

# Why Paraeducators?

*What Experience, History, Law, and Research Say!*

1950s	1970s	1990s	2000s
↓ Traditional clerical roles	↓ Transformed to instructional roles	↓ Increased classroom roles by 65% Research on paraeducators' roles begins to appear in the literature.	↓ Increased role of paraeducators working in inclusive classrooms to support students with disabilities; others are assigned to work with students in specialized classrooms (e.g., Title I, English language learning programs), computer labs, and libraries  Research on paraeducators' impact begins to appear in the literature.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>1975</b> The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P. L. 94-142) adds responsibilities for students with disabilities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>1997</b> The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is amended to require students with disabilities to have access to general education curriculum and instruction; thus many paraeducators accompany their students into general education classrooms.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>2001</b> The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) adds responsibility for teachers to supervise paraeducators and district responsibility to ensure professional development for highly qualified personnel and minimum standards for employment.</li> <li>● <b>2004</b> The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) adds requirement for paraeducators to participate in professional development activities.</li> </ul>

**Figure 1.1**  
Paraeducators in Schools: A Time Line of Key Historical Events

The time line in Figure 1.1 shows that there are many key historical events that have influenced the way paraeducators work in today's classrooms. As we begin, you may already be wondering:

- What are paraeducators?
- When did paraeducators first become a part of the American classroom?
- What does the research say about paraeducators?
- What are the current legislative mandates regarding paraeducators?
- What are the potential legal challenges?

In this chapter, you will learn the answers to these questions as they relate to paraeducators who work in inclusive classrooms.

## ■ WHAT PARAEDUCATORS ARE

First, what do we mean by the terms *paraeducator*, *inclusive education*, and *co-teaching*? In addition to being defined below, these and other terms that may be unfamiliar are found in the Glossary.

A *paraeducator* is a school employee who “provides instructional, safety, and/or therapeutic services to students” (French, 2008a, p. 1). Paraeducators work under the supervision of a professional in a position that might have one of the following titles: teaching assistant, paraprofessional, aide, instructional aide, health care aide, educational technician, literacy or math tutor, job coach, instructional assistant, or educational assistant. The two most frequently used terms for describing a person in this role are *paraprofessional* and *paraeducator*. For example, the term *paraprofessional* is used in the U.S. federal law that governs the education of students with disabilities (IDEIA, 2004, Part D, Section 651). The term *paraeducator* has been used by some leading authors in the field, such as Pickett and Gerlach (2003), who speak from the perspective of paraeducators themselves. To honor the perspective of and to reflect the increased instructional role of paraprofessionals, in this book we use the term *paraeducator*.

*Inclusive education*, in our (the authors') view, is a process where schools welcome, value, support, and empower all students in shared environments and experiences for the purpose of attaining the goals of education. *Co-teaching* is two or more people sharing responsibility for teaching some or all of the students assigned to a classroom (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2008a). Co-teaching involves distributing responsibility among people for planning, instructing, and evaluating the performance of students in a classroom. Co-teaching is one example of an inclusive educational practice that allows general education teachers and others to provide students with and without disabilities access to the general education curriculum.

## ■ THE INTRODUCTION OF PARAEDUCATORS TO THE AMERICAN CLASSROOM

The history of paraeducators began in the 1950s, when they were introduced into schools to provide teachers more time for planning for instruction. For

the most part, early paraeducators performed clerical services. They duplicated materials and they managed students in non-instructional settings such as the lunchroom or playground.

In the 1970s, federal legislation was passed that guaranteed students with disabilities access to a free appropriate public education. With the steady movement toward general education being the preferred primary placement for students with disabilities, the paraeducator's role has evolved and is now primarily instructional in nature, especially when supporting students in the general education setting (Giangreco, Smith, & Pinckney, 2006; Pickett, 2002).

The increased reliance on paraeducators to assist in differentiating instruction in the classroom is evidenced by the numbers. For example, a comprehensive study of K–12 staffing patterns in all 50 states (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000) revealed that in the seven-year period from 1993 to 2000, the number of paraeducators in classrooms increased from approximately 319,000 to over 525,000, a 65% increase. Over half a million paraeducators were employed in inclusive and other educational settings supporting students with disabilities—the rest were assigned to support students in compensatory programs (e.g., Title I aides or multilingual aides). Some paraeducators worked in learning environments such as libraries, media centers, and computer laboratories. These data reveal the predominantly instructional nature of today's paraeducators.

## **MEET PARAEDUCATORS: MS. O. AND MS. BEGAY**

The many and varied roles of paraeducators also have been reported in the literature. Paraeducators usually discover they wear multiple hats as they juggle their roles and responsibilities. For example, paraeducators can be note-takers for students with hearing impairments as they attend classes (Yarger, 1996) or translators as well as tutors for children who speak languages other than English (Wenger et al., 2004). Teaching pro-social behaviors to young children (Perez & Murdock, 1999) and serving as aides to coach appropriate behavior for students with autism have been shown to be effective (Young, 1997). Paraeducators have also served as speech-language assistants (Radaszewski-Byrne, 1997), job coaches (Rogan & Held, 1999), or tutors for helping students learn to read, compute, or write (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2000). Other, more subtle, roles have included paraeducators as cultural ambassadors who help educational personnel bridge the gap between monolingual professionals and bilingual communities (Koroloff, 1996; Rueda & Monzo, 2002) and those who help all the children in addition to those specifically assigned to them (Giangreco et al., 2006; Marks, Schrader, & Levine, 1999). Moreover, paraeducators are active in college classrooms to provide accommodations (Burgstahler, Duclos, & Turcotte, 1999).

Pamela O. serves as an example of a paraeducator who juggled multiple roles as part of her job in an inclusive multicultural magnet school for the arts in Miami, Florida. She instructed tutorials, provided playground supervision, and prepared materials. She worked for two years with a

team of co-teachers who practiced “looping,” where they followed their third-graders when they were promoted to fourth grade (see Nevin, Cramer, Salazar, & Voigt, 2007). Ms. O. knew the fourth-grade curriculum because previously she had been a paraeducator for the fourth grade. She had some unique gifts that helped her relate to her students, such as her creativity in helping them construct posters to visually represent what they were learning. In fact, her general education teacher complimented her communication skills: “She’s not bilingual but she understands Spanish (her husband speaks Spanish) and she can speak basics to the kids. For example, the Cuban kids will go up to her and ask for help with no problem” (R. Puga, personal communication, May 24, 2006). Ms. O. was especially grateful for the added skills she learned when the guidance counselor included her in once-a-week social skills discussions and activities for the fourth-graders to learn to tolerate and respect each others’ differences. In her role as playground aide, she often asked the students to use those skills when they were involved in arguments at recess.

Another example of a paraeducator who juggled multiple roles at a junior high school is reported in a study conducted by Nevin, Malian, et al. (2007). Ms. Begay spoke English and Dakota Sioux and had worked for several years in other roles prior to becoming a paraeducator. She explained her work in a junior high school this way: “I work [in a classroom] with sixth-graders [where I tutor] in math and science, seventh-graders in science and social studies, where there are 10 students with disabilities. The students are learning to speak English as a second language, as they are all Native Americans. [Many of my students have] behavior issues due to lack of academic self-esteem.” Ms. Begay reported that she helped her students work in cooperative learning groups and as peer tutors. She firmly believed that the student who has trouble learning represents an instructional challenge rather than a “problem student.” She reported that she received support for how to differentiate her instruction and that her classroom routines helped meet the needs of her learners. She said that to prepare for her lessons, she reviewed lesson plans with her co-teacher. She emphasized to the authors of the study that the most important part of her job in the inclusive classroom was “to assist my students with strategies that are easier to understand. I make my special education students feel good about learning.”

## ■ WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT PARAEDUCATORS

In Chapter 3, you will discover more about the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators. Regardless of role, the literature is clear about the value of paraeducators in the classroom. For example, students with disabilities are included more in classroom activities when paraeducators are present. The presence of paraeducators makes it possible for *all* students’ instruction to be differentiated. General educators appreciate the presence of paraeducators, who are considered essential for supporting students eligible for special education in their classrooms (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000;

Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2002; Marks et al., 1999; Mueller & Murphy, 2001; Piletic, Davis, & Aschemeier, 2005; Riggs & Mueller, 2001; Villa et al., 2008a).

The California Department of Education has recognized 22 California sites for their collaborative approaches to including all students in inclusive environments. In such collaborative cultures, paraeducators often are given the same inservice training, are sent to conferences and workshops, and are asked to share their experiences with professional colleagues. Paraeducators also experience the benefits of being appreciated. For example, at Rincon Middle School in Escondido, California, the special education department chair said that people wanted to “transfer to Rincon because of the way instructional assistants are treated here. They are a part of the team: valued, respected, given the ability to make decisions” (Grady, 2007, p. 7).

Paraeducators from underrepresented populations (particularly those from marginalized populations, such as those who are culturally and linguistically diverse) can offer new perspectives and support for both children and teachers. As Ashbaker and Morgan (2000) suggest, paraeducators who are themselves bilingual can serve as role models as well as ambassadors who help teachers better understand the impact of culture and language on learning outcomes.

Parents and family members also appreciate what paraeducators do. They are clear about their preferences for how paraeducators might work with their children (French & Chopra, 1999; Palmer, Borthwick-Duffy, Widaman, & Best, 1998). For example, French and Chopra (1999) report the results of an exploratory focus group process involving mothers of 23 children who received special education services in general education classrooms, mainly through support from paraeducators. The paraeducators were believed to be compassionate and dedicated people who were important to the parents. Especially valued were their roles as team members, instructors, caregivers, and health needs providers.

Although parents are clear that paraeducators can be beneficial in their children’s education (French & Chopra, 1999), they are cautious and remain apprehensive about the quality of education their child actually receives in inclusive classrooms (Palmer et al., 1998). The most frequently identified problem is that the paraeducators often have limited training and support, which results in high levels of staff turnover. Parents want paraeducators and classroom teachers who work with their children to receive appropriate training and supervision. In addition, parents appreciate paraeducators who are creative about facilitating peer relationships. Paraeducators can do a lot to make sure that students assigned to them are not isolated and further stigmatized. Parents insist that the following issues should be handled before their child works with any paraeducator (Paula Goldberg<sup>1</sup>, Executive Director of the PACER Center):

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1. For more information, visit the Council for Exceptional Children’s Web page “Improving Paraeducator Practices.” The home page is at <http://www.cec.sped.org>. Click on “Professional Practice Topics and Info,” then “Paraeducators.”

- Be sure paraeducators know the child's disability, techniques for positive behavior support, how to communicate with the child, and approaches to encourage independence and peer relationships.
- Paraeducators need clearly defined roles and responsibilities, which should ideally be written into the child's academic, behavior, or language development plan.
- Parents want paraeducators to be included in their child's team meetings and want them to update them on their child's progress.

What do children say about working with paraeducators? Children's voices are strikingly absent from the literature. Recently, some researchers have studied how children and youths talk about their paraeducators (e.g., Giangreco, Yuan, McKenzie, Cameron, & Flalka, 2005; Skär & Tam, 2001; Werts, Zigmond, & Leeper, 2001). Thirteen children and adolescents (aged from 8 to 19 years) with restricted mobility who lived in northern Sweden were interviewed (Skär & Tam, 2001). The results of the interviews yielded five distinctions with respect to their perceptions of their assistants. Some perceived their assistant as a substitute for their parent (mother or father). Others perceived their assistant as a professional or as a friend. All students could articulate how the "ideal assistant" should work with them. In other words, children from age 8 to 19 have formed very distinct perceptions of their relationships with their paraeducators. Some interactions were perceived as unequal and ambivalent. The results of this study emphasize the importance of clearly defining and clarifying the roles of paraeducators not only for paraeducators themselves, but for the educators who work with and supervise them as well as the students they serve. A paraeducator is not meant to be a substitute parent or friend; instead, he or she is meant to be an educational support person. With that said, because paraeducators often are quite sensitive to their students' views and interests, it is important for them to be able to share their perceptions.

## ■ CURRENT LEGISLATIVE MANDATES REGARDING PARAEDUCATORS

What do current legislative mandates suggest? Changes in paraeducators' multiple roles that have been reported by researchers are now officially part of recent legislation. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) have articulated several requirements for paraeducators. NCLB sets out the minimum requirements. Namely, paraeducators must complete at least two years of postsecondary study, obtain an associate's degree from a community college, or demonstrate knowledge of and ability to assist in instructing in reading, writing, and mathematics by passing a formal state or local academic assessment. Many paraeducators who were hired prior to the enactment of this legislation have had to participate in professional development activities in order to meet these requirements.

In contrast, IDEIA sets forth the specific guidelines for the content of professional development activities (Part D, Subpart 1, Section 651, 654). School systems and state departments of education must design comprehensive programs to empower paraeducators to learn how to teach and meet the needs of children with different learning styles and children who

speak other languages than English. They also must learn to implement positive behavioral interventions and scientifically based reading and early literacy instruction. Other training must include helping paraeducators work with parents and families, teaching children with low incidence disabilities, and helping health professionals meet the needs of students with health, mobility, or behavior needs. Paraeducators must learn how to participate in collaborative meetings with others.

## POTENTIAL LEGAL CHALLENGES ■

What are potential legal challenges for paraeducators who work in inclusive classrooms? Etscheidt (2005), in a comprehensive legal analysis of paraeducator services for students with disabilities, reminds us that “paraprofessionals may not serve as the sole designer, deliverer, or evaluator of a student’s program” (p. 68). Stated another way, it is the teacher who has the responsibility for the education of all learners, even when instructional and other tasks are delegated or mutually decided upon by a teaching team.

Paraeducators are school employees who teach under the supervision of other professional staff responsible for the design, modification, implementation, and assessment of instruction and learner progress. Thus, Pickett and Gerlach (2003), national leaders in the training and supervision of paraeducators, emphasize the supervision of paraeducators. Yet, ambiguity as to who is responsible for the supervision of paraeducators and how supervision should be accomplished remains a premier problem. Clearly, co-teaching among educators and paraeducators creates a unique opportunity for the regular and authentic ongoing observation, analysis, and coaching of paraeducator effectiveness recommended by Ashbaker and Morgan (2001).

## SUMMARY ■

To what extent do you feel that you have enough information to generate your own answers to the questions at the beginning of this chapter? For example, how would you answer the question “What is a paraeducator?” We hope you appreciate that your school district or state might use a title other than “paraeducator.” We hope you also understand the history of how paraeducators have become a vital piece of the fabric that makes public school classrooms more successful for students.

Now that you know more about what researchers say about paraeducators, you may have even more questions. This may lead you to read the studies or even, in some cases, to conduct your own study. We hope your curiosity has been stimulated by the demands that current legislative mandates place on school administrators and teachers as well as paraeducators. In addition, we hope you can join forces with school personnel to help address the legal challenges that continue to arise.

The next chapter brings to life the varied roles, responsibilities, and challenges faced by paraeducators in real schools today. You will meet elementary, middle level, and secondary paraeducators and their co-teaching teams.