

Topic: Engage in professional and ethical practice at all times.

Fisher, M., & Pleasants, S. L. (2012). Roles, responsibilities, and concerns of paraeducators: Findings from a statewide survey. *Remedial and Special Education, 33*, 287-297.

Context

In the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) amendments of 1997, Congress specified as a condition for eligibility that states have personnel standards such that paraeducators who are “appropriately trained and supervised . . . be used to assist” in the delivery of special education and related services (IDEA, 2008, Part B, Section 612 (a)15(B) iii).

State and federal reports demonstrate that the number of paraeducators working in the field of special education is growing across the United States. Since 1992, the number of paraeducators has increased 131%, whereas for the same period the number of special education teachers has decreased (DAC, 2010).

Purpose of Study

The researchers explored the following questions:

1. Given a list of 12 roles that have been noted in the literature, which of them are primary for paraeducators?
2. Do paraeducators view these roles as appropriate roles for paraeducators?
3. What are the concerns of paraeducators?
4. Do views differ based on assignment as either a “one-to-one” or “group” paraeducator?
5. Do views differ based on the amount of time paraeducators spend each day in general education settings?

Method

A survey was sent to paraeducators in districts across one Midwestern state. Of the total of 1,867 paraeducators returning their survey, 5% worked with pre-school-aged children. All respondents indicated that they were high

school graduates or had received a GED. Their experience as a paraeducator ranged from 3 months to 34 years ($M = 6.6$ years).

Paraeducators reported working with students identified in the following categories:

- Learning disabilities, 68%
- Emotional disabilities, 54%
- Mild mental disabilities, 53%
- Autism, 50%
- Communication disorders, 48%
- Moderate mental disabilities, 36%
- Multiple disabilities, 31%
- Other health impairments, 28%
- Orthopedic impairments, 26%
- Hearing impairment, 23%
- Vision impairments, 23%
- Developmental delays, 20%
- Severe mental disabilities, 19%
- Traumatic brain injuries, 11%
- Dual sensory impairments, 9%

Results

Answers to each question were as follows:

1. Given a list of 12 roles that have been noted in the literature, which of these roles are primary roles for paraeducators in this state?

The top three primary roles reported by paraeducators were: “Providing behavioral and social support to students;” “Implementing teacher-planned instruction;” and, “Supervising students.”

2. Do paraeducators view these roles as appropriate roles for paraeducators?

Yes, these top three roles were perceived by paraeducators as appropriate. Additionally, although “attending planning meetings” was not reported to be a primary or secondary role for them, they believed it should be.

3. What are the concerns of paraeducators?

The top five concerns reported by paraeducators were: “Lack of appreciation,” “Turnover;” “The general educator is less likely to interact with a student who has an IEP;” “Insufficient expertise for their role;” and, “Paraeducator as primary instructor.”

4. Do views differ based on assignment as either a “one-to-one” or “group” paraeducator?

Higher percentages of one-to-one paraeducators reported personal care support, adapting lessons designed by the general educator, and providing information between school and parents as being appropriate to their role. A higher percentage of group paraeducators (63%) reported clerical duties as appropriate relative to one-to-one paraeducators (55%).

5. Do views differ based on the amount of time paraeducators spend each day in general education settings?

A greater percentage of respondents who spent all day and nearly all day in general education believed the following roles to be more important: “Being included in planning meetings;” “Adapting lessons designed by general educators;” “Providing information between general educators and special educators;” and, “Providing information between school and parents.”

Discussion

Irrespective of the time spent in general education settings or special education settings, too many paraeducators do not participate on teams or meet regularly with teachers. This does not reflect a lack of interest on the part of paraeducators. These paraeducators want to be included as members of individual planning teams and the larger school community.

Because their voice is not often sought, the researchers encourage paraeducators to speak up and ensure their recognition on the team. These responses suggested that paraeducators view and experience their role as one of direct support to students and not as one of direct support for teachers. Even though they are “in this for the kids,” paraeducators must also understand that teachers are the other direct recipient of their support.

About Research-to-Practice Briefs

Research-to-Practice Briefs provide summaries of key studies that inform practice related to early childhood special education. The series is designed specifically to support community college faculty who prepare candidates to work with children with special needs in the early childhood setting.

About The ACCEPT Project

The ACCEPT (Advancing Community College Efforts in Paraprofessional Training) Project is a federally-funded cooperative agreement between the U. S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte College of Education. The focus of this effort is the inclusion of special education content in the coursework and experiences provided within the associate degree program in early childhood education at targeted state-supported community colleges in North Carolina.

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