

The Ambiguous Role of the Paraeducator in the General Physical Education Environment

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The use of paraeducators has increased as a main mechanism to include more students with disabilities in the public schools in the U.S. Although the utilization of paraeducators is intended to be a supportive service delivery option, many concerns and challenges have resulted. The purpose of this study was to examine the role of the paraeducator in the general physical education environment from the perspectives of special education, physical education, and adapted physical education teachers and paraeducators. Data were collected from a phenomenological approach using questionnaires, interviews, and observations. Results indicate concerns about the clarity of the role of the paraeducator in physical education. Emerging themes include elastic definitions of student protection and teacher backup, contradictory expectations and mixed acceptance, and paraeducators' role ambiguity. Findings regarding the role of the paraeducator are essential in determining both best practice and legal policy for the appropriate utilization of paraeducators in physical education.

Keywords: paraeducators, inclusion, students with disabilities, physical education, phenomenology

Over the past 20 years, the need to extend the support of special education teachers has grown tremendously as students with disabilities are integrated into general education settings (Beale, 2001; French, 2003; Walsh & Jones, 2004). As a result, the use of paraeducators has increased as a main mechanism for support to multiple general education settings (Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2001a; Giangreco & Doyle, 2002; Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2002). Many of the demands placed on paraeducators are unrealistic and burdensome, particularly for

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untrained individuals. For a paraeducator, the realities of their frequently undefined roles, inappropriate responsibilities, and lack of appreciation by others affects their perceived competence in their abilities to assist students with disabilities in all areas (Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2001a). Inadequate training and knowledge of teachers further prevents appropriate guidance of paraeducators to meet the educational needs of students (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000).

The role of the paraeducator has expanded in large part as a result of a decrease in special education teachers. This decrease has been attributed to high turnover rates due to adverse working conditions including large caseloads, increased paperwork, and lack of administrative support (Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001b). Many of the aforementioned issues highlight a breakdown in essential communication and collaboration among teachers and paraeducators for current delivery models of special education where students are integrated into the general education environment (French & Chopra, 2006). As more students are included into general education classrooms, more support personnel and collaborative practices are needed; however, the specific roles and responsibility of the paraeducator and the teachers, especially in the physical education environment, remains unclear.

To date, few studies describe how paraeducators and physical education teachers view what occurs when paraeducators and their students are in physical education classes. Therefore, this study aims to examine paraeducators' particular situations in general physical education as experienced by paraeducators and teachers within two school districts. The study addresses the following research questions: (a) How do paraeducators define their role in the general physical education environment? and (b) How do special education, physical education, and adapted physical education teachers define the role of the paraeducator in the general physical education environment? Understanding how teachers and paraeducators perceive their roles and responsibilities in physical education can assist educational teams and service providers in correcting inappropriate practices and establish policies and guidelines for performance (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000).

Paraeducator Roles

Paraeducators are known to have many roles in educating students with disabilities. Not all the roles they take on are appropriate and are oftentimes detrimental to students. In a study that explored parent perspectives on the responsibility of the paraeducator, French and Chopra (1999) described four primary roles that parents reported for paraeducators. The four roles were connector, team member, instructor, and caregiver/health service provider. Parents described role of connector as most important and powerful, as it keeps the parents linked with the school. Parents often reported that they were more likely to be in contact with their child's paraeducator than with the teacher; however, some parents also mentioned how the role of connector failed due to the paraprofessional being a barrier to their child with peers and general education teachers. Regarding the other roles, parents felt that paraeducators needed to be an equal part of the team because their input was valuable. They also perceived paraeducator instruction as good if being supervised by the teacher and if lessons reflected the Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals. On the other hand several parents were concerned that paraeducators were adapting curriculum without supervision. Parents were also concerned that as

caregivers, paraeducators were often doing things they were not trained to do that could compromise their children's dignity and privacy. The roles and concerns parents described are similar to the roles students have described for themselves, especially in regard to friend and primary teacher.

Broer, Doyle, and Giangreco (2005) found in interviews of students with intellectual disabilities that paraprofessionals take on the roles of mother, friend, protector, and primary teacher, which included themes of exclusion from peer relationships (friend), embarrassment (mother), stigma and bullying (protector), and invisible to general education teachers (primary teacher). Overwhelmingly present in the interviews was the denial of opportunity to develop peer relationships, creating the role of friend in the paraprofessional due to a necessity. Causton-Theoharis and Malmgren (2005) looked more closely at the inadvertent effect of the increased social isolation of students with disabilities and acknowledged that paraprofessionals were considered to be a physical barrier to peer interactions. They did find that through intervention and training, however, paraprofessionals were able to facilitate and increase interactions among students with and without disabilities, dissolving the inappropriate role of friend in the paraprofessional.

In their study of the proximity of paraeducators, Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, and MacFarland (1997) found eight themes identifying problems instructional team members thought paraeducators caused. The themes included perceived classroom problems of paraeducator interference with general educators' ownership of and responsibility for the class and interference with instruction of other students. The themes concerning the paraeducators' effects on special education students included separation from classmates, dependence on adults, negative impact on peer interactions, limitations on receiving competent instruction, loss of personal control, and loss of gender identity. These eight themes are examples of the issues relating to the "hovering" of paraeducators and the importance of examining the policies regarding paraeducator support, teacher supervision, and the collaboration of educational teams.

Paraeducator Roles in Physical Education

The roles of the paraeducator have not always transferred to the physical education environment. Often paraeducators have seen physical education as a time for a break or a planning period (Block, 2000). This has been due to a lack of expectation to assist in general physical education and undefined roles when positions of employment were accepted (Silliman-French & Fullerton, 1998). In one study, Bolen and Thomas (1997) surveyed paraeducators working in the physical education environment and found that none met the minimal 3-day orientation recommendations for training. Sixty-six percent of the paraeducators surveyed had not received any training for their position but all responded to receiving some on-the-job training from the teachers. They also reported a need for more feedback and suggestions and a desire for closer supervision by their teacher. Davis, Kotecki, Harvey, and Oliver (2007) reported that paraeducators in their study escorted students to physical education, provided prompting cues, and provided some one on one instruction. Some of the paraeducators also reported assisting with assessments and sharing IEP suggestions while few reported watching from the sidelines. Other literature in physical education regarding paraeducators is anecdotal with strategies on how to best use and work with paraeducators in physical education. There are training

guides to develop the roles and responsibilities for paraeducators and teachers in physical education that are based primarily on the research in special education and classroom literature. An extremely limited research literature addresses physical education and the paraeducator. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the particular realities of paraeducators in general physical education as experienced by the paraeducators and teachers within two school districts.

Method

To understand how paraeducators and the teachers they work with experience the role of the paraeducator in general physical education, one must learn through their voices, experiences, and meaning. As a result, this qualitative investigation was based on an empirical phenomenological framework, not a philosophical phenomenological one (Giorgi, 1997; Giorgi, 2009; Patton, 2002). Giorgi (1997) argues that scientific phenomenology is appropriate in research, which intends to describe an important structure based on the expressed experiences of others. Two levels of the empirical phenomenological approach are described by Giorgi (1985). The first level consists of the original data being comprised of simple descriptions obtained through open ended questions and dialogue, as in interviewing. In level two, the researcher describes the structures of the experience based on reflective analysis and interpretation of the participant's account. From these descriptions, general or universal meanings are derived. Likewise, phenomenological analysis, according to Patton (2002), works to understand and expose the meaning, organization, and fundamental nature of the lived experience of a particular phenomenon for a person or group of people. It is the study of how people describe, experience, and construct meaning for things through their senses.

Phenomenology is a method of description; it is not a method of theory-construction. The phenomenological approach includes the bracketing of prior knowledge of the topic so the research can start anew without theories and focuses on the participants experience and how they make sense of it, not if their views can be verified. The phenomenological approach also focuses on the objects of consciousness to seek the essences of the phenomenon being studied (Giorgi, 2009).

Observations and semistructured interviews provided the approach for collecting the interpretations of paraeducators and teachers on the role of the paraeducator in the general physical education environment. Demographic sheets, interview, and observation notes were used to verify themes from the interview data. Triangulation was used to increase the credibility and quality of the data and reduce systematic bias through the use of different data sources and a second coder. Epoche, an ongoing process acknowledging personal bias, was used to gain clarity about preconceptions (Patton, 2002). The primary researcher bracketed prior knowledge and noted assumptions and bias in journal entries throughout the entire project to examine data fresh during each observation and interview without prejudice.

Trustworthiness of this study was established through thoughtful, systematic triangulation (Patton, 2002) that included three strategies: (a) triangulation of multiple sources, (b) the use of two individuals to code and develop themes, and (c) member checks involving study participants. The interviews, observations, and extensive research notes provided strategies to reduce bias by checking findings against multiple sources. A second coder with a qualitative background independently

analyzed the same qualitative data to provide comparison. The primary researcher and second coder met after each had coded all the data. Discussions took place initially to refine the codes and reexamine the data. The primary researcher and second coder worked on reducing the data. The primary researcher pulled out key phrases and statements that spoke to the phenomenon of the paraeducator role in the general education setting to interpret as an informed reader. Participants were sent the structural descriptions of coded data to check for inaccuracies, confirm the description, and raise any questions about the findings.

Participants

The participants in the study were from two middle schools in a suburban school district in Oregon ($n = 8$) and one middle school from a rural district in California ($n = 7$). The two schools in Oregon are part of a large district consisting of over 38,000 students. Students with disabilities make up 12% of the population, second language learners 14%, and 38% of students are on free and reduced lunch (OR Department of Education). The rural California school district's enrollment is just over 4,000 students. Students with disabilities make up about 8% of the student population, second language learners 3%, and 41% are eligible for free and reduced lunch (CA Department of Education). The districts and particular schools were chosen based on criterion sampling, which included the following criteria: (a) students with disabilities were included in general physical education classes; (b) the school used paraeducators to help support students with disabilities in the district; and (c) the school had a certified/credentialed adapted physical education specialist for the district. The participants from both districts composed of paraeducators ($n = 4$), special education teachers ($n = 3$), general physical education teachers ($n = 4$), and adapted physical education teachers ($n = 4$) working at the middle school level. The middle school level was examined because physical education was offered at least 3–5 days a week with students with disabilities included in the physical education environment by certified physical education teachers. Paraeducators included three females and one male, while the special education teachers included two females and one male. The general physical education teacher group consisted of three females and one male, while the adapted physical education teachers included one female and three males. Participation in the study was voluntary and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and informed consent were obtained.

The participants, schools, and school districts were given pseudonyms to conceal their identity. One of the paraeducators worked one on one with a student throughout the school day while the other three paraeducators worked with groups of students in various capacities. The students the paraeducators in this study worked with did not have any physical disabilities. All the students had various forms of intellectual disabilities. The paraeducators did not have any coursework in adapted physical education or special education. All the adapted physical education specialists were itinerant and worked at a number of elementary, middle, and high schools within their district. Two physical education teachers worked full time, while two worked three-quarter time. Only one physical education teacher had coursework in adapted physical education and special education. The special education teachers were all full time. The participants spanned a wide spectrum of experience and education that can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1 School Teams

Middle School	Teaching Position	Years of Experience	Years at Placement	Highest Degree Earned
Maple				
Lauren	Paraeducator	4	2	BS
Mark	Adapted Physical Education	30	28	MA
Judy	Physical Education	22	2	BA
Rachel	Special Education	7	6	MA
Sycamore				
Megan	Paraeducator	14	14	BS
Colin	Adapted Physical Education	8	4	BS
Nicole	Physical Education	25	6	MA
Mary	Special Education	11	6	BA
White Oak				
Jack	Paraeducator	8	2	AS
Tammy	Paraeducator	2	1.5	HS
Paige	Adapted Physical Education	20	3	BS
James	Adapted Physical Education	24	21	MA
Janice	Physical Education	20	5	BA
Matt	Physical Education	35	31	BA
Greg	Special Education	27	4	BA

Note. AS = Associates Degree; BA = Bachelor of Arts; BS = Bachelor of Science; HS = High School; MA = Master of Arts.

Materials

The demographic questionnaire and semistructured interview questions were created by the researcher. The demographic questionnaire focused on years of experience, education, course work, training, and level of support by administration. The interview questions focused on a typical day of work, the roles and responsibilities of the teachers and paraeducators regarding students with disabilities, and more specifically, including students with disabilities in the physical education environment.

One hour and one half hour individual interviews were conducted by the primary researcher in a private comfortable space determined by the participant. Interview and observation notes were taken throughout the duration of the project by the researcher. A digital voice recorder was used for recording all 15 interviews which were transcribed directly to a PC by a professional transcriber and reviewed by the researcher for accuracy. Transcript and observation notes were coded by hand and stored and organized in Max QDA (VERBI Software, 2001) a qualitative coding software tool.

Procedure

After receiving district approval, a script e-mail was sent to identified special education teachers, adapted physical education teachers, and paraeducators that supported students in physical education. Once consent forms were signed, full day observations were set up with the paraeducators and interviews were scheduled. All participants were interviewed and the paraeducators were observed for a total of four sessions: one full-day observation and three one-hour observations surrounding the students with disabilities physical education time. Full-day observations of the paraeducators were completed before handing out demographic questionnaires or interviewing participants so questions could not potentially change the behavior of participants.

After a full day observation of paraeducators one-on-one interviews were scheduled with individual participants. During this period of time, one-hour observations surrounding the physical education time began based on logistics and school schedules. The researcher spent a total of eight to ten days in each school district. The days were spread over a two-month time period.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through constant comparative analysis before, during, and after data collection. The seven steps to data analysis using the phenomenological approach described by Patton (2002, p. 485–486):

1. Epoché, the process of examining one's own bias to gain clarity about preconceptions to understand the researcher's view of the subject matter.
2. Phenomenological reduction or bracketing is explained in five steps:
 - a. Locate within the personal experience, or self-story, key phrases and statements that speak directly to the phenomenon in question.
 - b. Interpret the meanings of these phrases as an informed reader.
 - c. Obtain the subject's interpretations of these phrases, if possible.
 - d. Inspect these meanings for what they reveal about the essential, recurring features of the phenomenon being studied.
 - e. Offer a tentative statement, or definition, of the phenomenon in terms of the essential recurring features identified in step 4. (Patton, 2002, p. 485–486)
3. Organize data into meaningful clusters.
4. Delimitation process. This involves eliminating irrelevant, repetitive, or overlapping data.
5. Invariant themes are identified.
6. Structural description. Content is extracted from the data for textural portrayals of each theme.
7. Last, a synthesis of the meanings with current literature was completed revealing the essences of the experience or phenomena. Through data analysis, categories emerged with descriptions about the paraeducator's role in general physical education. It should be noted that some of the emergent themes were similar to what has been reported in the classroom and special education research literature.

Results

Based on the data analyses, individual participants' comments were identified into three main themes surrounding the paraeducator role. They included elastic definitions of student protection and teacher backup, dealing with contradictory expectations and mixed acceptance, and paraeducators' role ambiguity. Subthemes included managing students: safety first, student learning second, and integration or inclusion.

Elastic Definitions of Student Protection and Teacher Backup Roles

The participants described the paraeducator role mostly in relation to student and teacher support, safety, and managing behavior. When discussing the overall job position, not specific to physical education, the paraeducators themselves described their role as "just being their [students] aide and helping the teacher, with everything" (Tammy, paraeducator, White Oak). Megan a one-on-one paraeducator at Sycamore Middle School described her role specific to supporting her student: "basically, I believe I have to modify and explain the course task in a simple way, an understandable way that he would be able to do his, you know his work." The paraeducators also mentioned supporting the teacher with different tasks such as documentation as noted by Lauren (paraeducator) from Maple Middle School: "I kind of feel like I'm the undercover cop reporting back to my teacher. I take notes regularly all through the day on kids' behavior and usually review it with her at the end of the day." Observation notes (Day 1 Maple) also captured this: "Linda sits at desk and writes notes about different incidents and interactions of students throughout the day. She says she is the note taker for the class/teacher so they can keep track and make note of different things with students." The paraeducators not only mention support for teachers and students but some mentioned being advocates for the students. Jack (paraeducator, White Oak) discussed his role in relation to the difficulties of his position: "it's trying to get everybody to accept them and to treat them as human beings. You know, I think that's my biggest role, just to make sure that they're all treated with respect." Jack felt he needed to protect the students from the perceptions and sometimes low or limited expectations held by the general education teachers regarding the students with disabilities.

When the teachers described the overall role of the paraeducator they described it much the same as the paraeducators in regard to one-on-one and small-group support as well as being record keepers and role models. Such description by Greg, a special education teacher from White Oak follows:

Well to work with students in small group instruction or one to one instruction, to follow lesson plans, to do any kind of bookkeeping that I ask them to do or charting that I ask them to do, or record keeping however you want to call it, to be a positive role model in class, to be a positive role model outside of class on campus.

The two other special education teachers and two of the physical education teachers also described the paraeducator's role in relation to being fellow teachers assisting with the class and described them as "co-teachers."

Managing students: Safety first, student learning second. Participants described the paraeducator's role in the general physical education environment in relation to keeping students safe and dealing with behavior issues. The special education teachers struggled more with answering questions specific to physical education; this may be due to their lack of collaboration and knowledge about what was actually going on in the gym. The dynamics of conversations were either between the physical education teacher and the paraeducator or the paraeducator and special education teacher, but rarely physical education teacher and special education teacher or between all three. Their comments were more in relation to specific students or groups and would answer by saying things like, "it depends on the students that I have" (Mary, special education teacher, Sycamore MS).

Megan (paraeducator, Sycamore) reported in regard to physical education: "The first thing is safety. My role is safety." Tammy (paraeducator, White Oak) also reports safety as being a priority by describing her role as "mostly watching and making sure that they're not getting hurt." The paraeducators also describe their role in relation to the physical education teachers. For example Lauren (paraeducator, Maple) said, "the mainstream PE teacher, she's got a class full of kids she's got to work with and so those kind of outbursts of behavior are not part of what she is there for." Research notes further indicate teacher acceptance of students without the responsibility for learning. Day 3 notes from Sycamore state, "teacher and paraeducators are thankful that physical education teachers accept their students in class, yet those without any curricular knowledge may not still see that modifications are not being made for some of the students to be more successful in physical education." Greg (special education teacher), James (adapted physical education teacher), and Jack (paraeducator) from White Oak described the dynamic of the male physical education environment very differently than the other two middle schools or the female physical environment within the same Middle School as will be seen throughout.

Jack (paraeducator, White Oak) felt that he had no role in physical education. He specifically described his situation by saying, "I'm a fly on the wall." After observing and interviewing the teachers and paraeducators at White Oak Middle School, it was apparent that the two physical education teachers were very different, and the students with disabilities were treated very differently depending on which teacher they had. White Oak Middle School practiced single sex physical education which alone created class size issues for the teachers and very different environments for the adapted physical education teacher and the female and male paraeducators to serve. The students integrated in physical education had very different experiences depending if they were in a male or female physical education class. The male physical education class had 56 students compared with the female class of 15 (Day 2 White Oak).

The male physical education teacher did not interact with the special education students and would not allow the students to enter class without the special education teacher, adapted physical education teacher, or paraeducator present. The physical education teacher did not want to have to work with the special education students or the paraeducator and even stated, "It's their job to deal with them in the classroom. If they're out of line, I will raise my voice. I will tell them what I expect in behavior, and they'll try and get to that level as quickly as possible. Some of them are slower to pick up on it, some of them balk at it and that's when I turn to the Special Ed instructor, whether it be the aide or teacher, and say, 'Hey, you

deal with it. I don't have time'" (Matt, physical education, White Oak). The special education students did not struggle in the class or seem to need paraeducator support in physical education during the observations noted by the researcher; however, students were not allowed in class without some other support staff. The teacher and paraeducator did not communicate on the days observed. The paraeducator would merely sit in the bleachers and observe the class from the opposite side of the gym (Day 4 White Oak).

The female physical education teacher's classes were more welcoming of the students and the paraeducator. The female physical education teacher talked to the special education students and the paraeducator and had an overall more positive learning environment in contrast to the male physical education class. The paraeducator moved about the class and interacted with students and the teacher during class (Day 1 White Oak). The female physical education class was much smaller in comparison with the male physical education class in part due to the single sex nature of the classes. Had they been coed, the class size would have been more equitable.

Greg (special education teacher, White Oak) described the paraeducator role in general physical education as very difficult due to their specific situation, while the other special education teachers did not describe it much at all. In contrast, the adapted physical education teachers described the role of the paraeducator in physical education with detail about safety, behavior, and overall management, such as getting students to physical education and helping them dress for class. The adapted physical education teachers saw the paraeducators as one of the many "tools involved in education" (Mark, adapted physical education, Maple) as they, the adapted physical education teachers, are. Colin (adapted physical education, Sycamore) described the role as to "always foster independence and independent learning. I think that never changes and everything else that covers that whether it's behavior and safety or changing and everything else that's relatively related to fostering independent learning in my opinion." Similarly, James (adapted physical education, White Oak) responded,

That assistant is there for safety reasons, making sure kids are socially behaving, following directions, acting appropriate, following through with whatever task is asked and then if those things are a challenge then that's when the paraeducator should step in and manage what needs to be done.

Physical Education teachers felt it was the paraeducator's job to keep students on task and organized. The teachers viewed the paraeducators as primarily responsible for the students with disabilities integrated in their classes. Janice from White Oak Middle School described the paraeducator as an anchor for the students that provided guidance and assisted in the development of a relationship between the special education students and the teacher. She said in the beginning of the year, her most important role was to be "the go-between" until a relationship was developed between the students and the teacher. Matt from White Oak said, "Basically his [the paraeducator] job is to make sure they're [students with disabilities] dressed out. They have problems with their locks, it's his job to get that organized." Nicole, a physical education teacher from Sycamore Middle School, also stated that the role of the paraeducator she works with is to "make sure he [student] was doing what he was supposed to do." According to the physical educators, the students with disabilities are the responsibility of the paraeducators during class.

Dealing With Contradictory Expectations and Mixed Acceptance

Participants were asked to discuss the challenges they face in their role integrating students with disabilities. The main themes for paraeducators were student behavior, expectations of others, and acceptance. It was important to ask about each teacher and paraeducators' challenges individually and collectively as they are part of school teams and districts working with each other and students with disabilities. The paraeducators and special education teachers described their greatest challenge within student behavior. However, in White Oak Middle School, acceptance by others was also a resonating challenge for the paraeducators, not only surrounding the male physical education classes but other areas as well.

Challenges. The paraeducators described the challenges of their role residing within the type of students they work with and the expectations they have for students, and expectations others have of them in their position. Megan and Lauren both described the challenges specific to the students they worked with. Megan (paraeducator, Sycamore) responded by saying,

The challenges I think, I guess is basically the nature of the students. You know being special needs. They have so many problems to be focused, to keep them focused in the mainstream. This is the main thing and to follow the teacher and know everything that the rest of the class is doing at the time and another challenge is the socializing. With our kids socializing is a big thing so they can't go there and start a conversation. Basically people don't understand them very well.

On the other hand, Jack (paraeducator, White Oak) felt that the biggest challenge for him in relation to the students he worked with was realizing that some of the students had more extreme behavior issues than he expected. He really felt that dealing with the behavior of students was his greatest challenge in his position. Tammy on the other hand described the challenges in her position related to her expectations of students. She described it as being "hard because sometimes you forget what their limitations are and you want to be able to show them more than they can really take on." She went on to describe the opposite of "not expecting enough" being just as difficult.

Expectations and acceptance. Challenges beyond the students were described by the paraeducators as the expectations of others. The paraeducators mentioned not only issues regarding expectations of students, but the expectations teachers had of both the students and the paraeducators. The greatest challenge for paraeducators was negotiating what was expected of them when in class with students. Lauren (paraeducator, Maple) began by describing the difficulty at the beginning of the year when she would go into classes where the students with autism were being included. She mentioned how difficult it was because the teacher seemed nervous and "not knowing what to expect" from the students or her as a paraeducator. Tammy (paraeducator, White Oak) had similar responses in relation to the expectation of the teachers and herself. She found it difficult at times supporting students because she said she often was "learning right along with the rest when they showed up to class." Observation notes for day 2 at White Oak triangulate this: "The PE teacher

pulls Tammy in the office to discuss the plan for her students in today's competitive basketball activity. The girls will be the 4th person on different teams of 3 to be the 30 second subs" (Day 2 White Oak). Tammy also felt she did not know what she was "allowed to do" when wanting to be more involved in physical education. Jack's (paraeducator, White Oak) challenges outside of the students were very different. He had many difficulties getting teachers to accept the students and value his knowledge about the students he supported. This was very clear in the physical education environment but he also described other instances this took place.

I think, at least at this level, they think that you're just there to sit in on the class and that these kids aren't going to really participate or be part of because they're not getting, most of them don't get a grade from that class; they get a pass or fail. And they're just sitting in there, which is sad because you know a lot of them can really function if they had the right tools and the right help. Jack (paraeducator, White Oak)

Jack went on to describe specific situations and challenges he had faced during the year, such as even getting a textbook for a student and proving to the teacher that the student was good at history. Jack stated that a few modifications could make this student a contributing part of the class and even one of the brightest in the class. It was clear that Jack noticed many barriers due to the preconceptions the teachers held about the students coming into their classes. Specific to physical education at White Oak Middle School, the challenges were clear. Students were not even allowed in the physical education class without a paraeducator or special education teacher, and the physical education teacher refused to grade the students. The physical education teacher, Matt, was very open about how he felt about special education students coming to his class and how it was not his responsibility to work with, or make modifications for them. He stated, "the Adapted PE teacher will tell me what he would like to do and I just basically say then do it. That's your student and you have at it."

The special education teacher (Greg) at White Oak Middle School mentioned many of the same challenges in regard to physical education and teachers not being accepting of his students. He clearly stated, "sometimes I have some frustrations with regular teachers not being open and willing to kind of have their kids welcome my kids in their classroom." This included the physical education teacher who Greg said was "very closed shop," which was also observed by the researcher and documented in the research notes. The first physical education observation at White Oak "the teacher immediately tells me [researcher] that his terminology and what he does would not get me to pass any college now days. He runs his class very militaristic and refuses to teach co-ed physical education" (Day 2 White Oak). Greg also mentioned frustrations with parents and being part of a district he did not feel was very progressive.

Integration or inclusion. To understand the dynamics of the paraeducator role as described by themselves and in relation to others, it was important to also understand how the teachers described their role in integrating students with disabilities into the general physical education environment. They described their role in regard to physical education differently from one another, but all fail to address learning for the special education students. The special education teachers described their role

as a support person and also to help with behavior and modifications. The physical education teachers described their role as providing a positive environment for special education students to interact and experience, except for Matt (physical education, White Oak MS), who responded this way:

To be quite honest with you, very little. I'm not authorized in that area. It's not my expertise and I always try to explain to special ed teachers that I don't send my 50 students down to them and say here deal with them and yours. Vice versa, I have no expertise other than I treat them as closely as I can to the everyday student. I don't make special situations for them. . . . I don't grade them, because I don't know how to grade them. . . . My input is minimal and my contact with them is just to the class itself through role call and getting on teams, but whoever comes with them, that's their job not mine.

Unlike her male counterpart, Janice (physical education, White Oak MS) responded by saying, "I want to integrate them totally into the class." Her response is different from the other two teachers in the sense that she takes responsibility for the students integrated in her class. Judy (physical education, Maple MS) on the other hand responded by saying, "it's hard for me to differentiate for them because I have so many kids so I think that my role is to give them the most positive and interactive experience they possibly can have." Her reply describes limited expectations and a lack of responsibility for the students' learning in physical education. Observation notes at Maple further support this:

Students receive give and go and v-cut instructions then get into groups of 5 under the baskets. All the special education students get under one hoop; they are not mixed in with the class (this is common I [researcher] notice). Lauren and the other paraeducator work with the group and give lots of prompts and cues. The teacher does not have any interactions with the special education students except to come ask how many points, which all groups are being asked. (Day 4 Maple)

The adapted physical educators described their role in integrating students as providing teachers with suggestions on modifications, equipment, and even staff development. They really talked about consulting with the teachers and being available for questions and suggestions. Their responses were very similar and can best be described by Mark (adapted physical education, Maple):

I try to provide a modest level of support as possible so that the efforts and the ownership of the program will be by the home supervising teacher. I may do the paperwork, I may provide special equipment, and I may provide background or suggestions varying on the situation.

The special education and adapted physical education teachers view their position as a support mechanism for the physical education teachers including students with disabilities in their classes. The special educators want the teachers to feel in control of their own classes and have ownership. On the other hand, the physical education teachers view their role for inclusion to be accepting to the students coming to class but not taking responsibility for their academic learning

needs while in class. During a discussion with Judy regarding students with disabilities being included, “she is positive yet feels that there is a better way and that sometimes she is unsure what to do with some of the students” (Day 4 Maple).

Paraeducators’ Role Ambiguity

The culminating theme was the ambiguity of the paraeducator role. The participants were asked if the role of the paraeducator was clearly defined for them, and how the role was defined. The responses of the participants were further examined against the district’s definition of the paraeducators’ roles. The paraeducators all said that their role was pretty clear and had been defined for them by the teachers. The special education teachers, on the other hand, reported the role not being described to them beyond receiving the districts sheet of responsibilities for instructional assistants. All the physical education teachers said that the role had never been described to them, while one adapted physical education teacher in each district said it had not, while their counterpart said it had.

The paraeducators all reported that their role had been defined for them and was described by the various teachers. Megan (paraeducator, Sycamore) said, “absolutely because the communication is there . . . I have daily communication with each teacher . . . I know everything and every teacher.” Lauren (paraeducator, Maple) also said that her special education teacher was extremely good at giving her direction in how to best assist in the classroom, but she also said that coming in, she was not provided a job description by her teacher or the administration other than telling her what teacher she was going to be an aide for. She said in the beginning it was incredibly unclear but they just learned in each environment where they worked with the students. Jack (paraeducator, White Oak) said that his role was defined by the teachers and was pretty clear, but also said, “I think each teacher has his/her own role on what they want you to do or be, you know some just do it their own way . . . other teachers are really excited about you being there and want you to be part of that class.” His counterpart Tammy, paraeducator at White Oak MS, felt her role was clear and that she had been lucky because “everybody’s been really good about telling me what I need to do and my limits.” She however mentioned that the other paraeducators taught her and gave her the guidelines that they expected her to follow. When asked who set those guidelines, she responded by saying, “the teachers.”

The special education teachers mentioned that the role of the paraeducator had never been described to them, but in contrast, the paraeducators stated the role was described to them by the special education teachers. The special education teachers further went on to mention that they may have indirectly received something about the role of the paraeducator such as performing lifts and transfers, self-help skills, etc., but they were not even sure if the paperwork was official. Rachel (special education, Maple) simply stated, “indirectly there are, there are things that we get that talk about their role. . . . I know there are guidelines but I am not even sure they’re official.” Greg (special education, White Oak) said it had never really been described to him but that about two years ago he received a paper of the responsibilities of instructional assistants, which is what his district calls paraeducators.

The physical education teachers reported not being informed about the paraeducator and that it had not been clearly defined. Judy (physical education, Maple) had mentioned that she had been described the role by the paraeducators that came into her class. She said, “they’re the ones who taught me about it, ‘cause I had been like what am I suppose to do with you guys.” She goes on to say that they told her what they had done in the past and that was how the role had been described for her. Janice (physical education, White Oak) also described in her response how unclear the role of the paraeducator was to her. She responded by saying, “No, no that’s missing. I had to ask the question right off the bat, what’s going on? Who are you? Why are you here? What are we doing?” Both Matt (physical education, White Oak) and Nicole (physical education, Sycamore) said that the role had not been described in detail but they just figured the paraeducators were there to help the students get dressed but that there was never a “game plan laid out” (Matt). Two of the four adapted physical education teachers responded similarly.

Interestingly, one adapted physical education teacher in each district said that the role had not been clearly defined to them, but their coworker alternatively said that it had. The two adapted physical education teachers that mentioned the role being explained said that they had received a write up or summary of the basic roles. Colin (adapted physical education, Sycamore) responded to the interview question by saying, “Yeah, as a matter of fact, our special education director just sent out an e-mail summarizing the roles, the basic roles of paraeducators.” Paige’s (adapted physical education, White Oak) response was much the same, but said that they generally get a copy of the agreement that describes the basic roles in the beginning of the school year. James (adapted physical education, White Oak), who works in the same district as Paige and Mark (adapted physical education, Maple), who works in the same district with Colin, both said that the role of the paraeducator had not at all been explained to them. If the role was explained the adapted teachers said it was explained in general expectations or responsibilities only.

Comparing the paraeducators comments with district documents highlights the lack of clarity of the paraeducator role. The district documents regarding the responsibilities of paraeducators showed a list of the duties they may perform. The suburban district’s human resource document contained some strategies on how to “help the teacher be successful.” Neither district had a clear description for the teachers in how to use the paraeducator appropriately. In the suburban district, the researcher asked for the paraeducator job descriptions and never received it from staff members; however, she was able to find some information through the district website that was very well maintained. In the human resource packet, there was a general list of how instructional assistants could help support teachers and also a section on classroom management. One of the bullet points stated the following: “Your primary source of learning is from teachers and other instructional assistants. Observe them and learn from them” (Suburban district human resource packet). The rural districts position description listed the different expectations for paraeducators in different types of roles, for example in job coach/workability positions, preschool instructional assistants, instructional aide health/medically fragile, and then general instructional aides. Each job description had a definition of the position. The definition of the general instructional assistant was posted as the following;

Under the supervision of the program administrator and the direction of a specific certificated staff member, performs necessary duties to assist in the planning and implementation of a program for special needs children in classrooms.

A list of primary duties and responsibilities then followed.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to describe the role of the paraeducator in the physical education environment from the perspectives of special education teachers, physical education teachers, adapted physical education teachers, and paraeducators. The paraeducators and teachers described the paraeducator role as being in a constant stretching and contracting position between student protection and teacher backup. The paraeducator role was further described through challenges of dealing with mixed expectations and acceptance stemming from the overall ambiguity of the paraeducator role.

Paraeducators reported that the roles they fill were clear to them and had been described by the teachers they worked with, yet the teachers reported the role of the paraeducator to be unclear and that for the most part, the paraeducator role had never been described to them beyond district lists of paraeducator responsibilities. How could the teachers be responsible for providing the paraeducators with a description of their responsibilities when they were unclear of what those responsibilities were, especially in physical education? Not only was it unclear to the physical education teachers what the role of the paraeducator should be when supporting students in their classes, but the teachers were unsure of their own role as it relates to both the students with disabilities and the paraeducators that come with them. The lack of clarity for the teachers and paraeducators created the challenges with expectations and acceptance of students. It is not clear what effect training would have on the clarity of role definitions, as physical education teachers, like many other supervising teachers, have not been adequately prepared to work with paraeducators (Davis et al., 2007; Giangreco, Halvorsen, Doyle, & Broer, 2004).

The ambiguousness of the paraeducator role in the general physical education environment, like other environments, indistinctly relates to findings related to the detrimental effects of excessive paraeducator proximity (Giangreco, Yuan, McKenzie, Cameron, & Fialka, 2005). The proximity noted in this study was more out of a protection to the teachers, then to the students. Paraeducators felt that the teachers should not have to “deal” with the special education students and therefore rarely stepped back from the students. The paraeducators and teachers unknowingly create a separation of classmates when interfering with peer interactions and interfering with the interactions of students with disabilities to the teacher. Teachers articulated a lack of knowledge about the paraeducator role, and observations further supported their responses. It was also apparent that the physical education teachers were unclear of their role teaching students with disabilities integrated into their classes and did not have a sense of responsibility or ownership over the students with disabilities. Most the teachers were accepting of the students integrated in their classes but did not readily take on the role of primary teacher to those students. Observations reveal the physical educators instructing the class

as a whole and working with general education students, while the paraeducators solely interact with the students with disabilities. Marks, Schrader, and Levine (1999) reported very similar findings with classroom teachers. The paraeducators were a barrier to peer involvement, which is a key factor to successful inclusion (Giangreco, Halvorsen, Doyle, & Broer, 2004). The “hovering paraeducator” at times observed in this study and first describe by Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, and MacFarland (1997) interferes with the ownership and responsibility of the general physical education teacher, impacts peer interactions, and makes special education students somewhat invisible to the teacher.

It is unclear if paraeducators “hover” and take on the roles of primary teacher and protector because their role is unclear or if the various roles of paraeducators developed out of a necessity because the general education teachers are unsure in their own responsibilities educating students with disabilities. The question that remains in this complex issue regarding the role of the paraeducator stems from why and how those roles are constructed. The issues of teacher preparation and training surrounding the inclusion of students with disabilities remain key issues that include the appropriate utilization and training of paraeducators. A broader view of how students with disabilities are being integrated and how teachers are prepared to work with a more diverse student population, however, remains a central issue to successful inclusion. The ambiguous roles of both the teachers and the paraeducators contribute to the challenges and issues surrounding the integration of students with disabilities in physical education. It was unclear to the teachers whether paraeducators were to be a support to them, to the students, or both, which further contributed to contradictory expectations and mixed acceptance.

The stretching and contracting between providing support to students and to teachers further highlights the struggle these particular schools have with including students with disabilities. The teachers were grateful to have the paraeducators as a support but did not know how to best use them. Teachers and paraeducators were unsure if paraeducators were to work alongside the teacher or the student (French, 2003) and extended and withdrew between both like a rubber band trying to hold it all together. In providing support to the students in this study, paraeducators were perceived to take on the role of primary teacher and protector when managing behavior and keeping students safe in physical education as described by Broer, Doyle, and Giangreco (2005). Paraeducators were also the protectors of teachers by managing student behaviors the teachers “did not have time for.” Marks, Schrader, and Levine (1999) had similar findings related to paraeducators “protecting” teachers from being troubled by the students with disabilities; however, the paraeducators were not perceived to take on the role of caregiver as described by French and Chopra (1999). In support to the teachers, paraeducators were described as the “connector” for the physical education teacher and special education teacher as Chopra and colleagues (2004) illustrated with classroom teachers and parents; however, effective collaborative connections among the team members were not observed in this study.

The addition of the paraeducator in general physical education can within itself create or produce conflict within the physical education teacher’s own role. When examining teacher role conflict, the addition of personal or professional roles, or change in any role in itself, may produce conflict. Teachers and paraeducators may then cope with the conflict by abandoning a role, creating role separation, or

creating a hierarchy and designating one role as their primary role (Gehrke, 1982). What remains unknown is how teachers and paraeducators may cope if the roles are ambiguous in nature as found in this study.

The multiple roles of the paraeducator could very well be in conflict with the various roles they are asked to fill in each environment or classroom where they work. To further understand the paraeducator role in general physical education, maybe both the teacher and paraeducator role should be examined through a role conflict framework. This framework could help guide further research by understanding that incongruent role definitions and expectations cannot be simultaneously filled creating cognitive dissonance (Braga, 1972). Inconsistency in role definition in itself creates conflict for teachers and may for paraeducators. The inconsistency of a role may institutionalize ambiguity.

The intent of this study was to obtain a description and determine what the experience of the paraeducator role in the general physical education environment from individual and group perspective means. The views held by the 15 participants in this study may be unique to their own districts, schools, and settings where they work but represent a starting place for studies regarding the paraeducator's role within the general physical education environment. There is no argument surrounding the importance of paraeducator support for students with disabilities, as they are integrated more and more in the general education environment. It is equally significant to understand as much as possible about their current roles and responsibilities within each environment where they support students, how information is disseminated and adhered to, and compare best practices and legal policy to determine the most effective use of these team members in all areas including physical education. Continued research should study the effects of training physical education teachers in regard to the paraeducator role and appropriate utilization. Inspection of integrated settings and the physical education teacher's role in creating truly inclusive classes should also continue. Research must go on to explore the needs of the teachers supervising paraeducators and ensuring that individual and group roles are clear to team members to prevent confusion and compromise practices that affect the integration and learning of students with disabilities in inclusive settings.

In conclusion, it was evident that the role of the paraeducator in general physical education was unclear. The teachers did not know what they should expect of the paraeducators or the students they are asked to integrate within their classrooms. Although students with disabilities were being integrated in the general education environment, the acceptance of those students and the struggles with "inclusion" were very much the same as 25 years ago. Teachers remain unprepared to work with students with disabilities and are even less prepared to work with other adults that provide support for students with disabilities. The districts may have vaguely described the roles of paraeducators, but they were not disseminated to all the staff, and there were no accountability measures in place to ensure appropriate utilization of the paraeducators nor was there adequate training in place.

Intervention research should examine the effects of preservice and in-service training on teachers, paraeducators, and more importantly, the students in physical education. Other areas to be studied should include the effects of paraeducator support or the use of other support models, such as peer support, on student learning outcomes in physical education. In order for the successful inclusion of students

to take place, more training and collaboration is needed within teacher teams and roles need to be unambiguous.

Acknowledgment

Rebecca R. Bryan is now at Department of Kinesiology, Sonoma State University. Jeffrey A. McCubbin is now at College of Applied Human Sciences, Colorado State University. This is one of two manuscripts based on data from a doctoral dissertation. This research was supported in part by the U.S Department of Education Doctoral Training Grant for the Movement Studies and Disabilities Program at Oregon State University and assistance from the Department of Nutrition and Exercise Sciences at Oregon State University.

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