Recruiting Paraeducators Into Bilingual Teaching Roles: The Importance of Support, Supervision, and Self-Efficacy

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Abstract

This mixed methods study examined the self-efficacy beliefs of paraeducators who became bilingual teachers and paraeducators who did not to explore the possibility that self-efficacy plays a role in paraeducators' career decisions. Data were collected through three sources: a survey, career goal statements, and interviews. Fourteen participants were included in the study. There were qualitative differences and significant quantitative differences between the two groups. Those who became bilingual teachers described work environments and duties that promoted the development of their teacher efficacy. Those who remained in the paraeducator roles described very different work environments. The study highlights the importance of clearly defining paraeducators' roles and responsibilities in ways that utilize their skills, abilities, and interests, and promote their career development.

Introduction

For the past decade, literature in the field of teacher recruitment and training has foretold of a teacher shortage for the beginning of the 21st century (Darling-Hammond, 2000) and suggests the need for as many as 2 million new teachers. Increasing enrollments, immigration, retirements, and attrition of current teachers are contributing factors to the need (Clewell & Villegas, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2000). The field of bilingual education is in great need of highly qualified teachers (Darling-Hammond).

More recently, the literature on teacher supply and demand has shifted its focus from the shortage of new teachers to the retention of teachers. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2003) noted that the

teacher shortage is only a symptom of the real problem: teacher retention. They suggested that hiring unqualified and poorly prepared teachers who leave the profession quickly only exacerbates these high turnover rates. The shift to retention creates a stronger argument for focusing recruitment and training efforts on paraeducators. In an evaluation of the national Pathways to Teaching Careers program, Clewell and Villegas (2001) examined the retention rates of three groups of teacher recruits: paraeducators, returning Peace Corps volunteers, and unlicensed teachers. Of the three groups, paraeducators were the most likely to have chosen to work in urban or rural areas, more likely to remain in teaching more than 3 years, and were rated more highly by principals than other novice teachers (Clewell & Villegas). These findings, coupled with a renewed focus on retention of teachers to solve shortages, build a strong argument for investing in paraeducators as future bilingual teachers.

Background and Significance

Paraeducator roles have evolved from primarily clerical duties to primarily instructional roles (French, 1999; Rogan & Held, 1999). Recruiting paraeducators into teaching roles has many benefits for schools. Paraeducators who become teachers meet the needs of schools in many different ways. They are more diverse than the current teaching workforce and tend to be indigenous to the communities in which they work (Nittoli & Giloth, 1997; Smith, 2000). As a result, they add both linguistic and cultural diversity to the teaching workforce and understand the community served by the school (French & Pickett, 1997; Genzuk & Baca, 1998; Miramontes, 1990; Nittoli & Giloth, 1997; Rueda & DeNeve, 1999). In addition, their work experience is mostly in fields with shortages such as bilingual and special education (Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996). Finally, once they enter the teaching profession, they tend to remain in the field, reducing teacher attrition rates (Clewell & Villegas, 2001; Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996).

Paraeducators face many obstacles before they can enter teaching (Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996; Nittoli & Giloth, 1997). Many do not have education beyond high school, lack basic skills, and are unsure about their academic abilities (Aragon, 2003; Bernal & Aragon, 2004; Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996). The largest barrier is financial. Paraeducators cannot afford to give up a salary and benefits to attend school and they need help paying for tuition and books (Gordon, 1995; Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996). Many colleges do not offer flexible course scheduling or day care services that allow paraeducators to coordinate work, family, and school responsibilities (Gordon, 1995; Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996).

Yet, some paraeducators overcome financial, academic, and social obstacles to complete college and enter teaching. How are paraeducators who become bilingual teachers different from and similar to their peers who do

not follow this career path? What influences their decision to become bilingual teachers? What goes into the decision making process? How do they come to believe that they can complete the necessary education and become teachers? This study examined the factors that influence paraeducators' transition to teaching by examining the differences and similarities between paraeducators who became bilingual teachers and those who remained in the paraeducator role.

Review of Literature

Bandura (1977, 1994, 1997, 2001) theorized that human behavior is influenced by self-reflection through which people evaluate their experiences and develop efficacy expectations about themselves. Four kinds of experiences build efficacy: mastery experiences, social role models, verbal persuasion, and emotional control.

Mastery experiences are the most powerful source of efficacy beliefs because they provide the most direct evidence that a person has the skills for success (Bandura, 1977, 1994, 1997). For example, successfully tutoring children in mathematics will give a person the best evidence of his or her capabilities because he or she is actually participating in the activity.

The second source from which a person can draw self-efficacy beliefs is social role models. Observing people succeed, even in the face of obstacles, can increase a person's belief in his or her own efficacy (Bandura, 1994, 1997; Schunk, 1987). The impact of social role modeling on self-efficacy is stronger if the person perceives the other as being more like oneself (Bandura, 1994, 1997). For example, observing the first person in the family graduate from college will increase a person's efficacy beliefs for college graduation more than seeing others who are less like him or her graduate.

The third influence on the development of self-efficacy is verbal persuasion. People can be persuaded that they possess the skills to accomplish certain goals or tasks, and verbal encouragement can make them more likely to increase their efforts than to give up when they encounter obstacles (Litt, 1988; Schunk, 1989). A respected teacher or colleague who encourages a paraeducator to become a teacher can contribute to the development of strong self-efficacy beliefs.

The final source from which people can develop efficacy beliefs is their own emotional and physiological states. Stress, tension, and mood can all affect a person's assessment of personal efficacy (Bandura, 1994; Ewart, 1992; Kavanaugh & Bower, 1985). How the person interprets these feelings impacts efficacy (Bandura, 1994). For example, a negative experience in school can lower academic self-efficacy unless a person can reduce stress and change his or her emotional interpretations of the situation.

People can develop efficacy beliefs in many areas. In order to choose a particular career, a person has to have high efficacy beliefs for both the educational requirements for the job and the specific tasks associated with it (Betz & Hackett, 1981). Paraeducators who enter teacher preparation programs must believe that they can complete both the college requirements and the necessary job tasks—demonstrating high academic and teacher efficacy.

Paraeducators can develop efficacy beliefs in many contexts such as work environment, personal background, and school experiences. In numerous recent studies, paraeducators report inadequate training, confusion about roles and responsibilities, low salaries, limited advancement, lack of support, and underappreciation of their contribution (Chopra et al., 2004; French & Cabell, 1993; French & Chopra, 1999; Hadadian & Yssel, 1998; Morehouse & Albright, 1991). Is it possible that poor working conditions and lack of respect have a negative impact on self-efficacy? If paraeducators are not trained to do their jobs, does this lead to confusion and frustration that would limit their ability to have mastery experiences? Role confusion could also raise their anxiety levels, contributing to negative emotions that could lower their career self-efficacy. If paraeducators are not respected or supported by teachers and administrators, does this limit their social role models for entering teaching?

On the other hand, paraeducators who are well trained report satisfaction with learning and are able to apply new skills on the job (Hall, McClannahan, & Krantz, 1995). Paraeducators who are valued members of the team are better able to create strong connections between the school and the community (Chopra et al., 2004). When paraeducators receive adequate training and are integrated into the school community, do their work experiences build efficacy for a teaching career?

Paraeducators' personal background could also influence their academic self-efficacy. Many face numerous obstacles to college completion, including lack of financial resources, child care difficulties, limited English proficiency, family opposition, lack of basic skills, fear of technology, and low self-esteem (Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996). Paraeducators, like many first generation college students, have a lack of role models for college completion. Lack of basic skills, fear of technology, and limited English proficiency could impact their efficacy beliefs.

Conversely, paraeducators may have personal background and characteristics that contribute to high teacher efficacy. The sources of high teacher efficacy have been examined from various perspectives. In one study specifically focused on bilingual teachers, Flores and Clark (2004) found that specific cultural experiences, ethnic identity, and self-concept can contribute to high teacher efficacy. These findings indicate that bilingual paraeducators may have personal characteristics that can help them successfully make the transition to teaching.

How do work environment, school experiences, and personal characteristics contribute to high teacher and academic self-efficacy for paraeducators who enter bilingual teaching? How are they different from their peers who do not enter teaching? From where do they derive and maintain their self-efficacy? This study sought answers to these questions.

Research Design

Participants

The teacher sample came from a cohort group that recently finished a paraeducator career ladder program designed to train paraeducators to become bilingual teachers in rural northern Colorado. The paraeducator sample came from a cohort of paraeducators who were completing their Associate degrees in order to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The participants in the second group clearly stated that their career goal was to remain in the paraeducator role. These paraeducators all worked in a large urban district in Colorado that serves a high percentage of English language learners. The names of the participants have been changed to pseudonyms throughout this report in order to maintain their confidentiality.

Data Collection

In Phase I of the study, the participants were asked to complete a survey and career goals statement. The survey contained one page of demographic information, academic and teacher efficacy scales from the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales Survey (PALS) (Midgley et al., 2000), and a section for a written career goals statement. The manual for the PALS states that the efficacy scales can be used alone or as part of other surveys (Midgley et al.). These two particular scales (i.e., academic and teacher efficacy scales) were chosen based on studies measuring career self-efficacy where participants were asked to rate both their efficacy for the tasks required to perform the job in question, in this case teaching, and their efficacy for the education required to enter the career field (Betz & Hackett, 1981, 1983). In Phase II of the study, participants completed in-depth interviews to help the researcher learn more about their career path, school and classroom experiences, educational goals, and views of career opportunities.

Data Analysis

Demographic analysis

Demographic information was compiled into several categories to help provide a detailed description of the participants. Those were gender, age,

ethnicity, level of education, high school grades, years working as a paraeducator, personal and family income, number of dependents, and native language.

Qualitative analysis

The initial data coding scheme was based on the four sources of self-efficacy: mastery experiences, social role models, verbal persuasion, and emotional control (Bandura, 1977, 1997) and the specific questions asked in the interview. These frameworks were used as an initial lens to view the career goals statements and the responses to interview questions. As themes outside of this initial framework emerged, the coding in QSR*NVivo was expanded to include them. From this process, a picture of the personal experiences of the participants was created.

Quantitative analysis

The data from the surveys were entered into SPSS 12.0, α was set at .05. Mean scores on the academic and teacher efficacy scales were computed. Group means were analyzed using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test for differences between the subgroups on the measures.

Limitations of the Study

As is the case with all research studies, this study has limitations. The first limitation involved sampling. The sample size for this study was very small, and this may limit the generalizability of the results. Second, the ethnicity of paraeducators in this sample was limited to Latinas and Whites. While these demographics closely matched the characteristics of the larger population of paraeducators in Colorado, we cannot assume that the findings apply to all paraeducators. To substantiate these findings, additional studies using larger sample sizes with more linguistic and cultural diversity should be conducted. Third, the results of the qualitative portion of this study could be subject to other interpretations (Creswell, 2003). To counter this inherent limitation peer, debriefing of the qualitative data was used to determine interrater reliability and high levels of interrater agreement were obtained. Finally, the academic self-efficacy scale from the PALS had been validated with both minority K–12 students and male and female nontraditional college students. While the participants in this study share characteristics in common with those groups, the scale has not been validated for the population used in this study, specifically Latina or White paraeducators who were first generation college students. Similarly, the teacher efficacy scale from the PALS had been validated using large numbers of teachers with a variety of ethnic backgrounds. However, it had not been validated specifically for use with paraeducators.

Findings

First, a description of the participants was developed based on the demographic information they submitted on the survey. Second, a description of their work environments and school experiences was developed based on their career goals statements and interviews. Third, the data were examined to look for evidence of their self-efficacy beliefs. Finally, their decisions about whether to enter teaching or remain paraeducators were described and analyzed.

Demographic Information

The paraeducators who became teachers

The profile of the typical participant in the teacher subgroup was female, Latina, and married. There was one male participant. Their median age was 41. Participants had an average of two dependents. Their first language was typically Spanish, and they had been B students in high school. Most had worked for 5 or more years as paraeducators before completing college and becoming teachers. Although 100% of them saw themselves remaining in teaching for the next 10 years, some were considering other educational roles and had enrolled in graduate programs.

The paraeducators who planned to remain in that role

The profile of the typical participant in the paraeducator subgroup had more variability than was found in the teacher subgroup. The group was again predominantly female. There was one male. Ethnically, they were almost equally divided between Latinas and Whites. Similarly almost 50% were married and 50% were single or divorced. They had an average of two dependents. Their median age was 51. Their first language was predominantly English. They had been B and C students in high school. Most of them had worked as paraeducators longer than 3 years. All had completed some college, but planned to remain in the paraeducator position.

Work Environment

Both groups answered the question about what they liked about the paraeducator role very similarly. The aspect that they liked best about their jobs was working with children and seeing them progress. This was expressed by an overwhelming majority of participants. Some got tears in their eyes as they described the feeling of seeing a child accomplish a goal. Jerri, a paraeducator who became a teacher, recalled:

> What I liked best about the job, you'll probably hear this all the time in your interviews, is the kids. The kids make you feel important, and I, in turn, make them feel important by letting them know that they can do it.

The answers regarding what the participants liked least about the job were slightly more varied. Almost 50% of those interviewed said there was nothing they did not like about being a paraeducator; they liked everything about the job. The dislikes fell into two main categories: school climate issues and issues with children. School climate issues included teachers not knowing how to use their services effectively or treating them like secretaries. Both paraeducators who planned to remain in that role and paraeducators who became teachers mentioned these specific dislikes. The other main category involved issues with children including discipline and behavior problems.

Educational Experiences

In describing their previous educational experiences, several themes emerged that were common across groups. Individuals in both subgroups mentioned that returning to school as an adult was a balancing act. Dora, a paraeducator who planned to remain in that role, explained, "It's been hard getting back into the practice of doing homework, attending classes, working, and attending to my home." Julian, a paraeducator who became a teacher, described similar challenges, "As a husband and father of two children, I must sacrifice some personal life."

Another commonality between the groups emerged as participants described challenges they had faced. Several participants had to deal with learning disabilities. Genevieve, who will remain a paraeducator, related the challenges she faced, "College has been eventful. I never thought I would be going to back to college at my age. I have a hard time learning because I'm dyslexic, but I'm getting help at the college for my classes." Peggy, who became a teacher, described having attention deficit disorder and learning to deal with her disability in order to be successful in school.

There was one theme that emerged in the subgroup of paraeducators who became teachers that was unique to their group. All of them described previous opportunities they had to attend college. All seven started college, but their education was interrupted. Elda described her desire to go to college after high school, but her father did not value education. It was not culturally acceptable for him to let her attend. Later, she started college on her own, "In 1995, I took the plunge and signed up to attend college. I majored in bilingual education with a Spanish minor…. Then I was forced to postpone school for a while because I had major surgery."

A second theme that was unique to the paraeducators who became teachers was their belief that their own experiences in K–12 education helped them develop understanding and empathy for the students they would teach. In their career goals statements, five of them described speaking a language other than English when they entered school or struggling with a learning disability. They believed that they had overcome these obstacles and expressed a desire to help other students who have similar experiences do the same. Oliva, an immigrant from Mexico, related her story:

> At the age of 10 my parents brought me from a small village in Mexico to Texas. I vividly remember that I started school after the Christmas vacation. It was very hard to start a new school in the middle of the year. Nonetheless, they placed me in the first grade for not knowing the new language. On that account, I've been in the same shoes where many of our second-language learners are now.

Self-Efficacy Beliefs of Participants

Mastery experiences

The participants' statements were analyzed for evidence of mastery experiences they had while working in classrooms as paraeducators that could have contributed to which the development of teacher or academic self-efficacy. Examples of mastery experiences include opportunities to plan and deliver instruction to students collaboratively with teachers.

Most evident in the career goals statements and interviews were references to mastery experiences paraeducators had while working in classrooms. The paraeducators who became teachers made many statements about mastery experiences that could have contributed to the development of their teacher efficacy. The experiences described by the participants all occurred while they were still working as paraeducators. While working in the English as a second language (ESL) program, Jerri, who became a teacher, learned how to modify instruction for students and communicate with parents:

> I help up to 6 to 8 students every block of schedule time 1to 4 classes one day then 5 to 8 classes the next. I assist the students with interpreting their daily schedule to interpreting their projects. I help the teacher modify the work for ESL students. I have been available for the parent teacher conferences so that I may communicate with the parents and the student.

Yvette, now a teacher, recalled the opportunities she had to plan lessons with the teacher:

> On many occasions, the teacher and I would get together and plan the weeks' activity. Several times a month, I was given the opportunity to provide instruction to half of the class. Within our class, there were several students who did not speak the English language. It was my responsibility to teach and translate our daily curriculum to them.

The paraeducators who wished to remain in that role made fewer references to mastery experiences they had while working in classrooms. As the participants described their duties and responsibilities, those who did not make references to mastery teaching experiences described spending much more time on routine clerical tasks. Amalia, a paraeducator, described a typical day:

> I get the attendance, the lunch count down, after that, reading groups. I take the middle groups…. Then after that I do math groups. We're starting to do addition and subtraction. In the afternoon, it's my job to make sure homework gets checked. I help the teacher prepare for the afternoon art project and it's my job to make sure she has all the supplies she needs. I get everything cut up and ready.

Participants who had fewer mastery experiences did have opportunities to work with children in instructional roles, as Amalia outlined above. The difference was that they did not have opportunities to work collaboratively with the teacher to plan and deliver instruction, as those who described more mastery experiences did.

Overall, there were fewer references to mastery experiences that could have contributed to the development of academic self-efficacy in the statements of both groups. Amalia decided to remain in the paraeducator role; however, she also described how taking classes helped her job performance, "I'm beginning to feel more confident in the way I teach my students. I love my job and enjoy being a paraprofessional."

Social role models

If participants discussed people who they admired or who encouraged their career development, the statements were coded as evidence of social role models. Role models were most often teachers and principals.

All of the participants in the subgroup of paraeducators who became teachers described social role models. Jerri thought highly of two middle school teachers with whom she worked:

> They thought of me as part of their classroom. As their paraeducator, they thought of me as not just their copier, but as part of the students' success. So they knew exactly what to do with me and how to put me in different blocks with the kids. They were just great.

They also encouraged Jerri's education. If she had a final exam or had to leave early for class, they accommodated those needs. Jerri continued, "Seeing teachers like that just encourages you. You want to work with teachers like that. It's just motivating." The teachers Sara worked with when she first moved to this country impressed her by helping her learn: "At that time I didn't speak a lot of English. The teachers helped me a lot. First of all, they're teaching me what to do with the kids, and then, at the same time, they helped me learn English."

The participants in both subgroups all believed that attending college as part of a cohort group provided them with needed support, encouragement, and role models. All participants described the cohort group as being important to their success in college. They spoke of the support they received from the cohort. They formed study groups with cohort members. They liked knowing

that there were others like them who were "in the same boat" sharing the experience of balancing work, family, and school. The cohort members motivated and encouraged each other.

Verbal persuasion

In the case of these participants, verbal persuasion took several forms. First, participants described instances of teachers and principals encouraging them to enter teaching. Second, they referred to times when teachers and principals provided verbal encouragement for their progress in college. Finally, they made reference to other participants in their cohorts providing encouragement for them to continue in college.

The paraeducators who became teachers all described instances where teachers and/or principals encouraged them to enter teaching. Elda, who became a teacher, was encouraged to do so by coworkers, claiming, "I have gained the respect and friendship of most of the staff I work with. They have encouraged and repeatedly advised that I go back to school to get the degree." Similarly, her colleague, Sara, was also encouraged by coworkers to become a teacher: "I can say that they actually empowered me to see that I could do it, because for me as a second-language learner . . . I wasn't sure that I was able to do it. But they always encouraged me."

Emotional control

The final source of efficacy beliefs for some participants was emotional control. Statements that showed evidence of emotional control that could have contributed to the development of teacher or academic self-efficacy were identified, coded, and analyzed.

Both groups described experiences that reflected emotional control in relation to the development of teacher efficacy. Olivia, now a teacher, provided an excellent example of how a person can develop positive emotions in relation to a negative experience and increase personal efficacy:

> The first year I started as an ESL aide was very hard emotionally and physically. . . . Resources in this school were very limited. Students had no access to Spanish books. I had to translate English books for them. I had no written instructions to teach these Spanish-speaking students. Many days, I went home very stressed and in tears.

Olivia could have allowed herself to become overwhelmed by the lack of teacher direction and the language policy of the district. She could have interpreted her stress as an indication that she was not capable of working with children and quit her job. Instead, she decided that by becoming a teacher, she could use her knowledge and her language skills to help children be successful.

Some of the paraeducators who became teachers described experiences that helped them develop their academic self-efficacy. Julian spoke about overcoming his lack of basic skills:

> I have been attending community college to obtain my Associate of Arts. This road has not been easy because when I started, I didn't know how to write. With time I have accomplished this, and life has gotten easier. I don't feel embarrassed anymore because I don't have to tell people that I don't know how to write.

Julian continued by expressing his thoughts on balancing work, family, and school in order to succeed in college:

> I must sacrifice some personal life. The road to success takes time, there are ups and downs, but with patience and persistence, anything can be overcome. It's like a ladder, one step at a time, eventually, you will get there.

Patience, persistence, and sacrifice are examples of emotional control. Elda also understood the required sacrifices, "Having attended college for a year, I know the time commitment and effort involved, and I'm willing to make the sacrifices needed to ensure success."

Self-Efficacy Scales

The results of the quantitative analysis of the self-efficacy scales support and enhance the findings of the qualitative analysis. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to evaluate for differences between the paraeducators who became teachers, and paraeducators who planned to remain in that role on the two dependent variables, teacher efficacy and academic self-efficacy. Table 1 summarizes the results of the one-way ANOVA analyses for the teacher efficacy and academic self-efficacy scales. Table 2 summarizes the means and standard deviations for each subgroup on the two scales.

Teacher efficacy

On the teacher efficacy scale, the ANOVA was significant, $F(1, 10) = 11.26$, $p < .05$ (see Table 1 for the ANOVA results and Table 2 for the mean and standard deviation data for each subgroup on the two efficacy scales). The results indicated that there were significant differences on teacher efficacy between paraeducators who became teachers and who planned to remain in that role. These results supported the qualitative analysis. The paraeducators who became teachers described more mastery experiences and social role models they had while working in classrooms. These experiences could have contributed to the development of their teacher efficacy.

Academic self-efficacy

There were not statistically significant differences found in the academic self-efficacy scores of the two subgroups $F(1, 10) = 0.62$, $p = .20$ (see Tables 1 and 2). This finding provided more insight into the academic self-efficacy beliefs of the subgroups than was found in the qualitative data analysis. Participants made few statements that revealed how they perceived their academic self-efficacy. All reported feeling successful in college, indicating that they believed in their ability to complete college courses and achieve their academic goals. The quantitative analysis supported this finding.

Table 1

One-Way ANOVA Results for the Two Self-Efficacy Scales

Variable	*df*	*SS*	*MS*	*F*	*p*
Teacher efficacy					
Between groups	1	2.72	2.72	11.26*	.001
Within groups	10	2.42	0.24		
Total	11	5.14			
Academic self-efficacy					
Between groups	1	0.21	0.21	0.62	.201
Within groups	10	3.45	0.36		
Total	11	3.66			

*$p < .05$.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for the Two Self-Efficacy Scales

Variable	Subgroup 1		Subgroup 2	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Teacher efficacy	4.50	0.48	3.54	0.50
Academic self-efficacy	4.50	0.43	4.23	0.71

Note. Subgroup 1 = paraeducators who became teachers; Subgroup 2 = paraeducators who planned to remain in the paraeducator role.

The Decision to Teach

These two groups of paraeducators had commonalities. They had many similar demographic characteristics. They also had high levels of academic self-efficacy. Differences were found in their previous educational experiences. Many of those who became teachers had previous opportunities to attend college. Finally, the subgroups had both qualitative and quantitative differences in their teacher efficacy. However, when examining their reasons for entering teaching or not, they completely diverged. The two subgroups had no common career decision themes.

The paraeducators who will remain in the role

The group of paraeducators who wished to remain in that role most commonly spoke of enjoying their current position, feeling comfortable there, and not believing they had the ability to handle the demands of teaching. Yet, among these paraeducators, there were three distinct factors influencing their career decisions: (a) age; (b) demands of teachers in terms of paperwork, planning, and leadership; and (c) preference for the position.

Dora felt her age was a factor. She was 56 at the time of the study. She thoughtfully replied to the question of whether she has considered becoming a teacher: "Yes I have. I've thought about it, but age wise, I think what I'm trying to do right now is be the best para[1] I can."

Ellen said that she really loved what she did as a paraeducator. She worked in the school cafeteria before she became a paraeducator but became bored with that job. As she considered the possibility of becoming a teacher, she replied, "If being a paraeducator became like wrapping hot dogs . . . if it became very boring . . . But I don't see that happening, to be honest with you. It's never been boring. There's always something exciting going on." She believed that the teacher worked too hard, had too much paperwork, and did not get to spend enough time with the kids. This real understanding of the realities of teaching was a factor in her decision.

On the other hand, Geneva was also happy with her job, but unsure if she could be a good teacher. She described her preference for library work:

> I don't know if I really want to take a position as a classroom teacher. I would really love to stay in the library. I think it's more challenging. . . . We have different classes everyday. In a way I would like to. I'm afraid to move further than the library. I don't know if I could really be a good classroom teacher.

In her role, she had the opportunity to see all the teachers and classes in the school. She observed them and was not sure that she would be a good teacher. Teachers were leaders, according to Geneva, and she clearly believed that leadership was not her strength:

> Why? I don't know. I'm not a leader. I'm a follower. That's one of the reasons why I did go to school again. One of my closest friends is really pushing me to go. . . . I don't know. I think I need to find some confidence and see if I could be a good classroom teacher. But I would really like to stay in the library.

Amalia wanted to encourage more paraeducators to earn their Associate degree. She believed that by raising the educational level of people in these positions, she could work to improve the status and working conditions of paraeducators. Amalia did not like the politics involved with being a teacher. She explained,

> I've never ambitioned to be a teacher because, if the para's politics is bad, the teachers' is even worse. There's always a division between teachers and paras. Teachers tend to look at us as secretaries and temps to do all their clerical work. We are assets to help teach the kids, sometimes teachers have to be reminded of that.

The paraeducators who became teachers

The paraeducators who became teachers focused on the limitations of the paraeducator role. They knew their knowledge and skills could benefit the teaching profession and the children they would teach. They believed that they had the ability to do more than they were doing in their paraeducator positions.

Elda discussed her need for more responsibility, stating, "I'm the kind of person that likes to keep moving up, and I wasn't going anywhere. I had moved up, but that was as far as I could go, and I felt so limited. I could do much more." Jerri believed she had already gone above and beyond the duties of her paraeducator position to help the ESL children with whom she worked. She replied, "Well, to put it very bluntly, doing the work of the teacher and not getting paid."

Several of the participants in this subgroup recognized the need for bilingual teachers and for teachers who could teach children from diverse backgrounds. They believed they could fill these roles. Sara saw the need for bilingual teachers:

> I saw that I could make a difference in children's lives here in the United States. I saw the need for bilingual teachers, and I saw that I could go and prepare myself for this role . . . become a teacher and do a better job helping these kids be successful.

The participants in this group also wanted to be role models for children. Julian especially felt this responsibility, admitting, "I can help encourage students to further their education and stay in school, especially as a male role model." Paula wanted to go beyond just academics to inspire her students:

"I want to give my students not just knowledge . . . but also to try to create in them a positive outlook, to teach them to aspire to good things in life, and to be good citizens." Elda also wanted to be a role model. She believed, "I can be an example for them. I can show them how I truly value education by becoming what I set out to be."

Discussion

There were many similarities and some specific differences between the two subgroups who participated in this study. Demographically they were very similar with two distinct differences. First was median age. The paraeducators who planned to remain in the paraeducator role were on average 10 years older than the paraeducators who became teachers. This age difference was cited as a factor in their decision to enter teaching. The second area of difference among the groups was native language. For the majority of paraeducators who became teachers, their first language was Spanish. The first language of the paraeducators who planned to remain in that role was predominantly English, although most were bilingual. This was most likely due to the fact that the college programs into which they were recruited had different goals. The career ladder program was specifically designed to train bilingual teachers; thus, it was more likely that the program would attract participants who were bilingual. The paraeducators in the second group were recruited to earn an Associate degree to meet legislative requirements.

There were similarities between the two subgroups in terms of the experiences they had in the classroom while working as paraeducators. About a third of all the participants, regardless of their career goals, stated that they liked everything about their jobs as paraeducators.

The two thirds who identified dislikes, pointed to aspects of their jobs that fell into two distinct categories. The first category related to respect and status. They described being treated as "secretaries" by teachers and not being utilized commensurately with their skills. This finding confirms previous findings that indicated paraeducators often report lack of respect, under-appreciation of their contributions, and too much time spent on clerical tasks as common causes of job dissatisfaction (Chopra et al., 2004; Riggs & Mueller, 2001; Rueda & Monzo, 2000). The finding also highlights that in spite of the fact that paraeducator roles have evolved to be much more instructional, some educators still view paraeducators as similar to their 1950s predecessors who mainly provided clerical support (Pickett, 2003).

The second category of dislike concerned issues with children, such as discipline, behavior management, treatment of children with disabilities, and lack of resources for English language learners. A possible reason for this type of job dissatisfaction is that paraeducators are often assigned to work with the most challenging children, yet receive little or no training and resources

on how to manage behavior or modify instruction, which makes it more difficult for them to do their jobs effectively (Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001; Riggs & Mueller, 2001).

One important difference among the subgroups was that the paraeducators who became teachers had more opportunities in their paraeducator positions to engage in work activities that could have contributed to the development of their teacher efficacy. For example, they had opportunities to plan lessons and teach under the supervision of teachers. Additionally, they spent more of their workday on instructional tasks. Because they spoke the same language as their students, they were able to establish relationships with parents and communicate with them about their children's progress.

In contrast, while the paraeducators who planned to remain in that role did report some instructional duties, they spent a much larger portion of their day performing routine clerical tasks, such as copying, taking attendance, collecting homework, and preparing materials for lessons. These types of duties are typical of all paraeducators in classrooms today, but the amount of time dedicated to clerical functions varies significantly in different classes (French, 1998; Rueda & Monzo, 2000).

Educational Experiences

Differences emerged in the subgroup of paraeducators who became teachers. Participants in this group had previous opportunities to attend college that were interrupted due to financial, health, and family problems. The previous college experience could have increased their academic self-efficacy, expanding their views of themselves to include college completion. Changes in perceived efficacy can produce behavioral changes after experiencing personal mastery of academic tasks (Bandura, 1997). In other words, once they experienced success in college, their perceived academic self-efficacy may have increased, influencing them to expand their career and educational goals.

The paraeducators who became teachers also described struggles in their K–12 education that helped them develop feelings of empathy for the students they would teach. These struggles included language differences and learning disabilities. This finding once again confirms the idea that paraeducators have much in common with their students (Nittoli & Giloth, 1997; Smith, 2000). As teachers, these paraeducators understood the needs of children who were English language learners or disabled because they had struggled with these issues themselves.

Teacher Efficacy

In examining the teacher efficacy beliefs of study participants, there were some qualitative and significant quantitative differences between the groups. From the qualitative analysis, it was determined that paraeducators who became

teachers made more statements that reflected mastery experiences, one of the sources of self-efficacy beliefs, during the period of time in which they worked as paraeducators. Paraeducators who planned to remain in that role made fewer references to mastery experiences. The mastery experiences described included working with supervising teachers to jointly plan and teach, communicating with parents, and learning how to keep data on students' progress. These are all aspects of a teachers' role in which participants were able to experience success.

The participants also identified social role models, a second source of self-efficacy beliefs. These role models influenced their career decisions. All of the paraeducators who became teachers identified social role models, mostly teachers, who influenced their career decisions. The paraeducators who planned to remain in that role identified the least number of social role models. Moreover, teachers who served as social role models were those teachers who had supervised paraeducators well. The power of mentorship through appropriate supervision suggests that preparing current teachers to supervise and mentor paraeducators might not only increase their job satisfaction, but it could positively affect the numbers of paraeducators who enter teacher preparation programs.

These findings indicate the work environments of the participants in this study may have contributed to the development of their teacher efficacy beliefs and influenced their decisions to enter teaching. It could be argued that the paraeducators who became teachers had higher teacher efficacy because they were already teaching, while the others were still working as paraeducators. However, the participants in this study were novice teachers who were all at the beginning of their first year of teaching. Novice teachers do have variations in their levels of teacher efficacy influenced by many variables, including perception of the quality of their teacher preparation, student teaching experiences, and mentoring (Knobloch & Whittington, 2002). Therefore, we cannot assume that the paraeducators who became teachers had higher teacher efficacy simply because they had a few months of teaching experience.

Academic Self-Efficacy

The subgroups did not have statistically significant differences in their academic self-efficacy. This could be attributed to the fact that all participants had experienced college success after enrollment in career ladder programs. Career ladder programs for paraeducators are designed in a manner that could contribute high academic self-efficacy. Those program design elements include K–12 and higher education collaboration, strategic recruitment and selection, financial assistance, cohort groups, comprehensive student services, and flexible course scheduling (Dandy, 1998; Genzuk & Baca, 1998; Safarik, 2001; Villegas & Clewell, 1998).

The Decision to Become a Teacher

Haselkorn and Fideler (1996) reported that the biggest obstacle to career advancement for paraeducators was financial. Paraeducators cannot pay tuition and fees with their low salaries, and they can rarely quit working to attend college fulltime. The participants in this study were all able to overcome this barrier because they were recruited into grant-funded programs that paid their tuition and fees. In addition, the programs designed classes that accommodated paraeducators' work schedules so they were able to continue working while in college.

The second biggest barrier to paraeducators' career advancement is the basic skills testing required for college entrance (Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996). The participants in the study, regardless of their career goals, were average to above average students in high school, indicating that they had basic skills and potential for success in higher education.

In spite of the fact that the two largest obstacles to career advancement for paraeducators were largely overcome for these two subgroups, their career decisions still differed. One possible explanation for these differences could be that they had varied self-efficacy beliefs. The results of both the quantitative and qualitative analysis in this study did reveal certain differences in the self-efficacy beliefs of participants, which would support this possibility.

Conclusions

This study emphasized the important contribution that career ladder programs make to the bilingual teacher education pipeline and to paraeducators' career and academic development. Successful career ladder programs are designed to overcome the obstacles that paraeducators who enroll in college face by providing a wide array of student support services (Dandy, 1998; Genzuk & Baca, 1998; Safarik, 2001; Villegas & Clewell, 1998). Also confirmed was the effectiveness of the academic, social, and financial support provided by career ladder programs. The results have also raised the possible conclusion that the supports provided in career ladder programs also helped to build paraeducators' academic self-efficacy.

When these strategies for success are included in career ladder programs and paraeducators' career decisions still differ, alternative factors need to be considered as also contributing to the career development and advancement of paraeducators. Self-efficacy is one of those possible factors. This study has shown that in addition to understanding the need to overcome academic, financial, and social obstacles to career advancement, self-efficacy may also play a role in paraeducators' decision to enter teaching.

Previous research has shown that paraeducators experienced vastly different work environments with duties that varied substantially based more on the teacher's perception of the paraeducator role as clerical or instructional,

without considering the paraeducators' individual interests, career goals, abilities, and skills (French, 1998). Moreover, these differences in job responsibilities impacted the paraeducators' career advancement, or their decision to enter the teacher track (Rueda & Monzo, 2000). This study confirmed that different teachers continue to assign different kinds of duties to paraeducators, but it also examined how those different supervision methods may impact paraeducators teacher efficacy beliefs.

With teacher supervision, paraeducators have become more involved in the instructional process, including small group instruction, assessment, and behavior management (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; Marks, Schrader, & Levine, 1999; Rogan & Held, 1999). The participants in this study demonstrated that although paraeducators are increasingly involved in instruction, some are still fulfilling more traditional clerical roles, and this may not only impact their job satisfaction but also inhibit the development of their teacher efficacy and their potential for career advancement.

Training and supervision of paraeducators are important issues for today's schools. Research has already determined training paraeducators increases their job satisfaction and job performance (Hall et al., 1995). The findings of this study indicate that when teachers train and supervise paraeducators properly, several additional positive outcomes occur. First, the teachers provide opportunities for paraeducators to use the skills they have learned, on the job or in training, by working with students in classrooms. Second, effective supervising teachers also have the potential to become role models who provide work environments that promote paraeducators' career development. Third, teachers who properly train and supervise paraeducators may influence paraeducators' teacher efficacy beliefs and their decision to become bilingual teachers.

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Endnote

[1] Many of the participants refer to themselves and others in their direct quotes as paras. Although the term paraeducator is used throughout this report, the exact quotes of the participants were not changed in order to maintain the integrity of their words.