



PRESCHOOL-3RD GRADE BILINGUAL PARAPROFESSIONALS
DISCUSS THE PATHWAY TO TEACHING
FINDINGS FROM A SERIES OF FOCUS GROUPS
PREPARED FOR NEW AMERICA
BY THE FDR GROUP
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I. INTRODUCTION

These findings are based on six focus groups conducted across the country with bilingual paraprofessionals who work in public schools and preschools, almost all of whom were interested in becoming classroom teachers. The research was commissioned by New America and conducted by the nonpartisan public opinion research firm FDR Group. New America plans to use these findings to inform its ongoing research, policy papers, blogs, and commentary as part of its education policy work and its focus on dual language learners.

The purpose of the research was to talk with bilingual paraprofessionals – specifically, those who work with children between the ages of 4 and 9 years old (essentially, preschool through 3rd grade, although some also worked with older children) – to gain understanding about the obstacles and facilitating factors they may come across on the path to becoming public school teachers. The research question going into the focus groups focused on the extent to which bilingual paraprofessionals may face financial, familial, academic, linguistic, and bureaucratic obstacles; the findings show that they face all these hurdles and more. At the same time, the findings also suggest that bilingual paraprofessionals are motivated to overcome these challenges by their professional goals, personal drive, desire to work with children, need to earn a higher salary, and sometimes because of the encouragement they get from classroom teachers and school principals.

The key findings are:

Finding 1. Bilingual paraprofessionals tend to fall into two categories – those whose responsibilities are directly related to instruction and those who are mainly responsible for classroom management tasks. One duty that virtually all bilingual paraprofessionals share (perhaps not surprisingly) is interpreting and translating.

Finding 2. Classroom teachers wield a considerable amount of power over the work environment for bilingual paraprofessionals.

Finding 3. According to bilingual paraprofessionals, many principals not only lack information about the needs of ELLs, but also about the role bilingual paraprofessionals play in their learning. Evaluations appear to be more a matter of compliance than substance.

Finding 4. The level of English language skill required to pass state licensure tests is an almost insurmountable challenge for some bilingual paraprofessionals.

Finding 5. According to bilingual paraprofessionals, student teaching is an obvious example of how the current system for licensing teachers works against them.

Finding 6. The rules and requirements surrounding teacher certification/licensure are resistant to change and, from the perspective of bilingual paraprofessionals, are a contributing factor to the bilingual teacher shortage.

Finding 7. Reliable sources of information about the pathway to teaching are not easy to find. Bilingual paraprofessionals tend to learn the ropes via word of mouth.

Finding 8. Meaningful professional development for bilingual paraprofessionals is lacking.

Finding 9. Despite the obstacles, a sizeable number of bilingual paraprofessionals in the focus groups showed interest in becoming full-time, credentialed early childhood or Kindergarten teachers.

Finding 10. Still, some bilingual paraprofessionals ask themselves if it is worth it to become a teacher, and their answer is no.

What follows is a description of the research methodology, the detailed findings with supporting quotes, and observations and suggestions for future research. The screening specifications used to recruit focus group participants and the moderator's guide are also included.

II. METHODOLOGY

The FDR Group convened six focus groups with bilingual paraprofessionals to explore their views and experiences around the role they serve in preschool through 3rd grade classrooms and their future career plans. The focus groups took place between February and April 2016, two in Washington, DC; and one each in Orange County, CA; Minneapolis, MN; San Antonio, TX; and Seattle, WA. In addition, one-on-one interviews were conducted separately with six bilingual paraprofessionals to supplement the focus groups. In total, 62 individuals took part in this qualitative research effort. A detailed screening process was used for recruiting (screening protocol attached).

The focus group participants were diverse in terms of country of origin, years of experience as a paraprofessional, previous experience as a classroom teacher, education level, and age. Virtually all worked in urban or suburban settings. All but a handful were women, and the vast majority were native Spanish speakers.

Ann Duffett, PhD, of the FDR Group, moderated the focus groups, analyzed the data, and wrote this report. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview protocol. That is to say the inclusion of some topics depended on the knowledge, interest, and experience of the interviewees, while other topics were asked of everyone. Our charge was to capture the views and experiences of these educators in their own words, and verbatim quotes are the data used to inform the findings.* All participants were assured of confidentiality; no names of people or schools are included here. We found the paraprofessionals who participated in these focus groups to be fully engaged in the conversations and many expressed gratefulness for having the opportunity to share their

* English was a second language for most focus group participants. In some cases, quotes were modified for clarity. In cases where the grammar was incorrect but the meaning clear, the quote was kept as is.

own experiences and learn from others. We, in turn, are grateful to them as this research could not have happened without them.

Participants were recruited by a variety of people at the local level who worked at institutions with access to bilingual paraprofessionals: school districts, departments of education, preschool programs, unions, nonprofits. Paraprofessionals who worked solely with special-needs students were excluded; to participate in these focus groups a paraprofessional was required to have spent most of their time in general education classrooms. Our contacts at the local institutions conducted outreach to find potential focus group candidates, screened them to ensure they met prescribed qualifications for participation, and sent reminders to encourage attendance. Each group lasted approximately two hours; participants were provided a light meal and \$100 as a way of thanking them for their time and input. The conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed.

A few words of caution about the nature of qualitative research: Focus groups are a valuable tool for exploring people's spontaneous views on a given topic and for uncovering underlying values that help explain why people feel the way they do. From a policy or communications strategy standpoint, they provide information on how to frame information to effectively appeal to the values and mind-sets that underlie beliefs. But, although focus groups are tremendously helpful for listening to people talk about issues, for uncovering the sources of their opinions and motivations for action, and for generating hypotheses for further research, they cannot determine how many people hold a particular view. These findings reflect the views of the focus group participants and cannot be generalized to the population of bilingual paraprofessionals as a whole.

III. DETAILED FINDINGS

FINDING 1.

Bilingual paraprofessionals tend to fall into two categories – those whose responsibilities are directly related to instruction and those who are mainly responsible for classroom management tasks. One duty that virtually all bilingual paraprofessionals share (perhaps not surprisingly) is interpreting and translating.

For bilingual paraprofessionals in the Orange County, Minneapolis, and Seattle focus groups, instruction was the main responsibility.

I think it's a silly question because if I'm an instructional aide, I am aiding your instruction not being a maid.—Orange County

I had a teacher before that made me file all day, and I actually went to the district and told them I'm actually capable of more than this. I'm not supposed to file. That's not my job. So they pulled me out of that class and put me in a different class where I was actually helping kids, especially ELL. —Orange County

I have to work with the lower kids. I spend a lot of time with them teaching them or reinforcing the syllables. The lower ones they just are having a hard time to actually connect syllables so I'm spending 30 minutes with them, 15 minutes each, I have 2 groups, sounding the words in Spanish and they have to write the syllables. —Minneapolis

I teach small groups. We have 4 reading and 4 math each day. We have a rolling cart we travel around with....So most of the time I'm traveling around place to place, to a table inside the classroom. —Seattle

I know that there are sort of two groups who are in my boat where the school hired specifically as a stepping ground to be a teacher, so as a potential pool for that. So most of us either already has a credential or are working towards that. And then there were others, somewhat older, who had been with the school a long time, started as a mom, lunch lady, playground, and then having to actually aid in the classroom. If any of them were here, they might give you a different kind of feedback in terms of [responsibilities] because they naturally want to spend more time filing, copying, cutting out things for the teacher. —Orange County

In Washington, DC, responsibilities were mainly non-instructional, e.g., escorting students, cleaning, setting up, keeping students focused on the teacher, et al. But the distinction was largely dependent on a school's bilingual program – bilingual paraprofessionals in dual immersion schools were more likely to describe being responsible for instruction compared with their peers in schools with other approaches to bilingual education.

I teach all day in Spanish, so anything the teacher does in English, I do in Spanish. We have whole days in our school, we have Tuesdays and Thursdays where everything is in Spanish. On other days we do small groups in Spanish, so it's

Spanish, Spanish, Spanish. We do everything the teacher is doing. —WDC (dual immersion program)

Keep control of the classroom, order, make sure everything is clean and stocked. Make sure the teacher can teach and the children are behaved. —WDC (not a dual immersion school)

As a paraprofessional, we have the same responsibility for pick up the kids when they are coming and drop them when they are leaving. Then breakfast, lunch, clean up the tables, engage with them when they are playing on the centers. Then set the beds so they go to sleep, turn them when they wake up, mop. —WDC (not a dual immersion school)

I would like to be more involved with the children. I don't want to be all day cleaning. That's what I do. Cleaning all day, wiping tables. We have to do it, but we would like to be more involved with the children or given more responsibilities to be with them, teach them. —WDC (not a dual immersion school)

In San Antonio, the distinction were made clear and spelled out in job descriptions; some bilingual paraprofessionals are instructional helpers, other classroom helpers.

[In Head Start program] the description is there's a Teacher 1 and a Teacher 2. So the Teacher 1 supposedly [does] that mostly, the time is the cleaning and basically making copies and prepare the material for the centers and things like that. And the Teacher 2 is who is more on the administrative part, which is more paperwork and help the teacher. That is the job description. —San Antonio

But one responsibility all bilingual paraprofessionals share is interpreting and translating. They interpret and translate culture as well as words. This cultural compatibility that many bilingual paraprofessionals share with students and parents is often a big part of what they feel they bring to the classroom.

And if they don't speak English they will only talk to me or try to use me to translate to talk to the teacher. In my school there's a lot of Hispanic descendants and it is not a bilingual school, and there's a lot of parents who have trouble talking to teachers. Parents who have kids in other classes, they will ask me to translate. —WDC

The curriculum we have right now, the trainings are only in English so it's not helpful for us because we are doing Spanish all day. We are translating

everything in Spanish our way, so there's not a Spanish structured curriculum in our school. There is no structure. —WDC

I do a lot of interpreting for families for all kinds of meetings, psychologists, speech therapists...usually before or after school. —Seattle

I have seen that sometimes a parent will like to talk to me better than the teacher. Because I can explain to that parent in Spanish and with our own expressions. Then that parent will feel more comfortable talking in Spanish with me than with the teacher. It is not because she has something against the teacher. The cultural, the expressions that we use, our way to say the things between Latinos. Also the kids, sometimes they'll come to me and say something to me in Spanish that I will understand that the teacher won't. Maybe it is a TV show they want to share with me because I watch it too, so many things, so many examples I could give, the cultural part. —Minneapolis

Sometimes you have to wear different hats. You are not just the instructor or IA, you are also sometimes their counselor, their resource person. They come to us. It is hard because a lot of times the district says your job is to teach the kids. The families, the parents are not priority, the kids are. My answer to that many times was a child cannot be successful if whatever is going on at home is not solved, because it would affect the child academically. We have to dedicate some time to the families, but that is not the time that we are given to work with the families. Sometimes it is hard to just take all that in, all the problems the families come with. My husband was deported, my child is committing suicide...what do I do, finding everything that family needs in order for that child to be successful is extremely hard. —Seattle

FINDING 2.

Classroom teachers wield a considerable amount of power over the work environment for bilingual paraprofessionals.

Several participants described it as the luck of the draw: Some classroom teachers are encouraging to the paraprofessionals they work with and treat them as equals – co-teachers, if you will. Others either under-utilize over-utilize them, mainly due to ignorance, inexperience, or inflexibility.

It also depends on the teacher. Last year, if you were to ask me the same question, I would say cleaning tables, but this year I would say I am an equal with my teacher. —San Antonio

I am very lucky to say that I'm working this year with this amazing teacher that allows me to actually teach without the paper that says I am a licensed teacher. She trusts me, she knows that I can do whatever she tells me and she gives me the freedom of...for example, this week we are going to teach numbers from 1-10; she knows I can come up with ideas and sit down and even improvise with the kids....She's given me a lot of opportunities. But I know some coworkers, they don't have the same luck. —Minneapolis

I would like to use "co-teaching" because we're both doing that. It would be a better term in my opinion. With my teacher she has allowed me because she knows my background, my experience teaching, to be involved with the lesson planning. So, I can actually add things in our lesson plan. —San Antonio

She gives me work to do, makes me feel like a co-teacher. —She is very encouraging. WDC

Because she has her way of doing things, and she's not deviating from it. It's her way or no way. I don't even feel comfy trying to be like hey, let's try this. —WDC

Some of the teachers don't know how to use us, so they care about us, they are grateful for us, but they don't know what to do some times....they say this is the topic this week....just teach it. —Seattle

First the teachers don't know how to utilize us – very confused as far as what we're actually supposed to do. Usually they don't know how we can be helpful so I think some actually [think] of us as a, not hindrance, but an annoyance, kind of where they don't know what they're supposed to prepare for us to do, or they give us nothing and just say do your magic. —Orange County

Sometimes they don't tell me what they want from me. Sometimes they just give me a group and say ok you need to work with this group, teach them a new math lesson. So those are the days that I usually don't like. They have already started (the math lesson), but they feel like they didn't get it so they give that group to me to re-teach it. This happened to me yesterday when I taught them the way I learn at school, and the teacher came up to me later on and said guess what, we do it a different way. I was like what? I didn't know. I wish they had told me beforehand. —Orange County

The teacher you work with can make life easy or sad. —Minneapolis (via telephone interview)

FINDING 3.

According to bilingual paraprofessionals, many principals not only lack information about ELLs, but also about the role bilingual paraprofessionals play in their learning. Evaluations appear to be more a matter of compliance than substance.

Bilingual paraprofessionals think it is unfair that principals – who are unfamiliar with the role bilingual paraprofessionals play, unfamiliar with the learning needs of children new to this country, and who rarely observe paraprofessionals' interactions with students – have the authority to evaluate them.

We have a new principal. She doesn't know anything about early childhood education so we ask her what she expects for us. And we don't get no answer....One hard part is...we're seen as an assistant, and inside the classroom we're co-teachers...but we're not getting compensated for that. The principals do not see that. —WDC

They always every year come up and say we are going to have an evaluation, but we really don't. Administration doesn't give us. I get strokes from my team. I know that they appreciate me. —Minneapolis

I don't think he is an expert on early childhood education, I don't think so, he's new, he is adjusting a lot to the building, the staff, all the issues that happen at school. So I don't think so, I haven't talked to him about that. —Minneapolis

They need to know more about what is ELL. How can they evaluate me if they don't know what is my role? —Seattle

More often than not the evaluation is informal, or the principal simply relies on the classroom teacher's assessment.

Well, you know, maybe the principal will say come to me and say you did that well the other day, but that's it. There's nothing formal. —Minneapolis

But he really doesn't know what I do directly so our ELL teacher lets him know, she does the evaluation really every single day with me and lets him know how I perform. —Seattle

I had one evaluation in the last year, and I think it was all word of mouth from the teachers. The principal had not seen me in action, so there was not much for her to evaluate, but from word of mouth, I did good. —Orange County

My principal never saw me teach. There was no sitting down, no formal evaluation. —Orange County

There were exceptions. For example, one Orange County bilingual paraprofessional said:

The principal does walk-arounds in classrooms wherever I work. She checks on me....And then the teachers actually report to the principal as well.

FINDING 4.

The level of English language skill required to pass state licensure tests is an almost insurmountable challenge for some bilingual paraprofessionals.

In each focus group, there were paraprofessionals who said that if the tests were offered in Spanish they would be certain to pass. (All but a few were native Spanish speakers, but presumably this would be true for other languages as well.) They are frustrated because they feel the tests assess their English reading and writing skills more than their content knowledge or teaching ability.

When I applied to [district], they could give me Spanish provisional licensing...and I was teaching for 5 years with provisional license as a Spanish teacher in 3rd grade. After that, [district said] I had to take Praxis 1 and Praxis 2 in order to have the standard license. I tried to pass the test. I passed the Praxis 2...but the other part I have some trouble with that, Praxis 1, because all the tests are in English. I can speak English fluently but my first language is Spanish. I said [what] can I do to pass this test? And they said they can give me one hour more since Spanish is my first language. I took the opportunity...I was not able to pass this. I have only the minimum score....5 years as Spanish teacher, 2 years as substitute teacher, and 3 year as paraprofessional or assistant. —WDC

I already graduated from Texas A&M. I have my master's now and my alternative certification. But in order for me to be [a] teacher, I need to pass four tests. One is Spanish, which I pass already. It's in my own language. Listening, speaking, and writing (in Spanish). The other one is...pedagogy – in English. I have done two. The Spanish I pass, but the other one I didn't....I've been taking 3 times the same test, the content. I haven't passed it....The first time I took it I can say very honestly I wasn't prepared. The second time I was kind of...but the third time I spent a lot of time studying for that test, and I didn't pass it. And like she said, it's very frustrating, not because it's \$120, it's a lot of money, but it's just because you don't pass it....You feel frustrated....I blame it on the language. —San Antonio

I was a volunteer 4 years ago in the district, and the principal keep asking me, did you pass your test, I really need you in the bilingual class. Sorry, I didn't pass it. She asked me two times. I have the position. I'm not going to put it [on] the market until you tell me what is the result. I was like 5, 10 points low. It was very frustrating. —San Antonio

I know paraprofessionals who are in my school that they have their bachelor's but because of the language barrier and trying to take the Praxis, they aren't able to take the test and able to make that move to become teachers. It's not offered in Spanish. I think maybe it should be so they can have that advantage. They cannot take the test, the Praxis. —WDC

For me, it's the language. Pass the Praxis. That's it. —WDC

FINDING 5.

According to bilingual paraprofessionals, student teaching is an obvious example of how the current system for licensing teachers works against them.

Many believe that it is essentially impossible for employed people to accomplish the student teaching requirement. To student teach, one must be available during the school day, which, for most people, is during working hours. The irony is not lost on paraprofessionals that their current job takes place in a classroom, precisely where they would be if they quit it in order to do student teaching “for free.”

There was this program, Grow Your Own. I was very excited, and I went to all the meetings, but then when they say I needed to quit my job and be one year studying, studying, studying, and also doing the internship, I was like when I'm going to have time for my girls? I can't quit my job. That's when I say I'm not doing this. Then I applied for a program for a master's degree, I don't remember the university. I was like OK but how I'm going to pay for this? So that's on stand-by. —Minneapolis

All day you will be in school, for one and a half years. I need to pay car bill, rent, kids need money... —Minneapolis (via telephone interview)

I have three kids. I work from 8-6. I'm exhausted. My children are 7, 4, and 1. I don't get to see them, and then Saturdays I'm gone in the morning. If you want to stay as a para forever — I hate my salary — that's not what I want. Yeah my children are important, but I don't want them to be 18 and I'm still a para. —WDC

And you need to stop going to work, that you need to commit to (student teaching). The hours would be the same as the school hours. Complications. — Seattle

I think it's hard for us to give up working for the 3-5 months or however long it is to do your student teaching. One program they do allow you to still keep working. But I think that it is a huge — I don't know anybody who can give up working 3-6 months. —Seattle

Time and money. Taking time and I know for a teaching credential you have to go through a year of student teaching and you have to quit your job. —Orange County

I heard just by talking to coworkers who are in the same level if you pass the test and you get certified then you have to have the student teaching also qualified. They were saying then you need to quit your job, go to school and do it for free for I don't know how long. Most places don't pay student teachers, so it's adding more of your time. —San Antonio

While I was working full time I looked into credential programs, so I was doing both, and then the last year of your credential program you actually have to be in the classroom. So I had to quit my regular job, and then was doing student teaching, and then I got information from other teachers that the best way is to be hired as an instructional assistant. That would be your next stepping-stone. So I was a student teacher, a sub teacher for the district, and then I was hired as an instructional assistant except it's very difficult to cross that line of classified versus certificated. So there's a big trench there. —Orange County

FINDING 6.

The rules and requirements surrounding teacher certification/licensure are resistant to change and, from the perspective of bilingual paraprofessionals, are a contributing factor to the bilingual teacher shortage.

The rules for becoming a certified classroom teacher — especially for those paraprofessionals who already have a college degree — often appear to be arbitrary with too many needless requirements. Commonsense tweaks or work-arounds are few and far between.

The last time I took it — this is writing, reading, and math — the requirement score, I pass for all of them, but together they have to be 517, and I have 510. I can't do

anything to get the 7 points, and I try – five or six times I take. Now they change to another kind of Praxis, and I have to start from zero. —WDC

I would like to have my certification but during this time I have 17-18 years in this country since the first day I was looking, investigation, research, everything and all of those ways that I found at the end, one, I'm going to have big money to pay, it is expensive. Plus all the (tests) – [there] is not only one, it is a lot, West B, West A, a lot of money. If I need to study I don't have to work, for me, in my experience. If I can find a way that is more easy, less stressful, then maybe. But I need money. Cannot leave my job because I need to live. —Seattle

Appreciate that we went to school, [that] at least we are trying, it is so difficult, we are studying, and it is hard....If they need bilingual teachers, but they don't help us out because they make things more complicated for us: you have to take these classes, this, and this. Make things easier for us. —Seattle

I stopped in 08. Now I'm like if I do become a teacher, all of that social work stuff will be thrown out, and I'll be starting over again. I don't want to do it. Forget it. —WDC

The process for assessing transfer credits from colleges in other states, let alone other countries, adds time and money to the quest to become a classroom teacher.

You have to get your papers to an evaluation organization...you get evaluated to see that your credentials are equal to a bachelor's in US so that makes you able to then go through the Praxis. It's a process. It's like you have to pay for it, it is kind of expensive. You have to know where to go because there's...just a few organizations they trust to do your evaluation. —WDC

When I did do my CDA, and then when I went to Trinity, it didn't transfer all of my credits....Not all of our credits went into Trinity. So we need to retake all the things we did for the CDA. And it costs money and time. —WDC

My credential was out of state so when I came here my credential didn't really translate into a job. It's expired. I only completed my student teaching. I went to school in Utah. I'm renewing it, but what they're talking about with the hiring shortage and the pool being so vast for very few openings, I'm more than likely moving out of state. —Orange County

Well-intentioned programs designed to facilitate the process of transitioning from paraprofessional to classroom teacher sometimes miss the mark.

I looked into it....They have the program where you have to commit your whole life to the program and be certified...and being a mother...you have to go to school from 7 (in the morning) to 8 at night, Saturdays and sometimes Sundays. It's unfeasible for an older person like me. —Orange County

Many times I've tried to apply for that program. But the thing is when I apply, they say denied or they say I'm not a good candidate. The reason is because I have a provisional license, and that [program] is for [teachers coming from] other careers. —WDC

Some felt that a PreK-6 credential is too wide a grade span – candidates who desire to teach no higher than Kindergarten, for example, shouldn't be required to pass tests of 5th or 6th grade content.

I have a master degree already, and I wanted to become a teacher, so I took the alternative certificate....My case is a little bit different because as a Mexican you have to do it from there, and then you have to pay the same amount of money that is here....I took the test three times already, the content, and I didn't pass it. There were many reasons. The first one, like she said, is the language. And I thought if I become a teacher assistant then that would help me to have the new vocabulary I don't have in Mexico because I don't use it. The other one is because they ask you about the history in Texas. If you were not born here, if you don't have anything related to it, it is very hard for you to give that information in a test. And the other one is once you know, the test EC-6 is not related to how you handle [an actual event at] the school. It's pretty much what is the perfect school....But when you're involved in education those things don't happen [perfectly]. —San Antonio

I would say, ok, if I'm focusing on teaching preK, please make the test for preK. The EC 6. Honestly, I don't think...I do not want to teach 6th grade or 5th grade. I want to stay in preK so give me an exam where I have my experience that I know about. —San Antonio

In Minneapolis, we conducted four in-depth interviews over the telephone.* One bilingual paraprofessional with 10 years' experience described how she had considered applying for Grow Your Own but was worried because it would require a full time commitment to teaching and taking classes with no pay, and she was not in a position to give up her paycheck. She believed the district 'should have a program where we get paid while we

* These telephone interviews were not recorded; the quotes below are paraphrased.

study and still take classes and work. They need us. We know the population of the school. We are native Spanish speakers. We have good connections with the families.'

Another, a veteran teacher who got her master's in teaching in Minnesota but did her actual classroom teaching in New York, learned that of several options potentially available to a professional in her situation, none was feasible for her. Her options were: 1) to repeat her master's program, which she perceived as 'unfair and wrong' and 'costs too much money'; 2) to participate in a licensure by portfolio program, but she learned she was not a candidate because her master's degree was granted by a Minnesota university and to be qualified it had to be granted somewhere else; or 3) participate in Grow Your Own, but she was disqualified because she already has a license from another state.

FINDING 7.

Reliable sources of information about the pathway to teaching are not easy to find. Bilingual paraprofessionals tend to learn the ropes via word of mouth.

One Minneapolis paraprofessional who was interviewed via telephone reported that there exists no single source for information about transitioning to the position of classroom teacher. She said, 'For the longest time I couldn't get anybody on the phone to explain how things work,' and that at the Board of Education 'nobody gives you a straight answer.' Virtually everything she learned had been through a paraprofessional whose husband works for the district.

Along the same lines, a first-year teacher in the Minneapolis focus group could not recall details about a program that she regularly receives emails about:

They do have a program through the district for AEs. [Another participant said: Grow Your Own?] To become a licensed teacher. I don't know a ton about it....I have gotten a ton of emails about it. [From who?] I don't know. It is coming to my district email. I can't remember who is sending it to me....There's AEs at my school who are doing the program...they are working there....I could ask them.

In Seattle, there was variation by district. One bilingual paraprofessional described the process in her school:

In my school it is different and I am grateful for that, because our principal is like, 'Oh, you guys need to be a teacher...these schools have program for paras who want to be a teacher.' They just went through this process, and they are going to financially help us to graduate and be a teacher. They encourage us to participate in this program, that's really nice.

But others in the Seattle group indicated that they must scramble for information:

Person to person, we just talk [with each other]....There's nobody that has that kind of information. I wish there was.

Washington State, they don't have very clear information on how to become a teacher, they have all these obstacles, and you call them [Washington State Department of Education] and they don't even know.

Similarly, in Washington, DC, one paraprofessional described how her cooperating teacher took an interest and helped her to move forward in the process of becoming a teacher, but others indicated there is no go-to source for information.

I did have offers. We used to have an assistant principal last year, in a fellowship. She offered to help me. She said you need someone to read your essay, which is the hardest part. You read it to me; I'll provide the [guidance]. I had several teachers in my school, they went through teaching fellows. The principal told me to go talk to them. It's the program where you become a teacher in 6 weeks. They get you to summer school where you're going to teach. You're not going to get paid (jokingly) – you'll pay them.

Just other teachers.

I asked my instructional coach, and she said there is no one person you can go to.

A bilingual paraprofessional in Orange County described how little information her district was able to proffer when she asked what she thought was a simple question about best local colleges to pursue her teaching credential:

I wanted to become a teacher here. I have done all research. I called the district and asked if they could provide me at least some schools that they think is going to be good, and they said we can't tell you which schools to go to. I said I know you can't tell me specific schools, but can you tell me some that are good, [that]

their credential is valuable? And they told me to check the educational dept website. So I checked, and the list is 100 schools. I just went to the teachers that I work with. —Orange County

In contrast, participants in the San Antonio focus group seemed well-informed about what it takes to become a teacher; heads were nodding when one bilingual paraprofessional said:

There's a place. It's called Region 20. And they tell you exactly where you're at. If you have paperwork, then you need to do this. If you have bachelor's from here, you need to do this. So they kind of guide you.

FINDING 8.

Meaningful professional development for bilingual paraprofessionals is lacking.

Professional development, they said, seems to be more about compliance (Common Core, how to administer tests) than about ways to help children learn.

We are under the second language department. I don't think we do get any kind of professional development. The only thing we get is we have the CBEST – an English test that gauges the students [on] how much they are progressing. We have to learn how to [administer it], every year we get trained on that. [Is it helpful to you?] No, it's required by the law. —Orange County

Bilingual paraprofessionals complain about professional development, saying that it is typically in English, even when Spanish (or another language) may be more effective or relevant; and that meaningful topics are more likely to be offered to teachers than to paraprofessionals.

I had experience when I went to the PD, a specialist in literacy. They don't have too much resource for English/Spanish. Spanish teachers ask the person who is presenting why they don't have more resources in Spanish. —WDC

Something I really feel we need that we used to have, was bilingual specific trainings. Where all bilingual staff could just be together and have trainings together and talk about what's going on....They have taken so many staff developments away from us now, there is no time. There used to be specific bilingual, those were great, because again we used to share ideas, what's working great, what's not working, oh that's working over there maybe we can implement that at our building. It was great because Somalis were there, Hmong

were there, Spanish, spending time together, sharing resources, ideas. [Why did it stop?] The woman that had been doing it for years left. —Minneapolis

[The principal] had somebody come in from another organization and do a multi-cultural training for the teachers. And I had to ask for it the year before and I made a suggestion they contact this agency to do that and then he plans it on a day that we [the paraprofessionals] are not there? And I asked – it was recorded – and yet they haven't seen fit to let us watch that. You know what – we work with kids who speak at least 33 different languages. Every day. Just like the teachers do. I think we need to have that same training so we can be sensitive to the other cultures. But the principal, it never occurred to him to have it on a day when we could be there too. —Seattle

I believe it was district wide, there was a training not for the bilingual instructional assistants, but for the special ed instructional assistants, and it was training on special ed related themes that I think would still have been good training for us, working with (EL) kids. They were talking about autism spectrum disorder and some of the ways to work with kids that may have emotional challenges and things like that that I think would be helpful for anyone doing any type of educating or instruction. But we were not included in that. —Orange County

Bilingual paraprofessionals who lead small groups or whole class lessons get little to no training or preparation yet must be familiar with methods and content for many subjects and multiple grades.

They [the teachers] think that we have all the answers too. They see us working with the ELD [so they think] that we have all the knowledge, that they are going to learn from us how to teach ELD. When we have not been properly trained. —Orange County

One time, they had me be in the classroom because the teacher's kid got sick, and they were waiting for the sub. They had to finish this math lesson, and so I was in there. I was reading the direction and the students were reading with me. We were trying to figure it out. I'm not prepared for this, and you're just thrown into it. —Orange County

But there were some exceptions, districts that provide useful PD to paraprofessionals:

We actually have a speaker that comes in every Wednesday morning for 45 minutes, and we do anything from decoding to tracking to...depending....IAs do different things. So personally....I have a wealth of information because our school has made it a priority to assure that our IAs, they are doing a lot of pull

out [of students from the classroom]. They [paras] understand what they're doing and how they're going to do it. I know for a fact because I have other IAs in my school district that do not get that. It is very different. —Orange County

The principal was very nice in inviting all the AEs at [my school] to this training that is a program that all teachers have to apply in their classrooms. I can't remember the name of that program, but it's all about being in the classroom teaching with a lot of gestures, the hands, songs, charts, whiteboard, more visual teaching for the kids. We had a 2-hours training. Usually that training is 8 days. But we got it in 2 hours. It was very, very fast, intense, but at least all the AEs, we got an idea of what it is. —Minneapolis

We have district-wide professional development days that are designated so all of us, including teachers whether certified or classified, will do some kind of training. And then we have per school site training development days the principal can decide whatever training. And then as a district we have also afternoon classes that anybody can sign up and then take. And sometimes if there are seminars or workshops outside of a school district, it's up to the principal to approve it. You can seek out and then sign up. There's an online school-net sign up you can sign up and do. Some classes are only for teachers. Some are only for paras. Some will be open to anybody. —Orange County

FINDING 9.

Despite the obstacles, a sizeable number of bilingual paraprofessionals in the focus groups showed interest in becoming full-time, credentialed early childhood or Kindergarten teachers.

A variety of factors contribute to bilingual paraprofessionals' ability to overcome the challenges described in the previous findings. Firstly, many were professional teachers in their home countries, and most are college graduates. Virtually all indicated they enjoy working with young children. Several said they admire and want to emulate their cooperating teacher, and some are actively being encouraged by their cooperating teacher or principal to pursue a teaching credential. Finally, while the programs to help paraprofessionals transition to teacher may not be perfect, many would-be teachers are benefiting from them.

I would love to be a teacher. I don't want to sound cliché. I found I don't know why I didn't study education when I lived in Colombia. I am good at it. It is my passion. I love to teach my first language that's Spanish. I just haven't been able to get that paper that says [I'm a teacher]. —Minneapolis

My teacher does help me, and...if I ask her what is the reason you're telling me to do this, she'll explain it to me, support....Also, if I'm doing something extraordinary as a teacher assistant, she will go to tell my principal. —San Antonio

My first year was when they made sure all aides had a CDA. [The district] paid for it. I made sure I went to every class because I love what I do. My first year I got my CDA, and ever since that, she's like your next step is you make sure you go to school to continue your education. I was like ok, I need to go to [college]. At [my school], ever since I got my CDA, I've always been told from other teachers, 'You should be a teacher, I didn't know you weren't.' —WDC

That was something I mentioned to the principal. I said I would like to become a teacher; unfortunately I do not have the requirements necessary to get there. He said don't worry. I will get you through. He has been looking for programs. He lets me know. —WDC

I have a really good ELL team, they've been doing it 25 years, I was a new one, they just kind of helped me out, I feel I have all the support that I can with my team. —Seattle

On a personal level, bilingual paraprofessionals want to earn more money.

I think it is more a personal thing. I love what I do. I would like to stay working in a Spanish immersion school. But I want to grow up. I want to move up. I don't want to stay in the same position. And I feel, and it is, if I stay here, there's no more, I won't grow up. No other level. My salary also will be the same because you get to a point where you don't earn more money. It is more a personal thing. —Minneapolis

Some indicated embarrassment at the downward mobility they have experienced as a result of serving as a paraprofessional.

It's hard for me since I come from a higher career path, and in my country, being an assistant is someone who doesn't have to write and learn. So for my family back there, it's like, 'Oh, you're doing that after all your 10 years of study?' It's like, OMG, this is what you went to United States for? —WDC

That first time when I had my interview with some...staff, they were reading my papers and they told me, 'Do you know you are going to be the assistant?' And I said, 'Yes, I know.' 'It is ok for you?' And I said yes. I [do] not have my certification, my Texas license. So, I would know my place. —San Antonio

FINDING 10.

Still, some bilingual paraprofessionals ask themselves if it is worth it to become a teacher, and their answer is no.

In three of the focus groups (Washington, DC; Seattle; San Antonio) bilingual paraprofessionals spontaneously spoke about classroom teachers who are over-worked; stressed out by parents, students, and administration; or burned out from the burdens of excessive testing. We may earn low salaries, they told us, but as paraprofessionals we can “turn off” at the end of the day in a way that a classroom teacher cannot.

I am ok where I am right now. Even though a lot of the time I take the role of the teacher and everybody is like ‘Why don’t you become a teacher?’ I am like, ‘No, I am ok where I am.’ As a paraprofessional they don’t ask you many stuff, they don’t ask you to do this and do that. Paperwork, reports....Screaming at, yelling at. —WDC

I do like to work with kids. I enjoy myself, but then all the responsibilities that come with being a teacher, I don’t know. I am 50/50 maybe yes. —WDC

I would say they are good teachers, but some of them just seem way too burned out, stressed out, they seem they are just very angry and sometimes they don’t like their job because they are too stressed out by the kids. —Seattle

I was looking into the options, what it takes to [become] a certified teacher. For me it would be two more years, after school program, I could do that, [but] I don’t know if it is worth it. I like the teaching part of teaching but not the total stress teachers have. Really a mentally stressful job. —Seattle

Because I see the hoops that the teachers have to jump through. There’s always something more that the principal wants, another meeting, another thing. The state puts all these burdens on the teaching industry. And now the federal government is getting into it. I don’t want to jump through all those hoops. I like working one on one with the kids. I don’t want to stand in front of a classroom and deal with all of the behaviors and all of the things that the teachers have to do. It is not for me. —Seattle

I enjoy going home, not bringing anything with me. I can go home and disconnect from work, where they don’t. They have to continue working because that’s their reality. It is like a balance. I go home and I’m with my family 100% and my weekends are for myself. And that’s not for them. —San Antonio

But after I saw the teachers in the school district working so many hours, with so many pressures, parents, principals, students, behaviors, testing, all the things they need to, emails, papers. I said, no. At my age? I don't need that. And with my English? Somebody takes 30 minutes to make a writing, it takes me one hour. And I said, no, this is not for me. I prefer to find another work. —San Antonio

IV. OBSERVATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Tension between tapping local talent and recruiting from afar

In Washington, DC, and Minneapolis, bilingual paraprofessionals expressed concern about the practice of recruiting bilingual teachers from elsewhere (e.g., Spain, Puerto Rico) to teach in their district public schools. From their perspective, there seem to be many potentially qualified teachers in their own backyard, so what is the rationale for a district to go to the expense of recruiting them from far away?

Teachers [come] from other countries to teach, mostly from Spain. And they don't need the Praxis. When they come in, they come in to teach for 3 years, and they have 2 years to pass the Praxis. When they finish the second year, they have to do the Praxis. So they have two years to learn and pass the Praxis, but they have 3-year contract. After three year, they leaving. At the end they don't need the Praxis. Why is that? They make it different with us. We just have our degree. I have my BA in Spanish [but] we cannot do it without Praxis. —WDC

We need to be enrolled in a program at least to get a provisional license. If you are not enrolled you can't have this provisional license. So my point is they bring these wonderful people – I like them it is nothing personal with them – but why not invest in us? We are already working. We are already here. We know the district. We know the policies. We know the families. We know the culture. We know how the building works. We know the kids, and the families. It makes me curious why? Why do they do that? I am assuming it is a lot of money to bring those people from Spain. And besides, some of them, the contract will end in 3 years, they'll go back. —Minneapolis

Consider making exceptions for people who are already professionals

Could state certification/licensing requirements be softened for bilingual paraprofessionals who already have a college degree and teaching experience, along the same lines as they are softened for teachers from Spanish-speaking locales? Future

research may want to explore the tension between the need for flexibility while still maintaining high quality teaching.

Assessing knowledge and skill or English language proficiency

Many bilingual paraprofessionals in the focus groups felt that passing the Praxis (or similar test) in English was an insurmountable hurdle. Policymakers might ask: Do the instruments that states use in the process of licensing teachers assess true teaching abilities and competencies? Or do these bilingual paraprofessionals make a convincing argument, that the exam essentially tests their ability to read and write in English and not their true teaching capabilities?

Ensure that policies address the number of bilingual teachers *in the earliest grades*

We learned in the focus groups that not all bilingual paraprofessionals who are currently working in EC-3 classrooms are interested in becoming certified teachers in these grades; some would prefer to teach older children or move into administration or research positions. Any proposed policies or program should include a commitment clause to ensure participants would remain in the early grades.

Creating a narrower credential to focus on early childhood

Would the youngest ELL students be served by a narrowing in the range of grades included in the credential? Several teachers in the focus groups were certain that they would only want to teach the youngest children (3 and 4 years olds) so it seemed excessive to them – and a waste of their talent and energy – that they are required to prove knowledge of content in higher grades that they never intend to teach. (Note that we did not discuss in the focus groups the natural tension that districts and administrators face between staffing needs and high quality teaching.)

Valuing dual-language capability

In other professions, having the ability to fluently speak a language other than English might be highly valued and compensated. Is it conceivable that school districts could consider paying a differential to those who have fluency in a sought-after language?

V. SCREENER: BILINGUAL PARAPROFESSIONALS PRE SCHOOL THRU 3RD GRADE

Name of Candidate: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Hello. There will be a small group discussion with BILINGUAL PARAPROFESSIONALS on _____.
If you are interested and available, may I ask you a few questions to see if you are eligible to take part?

*[TO QUALIFY, CANDIDATES MUST SPEAK **ENGLISH** WELL ENOUGH TO COMMUNICATE PUBLICLY IN A FOCUS GROUP SETTING. RECRUIT NO MORE THAN 12 PARTICIPANTS.]*

1. Are you a paraprofessional (or a teacher's assistant) in a public school?

Yes () CONTINUE

No () TERMINATE (Thank you, that's all the questions we have.)

2. Are you assigned to one or more SPED students, or is your job something else?

Yes, assigned to SPED students () TERMINATE

Something else () CONTINUE

3. Other than English, what languages do you speak?

Spanish () CONTINUE

Other language () CONTINUE (specify _____)

English Only () TERMINATE (Thank you, that's all the questions we have.)

4. Do you work in a general education classroom?

Yes () CONTINUE

No () TERMINATE (Thank you, that's all the questions we have.)

5. What grade or grades do you work with?

Pre-School () CONTINUE

PreK () CONTINUE

Kindergarten () CONTINUE

1st () CONTINUE

2nd () CONTINUE

3rd () CONTINUE

4th grade or higher () TERMINATE (Thank you, that's all the questions we have.)

6. Stop me when I read your own highest level of schooling:

High school grad	()	TERMINATE (Thank you, that's all the questions we have.)
C.D.A.	()	TERMINATE (Thank you, that's all the questions we have.)
A.A.	()	CONTINUE
Taking courses for Bachelors degree	()	CONTINUE
Bachelors (BA/BS)	()	CONTINUE
Masters or higher	()	CONTINUE

[CONTINUE IF NO "TERMINATE" RESPONSES IN Q1-6 ABOVE.]

7. What is the name of your school?

[RECRUIT A MIX; MULTIPLE SCHOOLS SHOULD BE REPRESENTED.]

NAME OF SCHOOL: _____

8. I'm going to read you a list of responsibilities you may have during a typical day at school. Please tell me if this is something you have done in the past month, or not.

[MUST ANSWER "YES" TO AT LEAST ONE ITEM BELOW]

	<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>
a. Translating for students or teachers	()	()
b. Teaching a lesson to the entire class	()	()
c. Managing students in the classroom	()	()
d. Instructing/supporting small groups	()	()
e. Instructing/supporting individual students	()	()
f. Assessing or evaluating students	()	()

NEXT STEPS

Thank you for answering these questions. You will be contacted shortly to let you know if you have been selected to take part in the small group discussion on _____. If you are selected, a light meal will be provided, and you will receive \$100 as a thank you for participating. Space is limited, so please know that not every person who is interested will be selected. [CONFIRM PHONE/EMAIL]

VI. MODERATOR'S GUIDE: BILINGUAL PARAPROFESSIONALS

Introduction

Confidential; not representing your school or district; trying to understand the experiences of bilingual paraprofessionals – what you like about the job, the challenges you face, what your plans are for the future.

[We'll be talking in English, but if you feel you can express yourself better in Spanish, someone is here to help.]

Let's get to know one another a little bit. Do you recognize each other? Tell me a little bit about you:

- How long have you been a paraprofessional?
- What grades/ages do you teach?
- What language other than English is most common among the students in your school?

If I asked a parent what you do, what do you think s/he would say? What if I asked your classroom teacher? A student in your classroom? What would they say? How right or wrong are they – is it mostly misperception or do they have it right?

The job

Tell me a little bit about what you do – what's a typical day like for you at work? (Probe: assessing students, classroom management, individual instruction, lesson planning, small group instruction, translation, whole class instruction)

What are the 2 or 3 things you would say you spend the most time doing on a typical day?

(Probe: In general, which do you think you spend more time doing:

- Actually helping students learn/instruction
- Doing administrative work
- Classroom management

How satisfied are you with the balance/break down? What would you change, if anything? What would you say gets too much of your attention? Not enough attention?)

How do you know that you have actually helped a student to learn what they were supposed to (– how do you know when you are doing a good job)?

What's the hardest part about being a paraprofessional, the toughest challenge for you? What do you like most?

How many of you have a second job, something besides being a paraprofessional?

Relationship with teacher

Would you say that you mostly agree or mostly disagree with your classroom teacher when it comes to the best ways to teach kids? Tell me why.

To what extent do you see your role as the same or different from the role of the classroom teacher?

How much do you think classroom teachers rely on paraprofessionals in your school? What kinds of things does your classroom teacher rely on you for? Can you give me an example?

How much time do you spend talking with your classroom teacher about lessons or about the needs of individual students?

What kind of feedback do you get from your classroom teacher, if any, when it comes to your interactions with students? How helpful is it to you in being able to teach children, get them to learn? Would you say your lead teacher goes out of her way to help you succeed, doesn't care either way, or doesn't really help you at all – you're on your own?

Describe the evaluation process. Who evaluates you? How useful is it? How often have you gotten feedback that you were able to use? Can you give an example? What would you change about the evaluation process at your school?

Professional development & training

Let's talk a little bit about professional development or training. What kinds of PD/training have you gotten? How much did it help you? What topics did it cover? Are these the topics you are interested in? What topics would you like to see more or less of? [Probe: more focus on student instruction]

What kind of training do you think is absolutely essential for a PreK-3rd grade paraprofessional to have, and what things do you think are better off being learned "on the job"?

Goals for the future

What's the next step for you in your career? Will you continue as a paraprofessional? Become a certified teacher? Change fields altogether? Where do you see yourself in five years?

What appeals to you about becoming a certified teacher? [What would you like to know about it?]

How much does your principal and/or teacher encourage you to pursue teaching, if at all? What kind of information have they given you on the things you would need to do to become a full-time teacher yourself? Does their encouragement influence you either way?

[If gets no encouragement: Would you like it if your principal or teacher was encouraging you? Would it make a difference in your choices?]

If you wanted to become a classroom teacher yourself, what would you need to do? Take me through the process. [Probe: courses needed, certification, credits, alternative paths, foreign credential...]

Who have/would you go to for help in figuring it out? How much do you know about programs in your district that can help you earn a teaching degree?

Write down the one or two obstacles or things that you think would most get in your way if you were pursuing a teaching certificate. [Be sure to hear from everybody.] Which would you say are the biggest problems for you?

[Probe each one if it doesn't come up:

- financial
- familial
- academic
- linguistic
- bureaucratic]

What do you think would help you most -- or what do you think you personally would need to have in place -- in order to make it possible to go to school to become a fully certified classroom teacher in grades PreK-3?

Closing questions

What do you think are the benefits to having a paraprofessional in a PreK-3rd grade classroom? Should paraprofessionals be encouraged to become full-time licensed teachers? Why or why not?

Anything that I should have asked you about but didn't?