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Paraprofessionals in the School Setting: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Teachers and paraprofessionals are partners in education, working together to provide the best educational experience possible for each child. Biggs et al. state “fostering and maintaining strong collaborative relationships are critically important for paraprofessionals and special education teachers working together to provide a high-quality education for students with severe disabilities” (2016, p. 152). It is crucial that paraprofessionals are offered training and taught strategies and techniques to implement and support diverse students in the classroom (Patterson, 2016).

In the 1950's, paraprofessionals were first added to the classroom as a way to provide teachers with more planning time and they performed mostly clerical duties (Villa et al., 2018). Between the 1970's and 2000's the duties of paraprofessionals transformed into more instructional roles and they have taken on more of a supportive role for students with disabilities and work in more inclusive classrooms. Today, paraprofessionals are expected to perform a variety of duties in the classroom and are spread thin throughout the school building in order to “fill gaps” out of necessity, but the training and methods to prepare paraprofessionals for these evolving roles have not changed.

Common concerns regarding these ever-changing roles have been highlighted by paraprofessionals across the public school settings including: a lack of administrative support, the need for mentorship programs, increased training opportunities and more opportunities for collaboration (Biggs et al. (2018). Throughout these articles and journals, there is a clear need for more training opportunities, enhanced communication and collaboration strategies and clearly laid out expectations.

This project consisted of a literature review that examined the research based around common themes of the expectations, roles and responsibilities of

paraprofessionals; the importance of collaboration in the classroom, and the immense need for professional development for paraprofessionals. Based on the findings from this literature review and our collective teaching experiences at two different rural schools, the project also consisted of the creation of a website specifically designed for paraprofessionals. It provides a culmination of resources, information, and training guides as a way to help paraprofessionals feel supported in their roles in the classroom.

Introduction

Paraprofessionals provide integral support to the learning and day-to-day routine of students with diverse needs. Seeley et al. states that “they {paraprofessionals} add another layer of support to the classroom, allowing students to have more opportunities for one-on-one support in the everchanging classroom environment where the push for inclusion is more important than ever” (2020, pg. 50). Paraprofessionals are heavily relied upon in the school setting to provide guidance, communication, instruction and interventions, behavior management, and even healthcare support. Studies (Austin, 2013; Douglas et al., 2016; Ramos, 2017) related to paraprofessionals in the public school setting have found that a high percentage of these individuals feel undertrained and underprepared to carry out their specified duties (Ramos, 2017). Giangreco and Broer (2012) suggest that the roles of paraprofessionals have steadily expanded to include teacher-type activities (e.g., planning, modifying curriculum, instructing), yet their roles remain unclear. Are they hired for clerical support, to ensure students receive accommodations and modifications, or as co-teachers? Some paraprofessionals are left to make daily curricular and instructional decisions without the benefit of appropriate training, planning, or supervision from qualified professionals. Additionally, Austin points out that many students with disabilities, specifically those needing 1:1 support often spend the majority of their instructional day with paraprofessionals (2013, pg. 27).

In order for paraprofessionals to be able to effectively perform their assigned duties, the roles and responsibilities specific to the assigned position should be clearly explained, collaboration with the classroom teacher should be encouraged and training and professional development opportunities should be made available. The following sections of this literature review highlight these specific topics while the accompanying website provides paraprofessionals with the necessary tools.

Roles and Responsibilities of the Paraprofessional

Giangreco and Broer (2012) state that the specific role of the paraprofessional in the classroom needs to be determined and conveyed to all parties. For example, is the role of the paraprofessional to provide one-to-one support or class-wide support? Are there expectations to support student personal care or is the role to provide instructional support? Those roles should be determined with a “student first” mindset (Biggs et al., 2016) while following specific district policy. This means that the decisions being made, the roles being assigned, and the overall expectations of the paraprofessionals should be made with the best interests of the students in mind. Paraprofessionals are in the classroom, primarily, as a way to support the unique needs of the students and their duties should reflect as much.

The roles of a paraprofessional tend to change often (as much as weekly....) and the expectations are unclear, however there is some consistency among roles and duties that may be performed in the classroom (Austin, 2013; Douglas et al., 2016; Ramos, 2017).

These are highlighted by Table 1.

- Work with individuals and small groups of students to reinforce instruction with and without direct supervision;
- provide inclusion services as defined in the IEP;
- assist the teacher in charting or collecting data;
- carry out activities designed by the teacher;
- work with the teacher to create classroom schedules and modify them when needed;
- prompt students during instruction;
- supervise students during transition;

- and carry out behavioral or instructional interventions

Table 1. Common Roles and Duties of Paraprofessionals (Douglas et al., 2016).

School districts need to clarify the range of responsibilities and job descriptions of paraprofessionals. In a study from Karen. B Patterson, twenty-two paraprofessionals were interviewed using a semistructured interview guide to establish their understanding of their roles, responsibilities, teacher expectations, training needs, and challenges they experienced while working with others. Patterson's findings from this study indicate that paraprofessionals tend to assume high levels of responsibility for managing the academic and behavioral needs for all students (2016, pg. 2). Patterson states that as the roles and expectations of paraprofessionals rapidly changes, the overwhelming challenge is to identify the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals while providing appropriate services successfully in inclusive classrooms in a way that is beneficial for all involved (2016, pg. 4). Paraprofessionals should explicitly be given their roles and responsibilities upon hire, however as their duties change throughout the school year, prior communication should come from administration. Many studies (Patterson, 2016; Ramos, 2017; Austin, 2013) specify a need for regular meetings (with paraprofessionals, educators, and administration), evaluations, and times to "check-in" with supervisors in order to ensure that all individuals are on the same page and have the opportunity to have any questions answered and concerns heard. Paraprofessionals indicate the need for "commensurate training and supervision, particularly for placement in settings where they have had no previous experience" (Patterson, 2016).

Collaboration in the Classroom

The fact that the practice of Collaboration is included in the Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) list of high-leverage practices (HLPs) highlights its importance as an essential skill for teachers and individuals working with students to utilize in the classroom (cite year). Friend and Cook (2016) define collaboration as, "...direct interaction between two co-equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work toward a common goal" (p. 5). Often this collaboration is between grade-level educators, a general education and a special education teacher. The value of collaboration between professionals can be found in that it "allows for varied expertise and perspectives about a student to be shared among those responsible for the student's learning and well-being" (CEC, 2017, pg. 5). This collective expertise provides collaborators with a more comprehensive understanding of each student's needs, which can be used to more effectively plan and implement instruction and services (McLeskey, 2017).

Teacher and paraprofessional collaboration plays an important part in the daily functioning of classrooms serving students with academic, social, emotional and behavioral disorders. According to Locke et al., there are many beneficial outcomes to paraprofessional-teacher collaboration in the classroom. These outcomes include effective communication, consistency in the classroom, a means of providing proactive measures that minimize conflict, building rapport, trust, respect, and relationships, an increased feeling of value in the classroom, and better support for students' learning, behavior, and engagement (2016). Unfortunately, few training opportunities are provided to teachers and paraprofessionals to collaborate in the classroom setting (Barnes et al., 2021). Opportunities, such as time to learn about the characteristics of successful collaboration, a personal inventory of their personal collaboration style, backgrounds and areas of strength they bring to the classroom, and time to for a paraprofessional and special education

teacher to share this information, can be valuable to any educator pairing, yet it is rare that time or resources are provided when the pairing is that of a paraprofessional and educator (Brown et al, 2014). Successful teacher-paraeducator teams are built on a strong foundation of understanding their roles and responsibilities within the team. Problems can arise when roles are unclear or assumptions are made about who is supposed to do what regarding lessons, students, and parents, according to Dr. Marilyn Likins, executive director of the National Resource Center for Paraeducators based at Utah State University. Schools that have found time and opportunities for this beginning collaboration to take place have specific training available to paraeducators and will seek out more opportunities, provide direct supervision and frequent feedback, have clear roles and responsibilities, and are aware of alternatives to the use paraprofessionals in order to prevent burnout and improve retention (Austin, 2013).

Specific tips and strategies to facilitate collaboration between an educator and a paraprofessional are highlighted in the following section.

Collaboration Routines. As much as possible the tasks, routines, and interactions assigned to paraprofessionals should capitalize on their experiences and strengths as well as be tailored to their specific work style. This information can be gathered through different interviews, questionnaires and conversations - these are often done at the time of hiring. Biggs et al., recommends assessing the specific collaboration style of the paraprofessionals in the school setting. Through these assessments information can be gathered about the amount of structure and support needed, the preferred type and format of feedback, and the best way to deal with conflict. This also allows for individuals to use their strengths, background, experiences, hobbies, interests, and goals to better connect with and support the students and teacher they are working with (Biggs et al., 2016).

To enhance the effectiveness of collaboration in the classroom, a sense of belonging must be built (Biggs et al., 2016). This study found that it is beneficial for paraprofessionals to have a separate desk or work area. A mailbox, separate supplies and work materials should be provided. It is important that paraprofessionals have a consistent and clear schedule and have access to any necessary student information (i.e. grades homework, IEP snapshots, behavior plans, health plans). Additionally, paraprofessionals should have access to lesson plans and activities. The classroom routines should be shared explicitly to ensure consistency and information about expectations of when there is a substitute teacher should be provided. It is also important that the paraprofessional shares their plans for a substitute paraprofessional.

Lastly, feedback is crucial. Brown et al. states that performance feedback is an effective way to support paraprofessionals in an inclusive classroom (2014). Through observations, evaluations, and general feedback paraprofessionals should be able to grow in the classroom. Teachers should use specific wording and examples when explaining tasks and making requests. It is important for teachers and paraprofessionals to work together to structure communication by clarifying non-negotiables, carving out times to meet, and using communication routines. Through frequent feedback (in regard to both positive and areas for improvement) paraprofessionals will be able to seek out areas they need support in and determine what types of professional development courses would be most beneficial to them (Austin, 2013).

The Need for Professional Development

Existing literature suggests that special education teachers receive very little training, if at all, regarding supervising paraprofessionals during pre-service learning (Douglas et al., 2016; Ghery & York-Barr, 2017; Giangreco et al., 2013). Also, many paraprofessionals do

not receive continuous training opportunities throughout their career to better understand job tasks that are asked of them or to increase their knowledge of students with disabilities (Austin, 2013; Douglas et al., 2016; Ramos, 2017). Ramos (2017) distributed a survey to paraprofessionals to determine their level of education and knowledge level and training opportunities within their position. The survey results found that 67 percent of the participants reported that they had an Associate's degree or less for their education. Educators are aware of this; in a study completed by Austin (2013), paraprofessionals were asked to rate themselves on their qualifications and training. This study interviewed over two dozen paraprofessionals, half of whom said they were untrained. They also reported that there were no training opportunities for them to attend in their district or community. Due to the lack of higher education requirements for the hiring of paraprofessionals, training opportunities are vital for continuous growth and understanding of working with students who have disabilities (Brown & Stanton-Chapman, 2014).

Quality Training Materials

It is essential to identify the areas in which training is critical for paraprofessionals, provide quality training, and set clear and consistent job expectations. Paraprofessionals need to have the necessary preparation to work with special education children who can require more attention or care. Patterson (2016, pg. 10) states that "professional development opportunities for paraprofessionals must include effective research based behavior management strategies, in addition to instructional strategies". There are a plethora of research-based quality online training materials, learning modules, and access to face-to-face and/or virtual training opportunities that are available to paraeducators, many of which are included on the accompanying website. Currently, many of these opportunities have to be sought out by paraprofessionals themselves, the purpose of this project is to emphasize

the importance of school districts providing these professionals with the opportunities for growth and improvement in order to be more effective in the classroom.

Supervision of Paraeducators

Another finding from the Brown & Stanton-Chapman (2014) study was that the training of the special education teacher on supervising paraprofessionals was key in how effective the participant was at completing their required duties. Themes of teachers having had little to no formal training in supervising paraprofessionals arose from a study designed to explore the practices demonstrated by special education teachers while supervising paraprofessionals (Douglas et al., 2016).

Final Thoughts

The purpose of this literature review was to determine what specific needs are for professional development and training opportunities for paraprofessionals based on the ever-changing roles of their job. It solidified our thinking that there is a lack of opportunity *and* quality training materials available for educators who supervise paraprofessionals. The [website](#) that accompanies this literature review is intended to be provided to newly hired paraprofessionals but also has professional development opportunities for veteran paraprofessionals. Additionally, it can help to define the roles and expectations of the position to other teachers and administrators in the public school setting. The themes of defining roles and responsibilities, collaboration, and professional development are addressed in the website. Additionally, the two researchers highlighted specific areas of need within their own school districts and addressed those needs. The website has sections dedicated to each of the main areas of concern specified by the plethora of journal articles and studies cited in this study.

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