the field and had one to five hours of preparation and training. Results showed that 30% spoke a language other than English (compared to less than 20% nationally). The 27 paraeducators worked at five school sites within San Diego County. Included were two high school sites (one with a predominantly ethnically diverse population (Hispanic, African American, Asian) and three elementary schools (2 with predominantly ethnically and linguistically diverse populations).

Classroom settings

The types of the classrooms in which survey respondents worked include special education, general education, and combined classrooms (e.g., special education and general education teams) at both the elementary and secondary levels. One respondent reported working in early childhood, elementary, and special education classrooms. Regarding the socio-economic status (SES) of the neighborhood in which their respective schools were located, 58% of respondents reported they worked in low-SES neighborhoods while fewer said they worked in middle-SES neighborhoods or high-SES neighborhoods.

When describing the classrooms in

which they worked, 79% of the paraeducators reported they worked with one to twelve students with disabilities with 21% indicating they worked with many more. Paraeducators who worked only in secondary or elementary classrooms where students with disabilities were present were more likely to be in classrooms with higher enrollments when compared to those who also worked special education resource or self-contained classrooms, where enrollments tended to be low.

Types of disabilities of the children paraeducators worked with

Paraeducators articulated details about the types of disabilities or challenges their children faced. Types of disabilities included behavior disorders, Down Syndrome, physical disabilities (e.g., deaf, blind), neurological impairment (e.g., autism), traumatic brain injury, cerebral palsy, and learning disabilities. Respondents wrote a description of the types of disabilities that were prevalent for the children and youth with whom they worked. Although the term "mental disabilities" is preferred now, the respondents used the term "mental retardation" in their descriptions. Similarly, though the terms ADD and ADHD are not generally thought of as learning disabilities under IDEIA (although they may occur concomitantly with a learning disability or many other disabilities), the respondents did not make those distinctions.

What Do Paraeducators DO?

In this section, the authors provide details about what the survey respondents and interviewees said that they do when they work in classrooms where general and special education students are learning together.

The survey respondents identified the title of their positions as paraprofessional, paraeducator, instructional aide, Title I paraeducator, teacher assistant, and campus supervisor. Many stated they worked with children and youth who needed behavioral support or social skills training. Others echoed the literature that shows paraeducators in inclusive classrooms who deliver instruction in reading and math through various activities such as learning centers and cooperative learning techniques.

Instructional content and pedagogy

Many paraeducators described their work with respect to the subject matter or content of instruction. Paraeducators helped their students achieve a wide variety of subject matter including social and life skills, math, English, reading, health, and writing. At the high school level, paraeducators helped their students achieve in the sciences (e.g., biology, earth and space) and math (e.g., Algebra I, geometry). Other subject matter areas included culinary arts, life skills, art, and physical education. One very busy respondent wrote this amazing array of subject matter: "fifth grade mathematics, sixth, seventh, eighth grade social studies, sixth grade reading, seventh grade language arts, seventh grade reading, seventh grade science." Another wrote, "As an aide [to a student with autism], my content areas mainly focus on social skills and behavior; I can work in any subject matter that the student needs help with."

It is evident that paraeducators in the inclusive classroom are exposed to and coach a wide variety of content and subject matter. They must be both versatile and creative. Indeed, paraeducators have supported students with disabilities to gain their rightful access to the general education setting and curriculum. Similar to results described by Piletic, Davis, and Aschemeier (2005),

the paraeducators in this study provided the extra support that is so appreciated by general education teachers.

Instructional strategies

Respondents rated instructional strategies that typically occurred in their inclusive classrooms. The instructional strategies had been identified through a review of the literature (e.g., Choate, 2004; Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2007; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2008). They circled a number from one to five which represented the extent to which they used that strategy during their work with students, where one indicated "not at all" , three indicated "somewhat", and five indicated "a great deal." Statistically, the most frequently used strategies included directing student behavior (68%), delivering individual instruction (59%), and teaching appropriate social skills (50%). The least frequently used strategies were supervising peer tutoring sessions (36%), coaching homework (26%), and supporting cooperative learning groups (14%).

In general, paraeducators were knowledgeable about many evidenced-based practices that were being used while they worked in inclusive classrooms. For example, they named specific instructional techniques known to increase listening and reading comprehension such as, two-column note taking, QAR--Question-Answer Relationship,[1] and question frames. They mentioned different types of instructional arrangements such as one-to-one instruction, small group instruction, peer teaching, and learning centers.

Also cited were techniques such as direct instruction for reading and math, cooperative group learning, question-and-answer sessions, hands-on teaching, computer assisted instruction (or assistive technology) and educational games from internet websites, and community-based instruction. Specific methods to increase generalization were noted. For example, a cognitive rehearsal technique was noted by the paraeducator who wrote, "While we walk in the hall, I am drilling on vowels, consonants, nouns, verbs." Paraeducators referred to specific curricula such as *Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication-related Handicapped Children* (TEACCH[2], a curriculum for students with autism) and *Character Counts*[3] (a framework based on basic values of trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship). Emphasizing the need to be sensitive to students' needs, another paraeducator said, "Reinforce [the student's] good behavior when on task; when off task, redirect the student back to working, [and] be consistent." Another wrote, "Keep trying different ways to present the topic." This advice echoed throughout other paraeducators' written responses with suggestions such as (a)

[1] International Reading Association. (2008). *Read-Write-Think*. Retrieved March 11, 2009, from http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=227

[2] Mesibov, G. B., Shea, V., & Schopler, E. (2004). *The TEACCH approach to autism spectrum disorders*. NY: Springer. See also *A parent's guide to autism and pervasive developmental disorder*. Retrieved March 11, 2009, from http://www.autismweb.com/teacch.htm

[3] Josephson Institute. (2008). *About Character Counts*. Retrieved March 11, 2009, from http://charactercounts.org/overview/about.html

"use visual materials" (b) "use oral instructions" and (c) set up "kinesthetic active learning." Another paraeducator explained, "[I] use signed instructions, tactile sign language."

Interviewees' experiences

As a way to corroborate and substantiate the survey findings, the analysis of California paraeducators' interviews revealed the theme of responsibilities, which included five sub-themes. The first sub-theme, Individual Support, included supporting transition, providing visual aids, and facilitating playground interactions. The second sub-theme, Instruction, included providing small group instruction, scaffolding instruction, pre-teaching vocabulary, and re-teaching concepts. The third sub-theme, Behavior Supports, included redirecting, arranging motivators such as taking breaks, and teaching social skills. The fourth sub-theme, Data Collection, referred to obtaining work samples, collecting behavioral data, and conducting fluency timing for an individual or groups of students. The fifth sub-theme, Preparing, referred to collecting and making adaptive materials and setting up curricular materials prior to instructional periods.

What Do Paraeducators Say About Their Preparation?

Approximately half of the survey respondents answered this question with respect to how they prepared to work with the children each day: "Reading the subject matter myself and doing all worksheets given to students." Another respondent wrote, "I read each student's goals and communicate with their primary teachers." Still another explained, "I do not have time to prepare. I find out what the curriculum is for that day and assist students on current tasks." Approximately half of the respondents answered this question by explaining their training, (e.g., four years of college, two years university and Autistic training, or 115 credits at Community College, towards obtaining an associate of arts and an associate of science degrees). One respondent explained, "I was trained as a social worker and worked as one for several years." Another wrote, "[I have] two years of after high school education." Another respondent noted, "I have a two year associate degree from a technical college: Instructional Assistant Program."

In addition to echoing the paraeducators in the national survey, the California paraeducators were also clear about the training needed for the relational aspect of their work. For example, one said, "A dose of positive attitude, along with a good sense of humor is needed." Another explained, "It's important to be strict and consistent with discipline but also to have fun and a sense of humor." Another noted, "There is a relational aspect to this role. To show I care, I have to know them inside and out, know when to back off, and when to move forward."

Moreover, 64% of the paraeducators emphasized the need for continued professional development. In the words of one, "It would be helpful to have more opportunities to attend training to increase my knowledge about this population and their changing needs." Another California paraeducator said during the interview, "Every student is different in diagnosis, personality, and ability level." Still another paraeducator elaborated, "You must be adaptable and attentive to a teacher's style… Listen for their new instructional changes to replace old teaching ideas." The need for professional development has been well documented in the literature (e.g., Pickett & Gerlach, 2003) and thus helps to increase the believability of this study.

Paraeducators' professional standards

Overall, the paraeducators showed that they understand the essence of the standards of the profession (e.g., Council for Exceptional Children, 2003). They also wanted to be sure to be able to meet the standards, which they hoped was the aim of professional development activities sponsored by their school districts. Being "flexible, patient, and open to change" were the dispositions they most frequently integrated into their daily work. The knowledge areas most frequently mentioned included knowing "students' backgrounds and disabilities and accommodations" and "the subject matter and teaching goals." One survey respondent summarized the combination of dispositions, skills, and knowledge this way,

> For me, I felt it necessary to take on the dual responsibility of paying attention as if I were the student and making sure the lesson is conveyed to the student either by listening to the teacher or by me trying to re-teach.

RtI as an emerging role

Paraeducators (10% of the survey respondents) reported an emerging role related to their responsibilities for implementing or monitoring recent legislation calling for Response to Intervention (RtI) programs. In the words of one participant from Michigan, "Our district uses RtI. We have used the 'six minute solution' in reading that is very effective. We have resource [teachers] that push in and pull out as needed." A participant from Rhode Island wrote, "I have coached children in language arts under the supervision of a reading teacher." Another participant from Michigan explained, "I document notes on each child seen daily to measure progress and give [the notes about] strategies [to the teacher]." Two paraeducators from Oregon used technical language to describe their tasks: "I use DIBELS to monitor progress [of all the students]." [Note: An acronym for Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, DIBELS is a reliable system to measure literacy skills (http://dibels.uoregon.edu].

What Advice Do Paraeducators Offer?

In this section, the national survey and California interview data were integrated. Paraeducators believe that others should know that their job is to be available to the children and their teachers. They often referred to the "challenging" nature of their work with children and teachers, the creativity required to "accommodate to all needs", and the belief that "all children can learn." As shown in Table 3, their responses were organized into two categories—Be Willing to Ask! and Be Flexible!

Be Willing to Ask! The first category - "*Be Willing to Ask*!" - included advice to ask questions, read books, collaborate and communicate with others in order to learn strategies to help the children. Representative quotes are shown in Table 3.

Be Flexible! The second category - "*Be Flexible*" - included advice that ranged from "be prepared to be busy" to "be prepared to work with some people who may not know exactly what to do with you." Representative quotes are shown in Table 3. From their responses to the survey and the interviews, paraeducators show that they understand both the importance of their work for the children and the impact of their work. They used phrases such as, "Help the student" and "Support the teacher" and "Give the child

confidence" and "Make learning fun" and "Adapt and modify the work." One respondent wrote, "I see the improvements and I love that. I love watching the children learning with materials that I have selected, and paid for…" Another wrote, "The most important part is to have students learn, not only academically but also life skills." Another paraeducator wrote, "It is a joy to be in this work." One paraeducator wrote, "We are so lucky to be in an inclusive classroom."

The California paraeducators, like the national respondents, were quick to explain the benefits of the work they do. They understand that their support has made a difference in the students' overall learning. As one participant explained, "inclusive classrooms are challenging, but rewarding. The benefits far outweigh the barriers and limitations." For example, one paraeducator said, "All students have a better chance to receive the support they need." Another realized, "Instruction is more responsive!" Another respondent explained, "When two teachers work, there are two ways and better opportunities (for the children)—but they must work together to provide consistency in norms, discipline, and teaching philosophies."

Table 3: Advice from Paraeducators

Be Willing to Ask!

- *"Listen!"* (National Survey, Wisconsin Respondent, Resource Room)
- *"Cooperative and responsive to teaching situation, willing to let the teacher lead, imaginative and patient with you student's challenging situation."* (National Survey, Connecticut Respondent, Secondary Level)
- *"If [more than one paraeducator works with one child], they should meet and discuss routines."* (California interviewee)
- *"Ask questions….be open and able to learn and change."* (California Interviewee, Elementary Level)

Be Flexible!

- *"Know that you have to be a genie… to shift from one place to another instantly … to know all areas [of the curriculum]…"* (National Survey, Minnesota Respondent, Early Childhood)
- *"You must be flexible and be willing to work with all types of children."* (National Survey respondent)
- *"Don't be afraid to work with others."* (National Survey, California Respondent, Resource Room)
- *"Flexible, open to change"*(National Survey, Florida Respondent)
- *"Try to figure out what it is that they are doing and why they are doing it. Once you have that understanding then you can find the best way to work with them."* (California Interviewee)
- *"You must be adaptable and attentive to a teacher's style. I also listen for their new instructional changes to replace the old teaching ideas."* (California Interviewee, elementary level)

Discussion

The authors encourage readers to cautiously interpret the findings in light of the following limitations. The respondents comprised a convenience sample and may not be representative of paraeducators in inclusive classrooms across the country, even though the 202 participants represented 38 different

states in the USA. Although they fulfilled the purpose of the interviews (which was to substantiate the survey items), there were only 27 paraeducators in five schools in the San Diego area who participated in follow-up interviews. Therefore, any conclusions drawn from the study are tentative and preliminary at best. Further research is needed in this area.

However, readers can be encouraged by the findings because they compare favorably with other studies. Olshefski (2006) surveyed 1016 paraprofessionals working in rural, suburban, and urban settings for a national profile of scope of work on behalf of the American Federation of Teachers. Findings showed that nearly 85% of the respondents have earned education levels beyond the high school diploma. Moreover, paraprofessionals in Olshefski's study reported that they worked with students with special needs (54%), students learning English as a second language (32%), students in the general education classroom (27%), students in Title I programs (8%), and students in early childhood programs (9%). Many reported that they provide instruction without working under the direction of a teacher on a daily basis (under certain reading reforms). Pickett (1999) reviewed the literature, concluding that "the duties of teacher aides are no longer limited to record-keeping, preparing materials, monitoring students in lunchrooms and study halls, or maintaining learning centers and equipment. Today they are active participants in the instructional process... Under the direction of teachers, paraeducators instruct learners in individual and small group settings, assist with functional assessment activities, administer standardized tests (teachers analyze test results), document learner performance, share relevant information with teachers and participate in program planning teams" (Paragraphs 2 and 6).

The paraprofessionals who responded to the current study often characterized their responsibilities as *helpers who arranged for more successful learning experiences for students*. This is very similar to the goal of differentiated instruction where lessons are carefully structured to tap into the varied strengths and knowledge bases of the participating teachers (Hall, 2002; Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2007; Villa et al., 2008). Members of teaching teams who practice differentiated instruction structure multiple modes of access to the content, multiple ways to show what has been learned, multiple goals of instruction, and varied methods of assessing learning. The paraprofessionals in the study seemed to be tuned in to differentiating their instructional strategies for helping their students understand the content or the directions for the assignments.

Many participants reported experiences that resonate with other researchers in the field. For example, some paraeducators reported that they not only worked with the students they were assigned to support, but also worked with other students in the general education classroom. For those students with disabilities, they tried to make them feel comfortable with the content that they were learning, often re-explaining concepts to many of the students. This sentiment resonates with the study by Marks et al. (1999) who found that many paraeducators were successful in avoiding the role of hovering over the child. Villa et al. (2008) emphasized that this "Velcro effect" should be avoided when paraprofessionals work with co-teachers. In fact, many experts agree that the paraprofessional role should more clearly focus on creating interdependence with the peers in the classroom and independence from adult supervision (Mueller & Murphy, 2001; Pickett & Gerlach, 2003).

A challenge that the respondents in the study raised relates to working with those who do not know what to do with another adult in the classroom. Although the survey was not designed to tease out factors related to a desire for more effective working relationships, the paraeducators were clear about the importance of having time and opportunity to collaborate with the teachers in the classrooms in which they work. This issue has been raised by others (e.g., Pickett & Gerlach, 2003) and was the focus of an ethnographic study of teaching assistants and their co-working relationships with teachers (Devecchi & Rouse, 2007). In that study, Devecchi and Rouse used observation and interview techniques to identify five factors that enabled collaboration, namely (a) being approachable and respectful, (b) being professional and competent, (c) sharing knowledge/skills/resources, (d) being autonomous, (e) being flexible and simultaneously having clear roles and responsibilities. The respondents to the national survey, however, seemed to report only two of those factors, namely the importance of being approachable (as indicated by descriptions of when to talk to teachers about what was expected of them) and being autonomous (as indicated by their advice to "*Ask Questions!*").

Table 4 extrapolates the survey and interview data into three sections: what paraeducators do, how they do it, and what helps them do it better. Readers are encouraged to add examples from their own experiences.

What actions might special educators and classroom teachers who work with paraeducators? The authors suggest the following practical steps:

1. Make a commitment to treat your paraeducator as a partner in the teaching/learning process.
2. Ask your paraeducator for observations about the progress and behaviors of the students with whom they work.
3. Participate in selected professional development activities together (e.g., to learn a new instructional technique, improve collaborative skills, etc.).

In summary, it is clear that the respondents from both the national survey and the California interviewees are open to learning new skills, with the California interviewees also revealing that paraeducators are reflective practitioners, eager to become better at what they do. Further implications for practice are described in the next section.

Implications for Practice

This study explored the multidimensional role of paraeducators who work in inclusive classrooms. District personnel and teacher educators may be able to apply the results to address the training needs for both teachers and paraeducators regarding the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed in the differentiated general education classrooms of the 21st century. Overall, the demographics of the respondents to the national survey and the California interviewees favorably compare to the national statistics with respect to (a) where paraeducators work and (b) types of students with whom they work. For respondents to the national survey and the California interviewees, no discernable differences emerged regarding the roles and responsibilities of elementary and secondary paraeducators. The results of the ratings on the issues and open ended questions resonate with the results from other researchers in the field as does the nature of the work they do (i.e., the instructional strategies and routine). The voices of these paraeducators who re-

sided in 38 states of the USA provide a powerful rationale for making the four changes recommended below.

First, because paraeducators value enhancing their knowledge and skill base, they can become reflective practitioners so as to support an increasingly diverse student population. They could benefit from additional paraeducator professional development regarding (a) updated categories of disabilities, (b) curriculum, (c) instructional methodology, (d) collaborative skills, and (e) coaching to include hands-on experiences to implement differentiated instructional techniques.

Second, additional grow-your-own partnership programs with universities are needed to upgrade the skills of paraprofessionals. This would involve creating career ladders and working with eligible paraprofessionals to complete teacher education programs. Revisions in the participating university credentialing coursework and district/ site-based professional development focused on (a) special educator responsibilities for supervising paraeducators, (b) tips for enhancing the collaborative teaming process, and (c) strategies to coach paraeducators when they implement instructional techniques to support students with a diverse array of learning needs.

Third, it is important to acknowledge, affirm, and collaborate with paraeducators. Many paraeducators do their work without clear job descriptions Some times, this leads to unmet expectations and general miscommunication. Therefore, it is important to clearly define duties and responsibilities regarding instruction, management, and planning. Administrators and other personnel must build in time during the school day for paraeducators to meet with each other and with their cooperating teachers. This would facilitate paraeducators gaining a comprehensive understanding of the goals for students, the classroom standards, and rules of engagement while working with students as well as other staff members.

Fourth, we anticipate and trust that readers will recognize the forthrightness, honesty and clarity, in the paraeducators' voices. Hopefully, their voices will replace the conventional wisdom about paraeducators with evidence-based research results. Hopefully, the ways in which paraeducators contribute to the research community as both participants and co-researchers can be showcased. Hopefully, the recruitment, selection, supervision, retention, and recognition of paraeducators will be strengthened for future people who decide to work in that capacity.

Table 4: Summary of Roles, Responsibilities, and Supports

What do paraeducators say they do?	How do they say they do it?	What do they say helps them do it better?
Provide tutorials	Work 1:1 with students, implement instructional strategies, computer assisted learning, RtI interventions	Initial training, reflective coaching from supervisor(s)
Provide small group instruction	Provide direct instruction, implement community-based instruction, QAR, note-taking strategies, hands-on experiences, RtI interventions	Initial training, reflective coaching from supervisor(s)
Teach social skills	Work 1:1, teach with social stories, implement programs such as Character Counts and as recommended on IEPs	Development of staff and student norms, implement rules of engagement, opportunities for role-playing
Supervise peer tutors	Demonstrate, supervise, and redirect peer tutors	Enhance use of peer tutors by moving to the use of cooperative group structures
Manage student behaviors	Redirect students, teach students to self-regulate via taking breaks when needed, implement programs as dictated by IEPs	Increase staff ownership, mutual respect, consistency in the use of behavior supports (reinforcement and natural consequences)
Be aware of lesson plans	Talk with teacher informally prior to class; implement lesson plan components under direction of teacher	Arrange more structured planning time within the work week for all staff involved, schedule specific staff development for collaborative teaming
Collect data	Collect work samples, anecdotal data, behavioral data, progress checks, and conduct fluency timings for an individual or groups of students (e.g., DIBELS)	Initial training, reflective coaching from supervisor(s), attend professional development focusing on curriculum based assessment
Prepare adapted materials	On their own personal time	Time built into their work day, access to resource materials, attend professional development workshops on adapting content, process, and products.

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