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The Role of Administrators in Paraprofessional Supervision to Support Ethnic Minority Students with Special Needs

Betty Y. Ashbaker and Jill Morgan

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 provided a clear mandate to school administrators to provide additional training for professional and paraprofessional staff. With its requirement that school districts must ensure that all staff are “highly qualified” for the roles assigned to them, it leaves no room for excuses or prevarication. Of particular note is the definition of highly qualified status for paraprofessional staff working in Title I programs. Although in the past many paraprofessionals have been hired on the basis of only a high school diploma or equivalent, the new requirement is that they have formal post-secondary education or be able to demonstrate their competence through a rigorous assessment approved at state level. This is a Title I requirement, but its wider application to *all* paraprofessionals working in Title I funded programs (and therefore specifically in schoolwide programs) makes it a general concern for educational agencies and programs hiring paraprofessionals.

In addition, the NCLB Act requires that paraprofessionals work under the direction of a teacher or other professional; that is, their work must be supervised. However, this issue of professional supervision is not new. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 stated that paraprofessionals could be used to provide special education and related services as long as they were “adequately trained and supervised.” This requirement for supervision was reiterated in the 2004 reauthorization of the IDEA known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) by adding that such use of paraprofessionals must be in line with state regulation and policy. In this article, we discuss the intricacies of the administrator’s role in paraprofessional supervision to support ethnic minority students with special needs.

Supervising the Paraprofessional

NCLB defines a paraprofessional as “an individual who is employed in a preschool, elementary school, or secondary school

providing instructional support” and states the paraprofessional must work under the direct supervision of a teacher. Earlier, Pickett (1986) described paraprofessionals as “the fastest growing yet most under-recognized, under-prepared and therefore, under-utilized category of personnel in the service delivery system” (p.14). Approximately 1.3 million paraprofessionals were working in the U.S. education system in 2002, and that number was predicted to increase at a rate surpassing that of certified teachers by the year 2005 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2005). As a case in point, recent data from Minnesota suggest that this has indeed happened in at least one state. Between 1988 and 2003, the number of Title I paraprofessionals in Minnesota increased from 3,000 to 5,000; and the number of paraprofessionals working in special education increased from 3,000 to 22,000. This last figure shows a massive seven-fold increase!

Another group of students that accounts for high employment of paraprofessionals and that is also expected to increase disproportionately in the coming years is that of English as a Second Language (ESL) students (U.S. Department of Labor, 2005). The number of ESL students directly impacts Title I programs since many of these students are in need of additional help with basic literacy and numeracy and would be considered “disadvantaged”—the major criterion for receiving assistance under Title I of the NCLB Act. For some time now, it has been known that ESL students are disproportionately referred to and identified for special education. The IDEIA now requires states and local school systems to develop policies and procedures to prevent the overidentification of or disproportionate representation by race and ethnicity of children with disabilities. This provision also calls for educators to record the number of students from minority groups in special education classes and to provide early intervention services for children in groups deemed to be over-represented (Osborne & Russo, 2006). All testing and evaluation materials and procedures must be “selected and administered so as not to be discriminatory on a racial or cultural basis” (IDEIA, 2004).

The NCLB Act requires each paraprofessional to work under the direction of a professional educator. The rather obvious corollary of the above cited growth rates therefore is that the increasing numbers of paraprofessionals will lead to an increasing need for professional educators who can provide adequate direction to and supervision of paraprofessionals. This translates into the every day reality of almost every teacher in the United States having responsibility for at least one paraprofessional for at least part of the school day.

Interestingly, many teachers with such responsibilities may even be ignorant of them (Ashbaker & Morgan, 1999b). Consider the teacher at the secondary level who has a student who comes to class accompanied by a paraprofessional because the student needs assistance in reading text or writing notes. This teacher may not consider that there is any real need to “interfere” with what the paraprofessional does, particularly if he/she has been assigned to do it by someone else. Nevertheless, that teacher does have a legal obligation to supervise him/her as part of the professional responsibility for everything that happens in the classroom.

Moreover, on a larger scale, the responsibility for supervision of paraprofessionals lies with school administrators, not just with classroom teachers. Again, this is a responsibility that may be overlooked by administrators, particularly in the case of paraprofessionals hired at the school district level, such as those working in bilingual or ESL programs. Such paraprofessionals often receive their assignments from a supervisor at the school district office and may work with

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students in several schools, making an appearance at scheduled times to work with students but otherwise having little contact with school faculty. They may also have the most contact with parents, an area of particular sensitivity especially when such contact occurs in a language that the teacher and administrator may not speak. As we have previously stated:

School administrators and their staff are largely unaware of exactly what she [the bilingual paraprofessional] does, how she interacts with the students, or what she tells parents. And yet, it is precisely those administrators and teachers who are legally responsible for the students. A safety net of support and advocacy should be put into place to legally protect the school and [the bilingual paraprofessional], and to ensure a coordinated program of services for the students. (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2000a, p.55)

Although these comments were made in relation to bilingual paraprofessionals not hired through the school, they apply equally to all paraprofessionals. The administrator remains the ultimate supervisor of paraprofessionals and the person with overall responsibility for what happens in the school (Ashbaker & Morgan, 1999a). Requirements that paraprofessionals are appropriately trained and supervised are required by federal legislation, but it is up to school level administrators and teachers to see that supervision is conducted.

Paraprofessional Supervision: Clarification and Meaning

Almost a decade after the enactment of IDEA, no real federal definition of supervision has emerged. As indicated, NCLB noted that paraprofessionals should work “under the direction” of a professional. Title I non-regulatory guidance provided the following non-binding clarification:

A paraprofessional works under the direct supervision of a teacher if (1) the teacher prepares the lessons and plans the instructional support activities the paraprofessional carries out, and evaluates the achievement of the students with whom the paraprofessional is working, and (2) the paraprofessional works in close and frequent proximity with the teacher (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, p. 10).

By any standard, this appears to be a scant definition of the supervising teacher’s role in planning the paraprofessional’s work, evaluating the paraprofessional’s students (with no mention of evaluating the paraprofessional) and keeping the paraprofessional close at hand.

An increasing number of due process hearings, court cases, and Office of Civil Rights (OCR) opinions have focused on the question of whether paraprofessionals have been adequately trained and supervised. The adequacy of training for assigned roles has received noticeably more attention than adequacy of supervision. When supervision has been the major focus of cases, more attention seems to have been given to whether there has been any supervision at all rather than the nature or quality of it (Ashbaker & Minney, 2005).

So far, we have considered what constitutes appropriate levels of supervision for paraprofessionals according to government sources. Several authors (e.g., French & Pickett, 1997; Morgan, 1998; Morgan, Ashbaker, & Roberts, 2000) have made recommendations on what constitutes the teacher’s supervisory role. According to Pickett and Safarik (as cited in Pickett & Gerlach, 1997), the supervising teacher has tremendous responsibilities with regard to paraprofessionals, namely:

1. Participating in the hiring of the paraprofessional for whom he/she will be responsible;
2. Informing family and student of the frequency and duration of paraprofessional services as well as the extent of supervision;
3. Reviewing each paraprofessional’s performance at least weekly;
4. Delegating specific tasks to the paraprofessional while retaining legal and ethical responsibility for all services provided or omitted;
5. Signing all formal documents, e.g., IEPs and reports;
6. Reviewing and signing informal progress notes prepared by the paraprofessional;
7. Providing ongoing on-the-job training for the paraprofessional;
8. Providing and documenting appropriate supervision of the paraprofessional;
9. Ensuring that the paraprofessional performs only tasks within the scope of the paraprofessional’s responsibility;
10. Participating in the performance appraisal of the paraprofessional for whom he or she is responsible.

French and Pickett (2003) also stated that supervising teachers should participate in supervision training prior to using a paraprofessional and must upgrade supervision skills on a regular basis. Similarly, Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, and Stahl (2001) suggested the following competencies for teachers who direct the work of paraprofessionals:

1. Communicating with paraprofessionals;
2. Planning and scheduling;
3. Instructional support;
4. Modeling for paraprofessionals;
5. Relating to the public;
6. Training;
7. Managing of paraprofessionals (p. 525).

French (2003) reiterated the supervising teacher’s responsibilities in terms of the following executive functions and then suggested new administrative duties for teachers to perform:

1. Orienting the paraprofessional to the classroom, school, and students;
2. Planning for paraprofessionals;
3. Scheduling for paraprofessionals;
4. Delegating tasks to paraprofessionals;
5. On-the-job training (including coaching of paraprofessionals).

She further added management and evaluation components—assignments new to most teachers’ scope of training:

1. Monitoring and feedback regarding performance;
2. Managing the workplace, e.g., communication, problem solving, and conflict management.

As for teachers participating in the hiring process, this is not generally the case as paraprofessionals are often hired by the district rather than by individual schools; thus, this removes the possibility of teachers participating in the hiring process. Other paraprofessionals may be hired to work with a particular student, rather than a specific teacher. Additionally, Title I paraprofessionals may work under the general direction of a Title I teacher but carry out their assignments in several different classrooms during the day, complicating the monitoring and management process, and multiplying the number

of potential supervisors. In sum, neither federal laws nor the ensuing legal opinions have clearly defined what paraprofessional supervision must look like. As it stands, they give only a rather vague idea of what constitutes appropriate levels of supervision by looking for negative evidence—or lack of supervision. Opinion varies among the academic community and even among educators as to what constitutes supervision.

Paraprofessional Supervision and Ethnic Minority and ESL Students

Ethnic minority and ESL students experience many challenges in the U.S. school system—challenges which are typical to all young people who move from one culture and language group to another. First, they face the physical and emotional demands of having to operate in a second language for most or all of the school day. Operating in a second language always requires additional effort and presents unexpected pitfalls. Many ESL students are not competent in English and require Title I support for basic literacy. Having English as a second language can rob the student's school experience of all spontaneity and add stress and anxiety to the learning process. Secondly, the difficulties of communication includes communication relating to learning (being unable to respond to—or even understand—questions that support learning), and to social events (being tongue-tied in the presence of English-speaking peers, and misreading social cues). Third, the challenge of not feeling part of or a contributor to their community becomes particularly important to adolescents who look for influence over their surroundings and need to begin to see that they have responsibilities towards the community that supports them. Finally, these students face the challenge of furthering their education and skills, and therefore their employment prospects, particularly with a lack of role models from their own cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

However, paraprofessionals who work with such students can have considerable influence in mitigating the effects of second language challenges. In addition, paraprofessionals usually live in the community where they work and already have strong roots in the community (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2000b). They represent minority populations in greater percentages than do teachers (Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996). Because paraprofessionals tend to know the students in schools and communities, they help make the school experience less alienating and connect it to students' cultural experiences (Ashbaker, Enriquez, & Morgan, 2004; Rueda, Monzo, & Higareda, 2004); and, in many cases, they are native speakers of students' languages and provide a sorely needed language resource (Rueda & Monzo, 2000). About a decade ago, Genzok (1997) examined the sociocultural scaffolding practices of current and former Latino paraprofessionals as they worked with Latino students. He found that paraprofessionals used important cultural knowledge in their interactions with students during instruction and with teachers in informal contexts in the community.

Ashbaker et al. (2004) concluded that there is a need for careful supervision of paraprofessionals who work with ESL students. Clearly, the importance of adequate supervision for paraprofessionals as they support the work of ethnic minority students with and without disabilities cannot be understated (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997). Three levels of supervision that are critical to the success of students include:

- Individual classroom teachers provide on-site supervision

to paraprofessional work experience. Through preservice sessions—before the students arrive—they can provide orientation to classroom procedures and schedules. In brief meetings prior to scheduled classes, they can discuss the tasks assigned to students. During classroom time, both the paraprofessional and teacher can monitor the students' work, but the teacher can provide the paraprofessional with on-the-job training and feedback, particularly through modeling best teaching practices.

- School administrators provide an organized infrastructure for the paraprofessional experience, providing support through availing resources for preservice training, offering basic training in teamwork, and ensuring that the system of evaluation and rewards are in place to recognize good work.
- Paraprofessionals avail themselves of training and keep students at the center of their focus. They are aware of their role assignments and avoid treading on the teacher's responsibilities. Matters of confidentiality and professionalism are always upheld.

In a Utah project, an interesting reversal in roles provided useful insight into the experiences of ethnic minority students and the influence that minority paraprofessionals can have in the learning process. *Latinos in Action* was a project designed to provide high school students with valuable work experience and the opportunity to make a contribution to the local community. Details of the program are available elsewhere (see Ashbaker et al., 2004); but in essence, the program consisted of placements for Latino high school students as paraprofessionals in local feeder elementary schools. The placements were specifically targeting younger Latino students, and much of the support was given one-on-one. The student paraprofessionals attended the elementary schools three days each week as part of an advanced studies class with the remaining two days of class time spent in preparation and debriefing. School district personnel provided training in effective instructional and behavior management techniques, and the students also received assistance in preparing résumés and applying for jobs. The student paraprofessionals and their supervising teachers in the elementary schools also received training in working together as an instructional team prior to working together in the classroom. During training sessions, supervising teachers were given time to explain assignments to the student paraprofessionals and to provide orientation to basic classroom procedures (including behavior management). Professional issues such as confidentiality, dress codes, and general comportment were also covered in the basic training.

Variations of this program have been implemented to suit the local needs, including migrant programs and alternative high school programs. Universally, the benefits of the program for the younger Hispanic students have been identified as: (a) valuable additional instructional input on an individual basis; (b) availability of a role model of educational success by someone of their own cultural background; and (c) creation of a greater sense of security as they had someone to talk to and ask questions of in their own language.

For student paraprofessionals, the benefits have included: (a) valuable work experience in a supportive setting; (b) a tremendous sense of achievement as they saw the learning process take place for younger students under their tutelage; (c) insight into teaching as a possible career; (d) development of leadership and collaborative skills; (e) increased self-esteem and confidence as they realized the

difference between being considered bilingual (an asset) rather than ESL (a deficit); and (f) a sense of satisfaction in giving community service and having that contribution recognized.

Participation in the Utah Latinos program led to higher than usual graduation rates from high school, employment opportunities for the high school students as paraprofessionals in after-school programs, and, for several students, enrollment in college courses where that had not been considered an option previously. These benefits for student paraprofessionals are not nominal as they go to the very heart of how to respond to challenges faced by minority and ESL students.

The Administrator's Role in Paraprofessional Supervision

Using the Utah program as a model, three main aspects are apparent. First, Latino high school students were placed in local feeder elementary schools as paraprofessionals. Under the direction of assigned classroom teachers, they worked with younger Latino students who were experiencing difficulties, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy. They provided additional instructional support for the younger students in their own language and in English, supported language assistance to facilitate communication with the teacher, and served as role models of school success within their common Hispanic culture. Secondly, the high school students received support for their paraprofessional experience in an advanced studies class taken for credit. This included coaching in general work-related skills and more specific teaching and behavior management strategies to use in the elementary classroom. Third, administrative support was provided in the form of busing to school sites, teamwork training sessions for the student paraprofessionals, and assignment to elementary school teachers.

Although the first two aspects required administrative support, the paraprofessionals received supervision and support at the classroom and teacher levels. The third level is purely an administrative issue and is beyond the authority of the classroom teacher. Again, although all three levels of supervision were important, the last—infrastructure support—was critical to the success of the various iterations of the Latino program. Where the administrator was careless of the program and expressed little or no appreciation for the student paraprofessionals' efforts and contributions, the program invariably prospered less than in those schools where the administrator made a point of endorsing the program in the school and showing an interest in the outcomes. This aspect of supervision also had financial implications: The supervising teachers, for example, cannot be expected to attend the teamwork training out of school hours without some form of compensation.

This suggests that while NCLB requires that paraprofessionals work under the direction of a professional, supervision in its broader sense requires the extra layer of administrator support and intervention. The aforementioned activities that resulted from the Latino in Action program can be applied to any school and serve to prevent problems such as those noted by Riggs (2001) and Mueller (2002). In her study of paraprofessionals, Riggs noted that in many cases paraprofessionals were unclear about specific policies and procedures related to their supervision. Further, she noted that paraprofessionals indicated that they were unaware of who would evaluate them and how they would be evaluated. Mueller (2002) argued that when evaluations do occur paraprofessionals report they are infrequent and often conducted by administrators who are unfamiliar with their work. As a

consequence, the link between paraprofessionals and their ultimate supervisors—school administrators—needs to be well-established and transparent.

Conclusion

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, with its requirement for highly qualified staff, mandates additional training for professional and paraprofessional staff. Increasing numbers of students in ESL and special education, where large numbers of paraprofessionals support instruction, require that they work under the direction of a teacher and that they receive supervision. The need for supervision of paraprofessionals is educationally undeniable. That NCLB and IDEIA should require it is reasonable since it would otherwise be impossible to guarantee the quality of services students receive without qualified professionals providing active oversight of the paraprofessionals who are their classroom deputies. What constitutes that supervision is still a matter of some debate. However, it is clear that teachers can provide direction and supervision for their paraprofessionals in order to meet the mandates of the NCLB and IDEIA Acts. Since ethnic minority students experience many challenges in the U.S. school system, paraprofessionals can offer wide-ranging support to these students. However, there is a critical need for careful supervision of paraprofessionals, including those who work with ESL and other minority students.

It is important for school administrators to provide an organized infrastructure for the system to accommodate the employment, training, and supervision of paraprofessionals. They must provide support through availing resources for preservice training, offering basic training in teamwork, and ensuring that the system of evaluation and rewards is in place to recognize good work. They can seek resources to provide schools with additional ethnic minority paraprofessional support because of the enriching support they can offer ethnic minority special education students. In addition, they must identify compensation for the supervising teachers to attend the teamwork training outside school hours instead of expecting them to attend without compensation and transportation reimbursement. School programs invariably prosper when administrators show interest in paraprofessionals and their contributions, support teachers' teamwork and training with paraprofessionals, provide guidance of innovative programs, and express appreciation for paraprofessionals' efforts and contributions. Paraprofessionals need to know they will be regularly evaluated, and that the content of the evaluation will relate specifically to the job description and the daily, regular duties. In the end, administrators conducting the evaluation must be familiar with the paraprofessional's duties and assignments.

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