

dressed topics such as role clarification, orientation and training, hiring and assigning, and supervision (Boomer, 1994; French & Pickett, 1997; Hilton & Gerlach, 1997; Jones & Bender, 1993; Palma, 1994; Parsons & Reid, 1999; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997; Salzberg & Morgan, 1995; Steckelberg & Vasa, 1998). A smaller subset of the nondatabased literature specifically addressed paraprofessional supports for students with disabilities within general education classrooms (Brown, Farrington, Ziegler, Knight, & Ross, 1999; Doyle, 1997; Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 1999; Hammeken, 1996; Kotkin, 1995; Palladino, Cornoldi, Vianello, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 1999) and other integrated settings such as community-based work sites (Rogan & Held, 1999). Except for somewhat standard statements about their importance, we identified a lone, three-page, nondatabased article that focused the issues of respect, appreciation, or acknowledgment of paraprofessionals (Palma).

Similarly, the databased literature does not substantially address the issues of respect, appreciation, or acknowledgment of paraprofessionals. This literature also has been dominated by topics such as role clarification (French & Chopra, 1999; Lamont & Hill, 1991; Welch, Richards, Okada, Richards, & Prescott, 1995), training (Hall, McClannahan, & Krantz, 1995), and paraprofessionals' interactions with students (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Marks, Schrader & Levine, 1999; Shukla, Kennedy, & Cushing, 1999; Storey, Smith, & Strain, 1993).

In their study of three rural states, Passaro, Pickett, Latham, and HongBo (1994) reported paraprofessional shortages and attrition that were attributed to a variety of factors, one of which was perceived lack of respect. Other key factors identified could also be viewed as being related to lack of respect; these included low wages, limited opportunities for advancement, and lack of administrative support. In identifying them as critical members of educational teams, Hofmeister, Ashbaker, and Morgan (1996) reported low job satisfaction among paraprofessionals. A study by Prest (1993) explored the relationship between the job satisfaction of instructional assistants and the

leadership behaviors of the teachers with whom they worked. Prest found that the actions of the professional staff who directed the work of paraprofessionals had a significant impact on the job satisfaction of those paraprofessionals.

These studies highlight the importance of considering various aspects of respect, appreciation, and acknowledgment of paraprofessionals as important factors in attracting and retaining them. These data also suggest that respect and acknowledgment extends beyond a "pat on the back," words or encouragement, or other symbolic gestures of appreciation. Rather, the extent of respect, appreciation, and acknowledgment of paraprofessionals that contributes to job satisfaction is reflected in many other factors such as compensation, role clarification, training opportunities, supervision, and support.

structive working relationships; (c) allows school administrators to make strategic staffing decisions; and (d) provides continuity for students with disabilities and their families.

The data presented in this article helps fill the gap in the research literature pertaining to paraprofessionals who support students with disabilities in general education classrooms. It does this by describing how paraprofessionals serving students with a wide range of characteristics and disabilities across the Grades from K-12, think about the issues of respect, appreciation, and acknowledgment. It explores these same issues from the perspectives of the teachers, special educators, and administrators who work with them. It is our hope that understanding these issues more fully will allow school personnel to create and improve working conditions for paraprofessionals that allow them to enhance their contributions to collaborative teams serving students with and without disabilities in general education classrooms and other inclusive environments.

SETTING

This study was conducted in four schools in Vermont. These schools were selected because they (a) were part of the same K-12 system, (b) had a history of including a full range of students with disabilities in general education classrooms, and (c) employed paraprofessionals to provide educational supports for students with and without disabilities. Three of the schools (Grades K-2, 3-5, and 6-8) were part of a K-8 school district. The number of students in these schools ranged from 430 to 526. Older students from this district attended a union high school (Grades 9-12), which also received students from two other districts. This high school served 1,410 students. Across the schools, approximately 5% of the students were from culturally diverse backgrounds. Approximately 10% of the students in the schools received free or reduced lunch. Class size across all four schools averaged in the low 20s.

Attracting and retaining paraprofes-

STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Data were collected from 103 individuals, including 41 general education teachers, 38 paraprofessionals, 14 special educators (2 of whom were speech-language pathologists), and 10 school administrators (i.e., superintendent, special education administrators, principals, and assistant principals). There were approximately the same number of participants from each of the four schools.

DATA COLLECTION

Two sources of data were collected throughout the 1998-1999 school year, semistructured interviews and observations. Approximately 22% of the study participants ($n = 23$) were both interviewed and observed. Approximately 46% ($n = 47$) were observed only. The remaining 32% ($n = 33$) of the participants were interviewed only.

Semistructured Interviews. Fifty-six individual, semistructured interviews were conducted, ranging in length from 35 to 120 min; most lasted between 45 to 60 min. Participants interviewed included 17 teachers, 17 paraprofessionals, 12 special educators, and 10 school administrators. All interviews were audiotaped with written permission from the participants and transcribed verbatim. Six of the interview transcripts were incomplete because the recorder was inadvertently set to "voice activation," causing lapses in recording.

A topical interview guide was used as the basis for all interviews. The topics were identified through current professional literature pertaining to paraprofessionals in general education classrooms (Giangreco, CichoskiKelly et al., 1999; Giangreco, Edelman et al. 1997; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997). Questions addressed the fol-

lowing paraprofessional topics: (a) acknowledg-

school paper, a nameplate on the classroom door

BEING ENTRUSTED WITH IMPORTANT RESPONSIBILITIES: "THAT'S WHY I'M GETTING MORE RESPECT."

One of the main factors identified as contributing to many paraprofessionals' feeling that they were respected was being entrusted with important, high-level instructional responsibilities. As one paraprofessional explained,

point where it was pretty sticky. Because in her mind she was that student's primary teacher, even though she wasn't. It took four hard-nosed meetings to get the point across that she had to implement (what the professionals had planned). Because some things she was doing weren't right for the child.

*NONINSTRUCTIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES:
"I DON'T WANT TO BE PUT IN THE SAME
CATEGORY AS SOMEONE WHO TAKES DOWN
BULLETIN BOARDS."*

While the paraprofessionals reported valuing their instructional responsibilities as an important and primary aspect of their job, the majority also expressed comfort with their other roles (e.g., clerical duties, general supervision of students in the cafeteria, preparing materials, and providing personal care supports to students). A smaller number discussed their roles as exclusively instructional and sought to distance themselves from tasks they perceived to be noninstructional.

A paraprofessional explained, "That's why value and acknowledgment (of my instructional role) is so important to me, because I don't want to be put in the same category as somebody who takes down bulletin boards and runs papers all day long." Some paraprofessionals in the K-8 system reported feeling "devalued" because as part of contract negotiations they were grouped with cafeteria workers and custodial staff: "Now to me that's no acknowledgment ... after working so hard to establish the fact that we are involved in education."

In the K-8 district there was a systemwide emphasis on increasing the instructional roles of paraprofessionals and minimizing their clerical roles. Having paraprofessionals engage in clerical roles "is very frowned upon in this district" (teacher). In part, minimizing their clerical roles was done to direct more human resources toward instruction, but it also was seen as a sign of respect for paraprofessionals. Some teachers abided by this approach closely: "My paraprofessional does not do my clerical work nor will she ever. I do it. That is my job. Some people don't

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An administrator at the high school explained that paraprofessionals who provide personal care supports to students with disabilities have differentiated job descriptions and receive slightly higher wages than the entry-level paraprofessionals. This was an example of an overall approach to differentiated job roles and wage levels for paraprofessionals at the high school: “There’s a job description for all the positions, each clearly defined with the competencies” (administrator).

WANTING TO B

them of value and respect. An administrator concurred: "We are not showing them respect if we are not equipping them with the training they need." When paraprofessionals experienced a thorough orientation and ongoing support, it helped them to feel valued because the implied message was that their job was important enough for a professional to take that time with them.

Planned orientation did occur for a small number of the paraprofessionals. In more cases the professional staff acknowledged: "Paraeducators are kind of thrown into things here. In terms of a really structured orientation process, it's not here." A high school faculty member agreed: "Orientation is on the run."

Lack of sufficient orientation resulted in questions and comments from paraprofessionals that ranged from, "Where's the bathroom?" and "How do I get a student out of a wheelchair without injuring my back?" to "I've got recess duty and I don't know what I am supposed to do!" Several paraprofessionals reported being unaware of a student's disability, how the disability affected learning, or a student's individualized education program (IEP) goals. As one paraprofessional who worked one-on-one with a student with disabilities explained, "There was a time I was not aware that I should be working on the IEP (goals and objectives); I had no clue. After I read the IEP and a letter from the parents I really understood the child so much better."

Some paraprofessionals reported being well-supported and spoke in glowing terms about the "excellent" ongoing support they received from either the classroom teachers or special educators. Most paraprofessionals who were assigned to a classroom rather than an individual student reported forming a "team" with the classroom teacher and having support. Paraprofessionals who did not feel they received this type of support were primarily those assigned to individual students with disabilities. Some of these paraprofessionals reported feeling "dumped on" when asked to work with students who had intensive needs (e.g., challenging behaviors, communication difficulties, and physical disabilities) with minimal support:

My first year was very hard because I didn't know anything at all about my student. I got on the phone with the special ed person: "What am I supposed to do?" "What is our next step?" I asked everybody because I was unsure.

There were two reasons that were most commonly mentioned to explain why some of the paraprofessionals working with the students with most severe disabilities received the least ongoing support. First, special educator caseload size and the number of paraprofessionals they were expected to supervise were identified as barriers to meet existing needs: "There aren't enough hours in the day" (special educator). Second, several respondents said it was their belief that both teachers and special educators were not well-trained in educating students with severe disabilities. Therefore, their ability to support paraprofessionals with these types of students was limited.

These data clearly demonstrate that issues pertaining to respect, appreciation, and acknowledgment of paraprofessionals run far deeper than the occasional pat-on-the-back or annual appreciation luncheon. They highlight the importance of this issue to paraprofessionals' job satisfaction and verify that the meaning that they, and the professionals with whom they work, attach to their experiences in schools varies widely. It should be noted that these data are limited to the four schools that were studied. Any generalization to other situations should be approached cautiously, especially given the local geographic scope of the sites and the similarity of the schools' demographic characteristics.

These data suggest that professional educators and administrators should not underestimate the importance of offering symbolic signs of appreciation to paraprofessionals. At the same time, it is vital to recognize that such gestures are only the most visible manifestation of a more complex set of interrelated issues. The impact of symbolic signs of appreciation on their job satisfaction may be reduced in situations where paraprofessionals believe that other aspects of their

employment experience (e.g., compensation, orientation, opportunities for training, and ongoing support) are inconsistent with the symbolic forms of appreciation they receive (Passaro et al., 1994; Prest, 1993).

Some paraprofessionals report feeling a lack of respect because they are not treated like a teacher by being given instructional responsibilities. One of our collective challenges is to communicate the value of *all of the roles* played by paraprofessionals, not just the instructional ones. Having paraprofessionals engage in clerical roles can create time for teacher assessment, planning, or teamwork. We especially need to affirm the value of providing personal care supports (e.g., bathroom, dressing, positioning, mobility, and eating supports) for students with the most severe and multiple disabilities as a val-

doing these teacher-level responsibilities? Or, as suggested by Brown et al. (1999), should we identify the conditions that led to these roles being assumed by untrained paraprofessionals in the first place, and ensure that all students, including those with disabilities, have full access to qualified teachers and special educators?

A major implication affecting paraprofessionals' perceptions about respect and appreciation is the extent to which professional and paraprofessional staff share expectations about paraprofessional roles and work activities. For example, when a paraprofessional values engaging in instructional roles such as implementing a small group reading lesson, and the teacher assigns such a role, there is a match of expectations. When a paraprofessional feels reluctant to implement certain types of instruction, such as math, and the teacher concurs, reasoning that the paraprofessional is not trained or paid for such a role, their expectations match. When the expectations of team members match, there is a greater likelihood that paraprofessionals will feel appreciated, respected, and not taken advantage of since there is individually agreed upon role clarity.

Conversely, when team members do not share the same role expectations, there is a greater likelihood that these mismatches will adversely affect a paraprofessional's job satisfaction (Thompson et al., 1997). For example, some teachers expect paraprofessionals to function in an instructional capacity. Some paraprofessionals do not want that responsibility and feel taken

will not be paid at the same level as teachers, special educators, and related services providers. At the same time, if schools expect to attract and retain a qualified work force of paraprofessionals, they must expect to establish better alignment between the work of trained paraprofessionals and their compensation.

Regardless of which direction the field or individual schools head, it is clear that paraprofessionals do important work in classrooms supporting students with and without disabilities. They deserve respect, appreciation, and acknowledgment in tangible ways, such as appropriate role clarification, training, support, compensation, and opportunities for input in schools. It is in our collective best interest, particularly the interests of students, parents, and teachers, to ensure that paraprofessionals are not allowed to be, or become, the Rodney Dangerfields of public education.

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