

Supporting paraprofessionals in schools: Current research and practice

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Abstract

Paraprofessionals are increasingly hired in US schools to support the learning and behavior needs of students with or at risk for disabilities; despite receiving very limited professional development supports to enhance their skills in classrooms. The research base is lacking on effective paraprofessional professional development and intervention provision. This special issue is the first to showcase the current science and knowledge of such practices for paraprofessionals. The six articles included in the special issue offer the range and depth of work in this area. Two articles focus on practices of supervision and assessments for paraprofessionals and one article critically appraises the professional development research for paraprofessionals working with student with challenging behaviors. The final four articles examine the effectiveness of paraprofessional as implementers of interventions in classrooms. The studies in this special series offer insight and ideas on the next generation of paraprofessional research, practice and policy for the field. Finally, the special issue concludes with a commentary synthesizing the current work and offers “big ideas” for future development and validation initiatives.

KEYWORDS

paraprofessionals, professional development, research

1 | INTRODUCTION

School districts are increasingly hiring paraprofessionals to support general and special education teachers in meeting the complex and changing needs of students with and at risk for disabilities. There are approximately 1 million paraprofessionals serving students in U.S. schools (Carter et al., 2009; Dulfer, 2013; Scull & Winkler, 2011) with greater numbers of paraprofessionals in schools serving students from high-poverty communities (Hampden-Thompson et al., 2007). Recent reports indicate that paraprofessionals are being hired more than full-time special education teachers in 42 states in the US (U.S. Department of Education, 2009; 2017) and this trend is expected to substantially increase through 2020 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016).

School psychologists frequently work with paraprofessionals in tandem with classroom teachers to identify students' academic and behavioral needs, determine antecedent and environmental factors affecting learning, select interventions, and support and monitor intervention implementation across learning contexts. They call upon paraprofessionals frequently to implement and monitor academic and behavioral accommodations or interventions, especially for students with disabilities with unique learning and behavior needs. Given their ability to work individually with students, paraprofessionals maintain an important role in addressing the resource demands of the classroom.

Despite their increased presence and seminal role in the provision of student supports, paraprofessionals receive very limited training and inconsistent supervision to meet the needs of students at risk for or with disabilities (Brock & Carter, 2017; Giangreco et al., 2013).

Paraprofessionals often receive little guidance beyond informal support provided by classroom teachers, school psychologists, and other specialists with whom they work. On top of this, classroom teachers report limited preparation or in-service guidance in supervision of paraprofessionals (e.g., French, 2001; Giangreco et al., 2013).

While paraprofessionals provide necessary student supports, a lack of training and supervision may limit their impact. Based on a synthesis of research, Farrell et al. (2010) concluded that the practices of paraprofessionals who received inadequate supervision, training, and performance feedback had limited impact on student educational outcomes. Other research has found that paraprofessionals without effective supervision often provide unclear or inaccurate explanations to students, engage in limited monitoring of student understanding, and offer low-quality feedback to students which have been associated with poor achievement gains (e.g., Blatchford et al., 2009; Brock & Carter, 2017).

Given the paucity of resources afforded to paraprofessionals, the need to focus on paraprofessional professional development is great. Additional research on professional development approaches for promoting effective paraprofessional practices is warranted. The purpose of this special issue is to synthesize and advance research on paraprofessional training that results in effective support for students in schools.

2 | SCOPE OF THE CURRENT SPECIAL TOPIC SECTION

This special issue represents an important first step examining training and supports provided by school psychologists and other professionals to prepare paraprofessionals to support students at risk for or with disabilities in schools. To our knowledge, this special issue is the first to showcase the current research of effective paraprofessional professional development in schools. The primary purpose of this special issue is to present the current science and practices in professional development for paraprofessionals and the state of evidence for paraprofessionals' effects on the functioning of students at risk for or with disabilities in schools. The six articles in this special issue are led by scholars in education, special education, and school psychology and capture the scope and breadth of the current science. Collectively the articles provide a snapshot of current practices in preparation, supervision, and assessment of paraprofessionals, as well as an overview of

the state of science pertaining to paraprofessional practices and methods of support for paraprofessionals such as coaching.

2.1 | Current practices in paraprofessional supervision and assessment

Although training and supervision and ongoing assessment of paraprofessional practices is required to appropriately guide paraprofessionals' support for students in classrooms, there is only limited research exploring existing supervision and assessment practices. In a survey of faculty in teacher preparation programs throughout the United States, Sobek et al. (2020) describe a national online mixed-methods survey of teacher educators on preservice teacher training on methods of support for paraprofessionals. The authors examine the extent to which preservice training is provided, along with training barriers. In addition, they offer research-based suggestions for improving preparation programs, as well as directions for future research in this area.

Given the importance of assessment of paraprofessional practices to guide feedback and ongoing training and support needs, Lekwa and Reddy (in press) provide a systematic review of existing paraprofessional assessment approaches. They critically examine the availability and validity evidence of existing approaches. Based on the limited availability of existing tools they offer a series of recommendations for future measurement development, including suggested domains of focus, and validation.

2.2 | Research on professional development supports for paraprofessionals

Given paraprofessionals' role in managing student behavior and the importance of professional development to support the implementation of research-based practices, Reddy et al. (2020) report the results of a systematic review of the research on training for paraprofessionals who serve students with externalizing behavioral problems. The authors highlight strengths and weaknesses of extant research and paraprofessional professional development practices. They provide recommendations for advancing research on professional development with implications for practice.

2.3 | Research on effectiveness of paraprofessionals as interventionists

The next three articles in this special issue collectively help to identify the state of empirical research with respect to effectiveness of paraprofessionals as interventionists. Jones et al. (2020) report the results of a meta-analysis of 16 intervention studies with paraprofessionals as implementers of supplemental reading intervention. This review focuses on the overall effectiveness of paraprofessionals as implementers. In addition, it explores the areas in which paraprofessionals are most effective.

Brock and Anderson (2020) provide a systematic review of research on the efficacy of interventions implemented by paraprofessionals in support of students with developmental disabilities. In their review of the research, they highlight intervention training implemented by teachers. The article concludes with specific research-based recommendations for strategies to be used—ideally by teachers in the school—for the training of paraprofessionals.

Given the important role that paraprofessionals have in supporting students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Walker et al. (2020) offers a meta-analysis of single-case studies in which paraprofessionals implemented behavior interventions for students with ASD. They provide a descriptive analysis of participant and intervention characteristics, research design quality, and intervention effects across studies. The authors explore differences in outcomes based on educational settings and intervention group formats. They conclude with a discussion of implications for research and practice.

3 | IMPACT AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Finally, the commentary provided by Lane (in press) further contributes to the special issue by synthesizing the six articles and discussing “big ideas.” Lane offers recommendations for researchers, school personnel, and policy makers on paraprofessional training, supervision, and evaluation. Lane emphasizes the importance of ongoing study and implementation of strategies effective in the coaching and supervision of paraprofessionals by other education professionals such as teachers and school psychologists.

As Lane notes, taking stock of extant research on paraprofessional training and implementation is important for advancing policies and practices with the potential to make a meaningful impact on students. National policy and attention to the credentialing, training, and supervision of paraprofessionals increases the relevance and urgency of this special issue. It is our hope this special issue will help focus the field on the development and validation of effective professional development resources for paraprofessionals. Likewise, it is our goal that this special issue will stimulate new avenues of science, practice, and policy that enhance paraprofessional capacity, ultimately leading to improved achievement and social behavior for students with disabilities.

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