

ARE COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR PARAEDUCATORS FEASIBLE?

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Paraeducators are vital components of public school educational programs for students with disabilities and those with remedial needs, as well as preschools and residential child care facilities. They are technicians who perform personal care and direct instructional services, and behavior management. Yet, training programs for these important employees are notably absent.

This study examined the feasibility of developing training programs in the community college system in Colorado. Directors of special education, teachers, and personnel directors were surveyed to determine their attitudes toward training needs, their perceptions of the levels of support that school districts might offer; and their knowledge of the hiring practices in their own agencies. There was considerable interest in and support for training efforts through the community college system. Yet, a compelling need for local autonomy in the hiring of trained or untrained applicants was illustrated. Conclusions were drawn about the character of potential training programs based on the information provided. For example, training programs must offer a flexible delivery system, and a menu of modules or short courses from which local agencies or schools can select requirements for their employees. Certificate programs were desired but mandated certification was unequivocally rejected.

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BACKGROUND

Paraeducators are technicians who serve alongside teachers and other professional educators, "just as their counterparts in law and medicine are designated as paralegals and paramedics" (Pickett, 1989, p. 1). Paraeducators have been a critical component in the effective delivery of services to children with disabilities, children in remedial education programs, pre-schools, and residential facilities, for more than thirty years (Pickett, 1989). Over the years, there have been substantial increases in the employment of paraeducators (U.S. Department of Education, 1987). This trend has been influenced by numerous factors. The factors include higher costs of educational programming, as well as shortages of qualified teachers and other related service personnel in special, remedial, and early childhood education (Pickett, 1989). Another significant factor is that people who reside in the local community and who have social and/or familial ties to that community are the most frequent applicants for paraeducator positions and are willing to accept a relatively low wage in exchange for the convenience of working a shortened work day close to home. Several studies over the past 20 years have shown that, while they may change positions within the district or agency, paraeducators rarely change employers (French, 1991; Pickett, 1980). Finally, because of shortages of minority teachers and the concurrent increase in the proportion of children from minority backgrounds, school districts have employed the short-term alternative of hiring paraeducators who are much more representative of the school population than are teachers (Pickett, 1989).

Recent research reveals that the role of the paraeducator in the 1980s and 1990s is significantly different from that of the traditional clerical or classroom aide (White, 1984). Whereas the clerical aide often completed routine tasks such as collection of money, attendance, typing, or duplication of materials, for which very little training was necessary, the paraeducator spends significant portions of the day in direct contact with students (Harrington & Mitchelson, 1986; Pickett, 1989; Vasa, Steckelberg, & Ulrich-Ronning, 1982). The duties paraeducators typically perform are: 1) behavior management; 2) tutoring; 3) reading with small groups of children; 4) progress charting; 5) assistance with eating and toileting; and 6) preparing instructional materials and maintaining special equipment (French, 1991).

This level of responsibility and influence on children might suggest that training is in order regarding the differentiation of roles and responsibilities between the professional educator and paraeducator; knowledge of handicapping conditions; human growth and development; behavior management techniques; tutoring techniques, data

lection and observational skills; equipment operation; first aid and safety procedures; legal and ethical issues; and confidentiality. Employers who entrust such responsibilities to an untrained person may, in fact, be placing themselves in legal jeopardy. Yet, systematic training efforts for paraeducators have not kept pace with their increased use (Pickett, 1989). Those who have received training typically have received sporadic on-the-job lessons (French, 1991).

With a few exceptions, paraeducator training occurs after employment, within school districts or other employing agencies, and consists of one-shot workshops with little follow up. School districts face the dual problems of the lack of funds to train paraeducators outside of school hours, and the disruption of services to students if they provide training during the school day. Even when those problems are surmounted, in-district training is rarely monitored or regulated by the state education agency. There is no standard curriculum nationwide, in spite of the existence of some generally accepted competencies, topics and model programs that can inform the development of curricula (Pickett, 1988).

Most states do not require any type of permit, certificate, or license to work as a paraeducator in special or remedial education. Those states that have a statutory basis (Kansas) for regulatory control typically issue permits that are contingent upon an established number of hours of training rather than a particular curriculum.

Another unresolved issue concerns the ideal timing for training (preservice vs. inservice), but there is substantial agreement that the community or junior college is the natural place for paraeducator training (Kaplan, 1982; P. Kells, personal communication, April 30, 1990; Weisz, 1968).

In spite of the large numbers of paraeducators employed by school districts and other agencies, only a few community college training programs exist. Where programs are in effect, seed money for curriculum and program development typically has come from grant monies allocated by state education agencies or the U.S. Department of Education. However, there are some programs that have become self supporting e.g., Chemeketa Community College, Salem, Oregon; Labette Community College, Southeast Kansas; and Kirkwood Community College, Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Numerous sources of funding for paraeducator program development are available (e.g., Federal Register, 1991). The purpose of most grant programs is to assist in the initial development of training programs, thereby increasing the likelihood of the program's self-sufficiency. Model programs using outside funding, however, are noto-

riously short-lived (Kaplan, 1982; P. Kells, personal communication, April 30, 1990).

In order to design and implement a systematic training program for paraeducators that stands a good chance of becoming self supporting, the community college must be reasonably assured of certain prerequisite conditions. There must be a market for graduates. Additionally, the rate of pay that graduates receive must, in some way, reflect the amount and type of training that they possess. Most important, from the perspective of the community college, is the issue of generating an adequate number of student credit hours to make a program financially feasible. In recognition of the general need, but lacking the specific information as to the issues just described, the Community College of Denver and the Colorado Department of Education collaboratively designed a feasibility study to probe the thoughts of local school district personnel.

METHOD

This study examined the perceptions of selected K-12 school district personnel regarding the current employment conditions and the training needs of paraeducators throughout Colorado. For the study, a survey instrument was designed specifically to cover issues presented in the literature. The instrument covered current policies and utilization of paraeducators, models and content of desired training, and ideal implementation of training.

Participants

The survey was distributed to 42 special education directors at a meeting in October, 1988. Directors were asked to complete one survey themselves, to distribute others to personnel directors and teachers in their districts, and to collect and return all surveys from their districts. These groups of administrators and faculty were assumed to be the most knowledgeable about the role and responsibilities of professionals and the most influential in causing change to occur if such change were necessary. There were responses from 16 local education agencies, each of which was represented by the special education director. In addition, six personnel directors and 18 teachers contributed their perceptions. These responses represented 38% of the 42 agencies originally asked to participate.

Demographics

Agencies were identified as urban and rural, and rural agencies were further divided into Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) and rural towns. The respondents included eight urban special education directors, four from BOCES, and four from rural towns. Six personnel directors responded: three urban and three from rural towns. The teachers represented five urban districts, three BOCES, and four rural towns. The special education director was the only position that was consistent across all responding agencies.

RESULTS

Employment and Utilization of Paraeducators

Policies When asked about current utilization of paraeducators, all but one agency (a ROCES) indicated that their districts employed paraeducators and that the most common titles used were "paraprofessional" or "instructional aide," plus "health aide" in rural districts. All the special education directors agreed that local policies regarding the use of paraeducators were deficient or nonexistent, although generic job descriptions and some shared understandings about paraeducator activities did exist. Only one rural town director indicated that they had adopted specific policies regarding paraeducator employment.

Job responsibilities Urban paraeducator responsibilities most commonly centered around academic skill assistance, behavior management, and clerical tasks such as record keeping and progress reporting. Two respondents reported that paraeducators were also used for self-care training and as community aides, specifically in the supported employment environment. Paraeducators' functions in rural town and ROCES districts were somewhat broader. They included all the functions mentioned by the urban group and also involved daily planning and tasks such as motor therapy.

Hiring criteria Minimum educational criteria for hiring ranged from none to two years of college, although there was a very low correlation between hiring requirements and composition levels. Urban districts typically required a high school diploma or its equivalent, while rural districts tended to list more people-oriented criteria, such as maturity, dependability, love for children, willingness to take directions, and good communication skills. Interestingly, urban teachers responded in more detail on hiring criteria than any of the other groups of respondents, including personnel directors. Teachers mentioned prior experience with special education students, reading and proof-

reading skills, ability to work both on a team and independently, and passing a basic skills test as requirements for hiring.

Salaries Urban and BOCES salaries ranged from minimum wage (\$3.35) to highs of \$8.61-\$9.00. Only one urban district reported that a benefits package was available for paraeducators. Paraeducators working in rural towns did a little better. Their hourly wages ranged from \$4.65 to \$8.60. The basis on which different wages are assigned is not known.

Current training All urban special education directors, except one, indicated that at least some form of inservice training had been provided for paraeducators, ranging from situational, on-the-job training to a rather extensive series of workshops taught by special education staff within one district. Most directors admitted, however, that training was sporadic and dependent upon time, budget, and distance considerations. Of the four BOCES represented, two reported that training was available in such forms as in-service workshops, group meetings, staff development activities designed primarily for teachers, and training provided directly by the classroom teacher. The other two BOCES reported that training was, in fact, solely provided by the teacher, and without a systematic scope and sequence or documentation. Three of the four rural town respondents indicated that no training was available.

Training Needs

Preferred training focus All respondents felt strongly that training topics should be specific to the paraeducator role as opposed to course work similar to that in teacher education programs. However, there were notable differences of opinion between urban and rural respondents regarding the degree of specificity needed. With one exception, urban respondents favored specialized training for particular student subpopulations and specialty areas, rather than generic training in education. On the other hand, the BOCES special education directors and all the rural town respondents preferred more generic training. Interestingly, the stated preferences coincided with the type of paraeducator responsibilities reported in each of the settings. Urban paraeducators tended to have more specialized duties, and, therefore, needed more specialized training. Rural settings seemed to demand an expanded array of roles and responsibilities, thus suggesting the need for a broader survey of training topics.

Preferred format and delivery of training There was nearly unanimous rejection of the option of requiring an associate degree for paraeducators. On the other hand, there was clear support for training.

that could lead to a certificate, with a 15 to 18 credit hour program deemed sufficient. In spite of this strong support for the availability of a certificate program, there' was overwhelming resistance to the idea that training of any kind should be a prerequisite for hiring a person to serve in this role.

Most respondents indicated that they would give hiring preference to trained paraeducators if they were available, but were unwilling to tolerate that as a limitation. One brave personnel director committed to offering a salary differential for trained applicants as well as up-ward salary adjustments for paraeducators who acquired additional training while employed.

The personnel directors were united in their insistence that training should occur after employment and be delivered by in-district personnel. Special education directors and teachers were equally comfortable with training being offered either on a pre-service or in-service basis without strong preference regarding who delivered it.

This lack of agreement about who should actually provide the training seemed to conflict with the selection of a certificate program as the most appropriate format, since district staff may not be qualified to teach credit-generating courses at the college level. The inconsistency in their preferences for a community college certificate on one hand and the use of district trainers on the other is not easily explained. One possibility is that those who favored in-district training did not actually care whether the course work carried college credit.

While respondents heartily agreed that systematic training was needed, another common theme that emerged was that training should be available in the most flexible, convenient manner possible. Most respondents wanted training sessions to be held within the school district as opposed to a nearby college campus, even if the training were delivered by college faculty. Urban special education directors preferred classroom-type training, while rural special education directors were split between classroom and field-based training or preferred a combination of both. Personnel directors and the majority of teachers preferred the more pragmatic approach of field-based training.

There was substantial agreement that training should be available to other school personnel as well. The three subgroups most frequently mentioned were school bus drivers and aides, health aides, and clerical personnel. In addition, all respondents expressed high interest in some type of in-service training for educational professionals regarding the appropriate utilization and supervision of trained paraeducators.

Course content Respondents were asked whether course content should be primarily theoretical, applied, or reflecting an even balance between the two. An applied curriculum was favored by the majority,

with some support for a combination of the two. No one preferred a primarily theoretical approach. There also was substantial agreement that individuals should be trained to work in both elementary and secondary situations.

Specific competencies/topics There was stronger interest in the training topics themselves than in the specific number of courses or credits that would be required for certification. Respondents endorsed the option of tailoring paraeducator training to the local district needs and to the individual's level of previous experience. They requested a range of training modules, units, or courses from which they could pick and choose.

Core competencies for all paraeducators were listed as: 1) communication skills, 2) behavior management techniques, 3) instructional methods, and 4) arranging the educational environment. Expanding on those competencies, the following specific topics were considered to be the most appropriate:

1. Behavior and classroom management
2. Appropriate role of the paraeducator
3. Learning theory
4. Child growth and development
5. Health and safety procedures
6. Instructional techniques
7. Tutoring in basic skills
8. Handicapping conditions

The core competencies and additional topics that were identified by this sample are entirely consistent with those prescribed by others (Pickett, 1988).

Hiring issues To determine the reasons why a district might prefer to hire trained paraeducators, respondents identified the issues that might affect decisions in their own districts. According to special education directors, the most important issues in the hiring of trained paraeducators were: 1) instructional effectiveness, 2) teacher satisfaction, and 3) the provision of more efficient services for pupils. Personnel directors added liability concerns and parent satisfaction to the list. In addition, teachers emphasized the importance of teacher satisfaction.

Statewide certification standards Finally, on the sensitive issue of statewide standards for paraeducator certification, the special education and personnel directors clearly indicated that they did want to be limited to hiring only pretrained applicants. This was of particular concern in rural areas where they may have a more limited applicant pool

than in urban areas, where certified teachers sometimes try to get "a foot in the door" by taking employment as a paraeducator. Teachers were fairly evenly divided on the issue.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study substantiate the employability of paraeducators, and also illustrate the dilemmas faced by their employers. The need for formal training was established and the question regarding appropriate training topics was unequivocally answered. There was nearly total resistance to establishing state-wide certification criteria over which the districts have little control. In fact, it appears that the best approach for the community colleges to take at this point will be to develop a modular, topic-focused curriculum.

To address the preferences of this sample, the designated curriculum will need to be delivered in creative ways, perhaps using school building facilities rather than classrooms on campus. Holding classes in school buildings could have the added benefit of creating the best possible climate for application level training activities. If the off-campus delivery truly is feasible, then courses could carry undergraduate degree credit and be arranged in such a way that students could choose to: 1) complete district-directed requirements, and/or 2) complete an approved paraeducator certificate. This flexible menu of offerings would provide adequate latitude to districts and paraeducators in meeting their specific needs.

The solutions to many of the problems currently encountered are beyond the scope of this project. A complex model for paraprofessional training, career progression, as well as supervisory training for teachers and other professionals must be developed. In order to have self-supporting training programs, school districts and community colleges must develop a shared vision. Districts of the future must actively seek out trained applicants, but must retain the authority and flexibility to hire paraeducators at a lower salary than professionals.

Corollary benefits of such a model is that potential teachers in fields with shortages might be identified. For example, the need for special education teachers and the even more pronounced need for special education teachers from minority backgrounds is well documented (Pickett, 1989). Paraeducators are typically hired from the community in which the school is located. If paraprofessionals received training that could be applied to teacher certification, those communities might be able, for the first time, to employ a teaching staff with ethnic and linguistic characteristics similar to those of the students they serve (Shafer, 1984).

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