

Introduction to the Special Series

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THE TIME IS RIGHT TO FEATURE THE ROLE OF paraeducators in this issue of *Remedial and Special Education*. Although the academic community has not yet fully embraced the issues involved in the employment, training, and supervision of paraeducators in schools, the importance of these issues comes as no surprise to teachers and administrators in special education, Title I, or English as a Second Language (ESL)/Bilingual programs.

This journal issue focuses on the vital role of paraeducators in linking communities and schools. Although this topic has been alluded to in many articles, it is only recently that research on the topic has begun to clarify the issues. There are two principal ways of considering the connectedness of paraprofessionals to community.

First, in this diverse nation, we continually seek to employ teachers who represent the diversity of students and their families but have had little overall success in doing so. Teaching remains largely a profession of White women. Additionally, administrators need to staff schools effectively, while guarding the budget. The pool of applicants for teaching positions is not sufficient in many places to fill local needs in special education, remedial education, or ESL/Bilingual programs. At the same time, many districts experience an abundant supply of paraeducators with linguistic and cultural similarities to their students and with the basic temperaments and attitudes that they need toward students. In schools that have sufficient applicants for paraeducator positions but lack diverse applicants for teaching positions, administrators show interest in “grow-your-own” programs that prepare paraeducators who are already employed in the district to become teachers. Administrators also show substantial interest in the retention of paraprofessionals in paraprofessional roles. Two

articles in this issue (White; Bernal & Aragon) report on the successes that have been achieved in preparing minority paraprofessionals to become teachers. White’s program has shown success over time, and the completion rates of students in the program are very high. The program described by White is funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Division of Personnel Preparation. Bernal and Aragon examine in detail the factors that current paraprofessionals believe are associated with their success in completing the first phase of a teacher preparation program while continuing to work in their paraprofessional positions. Bernal and Aragon describe paraeducators in programs that are funded by the former Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs, U.S. Department of Education (now known as the Office of English Language Acquisition). Both articles describe the issues involved in retaining program participants, but White focuses on the retention rate of paraeducators in special education, and he contrasts the retention rate found in his projects to the national average.

The second consideration is that of employing paraprofessionals who are more similar to the students and families in the communities, which bridges the gap between primarily White teachers and students and families of color. Administrators and teachers have recognized that the functioning of their schools relies heavily on the relationship between the school and the community. The majority of paraprofessionals working in schools live within the geographical boundaries served by the school, and they live among the students; teachers often do not. Three articles in this issue focus on the relationship among paraeducators, parents, and other community members. Chopra, Sandoval-Lucero, Aragon, Bernal, Berg de Balderas, and Carroll illuminate the paraeducator perspec-

tive on the role of paraeducators in establishing connections among the various constituencies involved in the learning environment. In contrast to the ancillary finding in a survey on the supervision of paraeducators (French, 2001a), where teachers reported that they alone maintained full responsibility for communications between the school and families, the Chopra et al. study showed that paraeducators believe that they play a vital role in connecting the school to the community and that they have a well-developed perspective on the importance of the connections they provide.

Werts, Harris, Tillery, and Roark report findings from a study of parent perceptions of the paraeducator's role in classrooms that included students with disabilities. One significant finding was an inverse relationship between the severity of the disability of the child and the school employee that communicated to the parent. Paraeducators were the primary contact person for families of children with the most significant disabilities.

Finally, the article by Chopra and French considers relationships between the parents of students with significant disabilities and the paraeducators who support them in inclusive educational settings. They report that whereas it is important for paraeducators and parents to communicate because paraeducators spend significant amounts of time with students, paraeducator-parent relationships must remain within the limits and boundaries established by the teacher, and the teacher must remain central to the communications.

In this issue, the reader will note that the authors tend to use both the word *paraeducator* and the more familiar word *paraprofessional* to refer to persons who are employed to work alongside school professionals, providing instructional and other related services to students under the supervision of school professionals. The words *paraprofessional* and *paraeducator* refer to the same people whose job titles may be classroom aide, instructional assistant, educational assistant, or teacher's aide, and who fill important roles in the educational process. Pickett (1996) was the first to use the title "paraeducator," in the early 1990s, to convey a level of training and responsibility analogous to those in the medical and

legal fields, known as paramedics and paralegals, who work alongside professionals in those fields. Meanwhile, Orlikow (1995) reported 14 different titles in Manitoba, Canada. Gerlach (1994) reported 15 job titles in Washington. Stahl and Lorenz (1995) reported that teachers and administrators in Minnesota used the job title "paraprofessional" for all those who worked in nonprofessional instructional positions, but paraeducators themselves reported numerous job titles. French (2001b) found more than 80 job titles in California.

Despite the lack of systematic titles, employment conditions, training, and career development, the employment and need for paraeducators in schools continues to grow. The articles in this issue clearly demonstrate that paraeducators provide valuable connections with the communities in which they work and are likely candidates for careers in teaching. ■

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