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Essential Components for Maximizing Paraprofessionals in the Special Education Field

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Abstract

The capstone project researched how paraprofessionals are being trained and monitored within one elementary school. The research was conducted through a survey sent to 20 paraprofessionals within an elementary level school, grades Kindergarten through 4th grade. There were 10 survey questions that focused on paraprofessionals training methods, paraprofessionals ability to implement interventions, paraprofessionals ability to support a variety of student needs, and how special education teachers can improve their ability to work with paraprofessionals in order to maximize students with disabilities outcomes. The survey results suggested focus areas as improvements in training methods, collaboration among the paraprofessional and special education teacher, and improvements in communication skills between the two educators.

Literature Review

Paraprofessionals

What is an educator? The definition of an educator is a person who provides instruction or education. Paraprofessionals are the bridge between a student's ability to access the inclusive classroom with the support needed for the individual to have successful outcomes. For students with disabilities, without the use of paraprofessionals in the inclusive classroom, the individual's ability to access and be successful decreases. With the use of a paraprofessional in the inclusive classroom, individuals with disabilities are more apt to gain friendships, independence, observe peer role modeling, and meet grade level academic expectations. The special education teachers role(s) include designing students IEP, differentiating curriculum, and providing modifications and adaptations (Causton et al.). The paraprofessional's role(s) include “supporting students academically, socially, and behaviorally in the school community” (Causton et al., page 74). The literature also states their role(s) include “reviewing and reinforcing instruction under the directions of special education teachers” (Causton et al., page 74). Special education teachers are responsible for identifying the needs of students, writing/gaining the needed materials for modifications, training, and monitoring the implementation of those modifications that are being used within the inclusive classroom by the paraprofessional(s). In order for paraprofessionals to implement a variety of modifications and carry out their job roles and responsibilities, the special education teacher(s) need to hold up their end. Research demonstrates there needs to be effective skills in communication, problem solving skills, and ongoing training opportunities for paraprofessionals for increased student outcomes and achievement.

Collaboration

Research has previously identified a variety of components that are needed when setting up a workplace environment that is high in collaborative practices. Collaboration is defined as “people working together toward common goals” (Solone et al., 2019, page 284). Research states the following components: parity, mutual goals, shared responsibility for outcomes, and synergy are important factors to implementing a collaborative setting (Solone et al., 2019). Collaborative practices are most effective when they are done throughout the entirety of the students’ team members. Team members might include the general education, special education teacher, parent(s)/guardian(s), student (over the age of 14), speech/language pathologist, occupational therapist, physical therapist, and/or district representatives. Parity is defined as each team member having equal and valued power when working together to support student learning. Mutual goals include the team members knowing and developing goal(s) that are based on one goal and outcome for the individual. Shared resources include team members using their individual expertise to work together to share what they have that will increase the students outcomes and learning. Shared responsibility for outcome includes being accountable for your individual responsibilities that in turn affect the students outcomes in the school setting. Lastly, synergy includes the team being able to set up an environment that is built around effective problem solving step(s) when conflicts arise.

Professional Development

Research states that “without strong training, paraprofessional support does not appear to improve the learning outcomes of students with disabilities and may actually hinder them” (Brock et al., 2015, page 2). When special education staff members do not provide adequate and ongoing training to paraprofessionals that may negatively impact our student outcomes. If staff members work together to provide a variety of training opportunities this will increase and

maximize the skill of the paraprofessionals who are working with students directly each day. Research states that three common components include modeling, accountability, and performance feedback (Brock et al., 2015). The component of modeling can look a few different ways depending on the preferences of the paraprofessional that you are working with. Modeling can be done in person, with/without a student, and/or modeling through pre-recorded videos. Through modeling the special education teacher is clearly outlining and showing how the intervention should be done when working with a student. The next component is accountability. This is the practice of setting up a consistent routine when monitoring to determine if intervention is being implemented with fidelity by the paraprofessional. The last component is performance feedback. This often includes setting up a routine to provide paraprofessionals with feedback on strengths and areas of improvement when implementing the intervention in the future. The three components allow for special education teachers and paraprofessionals the opportunities to grow professionally and work collaboratively to increase student outcomes.

Project Inspiration

Often in the teacher preparation programs, there is little to no focus content that is based upon the theme of working and collaborating with paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals play a vital and key role in the success and access to the educational setting for students with disabilities. Paraprofessionals are composed of individuals with a diverse background, history, education experience, strengths, and knowledge of evidence based practices that are carried out across school districts in the United States.

My personal experience when working with paraprofessionals has had its ups and downs throughout my career. Working with paraprofessionals is a partnership between the two team members (teacher and paraprofessionals) due to their direct impact on student outcomes. When

working with peer educators, it is taught and strived upon with the ideas of collaboration, communication, conflict/resolution, and so many other key components. In the last two years, I have had the career opportunity to work in a co-taught kindergarten classroom. The co-taught classroom consisted of a general education teacher, special education teacher, and paraprofessional. Over the last two years I, as well as the building administration, have pointed out how the co-taught team has grown in ways that are empowering the paraprofessionals roles and responsibilities. The empowerment has come through a focus and attention to the communication, collaboration, training, and being able to resolve daily conflicts effectively. The attention and focus on these areas have increased the paraprofessionals attitude, self directed problem solving, self directed student interactions, and the overall attendance when coming to work.

Survey Results

For this portion of the project I developed a survey to gain paraprofessionals' input in regards to working with special education teachers. The survey consisted of 10 questions that were designed to gain feedback about a variety of topic such as how long they have been working as a paraprofessional, personal strengths, did they have prior training, their confidence in implementing interventions in the core areas, supporting student needs in the core areas, and what is one improvement that could be made in regards to special education teachers working with paraprofessionals. The survey was sent to each individual paraprofessional and responses were recorded anonymously. The survey was sent to the 20 paraprofessionals that work within the building I currently work at. Out of the 20 paraprofessionals who received the survey, 11 responses were recorded, with a 55% participation rate.

Out of the 11 responses, 1 para has been working in the field for 1-2 years, 1 has been working for 3-4 years, 2 have been working for 5-6 years, and 7 have been working for 7+ years. A variety of strengths were reported from the participants which included listening skills, patience, knowledge, compassion, humor, calm, easy going, expressing love, helping them learn, understanding of diverse home life/backgrounds, flexible, effective communication, and task management. Out of the participants, only 1 indicated “yes” to having prior training. The prior training was connected to their personal life and the individual independently sought out resources and training to support the family member. The other 9 participants indicated not having no prior training before working in the school system.

The last question on the survey was “When working with special education staff, how might one improve collaboration, effective communication skills and/or conflict resolution in the workplace?” Based on the open ended survey responses the key components for improvement included increased collaboration, communication, and respectful relationships in the workplace. The need for further training and implementation of continued professional developments were indicated through 90% of the participants indicating that they did not have prior training before working in the school systems.

Survey Questions

Question #4: I feel prepared to support students in the following area(s)... (Literacy, Mathematics, Social/Emotional Skills, and Behavioral Skills).

Results

The rating scale for this survey question was strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. In the content area of literacy, the following results were recorded; one participant under “disagree,” two participants under “neutral,” six participants under “agree,”

two under “strongly agree.” In the content area of mathematics, the following results were recorded; one participant under “disagree,” one under “neutral,” seven under “agree,” and 2 under “strongly agree.” In the content area of social/emotional skills, the following results were recorded; one participant under “disagree,” two under “neutral,” four under “agree,” and four under “strongly agree.” In the content area of behavioral skills, the following results were recorded; two participants under “strongly disagree,” three under “neutral,” four under “agree,” and two under “strongly agree.”

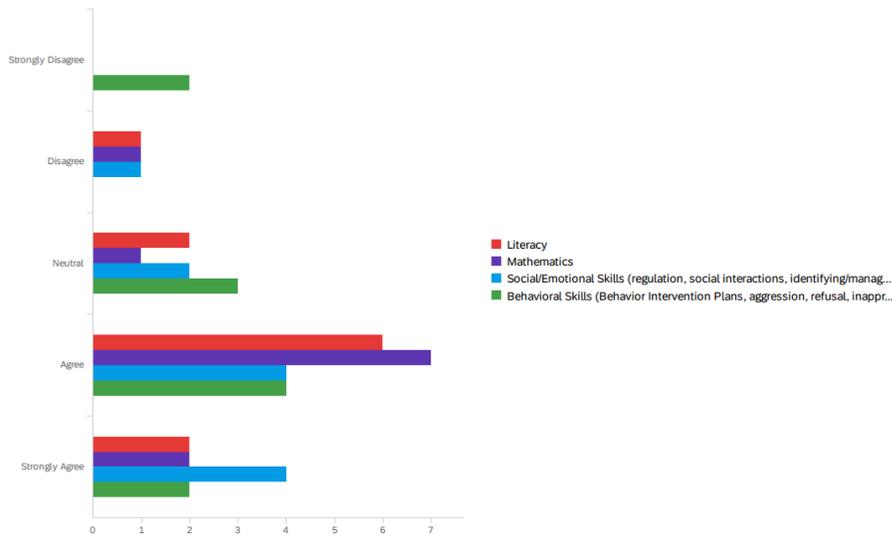
Connections to Literature

Research collected indicated that the need for initial and continued training for all paraprofessionals to be successful in supporting the daily outcomes for students who receive specialized instruction. Through the survey question #3, “Did you receive paraprofessional training prior to working in the school setting?” It was indicated that 9 out of the 10, 90% of participants, did not have training prior to working at the school. The data from the question below shows that there are multiple areas that are needed in order to give paraprofessionals tools to be successful in supporting students with disabilities. One of the training methods researched was teacher-delivered training (Walker et al., 2019). The article indicated that out of all of the school personnel paraprofessionals are typically the least prepared (Walker et al., 2019). One way special education teachers can change the outcome of paraprofessional readiness is through this training model. Some of the key components of this training model include coaching and performance feedback (Walker et al., 2019). Coaching and feedback can be provided through a variety of ways and this method allows for special education teachers to meet with paraprofessionals in person to model how they would implement a given intervention, ask questions, and allow for feedback to be provided to the individual. This is one method of closing

the gap between paraprofessionals being prepared to implement a variety of needs that a student may have within the four content areas.

Table 1

Question 4



Question #5: I feel prepared to implement the required accommodations/modifications...

(Literacy, Mathematics, Social/Emotional Skills, and Behavioral Skills).

Results

The rating scale for this survey question included strong disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. In the content area of literacy the following results were recorded; one participant under “disagree,” six under “agree,” and four under “strongly agree.” In the content area of mathematics the following results were recorded; one participant under “disagree,” seven under “agree,” and three under “strongly agree.” In the content area of social/emotional learning the following results were recorded; two participants under “neutral,” seven under “agree,” and two under “strongly agree.” In the content area of behavioral skills the following results were

recorded; one participant under “strongly disagree,” four under “neutral,” three under “agree,” and three under “strongly agree.”

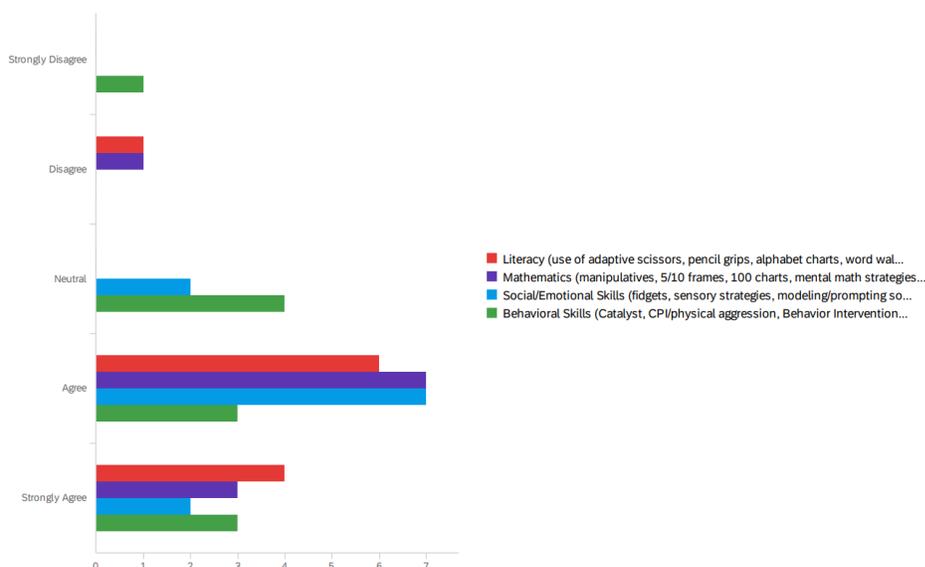
Connections to Literature

Research indicated that paraprofessionals when surveyed are extremely interested in additional training. Research also states that without strong training, paraprofessional support does not appear to improve the learning outcomes of students with disabilities and may actually hinder them (Brock et al., 2015, page 2). Throughout my personal career, observations in the workplace, and communication throughout the special education department has supported these statements. It is evident through observations in the school setting that when the paraprofessionals are not provided the needed training and continued support, student outcomes in the content areas are reduced. At times it has demonstrated the further process of creating students who are dependent on another adult to be successful. When the paraprofessional is not trained on how to support students with the use of interventions, modeling, social interactions, functioning independently, and management of behaviors it gives students the power to self monitor. When we teach and provide opportunities for students to independently practice self monitoring skills in all content areas, it allows students to be independent and to identify their personal body language. When paraprofessionals are not properly trained, they may assist quickly, use an increased amount of verbal language, provide students with answers versus practice problem solving through scaffolding support, and overall increase a child's ability to be independent. Within research, three components have been identified to support the consistent training of paraprofessionals. The first component is modeling, which is using clear communication and visual representation on how to implement a given intervention (Brock et al., 2015). The next component is accountability, which means that you as a special education

teacher are observing and checking in with the paraprofessional to ensure they are implementing the intervention (Brock et al., 2015). The last component is performance feedback, which means you as the special education teacher are intentionally planning time to set aside where you are able to give verbal correction and celebrations to the paraprofessional. Examples of the use of modeling can be live or with video. Performance feedback should be given through verbal and visual representation, offering feedback to the paraprofessional on what to do in the future implementation. This provides the support for the adults to identify the corrections and celebrations. With the use and implementation of these components, special education teachers can increase the paraprofessionals' ability to implement a variety of interventions and learn to self direct what they can do next time to increase the students' success.

Table 2

Question 5



Question #6: What area(s) do you feel you need additional and/or refreshment training... (Literacy, Mathematics, Social/Emotional Skills, and Behavioral Skills).

Results

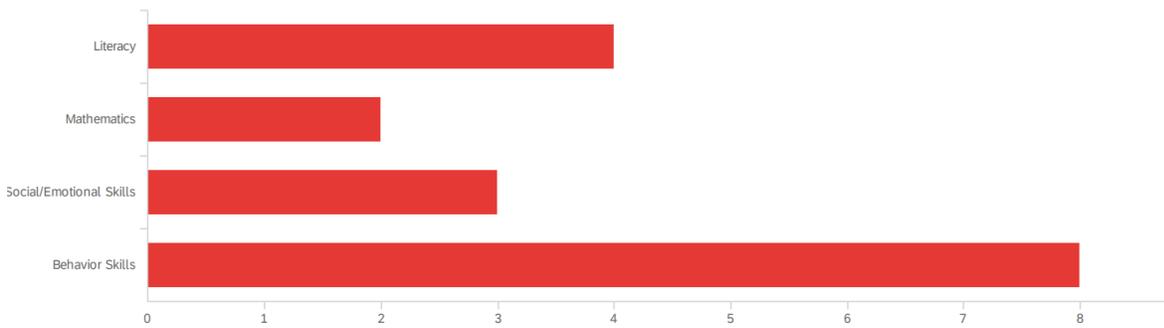
This survey question did not have a scale rating and was designed for participants to mark one or more areas they personally feel they are in need of additional training in regards to the content areas. Four participants indicated a need in the area of literacy. Two indicated a need in the area of mathematics. Three indicated a need in the area of social/emotional skills. Lastly, eight indicated a need in the area of behavioral skills.

Connections to Literature

It is important for special education teachers to collaborate with paraprofessionals in order to identify areas of further needed training. A part of collaboration includes an individual's ability to communicate with another. Research states open communication is needed in developing a collaborative climate (Hernandez, 2013). Additionally research states collaborative practices include professional expertise, efficacy of the collaborators, and interpersonal skills (Hernandez, 2013). When the special education teacher and paraprofessional have a relationship that has a strong base for communication, values each other's strengths, efficient use of each other's, effective interpersonal, and increased variety of positive outcomes will happen. Positive outcomes may include but are not limited to, increased student success, honest, open, trusting relationships, work efficiently, increased use of individual strengths, and the ability for a paraprofessional to have a greater report of what they need for training from a special education teacher.

Table 3

Question 6



**Question #7: I feel confident in my abilities to implement the following intervention(s)...
(Duration Maps, Redirecting/Prompting, Picture Schedule, First/Next/Then Visual, Assistive Technology Device, and Catalyst Strategies).**

Results

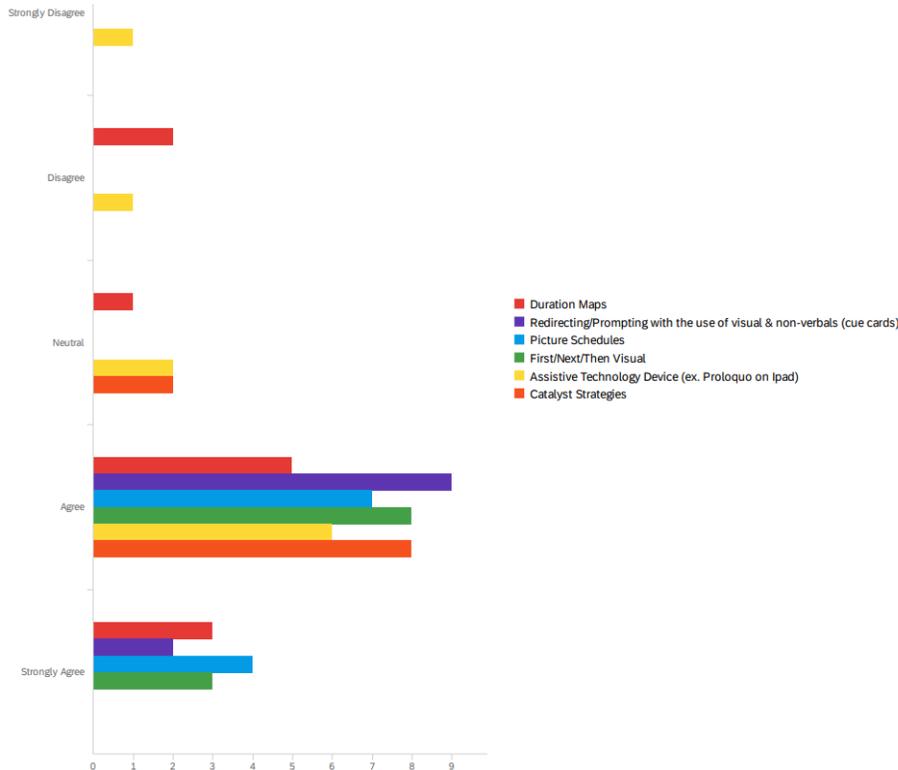
The following question asked about the implementation of the interventions that are most commonly used and asked of paraprofessionals to use when supporting students in the school setting. The rating scale is strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. In regards to the implementation of duration maps; two participants were under “disagree,” one under “neutral,” five under “agree,” and three under “strongly agree.” In regards to the implementation of redirecting/prompting with use of visuals and nonverbal signals; nine participants were under “agree” and two were under “strongly agree.” In regards to the implementation of picture schedules; seven participants were under “agree” and four were under “strongly agree.” In regards to the implementation of first/next/then visuals; eight participants were under “agree” and three were under “strongly agree.” In regards to the implementation of an assistive technology device; one participant was under “strongly disagree,” one under “disagree,” two under “neutral,” and six under “agree.” In regards to the implementation of Catalyst strategies; two participants were under “neutral” and eight under “agree.”

Connections to Literature

Interventions, such as those listed in the survey, are often used within a school system and are commonly taught to special education teachers during their teacher training but not taught to paraprofessionals. Research states that common roots of collaboration include consultation, collegiality, cooperation, and collaborative mentoring (Goulet et al., 2003). In order for special education teachers to provide the training to implement interventions, it may require the use of collaboration. Consultation refers to the ability for team members to create a space that allows for individual(s) to share their strengths, effective communication skills, and listening skills. Collegiality refers to each team member understanding their role and responsibilities. This also includes individual team members' strengths and skills are valued. Cooperation is referred to as setting time aside to understand each other so that at the end of the day the team's goal is one that is developed and carried out together. Lastly collaborative mentoring refers to the ability to work with one another and ultimately evolving as a collaborative team by being able to negotiate, share responsibilities, share roles, understand individual experiences, share thoughts/ideas, and being able to mentor one another towards reaching a common goal. When special education teachers and paraprofessionals work together through collaborative practices it allows for workplace relationships in which one another's strengths and ideas are used to implement interventions that work for a student. If the teacher and paraprofessional work together as a team to implement and understand the use of a variety of interventions, student outcomes and successes are increased.

Table 4

Question 7



Question #8: What method(s) of professional development do you prefer?

Results

This survey question did not include a scaled response but allowed for participants to indicate one or more methods of training they prefer. The training methods provided included 3rd party training (ex. Infinitec online), video modeling, in-person modeling, and whole group session. There was also a space for participants to share if they had another preferred method. Two indicated the preference of 3rd party training, one indicated video modeling, six indicated in-person modeling, and eight indicated whole group sessions.

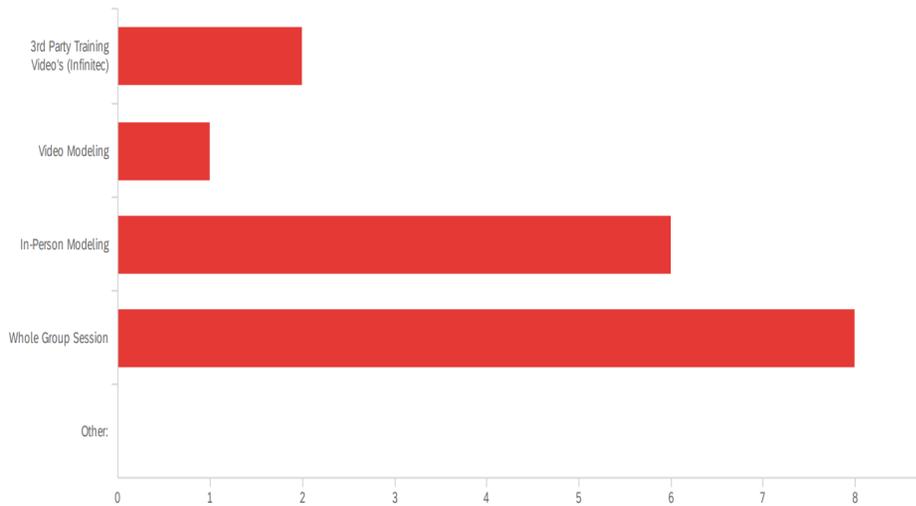
Connections to Literature

When special education teachers are aware of the processes, procedures, and practices their school implements, they can make changes that allow for a more open communication style. Research has shown that the use of shared resources and synergy increases overall student

outcomes and achievement due to the paraprofessionals having the tools and training to carry out job responsibilities (Soline et al., 2019). Special education teachers can set up training and consistent communication methods that increase the ability to connect with others and provide time/space to problem solve student challenges. When there are consistent training opportunities for paraprofessionals to attend with the use of a variety of communication models increases the participation and feelings of being valued. When there are a variety of communication models used, each individual's learning style or preference of the style is utilized. During training opportunities, one can create a collaborative space where paraprofessionals and general education teachers can share the resources that they have used in the past or are currently using. Having a space to share resources increases the use of time and efficiency. Sharing of resources can also include paper copies/visual representations, knowledge, experiences, and/or materials. Synergy can be referred to as the use of problem solving strategies. Through training models and opportunities, it allows for paraprofessionals and special education teachers to have time to communicate with each other about what problems they are currently facing with students. When current problems are identified the team can work together to walk through different interventions. The training models can be the start of setting up the consistent and deliberate time to collaborate. Increased training opportunities allows for increased student outcomes, decreased frustration among team members, and the sense of belonging when individuals feel they are being heard/valued.

Table 5

Question 8



Question #9: I feel appreciated, valued, and have a collaborative role in supporting students in the general education setting when working with... (Special Education Teachers and General Education Teachers).

Results

This survey question was scaled; strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. In regards to paraprofessionals working with special education teachers the following information was collected. One participant indicated “disagree,” five indicated “neutral,” two indicated “agree,” and three indicated “strongly agree.” In regards to paraprofessionals working with general education teachers the following information was collected. One participant indicated “disagree,” six indicated “neutral,” two indicated “agree,” and two indicated “strongly agree.”

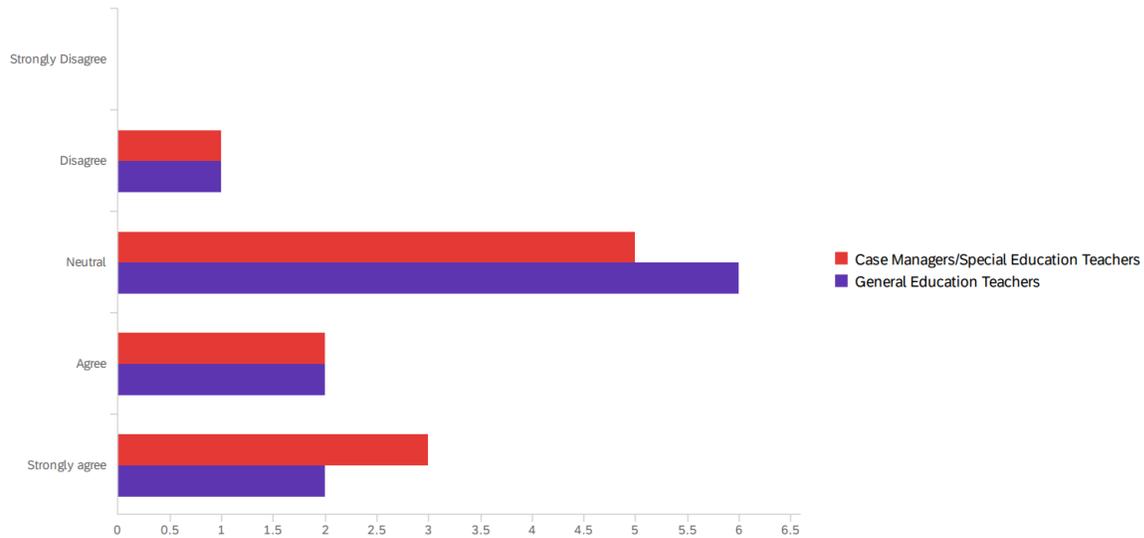
Connections to Literature

In order for an employee to perform to their best ability in the workplace they need to feel they are valued, appreciated, heard, and have relationships with their coworkers that are built on trust and respect for one another. Those components are needed in any and every workplace

but are essential in regards to a school system. Paraprofessionals play an important role in student outcomes and success. If they do not feel workplaces value them then student outcomes will be affected. Research states special educators, who have unclear roles in the classroom, can make paraprofessionals feel devalued or perceived as glorified assistants (Causton et al.). Research identifies a variety of roles that paraprofessionals have within the school setting. These include but are not limited to, supporting students academically, socially, and behaviorally, provide reinforcement, lead a station, and/or lead a read aloud (Causton et al.). In order for paraprofessionals to complete the many roles and responsibilities, special education and general education teachers need to ensure they are using collaboration, communication, and a variety of training practices. When each team member is accountable for their part, together, the team can create a work environment that is built on all of the components discussed within this literature review. Most importantly, the efforts will increase student success and outcomes, after all that is what an educator does. An educator is not defined by a degree one holds but by someone who wants and supports a child's ability to be successful in their everyday lives and grow up to be an active member in society.

Table 6

Question 9



Plan of Action Steps

Results

The last survey question leads this literature review and capstone project into my individual action steps that I can take as a special education teacher when working alongside paraprofessionals. The final survey question was “When working with special education staff, how might one improve collaboration, effective communication skills and/or conflict resolution in the workplace?”

The following are a few key points that stood out to me that tie into my action steps moving forward:

“I think as long as we can have an open communication on things we need to work on to make things go smoother in the workplace would be great.”

“More collaborative time during the day.”

“Have respect when wanting help from others.”

“Open communication to the fullest.”

“By allowing all those who are involved in the students progression and success to be included in all communication and progress monitoring.”

“Understanding that we all have different amounts of training and as a professional not talking down to us. Having us para’s come together monthly for meetings to talk about strategies or things that are working/not working would be wonderful. It seems sometimes we are left out of important conversations and if we were all included we could all be on the same page. We could effectively work together and communicate more to understand what is needed/expected.”

“Being open to new suggestions, working collaboratively, honest and open communication.”

I have identified three personal action steps that I want to intentionally plan to implement within the following academic school year. These implementations can be done independently or collaboratively with my special education team at my school. We all can be more intentional about how we are supporting our paraprofessionals and building relationships with them. Using the survey responses from paraprofessionals that work within my building allows for me to take action steps beyond myself and collaborate with my special education team about how we can each take steps to maximize our paraprofessionals within the school setting.

Action Step #1: Monthly Collaborative Meeting(s)

My action steps include setting up monthly paraprofessional “check-ins.” These “check-ins” can be both outlined by picking an intervention to review and/or time set where paraprofessionals feel they can come to the meeting to gain ideas. If we are not reviewing an intervention, we may open the floor to questions. It can be space and time where paraprofessionals can ask their coworkers as well as special education teachers, to share resources and ideas for moving forward when the situation arises again.

Action Step #2: Professional Development Opportunities

The next action step I plan to implement is being intentional and reaching out to my department members within my district to communicate the common themes. The themes within the survey include being intentional when hiring paraprofessionals and ensuring that we have time to collaborate with paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals are often given tasks that are busy work. I plan to work with department members to increase our intentionality and use every chance we get to set up training opportunities to increase student outcomes.

Action Step #3: Ongoing Training, Modeling, and Feedback

The last action step I plan to implement is ensuring that I am building time within my schedule to check in with paraprofessionals within the classroom setting. This will help me develop the needs of paraprofessionals for training, modeling, providing feedback, and to show them that I am available. I need to be intentional about being available in the classroom so if paraprofessionals have questions, I can model, observe, and provide feedback. This could be done through the arrival time in the mornings, during classroom morning meetings, during student recess, and/or student lunch times. These action steps are ways that I can increase my collaboration, communication, and overall workplace relationships with paraprofessionals within the school setting.

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