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# Paraeducators in Secondary Transitional Settings: Their Knowledge, Responsibilities, and Training Needs

Michelle Holbrook

*Brigham Young University - Provo*

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Paraeducators in Secondary Transitional Settings:  
Their Knowledge, Responsibilities, and Training Needs

Michelle S. Holbrook

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

Betty Y. Ashbaker, Chair  
Gordon Gibb  
Darlene Anderson

Department of Counseling Psychology and Special Education

Brigham Young University

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## ABSTRACT

### Paraeducators in Secondary Transitional Settings: Their Knowledge, Responsibilities, and Training Needs

Michelle Holbrook  
Department of Counseling Psychology and Special Education  
Master of Science

The authors queried 336 paraeducators working in 34 high schools or special programs offering transitional services for adult students with disabilities. The survey included (a) the contexts in which they support students with disabilities, (b) their knowledge about core competencies in educating these students, (c) the job-related tasks they perform most frequently, (d) their perceived ability to perform these tasks effectively, and (e) their need for further training across these knowledge and task areas. The study replicated a study conducted by Carter, O'Rourke, Sisco, and Pelsue (2009) surveying paraeducators working in K-12 settings. The authors found that paraeducators worked with a broad range of disabilities in multiple types of transitional school or program settings, with moderate supervision using varied types of teaching strategies, and they received most of their training on the job. Although most paraeducators reported having adequate training across knowledge standards, the quality of training received was reported as informal. Reported tasks performed most frequently were nontransition related. Preparing for transition and IEP plans were less frequently performed and trained for; while tasks less pertinent to students in transitional settings were more frequently performed and prepared for such as one-to-one instruction. Supervision under a certified teacher was reported to be moderately occurring (less than 50% of the time). Future research and development of standards for transitional paraeducators working with adults with disabilities is recommended. Identification of needed specific skills should be coupled with more formal training.

Keywords: paraprofessionals, paraeducator, transition, special education, students with disabilities, job coaches, knowledge standards, tasks, responsibilities, training

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## DESCRIPTION OF THESIS STRUCTURE

This thesis, *Paraeducators in Transitional Settings: Their Knowledge, Responsibilities and Training Needs*, is written in hybrid format. The hybrid format brings together traditional thesis requirements and journal publication formats. The preliminary pages of the thesis reflect requirements for submission to the university. The thesis report is presented as a journal article and conforms to length and style requirements for submitting research reports to education journals.

The literature review is included in Appendix A. The consent form distributed with the instrument is in Appendix B. Appendix C contains the 3-page instrument. Other study materials including the incentive coupon for the iPad drawing, recruitment letter to district special education directors in the state of Utah, and presentation script for distribution of the surveys are included in Appendix D.



## **Introduction**

Paraeducators are filling more complicated roles in varied learning environments since their inception 60 years ago. “In today’s schools, they are technicians who are more accurately described as paraeducators, just as their counterparts in law and medicine are designated as paralegals and paramedics” (Pickett, 1999). On the secondary school level, paraeducators have responsibilities much like a certified teacher; unfortunately, they have little to no training. They are often on their own in the community, supervising students with disabilities in supported work employment settings or in general education classes without direct supervision and direction from the licensed special education teacher (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000). Under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 1997), children with disabilities are merged into educational settings that are least restrictive. Paraeducators have become support personnel in many areas, including instruction, managing classroom behavior, tutoring, and other tasks that overlap with the responsibilities of the classroom teacher (Downing et al., 2000).

To ensure that paraeducators have the required skills for their expanded roles, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), in collaboration with the National Resource Center for Paraeducators, validated a knowledge and skill set for paraeducators who serve individuals with exceptional learning needs (CEC, 2004). These skills include a practical and useful understanding of foundation, development and characteristics of learners, individual learning differences, instructional strategies, learning environment, social interaction, language, instructional planning assessment, professional and ethical practice, and collaboration. Revisions of the CEC standards are likely to be available fall 2011. It is clear that standards for paraeducators have been established at federal and state levels by concerned organizations. However, despite knowledge and skill standards that have been developed for paraeducators, and

in spite of the dramatic shift in paraeducators' roles away from clerical work and toward instructional support, research indicates that paraeducators are asked to perform difficult tasks with little training and role definition. Paraprofessionals are frequently assigned to students with the most challenging behaviors and learning characteristics as well as performing multiple roles (Giangreco, 2001; Listen, Nevin, & Malian, 2009). For these reasons, as well as others such as low pay, unclear job description, lack of training and respect, it has become difficult to attract and retain paraprofessionals (Giangreco, Edelman, Bower & Doyle, 2001). There is a need to identify skills paraeducators must have and how educators can best train and support paraeducators as they strive to fulfill their responsibilities of assisting students in transitional settings.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Literature in the area of transitional paraeducators is limited, mostly focusing on school settings. Some attention has been placed on qualifications for job coaches (Agosta, Bown, & Melda, 1993; Morgan, Merrill, Ames, Feng, Loosli, & Salzberg, 1995). Roles of paraprofessionals working in transitional and vocational educational programs are similar to those working in schools with four major differences: (a) paraeducators in this setting have autonomy with regard to adapting instruction, (b) they participate as active members of the IEP team, (c) they communicate and provide assistance to parents, and (d) they serve as liaisons between the school, employees and other pertinent personnel (Pickett, 1999). Due to these factors, paraprofessionals must be formally trained to appropriately interact in tasks distinct to their role.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is threefold: first, to identify strengths and weaknesses

concerning the responsibilities of paraeducators working in secondary transitional settings; second, to identify the knowledge they have and may need to perform these responsibilities; and third to learn how they obtained that knowledge.

A survey of paraprofessionals (Carter, O'Rourke, Sisco, & Pelsue, 2009) addressing knowledge, responsibilities, and training in traditional assignment focused exclusively on those working in K-12 settings. Paraeducators working in transitional settings with adults with disabilities were not included because they worked almost exclusively off-campus in community settings and infrequently came to campus. Limitations of that study stated by Carter et al. (2009) indicated that paraeducators working in community worksites and off-campus programs may "encounter divergent responsibilities and [need] to self-identify unique training needs" (pg. 357). Furthermore, explorations of specific training adaptations were suggested.

A replication of the K-12 paraeducator knowledge survey (Carter et al., 2009) was used to answer the study questions that extend to perceptions of transitional paraeducators who work on campus and are in community-based programs. The survey method was chosen to reduce interview bias by use of one instrument in data collection (Drew, Hardman, & Hosp, 2008). A mail-in survey was convenient and practical for paraeducators who do not have addresses and results are easily quantified.

### **Research Questions**

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What knowledge, skills and desired skills do secondary transition paraeducators perceive they have?
2. How were they trained for the knowledge and skills they have?
3. What further training do they need?

## **Implications**

Implications of the study included a trend indicating the need for more formal training focusing on in-service or conference training, as inferred from statistics of on-the-job training. Training should be aligned to specific needs (Carter et al., 2009), designation of supervision standards should be executed (Downing et al., 2000), and provisions for needed training should be established despite obstructions. Training is necessary for all levels of paraeducators, from newly hired to veteran assistants (Riggs & Mueller, 2001). One summarized practice tip from research in perception of training was to participate in selected professional development activities together with the certified teacher to learn new instructional techniques and improve collaborative status (Listen et al., 2009).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were 336 paraprofessionals working in 51 separate locations, 34 being secondary schools and 17 being transitional programs for students over 18. Ethnicity of those schools or transitional programs was 81% Caucasian, 12.5% Hispanic, 1.2% each Asian and African American and 4% totaling other backgrounds. This is representative of 2008-09 Utah state student K-12 enrollment demographics (79% Caucasian, 14.4% Hispanic, 1.7% Asian, 1.4% African American and 3.5% totaling other or unknown backgrounds). Enrollment from school district participants included eight urban (6,458 – 81,017), nine suburban (5,960 – 65,014) and 16 rural (1,202 - 13,406; USOE, 2008-09). Females made up 89% of the participants. Ethnicity of participants was 94% Caucasian, 4% Hispanic, 0.7% African American, 0.6% Polynesian and 0.3% Asian.

## **Instrument**

A three-page survey replicated from a prior study (Carter, et al., 2009) was mailed with postage-paid return envelopes to paraeducators working in transitional settings. The survey contained three parts: (a) paraeducators' demographics and job descriptions, (b) knowledge standards, and (c) job-related tasks. Estimate of survey time was 20-30 minutes.

The authors obtained permission to use the Carter et al. 2009 survey in an email sent August 6, 2010 to the researchers allowing them to use the survey as they saw fit. Small wording adaptations and a few tasks were omitted to allow specific focus on transitional paraeducators' roles. The survey was administered focusing on paraeducators in community training roles or transitional educational settings seeking self-identification of their responsibilities, needs, and training.

## **Demographics**

The demographic information requested included years of experience, gender, ethnicity, teacher certification, and current job description.

## **Community-based/school settings**

Paraeducators reported their types of work setting (11-12 grades, work-supported employment/community, work supported employment/sheltered workshop, life skills classroom ages 18-22, transition program classroom ages 18-22); the disabilities of students, and a description of the typical settings where they train students (i.e., all training in the community, mostly training in the community, split between the community and transition classroom, mostly transitional classroom, all transitional classroom). The amount of time they were directly supervised by a certified teacher (none (0%), some (1-20%), moderate (21-50%), substantial (51-75%), mostly (76-100%); the degree of disability that most of the student they were serving

displayed (i.e., mild/high-incidence vs. moderate/severe/low incidence disabilities; see Table 1).

### **Knowledge**

Using the Carter et al. 2009 survey, 15 items covered the purpose of job skill training, educational terms, effects of disability, rights and responsibilities of families, abuse indicators, teaching strategies, environmental impacts, procedural safeguards, ethical practices, cultural biases, and role in the IEP planning. These standards were considered minimal according to field validation by paid paraprofessionals who were members of CEC, American Federation of Teachers, and National Education Association (Carter, et al., 2009). Three measurements were collected on each knowledge-related item using CEC knowledge standards: first, paraprofessionals were asked to rate their level of knowledge on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from *no knowledge* (1) to *substantial knowledge* (5); second, they were asked to rate their need for additional training expanding from *no knowledge* (1) to *substantial knowledge* (5); finally, they were asked the types of training they had received in each area (i.e., on-the-job training, in-service training, attendance at conference sessions, or other unspecified training).

### **Job-related tasks**

This portion of the survey asked about job-related tasks that paraprofessionals in transitional settings might perform. The 19 tasks were drafted from a survey conducted by Carter et al., 2009. In turn, Carter et al. 2009, had drawn from items included in a Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education, (Carlson, Chen, Schroll, & Klein, 2002) survey of paraprofessional and teacher aids. Paraprofessional training is limited, not task focused and in need of revision (e.g., CEC, 2004; French, 2003; Giangreco & Doyle, 2002; Picket & Gerlach, 1997). Three measurements were collected on each job-related task: first, they were asked how often they performed the task (i.e., daily, weekly, monthly yearly or never); second, using a five-

point Likert-type scale, they were to rate their level of preparation from *unprepared* (1) to *very prepared* (5); and finally, using a five-point Likert-type scale, they were asked to report their need for additional training on each task from *no need* (1) to *substantial need* (5).

### **Procedure**

All data collection activities were conducted during the first three months of winter semester. Initially, all 41 school districts in the state of Utah were invited to participate in this study, reflecting a range of variables including geographic location (i.e., rural, suburban, urban), service delivery approaches (e.g., total transition programs to transition services offered in a high school setting to students ages 18-22), and professional development opportunities. A newly formed urban district declined to participate, stating need for program development and training. A second urban school district declined to participate. Eight rural districts did not participate, citing no students in this age group were attending their school district at the time the study was done. Results were gathered from 31 of the 41 (78%) Utah school districts: urban (81%), suburban (100%), and rural (68%).

Researchers obtained permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the university and district levels. The Utah State Office of Education transition specialist supplied names of district superintendents and special education directors as well as phone numbers and emails. District Special Education directors then supplied contact information of supervisors/teachers of schools and transitional programs with transitional paraeducators.

Survey packets were mailed via the United States Postal Service to supervisors or program directors for distribution. Each questionnaire included an overview, consent, incentive coupon, confidentiality assurance, return instructions, and a postage-paid envelope. Incentive for return of the completed survey was a coupon for a drawing to win an iPad. Upon completion, a

postage-paid envelope was provided for return. Of the 548 surveys originally sent out via USPS, 299 were returned, equating a 55% return rate. A second mailing of 52 surveys had a return of 37, for a total return rate of 61% (336 surveys). The Carter et al. (2009) survey of elementary and secondary paraeducators yielded a similar return.

A reasonable and acceptable response rate according to Baruch was determined to be 55.6% with a standard deviation of 19.7 in a study of 175 cases (1999). Accompanying information verified that response rate has declined in the past three decades.

### **Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize paraprofessionals' item-level responses across each of the seven subsections of the questionnaire: current job description, knowledge (i.e., level of knowledge, need for additional training, training actually received), and job-related tasks (i.e., tasks performed, level of preparation, and need for additional training). Chi-square analyses were conducted to examine differences in job-related tasks associated with disability focus (i.e., high- vs. low-incidence disabilities). To evaluate factors associated with overall levels of knowledge (i.e., average of all 15 knowledge items), a multiple regression analysis examined the extent to which years of experience and disability incidence predicted overall level of knowledge. Analyses are organized according to subsections of the survey.

### **Results**

The results of this study indicated that transitional paraeducators work with low incidence disabilities more frequently in community/classroom combination settings. They are confident with knowledge standards, with knowledge predicted by years of experience and disability incidence. Those working with people with low-incidence disabilities are more knowledgeable.

On-the-job training was the most accessed type of training with transitional types of skills



needing more training. Task frequency was high in one-to-one instruction and low in IEP planning.

Results will include work environment reports, evaluation of knowledge, factors indicating what determines overall knowledge, and knowledge training received. Further results will evaluate task performance, tasks that were most and least prepared for, and evaluation of needed task training.

### **Work Environment**

Paraprofessionals reported working with students with a broad range of disabilities under an average of 7.9 (range = 1-12; SD = 3.1) different disability categories. Over 72% reported working with students with low-incidence/severe range of disabilities (e.g., autism, moderate to severe intellectual disabilities, deaf/blindness), 28% reported working with high incidence mild range of disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, speech or language impairments).

Paraprofessionals reported that the majority of their time spent with students was split between work in the community and in the transitional classroom 34% of the time, 29% trained students mostly in transitional classrooms, 23% all transitional classrooms, 7.4% did most of their training in the community and 2% reporting all training occurring in the community. Eighty-eight of the paraprofessionals reported providing one-to-one instruction daily and group instruction 71.1% daily.

### **Evaluation of Knowledge**

For each of the 15 CEC-based knowledge questions, paraprofessionals reported above the mean (i.e., rating at 3) of the scale knowledge on all topics (overall  $M= 3.68$ ,  $SD=0.73$ ). High degrees of knowledge were reported (i.e., rating 4 or 5) on the following standards: appropriate communication with other members of the educational team (80.3%), ethical practices for

confidential communication about students with disabilities (77.3%), effects a disability can have on a student's life (74.1%), and purpose of job skill training for students with disabilities (70.8%; see Table 2).

Four knowledge topics ranked below the mean: paraprofessional role in planning the IEP (32%), rationale and procedure for assessment (41.3%), basic technologies appropriate to students (42.4%), and rights and responsibilities of families as they relate to student learning (45.3%; see Table 2).

### **Factors of Overall Knowledge**

A regression model was used to examine the association between the dependent or criterion variable overall level of knowledge (i.e., average of all knowledge items), years of experience, and disability incidence. Regression analysis was used to predict the criterion variable "overall level of knowledge" using years of experience and disability incidence as predictors. The following is the full regression model:  $\text{level of knowledge} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{ years experience} + \beta_2 \text{ disability incidence} + \varepsilon_1$ . Table 3 represents results from the ordinary least squares (OLS) regression of the full model. Increasing years of experience significantly predicted increasing knowledge while holding disability incidence constant ( $\beta_1 = .015$ ,  $\rho = .019$ ). Paraprofessionals that work with a severe/low-incidence disability focus reported significantly higher levels of knowledge than those working with a mild/high-incidence disability focus ( $\beta_2 = .229$ ,  $\rho = .023$ ) after holding years of experience constant. Constant knowledge score (3.393) = 0 years experience, working with mild/high-incidence disability focus. Every year of experience adds .015 knowledge units while working with severe/low-incidence disability focus and holding years of experience constant. The difference between high incidence and low incidence paraprofessionals was 0.229 units of overall knowledge.

### **Knowledge Topic Training Received**

The most common training reported in CEC knowledge standard training was on-the-job (69.91%), followed by in-service (39.24%), non-described other forms of training (20.94%), and conference training (18.49%). The cumulative for no training at all was 11.53%. School-provided training (on-the-job) was the highest in the following seven topics: communication with the educational team, purpose of job-skill training, basic teaching strategies and materials to use, ethical practices for confidential communication, rules and procedural safeguards, effects a disability can have on a student's life, and basic educational terms regarding student's programs, roles and instructional activities (see Table 2).

Paraprofessionals reported having the lowest amount of on-the-job training in the following five areas: role in planning an IEP, indicators of abuse and neglect, rights and responsibilities of families related to student learning, personal cultural biases, and common concerns of families of students with disabilities (see Table 2).

### **Evaluation of Needed Knowledge Topic Training**

Twenty-five percent of paraprofessionals reported moderately low levels of training needs in the 15 knowledge standards overall. Paraeducators specified substantial need on the following standards: indicators of abuse and neglect (35.5%), role of paraprofessional in planning the IEP (35.4%), basic technologies appropriate to students with disabilities (33.6%), rights and responsibilities of families and students as they relate to student learning (29.9%), and basic teaching strategies and materials to use (28.6%; see Table 3).

Paraprofessionals reported the least need for training in the following knowledge standards: ethical practices for confidential communication about students with disabilities (58.9%), appropriate communication with other members of the educational team (58.6%),

purpose of job skill training for student with disabilities (48%), personal cultural biases and differences that affect one's ability to work with others (46.9%), and effects a disability can have on a student's life (44.8%; see Table 2).

### **Evaluation of Task Performance**

Over half of paraprofessionals reported engaging in 14 of the 19 tasks either daily or weekly. The most frequently reported tasks were student related, which included one-to-one instruction, teaching skills that will allow independence, using behavior management skills, facilitating social relationships among students, and providing instruction to small groups. Less frequently performed tasks on a daily or weekly basis were transition-focused skills, including participating in planning for students' IEP meetings, communicating with parents or primary care givers, teaching job tasks to student in community settings, role in preparation of student transitional plans and completing job or disability related paperwork (see Table 3).

For paraeducators working with students with high incident disabilities, an association was noted between task frequency and incidence of disability. Chi-square tests indicate this association was less than expected by chance for the following tasks: one-to-one instruction, communicating with parents/primary care providers, collecting data on students, assisting with health care services, helping students use assisted technology, participating in planning for students' IEP meetings, and providing personal care assistance, in mild/high-incidence vs. severe/low-incidence disabilities daily or weekly (see Table 4).

### **Most Prepared Task Performance**

Paraeducators reported confidence with their job preparation, ratings of 4 or 5 (prepared or very prepared), with over 68.9% in 11 of the 19 tasks addressed. Ten tasks were ranked with over 70% preparation level rating either 4 or 5 (prepared or very prepared): providing one-to-one

instruction, teaching skills that will allow independence, collecting data on students, facilitating social relationships among students, providing instruction to small group, clerical work, providing personal care assistance, teaching job tasks to students in community settings, meeting teachers or employers to discuss student issues and using behavior management skills (see Table 3).

Five tasks for which preparation levels fell at or below the mean of preparedness include participating in planning for students' IEP meetings, administering and documenting informal assessments, communicating with parents or primary care providers, helping students use assistive technology, role in preparing student transitional plans. Surprisingly, only one of the lowest five fell directly below the moderate level of preparedness indicating high levels of confidence in preparedness.

### **Evaluation of Needed Task Training**

As we view the broad picture, paraeducators feel moderately to very prepared (above 50%) on 14 of the 19 tasks queried. Paraeducators expressed that they were unprepared over 20% of the time in seven tasks: participating in planning for students' IEP meetings (37.7%), communicating with parents primary care providers (35.1%), administering and documenting informal assessments (27.2%), completing job or disability-related paperwork (25.9%), role in preparing student transitional plans (24.3%), disability-related paperwork (25.9%) and implementing written behavior management plans (22%). Paraeducators reported being supervised by a certified teacher "substantially" or "mostly" 50.3% of the time, while 49.7% reported "moderate" to no supervision (See Table 3).

## Discussion

### Implications for Practice

There are three prevalent themes in the study: first, paraeducators' responsibilities, their strengths and weaknesses in performing those responsibilities; second, what knowledge they have to perform those tasks, their perception of how they received that knowledge; and third, what transitional training is needed. Paraeducators in transitional settings perform many tasks on a daily or weekly basis with moderate or above perceived levels of knowledge that they received through on-the-job training. Outcomes of these themes range from location of paraprofessionals in transitional settings to types of training vs. disability incidence and focus, the relationship those factors bear on the tasks they perform, and their overall knowledge.

**Suggested responsibilities for paraeducators.** Transitional paraprofessionals work with a broad range of disabilities in varied settings. Paraeducators are working with many types of disabilities. Training takes place between the classroom and the community. Two-thirds of the programs offered in Utah are in school classrooms with the other third providing specific transitional programs with separate training locations. Off-campus, specialty transitional schools often offer opportunities for students to work in the community with the supervision of a paraeducator or job coach. Typically, rural communities are those providing training in school settings, while suburban and urban programs are more specifically transitional settings. Paraeducators responsibilities vary depending on the setting they are working in. These geographic factors may influence the quality of student transitional services as well as the types of paraeducator responsibilities.

Thus, what are the roles and tasks performed by transitional paraeducators in varied transitional settings? Task performance factors into the quality of instruction students are

receiving in addition to geographic considerations. The survey results specify that paraeducators' roles determine a wide range of tasks engaged in daily and weekly. Tasks not specifically pertinent to transition were ranked as most performed over 90% of the time: one-to-one instructions, behavior management skills, developing skills for independence, and social relationships. Paraeducators list their involvement in planning for the IEP less frequently than other tasks they perform. However, the fact that an IEP is prepared for and held only annually may have influenced the rate of performance of that particular task.

Moreover, paraeducators who work directly with students do not participate nor are they confident in their levels of knowledge concerning transitional plans, informal assessment, and communication with parents or caregivers. Yet, they are most directly involved in activities that should be reported through transitional plans and IEPs. Parents have to be apprised of these plans. Under IDEA, paraeducators must be appropriately trained and supervised, yet just under half report they perform these tasks with minimal to no supervision. Paraeducators working with students ages 18-22 need to be formally trained and more than minimally supervised while assisting students with transition in preparation and communication of assessment results for annual IEPs. Otherwise, students are at a risk of not receiving a free appropriate public education as specified under IDEA.

**Paraeducators' perceived knowledge level.** Paraeducators in transitional settings perceive themselves as having substantial levels of knowledge. This perception is confirmed by paraeducators, with a mean of 13 of the 14 knowledge areas falling above the moderate level of knowledge. Highest levels of knowledge were in appropriate team communication, ethical practices, effects of the disability on the student and their learning, and the purpose of job skill training.

Paraeducators report just under half of their time was spent with little or no direct supervision from a certified teacher. Link that with the statistic that 44% of transitional paraeducators work in split transitional classrooms/community sites, mostly or all community site training. Lack of supervision in a community setting allows for concerns for amounts of instruction and training paraprofessionals are receiving. Several legal issues have emerged involving the responsibilities related to adequacy of training and supervision of paraeducators (Ashbaker & Minney, 2007; Etscheidt, 2005). The need for paraprofessionals to be appropriately trained and supervised is required by IDEA and NCLB. When training is lacking, paraeducators' adequacy in delivering supporting instructional services is in question.

Knowledge has a direct effect on management of students in the community when paraeducators and students are away from direct supervision. As reported, on-the-job training surfaced as the most dominant type of training at 69.91%. Informal on-the-job training becomes the support for paraeducators training, teaching, and meeting the needs of students in transitional settings (e.g., all community training, split community training/ transitional classroom training or all classroom training).

Low levels of knowledge concerning individualized student services included rationale and procedures for paraeducators' role in IEP planning, assessment, technology, and rights and responsibilities of families and students. Knowledge results from experience and training. Transitional paraeducators report that they are working hand-in-hand with students in transitional classrooms and in the community yet student focused knowledge topics are least adequate. Training may be influenced by financial constraints, hourly pay, irrelevancy for rare opportunities, or job advancement (Carter et al., 2009).



**Transitional paraeducator training.** On-the-job training surfaced as the most dominant training type. Training may take on different appearances for those working with high incidence vs. low-incidence disabilities. The study of transitional paraeducators overwhelmingly names the majority of the students they work with as having low-incidence/severe disabilities. Those working with low-incidence disabilities were more knowledgeable than those in high-incidence settings. Despite the setting, it is imperative to remember that those with whom we are entrusting our students with disabilities, resides in their abilities, qualifications, and competencies (Carter et al., 2010). Often those people are paraprofessionals that are not certified or formally trained (Riggs & Mueller, 2001). As evidenced from this study, in-service, conferences, and other types of training are falling behind and possibly replaced by training occurring on-the-job. This survey helps us bridge a gap in the lack of literature addressing paraeducators in transitional setting, the theory of little training, and the reality that the majority of training occurring is on the job. That overall knowledge is predicted by years of experience and working with students with low incident of disabilities, rather than knowledge being gained from extensive training, which is lacking.

Paraeducators must be provided with precise, relevant training. Standards need to be established specifically for paraprofessionals in transitional settings due to their unique job description, which entails training in the community and in the classroom. There is a pressing need to maximize educational outcomes through additional research to identify and evaluate pertinent strategies and the delivery of content to facilitate educational outcomes (Cater et al., 2009). Other considerations should include paraeducators' direct need to be involved in formal transition and IEP planning, assessment of student performance while supervising students in the community, and communication to parents on these issues. Paraeducators are with students in an

unsupervised setting some of the time and lack knowledge in the student related services such as communicating with parents and planning for the IEP. Supervision of transition paraeducators by a certified teacher is occurring some of the time or less by just under half of the participants (n=336). Yet, according to IDEA, paraeducators are to be under the supervision of a certified teacher. Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) is a critical component of effective implementation of the IEP. Further investigation could examine how districts are complying with this mandate.

The authors recommend formal training for transitional paraeducators in areas that affect transition of adult students with disabilities. Because of the short time students have to receive special education transitional services before they graduate or age-out, time is premier. Specific task driven training for those working with students in the community and in the transitional school setting is strongly suggested.

### **Limitations**

The survey was mailed out with no verbal contact with those actually participating. The survey was distributed with a one-page letter of participation and consent with two lines of instruction. Any questions or clarification on the survey content went unanswered by the researchers. On the task page of the survey, four of the 19 paraprofessional tasks had 20% of the respondents leave missing information (N=336). This may be due to non-performance of the task by the individuals; thus, the task statements were completely ignored. However, that information is undetermined. This study relied on a set of knowledge standards and tasks compiled for a previous survey with modifications (Carter et al., 2009). The information in Carter's survey relied on national standards. However, many states have compiled their own set of standards for their system's employees. Results reflect knowledge and task performance in

relationship to national standards. States may need to modify survey material to make it more pertinent and collaborative with state guidelines. CEC standard updates are to be published in the fall of 2011. Standards need to be established specifically for paraprofessionals in transitional settings due to their unique job description entailing training in the community as well as in the classroom. Other considerations should include paraeducators' direct need to be involved in formal transition and IEP planning, assessment of student performance while supervising students in the community, and communication to parents on these issues. Paraeducators are with students in an unsupervised setting some of the time while lacking knowledge in the student related services such as communicating with parents and planning for the IEP. Supervision of transition paraeducators by a certified teacher ranked some of the time and below at 47.9%. Yet, according to IDEA, paraeducators are to be under the supervision of a certified teacher. Further investigation could examine how districts are complying with his mandate.

This survey was exclusively given to paraeducators working in transitional settings. The results may be interpreted to reflect perceptions of only that particular group of paraprofessionals.

### **Implications for Future Research**

CEC Standards and Skills Sets should be compared to state paraeducator standards. As comparisons between CEC standards and state standards are made, researchers must consider specific training needs of paraeducators in transitional setting and the unique roles they take in those varied settings. Effective, specific, and meaningful training should be developed, training enveloping the transitional needs of the students with low-incidence that transitional paraeducators are serving. Supervision must be addressed and executed. Amounts of supervision by a certified teacher for a transitional paraeducator should be researched both in the

classroom and during training for students in the community. Cross validation of research results is recommended for teacher and administrative teams supervising transitional paraeducators. Paraeducators working with students with high-incidence disabilities training needs were minimal in this research. The authors recommend further study for the needs of transitional paraprofessionals working with students with high-incidence disabilities and identify their roles, task performance, and knowledge standard needs.

### **Conclusion**

The lack of recent literature on the role of job coaches or paraprofessionals working in the secondary transitional setting signifies a need to assess paraeducators' current knowledge and skills in relationship to the specific tasks required of them in this field. Paraprofessionals are a critical component of the education team. There is a lack of research-based formal training methods and attention to supervision in community training settings and transitional classrooms. Training is needed for all paraprofessionals and must be aligned to specific criteria. There is a need for additional research to pinpoint specific educational objectives or skills needed to be taught by paraeducators in transitional settings while working with students in community employment scenarios. To ensure a more highly qualified transitional paraprofessional, positive transitionally based educational outcomes for the adult population of special education students must be addressed and enforced.

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Table 1 - Characteristics

Characteristics	N	Percentages
Gender		
Female	295	87.8
Male	39	11.6
Years Experience		
0-5	163	48.5
6-10	67	20
11-15	38	11.4
16-20	34	10.2
21 or more	29	8.4
Types of Students worked with <sup>a</sup>		
Autism	297	88.7
Intellectual Disabilities	295	88.1
Emotional Disturbances	214	63.9
Deaf / Blind	132	39.4
Learning Disabilities	299	89.3
Hearing Impairment	166	49.4
Multiple Disabilities	286	85.4
Orthopedic Impairment	167	49.9
Other Health Impairment	187	55.8
Speech / Language	265	79.6
Traumatic Brain Injury	181	54
Visual Impairment	169	50.4
Disability Type		
Low-incidence/Severe	215	72.1
High-incidence/Mild, Moderate	83	27.9
Setting of Students worked with <sup>a</sup>		
11-12 grades	336	44
Work Supported Employment/ Community	336	13.7
Work supported Employment / Sheltered Workshop	336	3.6
Life Skills Classroom	336	56.3
Transition Program Classroom	336	54.5
Typical Work Week Training		
All in community	8	2.5
Mostly in community	25	7.7
Split community / transition Classroom	115	35.3
Mostly transition classroom	99	30.4
All transition classroom	78	23.9
Supervision / Certified Teacher		
None	19	5.7
Some (1-20%)	78	23.2
Moderate (21-50%)	64	19
Substantial (51-75%)	47	14
Mostly (76-100%)	122	36.3

Note: Percentages are based on the number of participants who provided information for each item

<sup>a</sup> Multiple choices were selected



Table 2  
Level of Knowledge, Training Types, Training Needs

Knowledge Standard Description	Level of Knowledge <sup>a</sup>		Type of Training Received (% Reporting)					Need for Training <sup>b</sup>	
	M	SD	On-the -Job	In-Service	Conference	Other	None	M	SD
Purpose of job skill training for student with disabilities	4	1.082	77.6	44	23.9	21	8.4	2.52	1.057
Basic educational terms regarding students programs, roles and instructional activities	3.73	0.939	72.9	42	21.2	21	7.8	2.72	1.094
Effects a disability can have on a student's life	4.06	0.894	73.4	45.1	26	25.4	6.9	2.68	1.1112
Rights and responsibilities of families and students as they relate to student learning	3.54	2.877	63	37.9	17	23.1	14.4	2.9	1.172
Indicators of abuse and neglect	3.7	2.834	60.6	38.8	14.3	23	14.9	3.03	1.165
Basic teaching strategies and materials to use	3.77	0.889	77.3	41.5	25.1	25.4	5.4	2.89	1.124
Basic Technologies appropriate to student with disabilities	3.29	1.012	69.6	31	13.7	18.8	14.1	3.09	0.983
How the environment impacts the students learner	3.68	0.983	69.6	37.6	18.8	22.7	12.5	2.8	1.081
Rules and procedural safeguards regarding management of students	3.82	0.923	74.9	51	20.9	21.3	6.3	2.85	2.648
Appropriate communication with other members of the educational team	4.22	0.861	80.9	44	17.3	19.8	4.5	2.34	1.13
Rational and procedures paraprofessionals use for assessment	3.32	1.958	68.4	33.8	11	12.8	15.8	2.9	1.204
Ethical practices for confidential communication about students with disabilities	4.2	0.901	75.5	50.1	23.3	21.5	4.2	2.32	1.92
Personal cultural biases and differences that affect one's ability to work with others	3.62	1.057	63.3	32.8	13.5	19.7	16.7	2.61	1.138
Common concerns of families of students with disabilities	3.61	1.119	65.1	34	19.4	24.9	14.1	2.79	1.203
Role of paraprofessional in planning an IEP	2.87	1.343	56.6	25.1	12	13.8	27	2.97	1.348

<sup>a</sup> 1 = no knowledge, 5 = substantial knowledge

<sup>b</sup> 1 = no need, 5 = substantial need

Table 3  
Task Frequency, Preparation Level , Training Needs

TASKS	Frequency of Task Performance (%)					Level of Preparation <sup>a</sup>		Need for Training <sup>b</sup>	
	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Yearly	Never	M	SD	M	SD
Tasks Descriptions									
Providing instruction to small groups	71.1	16.6	3	0.6	8.7	4.18	0.836	2.22	0.961
Providing one-on-one instruction	89.2	7.2	0.6	0	3	4.29	0.81	2.11	1.1
Preparing materials so you are ready to teach	46.7	28.7	7.8	1.5	15.3	3.81	1.033	2.39	1.078
Role in preparation of student transitional plans	23.5	16.7	13.6	8	38.3	3.31	1.269	2.68	1.282
Communicating with parents primary care providers	12.5	10.4	14.6	3	57.7	3.04	1.476	2.24	1.299
Completing job or disability related paper work	36.4	10	7	4.2	42.4	3.36	1.468	2.33	1.293
Meeting teachers or employers to discuss student issues	27.3	33.3	18	3	18.3	3.89	1.176	2.24	1.16
Collecting data on students	66.3	14.5	9.6	0.9	8.4	4.25	2.536	2.2	1.104
Assisting with health care services	46.3	8.5	9.1	4.3	31.7	3.53	1.306	2.4	1.206
Using behavior management skills	84	10	2.7	0.6	2.7	3.87	0.911	2.69	1.162
Implementing written behavioral management plans	44.3	12.8	8	4.3	30.6	3.38	1.258	2.69	1.265
Helping students use assistive technology	43	25.6	7	3.7	20.7	3.44	1.126	2.89	1.248
Administering & documenting informal assessments	23.5	14.6	14.2	6.2	41.5	3.13	1.31	2.6	1.292
Teaching job tasks to students in community setting	38	14.9	10.2	3.3	29.5	3.85	1.25	2.22	1.204
Clerical work (e.g., photocopying, typing, filing)	33.1	25.6	18.4	1.5	21.4	4.19	1.091	1.76	1.002
Teaching skills that will allow independence	85.5	9.1	2.7	0	2.7	4.16	0.845	2.38	1.19
Participating in planning for students' IEP meetings	4.5	3.6	16.7	15.8	59.4	2.84	1.391	2.69	1.401
Facilitating social relationship among students	80.5	11.4	2.7	0.6	4.5	4.15	0.878	2.26	1.106
Providing personal care assistance	64.4	11.7	4.8	2.1	16.8	4.14	1.002	2.09	1.179

<sup>a</sup>1 = unprepared, 5 = very prepared

<sup>b</sup>1 = no need, 5 = substantial need

Table 4  
Task Significant Associations

TASK FREQUENCY & DISABILITY LEVEL SIGNIFICANT ASSOCIATIONS	High Incidence Mild %	Low Incidence Severe %	$X^2$	$p$
Providing one -on-one instruction	26.3	73.7	5.503 <sup>a</sup>	.019
Communicating with parents	16.2	83.8	6.128 <sup>a</sup>	.013
Collecting data on students	24.9	75.1	4.322 <sup>a</sup>	.038
Assisting with health care services	18.6	81.4	14.846 <sup>a</sup>	.000
Helping students use assisted technology	21.6	78.4	12.151 <sup>a</sup>	.000
Participate in planning IEP meetings	8.3	91.7	4.913 <sup>a</sup>	.027

## APPENDIX A

### **Review of Literature**

Over the years, paraeducators' roles have changed dramatically. Once they created bulletin boards, took roll, supervised recess, or made copies. Today, paraeducators may provide instructional and clerical support for classroom teachers by allowing them more time for lesson planning and instruction (Utah Paraeducator Handbook, 2009). The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)—funded Study of Personnel Needs In Special Education (SPeNSE)—found that the majority of paraeducators who work in special education typically spend 85–90% of their time participating in instructional activities including tutoring individual and group learners under the direction of a licensed practitioner, gathering data, implementing behavior management plans, preparing material, and meeting with teachers (Research Connection in Special Education, 2003).

Paraeducators are filling more complicated roles in varied learning environments since their inception 60 years ago. “In today’s schools, they are technicians who are more accurately described as paraeducators, just as their counterparts in law and medicine are designated as paralegals and paramedics” (Pickett, 1989). On the secondary school level paraeducators have responsibilities much like a certified teacher; unfortunately they have little to no training. They are often on their own in the community supervising students with disabilities in supported work employment settings or in general education classes without direct supervision and direction from the licensed special education teacher (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000). Under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 1997), children with disabilities have merged into educational settings that are least restrictive. This educational shift has affected the way teachers deliver instruction. Paraeducators have become support personnel in many areas including

instruction, managing classroom behavior, tutoring, and other tasks that overlap with the responsibilities of the classroom teacher (Downing et al. 2000).

The problem of paraeducators lacking adequate supervision from certified teachers and proper training is further complicated by the fact that federal and state guidelines are changing. New federal regulation No Child Left Behind (NCLB) guidelines for “a qualified paraprofessional” outline that paraeducators should be trained and supervised. IDEA says, “Trained and adequately supervised” whereas NCLB specifies 2 years of college or an associate degree—or pass a rigorous test. Education consultant Krista Reid for the Department of Education in Michigan states that federal funding is closely tied to components of NCLB. Federal funding will be received by states as paraprofessionals meet standards set by their particular state (Michigan Paraprofessional Federal Requirements, 2007). When paraeducators lack good training and supervision, the state may be in jeopardy of receiving federal funding.

In 2003, the state of Utah set new standards for paraeducators to follow under the supervision of their certified classroom special education teacher. These standards are based on Utah Standards for Instructional Paraprofessionals (2003). The standards were designed to be used across districts. They are divided into two sections, (1) core and supporting knowledge and (2) skill competencies. In addition, Utah special education teachers are instructed in certain standards for training and supporting paraeducators including how to support paraeducators during instructional opportunities, how to demonstrate professionalism and ethical practices, how to train paraeducators to support a positive learning environment, and how to train paraeducators to communicate effectively and participate in a team process (Utah Paraeducator Handbook, 2009).

To ensure that paraeducators have the required skills for their expanded roles, the Council

for Exceptional Children (CEC) in collaboration with the National Resource Center for Paraeducators validated a knowledge and skill set for paraeducators who serve individuals with exceptional learning needs (CEC, 2004). These skills include having a practical and useful understanding of the foundation of learning and the development and characteristics of learners, including individual learning differences, instructional strategies, learning environment, social interaction, language, instructional planning assessment, professional and ethical practice and collaboration. It is clear that standards for paraeducators have been established at federal/national and state levels by concerned organizations.

Despite the excellent standards that have been developed for paraeducators, and in spite of the dramatic shift in paraeducators' roles away from clerical work and toward instructional support, research indicates that paraeducators are asked to perform difficult tasks with little training and role definition (Giangreco, 2001). Results from Giangreco's study indicate that paraprofessionals are frequently assigned to students with the most challenging behaviors and learning characteristics and paraprofessionals often have multiple roles for which they receive inadequate training (Listen, Nevin, & Malian, 2009). For these reasons as well as others, such as low pay, unclear job description, and lack of training and respect, it has become difficult to attract and retain paraprofessionals (Giangreco, Edelman, Bower, & Doyle, 2001). There is a need to identify skills paraeducators must obtain as well as how special educators can best train and support paraeducators as they strive to fulfill their responsibilities assisting students in transitional settings.

It is recommended that education teams clarify roles for paraprofessionals and incorporate clear training, supervision, and recognition procedures into the paraeducators' work schedule (Giangreco, Edelman, Bower, & Doyle, 2001; Morgan & Ashbaker, 2001). Basic

information should be provided to paraeducators, including information on the child's disability, techniques for positive behavior intervention, and health issues. Communication strategies for interacting with parents as well as approaches that encourage independence and self-determination for the child would benefit the paraeducator (Devlin, 2008). To do this, however, teachers need supervisory skills such as communication and interview techniques, strategies for providing on the job training, understanding of the role distinctions, and task delegations skills (French, 2003).

The purpose of this study is threefold: first, to identify strengths and needs concerning the responsibilities paraeducators have who are working in secondary transitional settings, second, to identify the knowledge they have and that they may need to perform these responsibilities including roles, teaching strategies, educational terms, disabilities, communication, and practices of the paraprofessional and third, how they received that knowledge.

### **No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and Paraeducators**

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has redefined requirements for paraeducators. Prior to NLCB paraeducators were required to have a high school diploma or GED within 2 years of being employed. According to the State & Local Implementation of the "No Child Left Behind Act" Teacher Quality Final Report, NCLB requires that a Title I paraprofessional must have two years of postsecondary education, an associate's degree, or a passing score on a final assessment. Allowable duties indicate that paraeducators may provide "instructional services" only under the direct supervision of a highly qualified teacher (Birman, et al., 2009).

Only Title I paraeducators have specific education requirements. Most districts require

paraeducators in special education to have a high school diploma at a minimum. However, under NCLB, parents must be notified by the school district of their right to request the qualifications of the teachers and paraprofessionals that are teaching their children. Birman et al., (2009), reports that only 19% of paraprofessionals participated in formal training and professional development once or twice a month according to their own personal reports. Over 78% reported that the core source of training was given informally while meeting with their supervising teacher and discussing classroom activities and instruction as job-embedded training (Birman et al., 2009). Figures like those reported by Birman et al. (2009) may cause one to question what problems would arise in school districts if schools were in fact reporting on paraprofessional qualification and continuing training.

Since the passing of the No Child Left Behind and Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement acts there have been relatively small amounts of empirical data about responsibilities, assignments, and roles of paraeducators in the public schools (Carter, O'Rourke, Sisco, Pelsue, 2009). Furthermore, an additional gap in research is the lack of defined job tasks associated with grade level assignments and disability types (Carter et al., 2009). Not only is there a gap in up-to-date literature, but past literature shows high expectations of responsibility of services delivered by job coaches with little investment in developing skills or providing training (Rogan & Held, 1999). High-level skills and competencies are expected of paraprofessional working with students with severe disabilities in the community setting.

Prior to the NCLB, School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994, the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1998, and other associated legislation shaped transition-related activities and the services and personnel provided in work-based and school-based learning programs. Transition from high school to supported employment services is dramatically impacted by the quality of



paraeducators who maintain job coach roles (Rogan & Held, 1999). Quality is in part determined by training that paraeducators receive through formal or informal on-the-job training. Inadequate paraeducator training equates to diminished quality of job training for students with disabilities.

### **No Child Left Behind Non-Regulatory Guidance**

Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) amended by No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) based on guidance from the U.S. Department of Education describes a paraprofessional as an employee whose responsibilities include assisting with instruction. Section 1119(g) lists these responsibilities as:

- Providing instructional services to students while working under the direct supervision of a teacher.
- Working under the direct supervision of a teacher is interpreted, through the U.S. Department of Education's Title I Paraprofessional Non-Regulatory Guidance (March 2004) to mean the teacher prepares the lesson and plans the instructional support activities, the paraprofessional carries out, and the teacher evaluates the achievement of the students with whom the paraprofessional is working, and the paraprofessional works in close and frequent proximity with the teacher.

Paraprofessionals may also be assigned responsibilities to:

- provide one-to-one tutoring for eligible students, if the tutoring is scheduled at a time when a student would not otherwise be receiving instruction from a teacher; or
- assist with classroom management, such as organizing instruction and other materials; or
- provide assistance in a computer laboratory; or

- conduct parental involvement activities; or
- provide support in a library or media center; or
- act as a translator.
- Provide instructional support services under the direct supervision of a highly qualified teacher *[Title I, Section 1119(g)(2)]*

IDEA also requires paraeducators working in a Title I funded school to be highly qualified. Standards for training for paraeducators outside a Title I setting are, however, unaddressed. While utilization of paraeducators has increased, it appears that systematic training and career development is not up to par (Pickett, 1999).

This lack of adequate training and supervision are equally present in secondary transition settings. Secondary paraeducators in job site training settings for transitional students are neither adequately trained nor under direct supervision of a teacher (Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl, 2001).

### **CEC Performance Based Standards**

CEC realized there was a need for standard guidelines in addition to federal government efforts (CEC, 2004). In collaboration with the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Services, CEC developed a set of national paraprofessional standards. Many states have used these standards as a guideline for developing their own standards. The ten standards were validated through samplings of paraprofessionals from paraprofessional organizations: CEC, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers (CEC, 2004).

The CEC standards focus on development and characteristics of learners, individual learning differences, instructional strategies, learning environments/social interactions, language,

instructional planning, assessment, and professional and ethical practices. All standards are important for paraprofessionals to utilize, however four of the standards deal directly with instruction. Standard 1: Knowledge Foundation; Standard 4: Instructional Strategies; Standard 5: Learning Environments/Social Interactions; and Standard 7: Instructional plans. Each of these standards is an area of interest for this study.

### **Utah Standards**

While federal initiatives such as NCLB have established basic requirements that deem paraprofessionals to be qualified, states determine specific guidelines for paraeducators. The Utah standards as described in Utah Standard for Instructional Paraprofessionals (2003) are corresponding knowledge and skill competencies that were developed to create approved performance expectations for paraeducators. A revision of these standards can be found in the Utah Paraeducator Handbook, 2009. This handbook points out that today paraeducators may provide instructional and clerical support for classroom teachers by allowing them more time for lesson planning and instruction (Utah Paraeducator Handbook, 2009). A further stipulation is stressed that the standards in this handbook are to be performed under the direction or supervision of licensed and/or certificated personnel.

Through the Utah Office of Education, Utah special education teachers have been given standards and a handbook with guidelines to follow while directing paraeducators in their job responsibilities. These guidelines specify that certified teachers support paraeducators in instructional opportunities, in demonstrating professionalism and ethical practices, in supporting a positive learning environment, and in communicating effectively and participating in the team process. Clearly, standards have been established not only at the national level but also on a state level as evidenced in Utah's paraeducator standards.

On the secondary level, paraeducators are often implementing discipline and behavior management strategies as well as providing opportunities for students to practice and manage skills out in the community and other learning environments (Pickett, Faison, Formanek, & Woods, 1999). Paraeducators must have adequate training in relationship to outlined standards. Without such training paraprofessionals should not be responsible for transition programs or initial job placement (Sitlington, Neubert, & Clark, 2010). Thus, there are standards available, but how can special education teachers best train paraeducators under these competencies? What specific skills do paraeducators have to carry out their assigned responsibilities, and what knowledge do they need to improve?

### **Definition of Terms**

Paraprofessionals have been widely used in the special education field as assistants in the special education classroom. This literature review will define various job titles of paraprofessionals who work with special education students with severe disabilities in secondary transitional settings.

**Paraeducator.** A paraeducator is defined as a paid school employee whose position is either instructional in nature or who provides other direct service to children, youth, and/or their families (Utah Paraeducator Handbook, 2009). Furthermore, a paraeducator works under the supervision of a certified or licensed school professional which is responsible for the design, implementation, and assessment of student progress. (Utah Paraeducator Handbook, 2009). A supervisor may be a teacher or another licensed professional. The supervisor is responsible for directing and monitoring the paraprofessional's day-to-day work with students as well as giving feedback on his/her job performance. (Utah Paraeducator Handbook, 2009).

**Paraprofessional.** Paraprofessionals have many different job titles. These titles vary

depending on the paraprofessional's state, district, school, and particular job assignment.

Specific titles for paraprofessionals in secondary education transition setting include job coach, job trainer, job shadower, employment specialist, transition professional, paraprofessional, and paraeducator. Paraprofessionals in a secondary transition setting support students with disabilities while they are out in job settings. Flexer, Baer, Luft, & Simmons (2007) defined a job trainer as an assistant in a supported employment setting, a paraprofessional who provides on-the-site job training and supports to a worker with a disability. The title *employment specialist* or *job coach* is interchangeably used with the title *job trainer* (Flexer, et.al. 2007).

**Job Coach.** A desired outcome for people with disabilities upon completion of high school is employment in the community. This often includes supported employment for individuals with more severe disabilities. Adults who offer services to these individuals are often referred to as job coaches. Job coaches are defined as individuals helping students with disabilities get and keep community-based employment (Rogan & Held, 1999).

**Educational Support Team Member.** Downing, Ryndach, & Clark (2000) pointed out that 57% of respondents in a teacher sampling said that their students' principal support was from teacher associates and paraeducators. Thus, another role to be considered would be a member of an educational support team, considering that in transitional settings paraeducators are in the community with the student on job sites (Downing et al.2000).

### **Training for Paraeducators**

As paraeducators assist and support students, teachers assist and support paraeducators by providing training. That training should include teaching legal requirements, national and state standard, and students' instructional and behavioral needs, as well as what paraeducators need to define the complex roles they are given today. Several legal issues have emerged involving the

responsibilities related to adequacy of training and supervision of paraeducators (Ashbaker & Minney, 2007; Etscheidt, 2005). The need for paraeducators to be adequately trained is a recurring theme in the literature. When training is lacking, paraeducators adequacy in delivering supporting instructional services is in question.

Literature on training paraprofessionals to supervise students with severe disabilities in the work place is mainly directed to those in the school setting rather than those working in transitional or community employment settings, although paraprofessionals roles in both settings coincide (Doyle, 1997). For example both settings' roles include retention of job roles and skills, orientation, training, responsibilities of student supervision, evaluations, and compensation in either setting (Rogan & Held, 1999). Literature in this area is very limited however; supported employment literature has focused on criteria for job coaches (Agosta, Bown, & Melda, 1993).

One of the few resources aimed specifically at paraeducators in transitional settings was developed by the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals (NRCPP). This resource titled *A Core Curriculum and Training Program to Prepare Paraeducators to Work in Transitional Services and Supported Employment Programs* was developed to assist paraeducators in the unique transitional community classrooms in which they find themselves helping young adults develop on-the-job skills without direct supervision (Pickett, Faison, Formanek, & Woods, 1999).

Roles of paraprofessionals working in transitional and vocation educational programs are similar to those working in the schools. However, Pickett et al., (1999) points out four major differences 1) they have autonomy with regard to adapting instructional strategies and methods to meet the needs of the individual students, 2) they also participate as active members of the IEP/ITP team meetings, 3) they communicate information and provide assistance to parents and

4) they serve as liaisons between the school, employers, and personnel in other provider agencies. Paraeducators are filling more complicated roles in varied learning environments. Transitional training programs and specific standards for transitional paraeducators are extremely limited in the literature. In spite of searching various sources I was able to find little else relating to specific transitional training materials for paraprofessionals assisting in job training settings. This is in part due to changes in demographics, awareness of children with disabilities and efforts to increase individualized education (Pickett et al. 1999).

Educators, parents, and researchers expect quality educational services for children with exceptionalities; however, we must remember that those with whom we are entrusting our children's education resides in their abilities, qualifications, and competencies (Carter, O'Rourke, Sisco, & Pelsue, 2009). Often times those with whom we are entrusting our children's education are paraprofessionals that are not certified or trained (Riggs & Mueller, 2001).

### **Training Objectives**

The need for training has been established. Paraeducators value skills and knowledge base as they support instruction to diverse populations of students (Listen, Nevin & Malian, 2009). Current literature suggests that paraeducators need clear direction in order to complete job roles (Rogan & Held, 1999). The question that logically follows is what that training should look like for paraeducators in a community setting.

One issue about training that lacks clarity is how supervision and training should be executed (Downing et al.2000). The need for identifying specific areas of knowledge and task requirements through in-service and other training methods should be more closely aligned with paraprofessionals' actual needs (Carter et al.2009). Training efforts are often irrelevant to the

perceptual needs expressed by paraeducators (Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl, 2001).

In addition, teachers may lack training and time to give proper supervision. Given these circumstances, it can be difficult to determine whose responsibility it is to provide the supervision and training needed by paraeducators or how that supervision and training should be carried out (Riggs & Mueller, 1999).

In considering how training and supervision should be executed, reviewing literature that summarizes surveys of paraeducators' expressed needs can guide training objectives. In a study conducted by Riggs and Mueller (1999), paraeducators were asked 30 questions about the training they received. Some stated they started work with no training, while others stated they had support provided by other paraeducators. Those that listed they had some training, said that it lacked in academic modification training and behavior management skills for challenging behaviors. Participants in this study noted that training was necessary not only for entry level paraeducators but for veterans as well (Riggs & Mueller, 1999). In the national survey of 202 paraeducators done by Liston et al.(2009), the authors summarize the paraprofessionals perception of training suggesting the following practice tip: participate in selected professional development activities together with the certified teacher to learn new instructional techniques and improve collaborative skills.

Researchers in the area of paraeducator training suggested further general guidelines for paraprofessional training objectives. These objectives coincide with competencies required of paraprofessionals in the job coach role. These include being able to teach skills to students about interacting with employees, co-workers, and the public (Rehabilitation Research & Training Center, 1992). In addition, job coaches should possess skills in job training creation and placement topics (Sitlington et al., 2010). Having the skills to go into the community and work



with businesses to create job-training opportunities for people with disabilities with the vision that a future job placement may be obtained. Additionally, paraprofessionals should be able to work with and manage challenging behaviors, understand behavior management techniques, and reinforcement procedures (Morgan, Ames, Locolil, Feng & Taylor, 1995).

Recommendations for training objectives also include instruction on clear descriptions of roles, desired student outcomes, relevant legal issues, person centered planning, the entire job acquisition process, job training and support skills, systematic instruction, task analysis, corrections of job task skills, fading, student self-management, data collection, and positive social skills (Rogan & Held, 1999).

An additional component of training objectives is teaching paraprofessionals how to individualize curriculum for individual student needs. Paraeducators must be aware of those students' needs that they assist and supervise in the community setting (Turnbull, A. & Turnbull, R. 2006). Finally, paraeducators need be trained how to allow a students' self-determination to emerge to foster freedom and to allow that student to learn to organize personal support, make decisions and to promote self-advocacy. Paraeducators must not forget whose life is being lived (Turnbull, A. & Turnbull, R., 2006).

### **Training Resources**

Resources for training for teachers are available at <http://www.nrcpara.org/training>. These are evidence-based strategies to support paraeducators. See Table 1.

Table 1  
Paraeducator Training Resources

Title	Author	Publisher	Date
<i>Utah Paraeducator Handbook</i>	Alexander, M., Ashbaker, B., Fillmore, D., Giddings, K., & Likins, M.	Salt Lake City, UT: Utah State Office of Education	2009
<i>A curriculum and training program to prepare paraeducators to work in inclusive classrooms serving school-age students with disabilities.</i>	Pickett, A.L., Faison, K., & Formanek, J.	National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals <a href="http://www.nrcpara.org">www.nrcpara.org</a>	2006
<i>Managing paraeducators in your school: How to hire, train and supervise paraeducators</i>	Pickett, A.L., Faison, K. & Formanek, J.	Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin	2003
<i>A teachers guide to working with paraeducators and other classroom aides</i>	Morgan, J. and Ashbaker, B.Y.	Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development	2001
<i>Colleagues in the classroom: a video-assisted program for teaching supervision skill</i>	Morgan, R.L., Gee, T., Merrill, A., Gerity, B.P. & Brenchley, R.	Logan, UT: TRISPEC	1998
<i>Supervising paraeducators in school settings</i>	Pickett, A.L. & Gerlach, K.	Austin, TX: Pro-Ed	1997

**Table 2**  
**Transitional Paraeducator Training Resources**

Title	Author	Publisher	Date
<i>A core curriculum and training program to prepare paraeducators to work in transitional services and supported employment programs</i>	Pickett, A.L., Faison, K., Formanek, J., & Woods, J.	National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals <a href="http://www.nrcpara.org">www.nrcpara.org</a>	1999
<i>Advancing Skills of Specialist in Employment Training (ASSET)</i>	Morgan, R., Merrill, Z., Ames, N., Feng, J., Loosli, T., & Salzberg, C.L.	Logan, UT: Technology, Research, and Innovation in Special Education (TRI-SPED), Utah State University	1996
<i>Job coaching in supported work Programs</i>	Fadely, D.	Stout, WI: Stout Vocational Rehabilitation Institute, School of Education and Human Services, University of Wisconsin – Stout.	1987

Though there are many training programs and materials available, few are research based publications. In addition, those that are specifically related to job coaches or transitional settings are sparse and many years old. Hopefully trainings that are based on conventional wisdom oriented information can be replaced by evidence based research results as paraeducators begin to contribute to the research community (Liston et al., 2010).

### **Supervision**

Supervision emerges in the literature as a key concept that is coupled with training. Teachers must make time to communicate expectations and guidelines. Too often supervision and communication does not happen due to lack of time. Communication is significant; paraeducators meet teachers on the run, not in formal meetings. They are left out of planning meetings and thus are out of the loop (French, 1998). Open communication is outlined as a systematic necessity (Carnahan, Williamson, Clark, & Sorensen, 2009). The authors suggest non-emotional, adult-adult communication, including concrete language, example and non-examples, modeling, and checking for understanding (Carnahan et al., 2009).

Research points to several elements that should exist in good supervision of paraprofessionals. For example, supervisors should clarify roles and differences in behavior expectations between school and community settings for paraeducators (Rogan & Held, 1999). Paraeducators should be included in team meetings if they are working in the community as the student's sole supervisor. Supervisory methods, team communication, and understanding about vocational education can have an impact on the difference paraprofessionals have on students (Rogan & Held, 1999). On the job training and collaboration result in the most relevant type of professional development (Morgan & Ashbaker, 2001).

Collaboration is defined as “a style for direct interaction between at least 2 co-equal partners voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work toward a common goal” (Cook & Friend, 1991). This philosophy of collaboration between teacher and paraeducators is supported by Carnahan et al. (2009), who suggests that there should be regularly scheduled staff meetings and time for supervision of teachers to assess paraprofessional’s performance and provide opportunities for problem solving. Teachers should then introduce new teaching strategies and provide positive support to the paraprofessional in the form of reviewing and practicing, modeling, observing, and coaching the paraprofessional in his/her job responsibilities (Carnahan et al. 2009).

Training is influenced by the fact that paraeducators’ roles have become increasingly instructional (Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010). Yet only 2% of teachers’ time goes toward supervision of each paraeducator. Thus, even when a teacher’s supervision skills are sufficient, time is a limiting factor in how much supervision is provided to paraprofessionals (Giangreco, Boer, 2007).

The lack of recent literature on the role of job coaches or paraprofessionals working in the secondary transitional setting signifies a need to assess paraeducators’ current knowledge in relation to the specific tasks required of them in this field. There is also a need to research which educational objectives or skills need to be taught and modeled by paraprofessionals in the supported community employment scenario while working with students. But what knowledge, skills, and desired skills do paraeducators in secondary transitional settings have? And which do they need?

The purpose of this study is to examine the training needs and training opportunities of paraprofessionals working with secondary transitional students ages 18-22. We will examine

knowledge, training needs, and professional development opportunities across a number of knowledge standards and common job-related tasks. This study closely replicates a study done for elementary and secondary paraprofessionals (Carter et al., 2009). In Carter's study the research was directed to paraeducators working with children in a K-12 setting. However the authors identify the need for future research with paraprofessionals assisting in community work sites and in alternative school settings which require unique training needs.

The authors suggest future research could explore skills and competencies needed for paraprofessionals within these settings and for the adaptation needed to facilitate training and supervision that these contexts may necessitate (Carter et al., 2009). The authors of this study also emphasize the pressing need to maximize educational outcomes through additional research to identify and evaluate pertinent strategies and the delivery of content to facilitate that (Carter et al., 2009).

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## APPENDIX B

## Consent Form



DEPARTMENT OF  
COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY AND  
SPECIAL EDUCATION

**Paraprofessional Consent to Participate in Paraprofessional Knowledge Survey**

Dear Transition Specialist / Paraprofessional:

This survey is expected to take about 20-25 minutes to complete. Your responses will be kept confidential and your participation is voluntary, though I hope you will participate. There are minimal risks associated with this survey. There are no direct benefits to you. There may be a benefit to society as we better understand paraprofessionals' experiences and needs. Responders will be given one chance for a drawing for a free iPad. The chances of winning the iPad depend on the number of surveys returned but should be no more than 1 in 500. Should you have any questions about this project or interest in the research results, please contact Dr. Betty Y. Ashbaker, through email [Betty\\_Ashbaker@byu.edu](mailto:Betty_Ashbaker@byu.edu), or telephone (801) 422-8361 or the BYU IRB Administrator at (801) 422-1461, A-285 ASB, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602.

Thank you for considering this important request. I expect that the information you and the other paraprofessionals provide will help identify areas of strength and improvement for those supervising and training paraprofessionals in transitional settings, working with students with disabilities ages 18-22.

Best Wishes,

*Betty Y. Ashbaker*

Dr. Betty Y. Ashbaker  
Associate Professor  
Department of Counseling Psychology &  
Special Education  
Brigham Young University  
[Betty\\_Ashbaker@byu.edu](mailto:Betty_Ashbaker@byu.edu)

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DEPARTMENT OF  
COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY AND  
SOCIAL EDUCATION



**Paraprofessional Consent to Participate in Paraprofessional Knowledge Survey**

\_\_\_\_\_ I give my consent to participate in the Paraprofessional Knowledge Survey.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not give my consent to participate in the Paraprofessional Knowledge Survey.

My participation is voluntary.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Paraprofessional

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

Please include in the postage-paid envelope

- The completed survey
- This signed consent form
- Your completed coupon for the iPad drawing

**APPROVED EXPIRES**  
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## APPENDIX C

## Instrument

**Paraprofessional Knowledge Survey**

We are gathering information about the training needs of paraprofessionals who work with students with disabilities in post high school transitional settings. This information will assist us in (a) identifying what those training needs are and how training needs may differ across the grade span, and (b) designing effective training opportunities for paraprofessionals. Completion of this survey is voluntary and all responses will remain confidential. Please answer the following questions honestly. We know your time is valuable—thank you in advance for your contribution to this project!

**1. In what grades are the students with whom you work? (Check all that apply)**

11-12 grades  Life Skills Classroom ages 18-22  
 Work Supported Employment / community  Transition Program Classroom Ages 18-22  
 Work supported employment / sheltered workshop

**2. During a typical week, in what settings do you primarily work with students with disabilities?**

All training in the community  Mostly training in the community  Split between in the community and transition classroom  Mostly transitional classroom  All transitional classroom

**3. During a typical week, which category the percentage you are directly supervised by a certified teacher?**

None (0%)  Some (1-20%)  Moderate (21-50%)  Substantial (51-75%)  Mostly (76-100%)

**4. How many years have you worked as a paraprofessional? \_\_\_\_ years**

**5. Sex:**  Female  Male

**6. Ethnicity:** \_\_\_\_\_

**7. Under which of the following disability categories are the students you work with identified? (Check all that apply)**

Autism  Learning Disability  Other Health Impairment  
 Intellectual Disability  Hearing Impairments  Speech or Language Impairment  
 Emotional Disturbance  Multiple Disabilities  Traumatic Brain Injury  
 Deaf Blindness  Orthopedic Impairment  Visual Impairment

**8. How would you describe the level of disability experienced by MOST of the students with disabilities with whom you work at your school?**

Mild or high incidence disabilities  Moderate/severe or low incidence disabilities

**9. At present, are you actively pursuing teacher certification?  Yes  No**

Paraprofessional Tasks	How often do you perform each task?					How well prepared do you feel you are to perform each task effectively?					What is your need for additional training on each task?				
	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Yearly	Never	Unprepared	Somewhat prepared	Very prepared	Very prepared	Very prepared	No need	Moderate need	Substantial need		
Providing instruction to small groups	D	W	M	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Providing one-on-one instruction	D	W	M	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Preparing materials so you are ready to teach	D	W	M	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Role in preparation of student transitional plans	D	W	M	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Communicating with parents primary care providers	D	W	M	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Completing job or disability related paperwork	D	W	M	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Meeting teachers or employers to discuss student issues	D	W	M	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Collecting data on students	D	W	M	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Assisting with health care services	D	W	M	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Using behavior management skills	D	W	M	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Implementing written behavior management plans	D	W	M	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Helping students use assistive technology	D	W	M	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Administering & documenting informal assessments	D	W	M	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Teaching job tasks to students in community settings	D	W	M	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Clerical work (e.g., photocopying, typing, filing)	D	W	M	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Teaching skills that will allow independence	D	W	M	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Participating in planning for students' IEP meetings	D	W	M	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Facilitating social relationship among students	D	W	M	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Providing personal care assistance	D	W	M	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5

Knowledge Topics	Rate your level of knowledge about this topic.					Rate your need for additional training on this topic.					What types of training have you already received on this topic?				
	No Knowledge	Moderate Knowledge	Substantial Knowledge	No Need	Moderate Need	Substantial Need	On-the job training	Inservice training	Conference sessions	Other training	I have not had training				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	OTJ	INSV	CONF	OTH	NONE
Purpose of job skill training for student with disabilities	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	OTJ	INSV	CONF	OTH	NONE
Basic educational terms regarding students programs, roles and instructional activities	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	OTJ	INSV	CONF	OTH	NONE
Effects a disability can have on a student's life	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	OTJ	INSV	CONF	OTH	NONE
Rights & responsibilities of families and students as they relate to student learning	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	OTJ	INSV	CONF	OTH	NONE
Indicators of abuse and neglect	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	OTJ	INSV	CONF	OTH	NONE
Basic teaching strategies and materials to use	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	OTJ	INSV	CONF	OTH	NONE
Basic technologies appropriate to students with disabilities	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	OTJ	INSV	CONF	OTH	NONE
How the environment impacts the student learner	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	OTJ	INSV	CONF	OTH	NONE
Rules and procedural safeguards regarding management of students	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	OTJ	INSV	CONF	OTH	NONE
Appropriate communication with other members of the educational team	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	OTJ	INSV	CONF	OTH	NONE
Rational & procedures paraprofessionals use for assessment	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	OTJ	INSV	CONF	OTH	NONE
Ethical practices for confidential communication about students with disabilities	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	OTJ	INSV	CONF	OTH	NONE
Personal cultural biases and differences that affect one's ability to work with others	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	OTJ	INSV	CONF	OTH	NONE
Common concerns of families of students with disabilities	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	OTJ	INSV	CONF	OTH	NONE
Role of paraprofessional in planning an IEP	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	OTJ	INSV	CONF	OTH	NONE



APPENDIX D

Other Study Materials

NOV 11 2008 - NOV 10 2009

**Paraprofessional Knowledge Survey  
Incentive Coupon iPad Drawing**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

Email address \_\_\_\_\_

Please return this coupon with the completed survey  
for a chance to win the iPad.

Survey will be assigned a number upon receipt.  
Confidentiality of survey respondent will be respected.

**Paraprofessional Knowledge Survey  
Incentive Coupon iPad Drawing**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

Email address \_\_\_\_\_

Please return this coupon with the completed survey  
for a chance to win the iPad!

Survey will be assigned a number upon receipt.  
Confidentiality of survey respondent will be respected.

## Recruitment Letter to District Special Education Directors in the State of Utah

## To Whom it May Concern:

My name is Michelle Holbrook. I am a graduate student at Brigham Young University working on my master's degree in special education. My research is concerning paraeducators in secondary transition setting. Specifically, I'd like to study what knowledge, skills and desired skills paraeducators in secondary transitional settings have? How did they receive that knowledge and what further knowledge is a perceived need?

I am trying to identify possible participants for my study. I am trying to locate paraeducators who are working with students 18-22 years of age in transitional schools, community work programs or transitional work programs. Would you be willing answer the following questions to help me locate possible participants?

- 1) Would you be willing to facilitate contacting those paraeducators in transitional settings to encourage them to fill out a 20-25 minute survey? (Please see attached survey)
- 2) Can you give me the addresses of the facilities / schools in your district for students in the post high school transitional educational programs for students 18-22 years old?
- 3) Can you give me the contact information for the supervisor of the teachers of transitional programs in your school district?
- 4) Can you give me the contact information for the teacher/teachers who supervise the transitional programs in your school district for students 18-22 years old?

I sincerely appreciate your help with this research project. You may email me at [farm722@idsn.com](mailto:farm722@idsn.com) or [mholbrook@alpine.k12.ut.us](mailto:mholbrook@alpine.k12.ut.us). If you have further questions feel free to contact me at 801-376-3567.

Thank you,

Michelle Holbrook  
Graduate Student  
Brigham Young University

APPROVED EXPIRES

NOV 1 1 2010 - NOV 1 0 2011

Presentation Script for Distribution of Surveys

Michelle Holbrook, a graduate student at Brigham Young University is requesting your assistance with a research project concerning the knowledge, skills and desired skills paraeducators in secondary transitional setting have – how they received that knowledge and the perceived need of further knowledge. She is requesting that you fill out this 20-25 minute survey and return it to Brigham Young University in the postage paid envelope. To help compensate you for your time you may fill out the attached coupon to be entered into a drawing for a free iPad. The chances of winning the iPad depend on the number of surveys returned but will be no more than one in 500. She would appreciate a timely response.

APPROVED EXPIRES  
8/7/11 1:09 - M 10 2011