Optional ERIC Coversheet — Only for Use with U.S. Department of Education Grantee Submissions

This coversheet should be completed by grantees and added to the PDF of your submission if the information required in this form **is not included on the PDF to be submitted**.

INSTRUCTIONS

- Before beginning submission process, download this PDF coversheet if you will need to provide information not on the PDF.
- Fill in all fields—information in this form **must match** the information on the submitted PDF and add missing information.
- Attach completed coversheet to the PDF you will upload to ERIC [use Adobe Acrobat or other program to combine PDF files]—do not upload the coversheet as a separate document.
- Begin completing submission form at https://eric.ed.gov/submit/ and upload the full-text PDF with attached coversheet when indicated. Your full-text PDF will display in ERIC after the 12-month embargo period.

GRANTEE SUBMISSION REQUIRED FIELDS

Title of article, paper, or other content

Paraprofessionals' Perceptions of Job-Related Supports, Challenges, and Effectiveness.

All author name(s) and affiliations on PDF. If more than 6 names, ERIC will complete the list from the submitted PDF.

Last Name, First Name	Academic/Organizational Affiliation	ORCID ID
Fluhler, Sally	Vanderbilt University	0000-0001-5354-0447
Lemons, Christopher J.	Stanford University	0000-0001-8562-7846
Haddad, Yasmina E.	Vanderbilt University	0009-0002-7347-2829
Chauvin, Casey	Vanderbilt University	
Martin, Guy	Vanderbilt University	
LeJeune, Lauren	Vanderbilt University	0000-0001-5614-313X

Publication/Completion Date—(if *In Press,* enter year accepted or completed) 2022

Check type of content being submitted and complete one of the following in the box below:

- ☐ If article: Name of journal, volume, and issue number if available
- ☐ If paper: Name of conference, date of conference, and place of conference
- ☑ If book chapter: Title of book, page range, publisher name and location
- ☐ If book: Publisher name and location
- ☐ If dissertation: Name of institution, type of degree, and department granting degree

Handbook of Special Education Research, Volume II, pgs. 97-109, Routledge, New York, New York

DOI or URL to published work (if available) DOI: 10.4324/9781003156888-9

Acknowledgement of Funding— Grantees should check with their grant officer for the preferred wording to acknowledge funding. If the grant officer does not have a preference, grantees can use this suggested wording (adjust wording if multiple grants are to be acknowledged). Fill in Department of Education funding office, grant number, and name of grant recipient institution or organization.

"This work was supported by U.S. Department of Education **[Office name]** Institute of Education Scien through **[Grant number]** R324A19024 to **Institution]** Stanford Univer. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the **[Office name]** Institute of Education Scie or the U.S. Department of Education.

9

PARAPROFESSIONALS' PERCEPTIONS OF JOB-RELATED SUPPORTS, CHALLENGES, AND EFFECTIVENESS

Sally K. Fluhler, Christopher J. Lemons, Yasmina E. Haddad, Casey Chauvin, Guy Martin, Lauren LeJeune, and Emily Gurwitz

In 2017, slightly more than 6 million children and adolescents received special education services in public schools in the United States. These students were educated by 389,456 special education teachers and 458,676 paras (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). The number of paras who support students with disabilities has increased substantially over the past decade (i.e., 390,000 full-time equivalent paras a little more than a decade prior (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). This change in special educator staffing trends clearly highlights the need to understand the best ways to provide professional development (PD) and ongoing coaching to paras.

Paras are special education support staff who most commonly have a high school diploma or have additional education such as credit hours from an institution of higher education, or an associate's or bachelor's degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007; Brock & Anderson, 2020). Many paras have also received supplemental training in the form of school district–provided PD. Carter et al. (2009) found that 97% of paras included in their study reported providing one-on-one instruction to students with disabilities. Other responsibilities often identified include small-group or large-group instruction, clerical tasks, data collection or observation, recess or lunch supervision, and supporting the special education teacher in delivering instruction (Carter et al., 2009; Giangreco et al., 2005; Fisher & Pleasants, 2011). Further, when paras are used to fulfill supplemental instructional roles, this can assist special education teachers in maximizing their primary instructional time with students with disabilities (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2007).

Due in part to school districts' increased reliance on paras to support students with disabilities, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) outlined the expectation that paras would demonstrate competence by either (a) having completed a minimum of two years of study at an institution of higher education (i.e., an associate's degree) or (b) having demonstrated meeting rigorous standards of knowledge and skill as indicated by a formal state or local assessment (e.g., ParaPro Assessment; Educational Testing Service, n.d.). ESSA also outlines appropriate roles for paras indicating that they can be appropriately used to provide one-on-one instruction, assist with classroom management, or provide instructional support services under the direct supervision of a teacher (ESSA, 2015).

Based on the number of paras currently employed in public schools, it is clear they are essential school personnel who can assist students with disabilities in obtaining individualized education program (IEP) goals through a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) as outlined in the

 DOI: 10.4324/9781003156888-9

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). However, previous studies have suggested that paras typically receive minimal preservice training (Breton, 2010; Brock & Carter, 2015; Giangreco et al., 2001) and, when it is provided, in-service training is typically focused on compliance and managing challenging behavior (Fisher & Pleasants, 2011; Reddy et al., 2021). The purpose of this chapter is to provide a review of current research focused on supporting paras, to highlight outcomes from a research study in which we provided ongoing PD and coaching to paras who were delivering reading and math interventions to students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDDs), and to outline implications for current practice and future research.

Current State of Research

Several research teams have explored responsibilities of and PD for paras. For example, Giangreco et al. (2001) reviewed literature from 1991 to 2000 pertaining to the types of supports paras provided to students with disabilities. The authors found that para job descriptions are too often vaguely defined with unclear expectations, leading to confusion in job responsibilities. Further, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the roles and responsibilities of paras varied widely and frequently included responsibilities for which paras were not adequately trained (e.g., required to support students with complex support needs, assigned as a primary instructor to students with disabilities with limited supervision).

Brock and Anderson (2020) reviewed experimental studies published between 2012 and 2019 in which the efficacy of training paras who work with students with IDDs was evaluated. The authors found that the number of experimental studies focused on para training has increased over time (c.f., Brock & Carter, 2013), with an average of three to six studies being published each year between 2013 and 2019. Brock and Anderson (2020) also found that recent research further supports the idea that paras can be effectively trained to deliver high-quality instruction. The authors also identified several characteristics of effective training for paras, including the use of performance feedback, implementation checklists, modeling, planning, and role play. The authors suggested that para training can be delivered effectively through group in-person, online, or online/in-person hybrid formats. Paras in the included studies focused on systematic instruction, function-based interventions, video modeling and prompting, peer support interventions, and social network interventions. The authors highlighted that the diversity of interventions delivered by paras in the included studies is encouraging, as the responsibility of paras for providing supports to students with disabilities appears to be increasing (Brock & Anderson, 2020).

Study Context

Given the increased expectation that paras provide instructional supports to students with disabilities and the requirement within the 2017 Request for Applications from the Institute of Education Science's National Center for Special Education Research that research proposals had to focus on outcomes of teachers and other instructional personnel, our research team proposed and received funding for an efficacy trial to evaluate PD designed to enhance paras' knowledge and skill related to delivering a reading or math intervention to elementary and middle school students with IDD (https://ies.ed.gov/funding/grantsearch/details.asp?ID=2209). In the domain of reading, we had two PD conditions. The first, traditional reading-focused PD (T-PD), provided paras with basic training on the reading intervention combined with ongoing weekly PD sessions in which they reviewed intervention videos with an instructional coach (i.e., a university employee who was providing ongoing support). Paras were also given weekly goals and support. The second PD condition, an enhanced reading-focused PD (E-PD), extended T-PD by adding further training modules and coaching focused on a deeper understanding of reading development, explicit instruction, and behavior management. In a sense, we designed the E-PD condition to help paras understand the

"why" behind the instructional practices we asked them to use and to broaden their skill set beyond the scripted reading intervention. The third condition, designed as a business-as-usual control (BAU) condition for the reading conditions, provided training and support to paras in the domain of intensive math intervention. The efficacy trial was designed to have three cohorts of para-student pairs who would each engage in the study across two full academic years of intervention.

The coaching model used in both reading conditions included ongoing weekly support provided by instructional coaches, which included performance feedback, the development and monitoring of targeted goals and support, and opportunities for modeling components of the intervention. Each week, instructional coaches watched at least one recorded intervention session for each para. The coaches focused on adequate fidelity of implementation, areas in which improvement could be made, and positive feedback in areas where implementation had improved in relation to previous feedback. During coaching sessions, instructional coaches started by providing specific praise statements about the positive instructional behaviors observed in the video. Next, coaches provided feedback on the fidelity of intervention by identifying up to three specific implementation steps that could be improved upon. In these instances, the instructional coaches provided explicit guidance on how to improve implementation (i.e., modeling a step, directing a para to a specific portion of a training video). Coaching sessions also provided opportunities to discuss data regarding student progression through the intervention. In cases where students were not responding as well as intended, the instructional coach discussed ideas to enhance responses (e.g., motivation strategies, behavior management). Coaches then discussed priority goals and action items for the para to work on before their next coaching session. The instructional coach finished the coaching session by reiterating positive feedback and providing encouragement to continue working to enhance intervention delivery. Paras in the E-PD condition were also provided time to discuss the content of the additional training modules they watched with their instructional coach. Due to being the BAU condition, coaching for paras in the math condition followed the same model for the reading conditions with the exception of setting priority goals each week and follow-up with a related email.

During the spring of 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted project activities, including paras' delivery of intervention and our ability to collect a majority of our student assessment data. Due to the disruption of planned activities, our research team decided that we had a unique opportunity to conduct a set of qualitative interviews with participating paras to ask about their experiences and roles in schools, prior training and preparation, and experiences in the larger project. We anticipated the responses from the participating paras could inform our ongoing research project and current practice and could potentially highlight future research needs.

The overall research questions for the qualitative interviews were:

1. How do paras describe their job experiences, including challenges?
2. What PD opportunities have paras received?
3. What supports have been provided to paras by their supporting teachers?
4. What were paras' experiences in the study, including motivation for participating, experience engaging in the study, and challenges?
5. How do paras perceive the impacts of the study on themselves and their students?

Method

Participants

During March 2020, 55 paras were engaged with the larger efficacy trial. All were invited via email to participate in the qualitative interviews; 47 paras across three states in the South and

Southwest regions of the United States agreed to participate. The interviews were conducted using Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2020). Regardless of their ability to complete required research project requirements due to school closures, we provided paras with the originally intended stipend of $600 for engaging in the larger study and requested their participation in the interview in lieu of missed intervention sessions. Of the 47 paras interviewed, the majority were female (n = 45; 96%). In terms of educational backgrounds, paras had received a high school diploma (n = 8; 17%); completed an associate's degree (n = 6, 13%); received trade, tech, or vocational training (n = 3; 6%); received some undergraduate credits (n = 15; 32%); completed their undergraduate studies (n = 13, 28%); and completed some postgraduate credits (n = 2, 4%). The paras were Black (n = 8; 17%), White (n = 37; 79%), and Asian (n = 1; 2%). Nine percent of the interventionists reported their ethnicity as Hispanic. The paras were equivalently divided across treatment conditions (T-PD = 16, E-PD = 16, BAU = 15).

Interview Procedures

Interviews were conducted by instructional coaches. Interviews were semi-structured and consisted of 14 or 15 questions (E-PD had one additional condition-related question). Interview durations ranged from 6 minutes to 93 minutes. All interviews were transcribed by instructional coaches.

Coding Procedures

Development of the coding procedures was an iterative process. First, three members of the research team reviewed one randomly chosen transcript to begin the development of codes to represent paras' responses to interview questions. Second, the research team met to review initial codes and came to a consensus regarding the initial draft of the codebook. Third, two members of the research team used the initial draft codebook to code three additional transcripts. Following the coding of each individual transcript, the team met again to come to a consensus on a revised version of the coding procedures. In this process, modifications were made to the codebook, and previously coded transcripts were recoded as necessary. Two researchers coded seven transcripts prior to establishing a finalized codebook for training and reliability.

Next, researchers trained a third coder to use the codebook and code transcripts. The training consisted of an hour-long orientation to the codes, codebook, and the coding process. The third coder reached at least 90% reliability on a gold standard transcripts in order to code independently; 31% of the total transcripts (n = 14) were coded for reliability. Reliability was determined using a procedure proposed by Kurasaki (2000) in which after two coders independently code the same transcript, the lead coder selects one coded unit (one line in the transcript) and compares all codes within the following 9 lines for a total of 10 coded lines of the transcript. The lead coder chose a starting line within the first 10 lines of the transcript, compared codes for 10 lines, then chose another chunk for reliability after 30 lines of the transcript. For example, the lead coder would code lines 7 to 17 for reliability, and then lines 47 to 57, and so on until the end of the transcript. The three coders met weekly to independently code transcripts and to come to a consensus on any additional edits that were needed in coding procedures and the codebook. The codebook was updated after each meeting, and previously coded transcripts were recoded as necessary. Once all transcripts were fully coded, a database in which all coded transcripts were represented was created. The database reflected each code that appeared in each transcript at least one time. This database allowed researchers to determine broad themes and trends in the coded data. Results are reported as percentages of paras who made statements reflecting a specific code.

Results

The first few questions of the interview asked paras about their overall jobs and experiences as paras. Participating paras reported being satisfied with their job (n = 42; 89.36%) and having positive relationships with school personnel and students (n = 35; 74.47%). Paras reported serving in numerous roles in the school, including providing one-on-one support (n = 10; 21.28%), assisting teachers (n = 4; 8.51%), and providing small (n = 3; 6.38%) and large (n = 2; 4.26%) group instruction. Positively, only a small number (n = 6; 12.77%) of paras reported being dissatisfied in their current position.

However, paras did report challenges with their job. The majority of paras reported that challenges in their positions were student related (n = 25; 53.19%), with a small percentage reporting that challenges in their positions were related to adult interactions (i.e., teacher, school staff, parents) (n = 4; 8.51%). Many paras reported challenges in their job due to various job characteristics (n = 21; 44.68%). These job characteristics included but were not limited to being constantly busy, having little downtime, providing support in inclusive settings, sudden changes in responsibilities or schedules, and large caseloads. Eighteen paras reported other challenges to their job (38.30%); these other challenges were comments made by only one para and could not be grouped with other coding categories (e.g., needing a substitute, feeling bad for student situations, lack of parental support, lack of pay). Many paras reported feeling underprepared for their positions (n = 16; 34.04%) or reported feeling a lack of respect, value, and/or equality in their position (n = 13; 27.66%). Some paras reported that even though they had challenges in their positions, they still expressed positive reactions or responses to the challenges (n = 13; 27.66%), and only one para expressed a negative response to the challenges of their position (2.13%).

We asked paras about the PD and training they had received prior to participating in our PD study. Paras reported they received prior PD related to instruction content (n = 5; 10.64%), behavior management (n = 12; 25.53%), nonspecified PD (n = 29; 61.70%), or PD that was in another area (n = 7; 14.89%). However, a slight majority (n = 26; 55.32%) of paras indicated a lack of prior PD or training. A few paras made comments that specified positive (n = 4; 8.51%) or negative (n = 4; 8.51%) responses to previously provided PD. Paras also made comments referring to the time of year or frequency of the PD that has been provided (n = 18; 38.30%).

Many paras reported that prior to the start of the larger efficacy trial, they received teacher support (n = 19; 42.22%). Specifically, 14 paras reported receiving support with materials (31.11%), 6 paras reported receiving support in skill development (13.33%), and 5 paras reported receiving personal or social and emotional support (11.11%) from their teachers. A smaller but meaningful number of paras (n = 9; 20%) reported a lack of prior support from their teachers or feeling neutral about prior supports (n = 4; 8.89%). Paras who reported feeling neutral about prior supports did not report a specific lack of support but also did not report feeling supported in a specific way (e.g., were provided with supports but also, they did not ask for support). The majority of paras (n = 30; 66.67%) made comments that indicated they felt supported, whereas a smaller number (n = 5, 11.11%) specifically indicated they did not feel support from their teachers.

The remaining questions of the interview pertained to the paras' participation and experiences in our PD study, beginning with their motivation to participate in the study. The overwhelming majority of paras reported that helping one particular student or students in general was their motivation for participating in the larger research project (n = 37; 78.72%). Many paras were motivated by the possibility for self-improvement (i.e., learning, developing new skills, improving skills, new techniques) (n = 19; 40.43%). Other sources of motivation for participation were being encouraged by a teacher, school administrator or other school personnel (n = 11; 23.40%), having general interest in the project based on the project description (n = 9; 19.15%), being told to participate by

school personnel (n = 2; 4.26%), and being motivated by the compensation that was provided for participation (n = 1; 2.13%).

When asked about their experiences engaging in the study as a whole, overall paras reported having positive experiences with the larger research project (reading = 25; 78.13%; math = 13; 100%). Specifically, paras mentioned positive experiences with the training (reading = 8; 25%; math = 5; 38.46%), the curriculum used (i.e., the reading or math curriculum) (reading = 19; 59.38%; math = 10; 76.92%), their instructional coach (reading = 9; 28.13%; math = 6; 46.15%), and student outcomes (reading = 21; 65.63%; math = 10; 76.92%). All of the paras in the reading conditions mentioned they would continue to use the materials provided during the study in the future (n = 32; 100%), and nearly all paras in the math condition would continue use the research project materials (n = 14; 93.33%). Given the structure of the PD models used in the study, we asked paras about the ongoing instructional coach support provided. The majority of paras in both reading and math conditions reported that the feedback and coaching was the most helpful support provided by the instructional coaches (reading = 24; 75%; math = 11; 73.33%). Interestingly, paras reported the other most helpful support provided by the instructional coaches was social and emotional support, again across both conditions (reading = 17; 53.13%; math = 7; 46.67%). Other helpful supports that were commonly reported included motivation and encouragement provided (reading = 11; 34.38%; math = 4; 26.67%), supports for skill development (reading = 9; 28.13%; math = 2; 13.33%), and the instructional coach's responsiveness (reading = 10; 31.25%; math = 6; 40%).

Paras also reported on challenges in meeting the project expectations; reported challenges pertained to both implementation of the intervention and recording and uploading intervention sessions. Unsurprisingly, one of the most common challenges mentioned by paras across study conditions was challenges with having the time to implement (reading = 46.88%; math = 8; 53.33%). Many paras mentioned challenges with other school responsibilities (e.g., substituting in other classrooms in school, providing support to students other than the target student, inflexibility of schedules, abrupt schedule changes) that prevented implementation of the intervention (reading = 19; 59.38%; math = 11; 73.33%). The majority of paras in both reading and math conditions reported that student-related challenges were a barrier to intervention implementation (reading = 17; 53.13%; math = 7; 46.67%). Other challenges that were reported were challenges with the availability of physical space for intervention (reading = 7; 21.88%; math = 3; 20%), challenges with technology used (reading = 2; 6.25%; math = 4; 26.67%), and intrapersonal challenges (e.g., feeling self-conscious about being recorded, being evaluated via recording, self-doubt in general; reading = 6; 18.75%; math = 6; 40%).

The last part of our interview asked paras about the changes they noticed in themselves and their students as a result of participation in our PD study. Overall paras reported they noticed gains in knowledge and skill (reading = 23; 71.88%; math = 8; 53.33%) and their overall effectiveness as a para (reading = 21; 65.53%; math = 7; 46.67%). Paras also noticed social and emotional changes (reading = 9; 28.13%; math = 6; 40%), which included changes in their self-confidence, patience, happiness, and general understanding of and responsiveness to students' social-emotional state. A small portion of paras also mentioned changes in the relationships they had with either their student, teacher, and/or school staff as a result of participation in the larger research project (reading = 4; 12.50%; math = 3; 20%). Unfortunately, there were a small number of paras who specifically stated a lack of noticeable change (reading = 3, 9.38%; math = 1, 6.67%).

Paras were also asked to report on changes they noticed in their students as a result of participating in the larger research project. The majority of the paras in the reading conditions noticed gains in their students' reading skills (n = 20; 62.50%). The majority of the paras in the math condition noticed gains in their students' math skills (n = 9, 60%). Paras made statements regarding changes in their students' behavior (reading = 8; 25%; math = 4; 26.67%) and social and emotional

skills. Overwhelmingly, the majority of paras noticed changes in their students' social and emotional skills (reading = 19; 59.38%; math = 12;, 80%). Social and emotional changes included reported changes in students' confidence, enjoyment of the intervention, eagerness or willingness to participate in intervention sessions, and excitement about intervention. Many paras reported other changes in their students, such as changes in their students' conversational skills, communication, and that the project was a positive experience in general for their student (reading = 11; 34.38%; math = 6; 40%). Paras also shared that other people who interact with their student reported changes in the student as well (reading = 17; 53.13%; math = 9; 60%). Unfortunately, a small number of paras indicated a lack of noticeable change in their student (reading = 3; 9.38%; math = 1; 6.67%).

Discussion

Our research team was evaluating PD designed to enhance paras' knowledge and skill related to delivering an intensive reading or math intervention through a randomized controlled trial. In the spring of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic halted our project activities, we conducted a set of qualitative interviews with 47 participating paras. The purpose of this qualitative study was to ask paras about their experiences and roles in schools, the training supports provided to them, and their experience and perceived outcomes while participating in our PD research study.

Job Experience

When asked about their experiences as paras, it is encouraging that most paras reported having job satisfaction and positive relationships with school-related personnel and students. Of paras who reported statements about the specific roles they performed, providing one-on-one support to students with disabilities was the most frequently mentioned role. This reflects the findings from Carter et al. (2009), reporting that 97% of the studied paras reported providing one-on-one instruction to students with disabilities. Additionally, the other specific roles mentioned reiterate previous research (Brock and Anderson, 2020; Carter et al., 2009; Giangreco et al., 2005; Fisher & Pleasants, 2011) and the general job description in ESSA.

Some paras made statements of job dissatisfaction using terms of wanting "more" from their jobs. For example, Ms. Pine described her experience of being a para as, "We don't do a lot of things like we're not included and stuff and some of the paraprofessionals they like that, like they just want to come in and do stuff. But it's really, I just want to be like, I want to matter." Paras also reported feelings of lack of respect, value, or equality. Ms. Pine described her feelings of lack of respect and equality as, "It's been fine, but it really pushed me to want to be a teacher more because a lot of times I feel and it's not the people I work with, they don't mean it, but it's like 'you're not a teacher.' So, you matter but not really kind of feeling." It is possible that these findings are related. Paras reported wanting to "matter" or wanting their ideas to be heard, which can seemingly lead to job dissatisfaction when one feels as if they are not being heard or respected. Although not related to our specific research questions, many paras expressed their appreciation for being able to participate in the PD study and having a study that focused on them, providing supports for them.

Several paras reported feeling underprepared for their job. This could be due to various reasons, including the vague job descriptions that vary across schools and districts or being asked to perform roles and responsibilities without proper or sufficient training. Studies have found that the majority of training provided to paras is considered "on-the-job" training, which can vary in quality, be spontaneous, and lead to feelings of being underprepared (Carter et al., 2009; Riggs & Mueller, 2001; Steckelberg et al., 2007).

Professional Development

Paras reported a lack of training and lack of preparedness for their positions prior to engaging in the larger research project. Although this is not novel—for example, Giangreco et al. (2001) found para job descriptions were often vaguely defined with unclear expectations—it does indicate the continued need to support paras, provide adequate training opportunities, and clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the position. Of the training paras participated in, most were very general. Of the targeted PD opportunities reported, specific behavior management training was the most frequently identified. This could be an indication of the primary focus of the defined roles for these paras. It also may relate to the fact that paras most frequently identified student-related behavioral challenges as their primary concern—in other words, schools may provide this type of focused PD because it is the most urgent need for paras.

A small number of paras reported receiving PD and training related to instructional content (n = 5; 10.64%). This is somewhat concerning, as the most frequently mentioned role that paras were serving in was providing one-on-one instruction. To provide high-quality one-on-one instruction, paras need training and preparation in the specific areas of instruction they are providing. There seems to be a disconnect between the paras' reported role and the preparation for that role with supportive instructional content PD. If paras are likely to fulfill one-on-one instructional roles, they should be provided with training and preparation to do so properly (with content-specific training) while being supervised by a certified special education teacher.

Related to this concern is the "elephant in the room" of poor pay for paras. Frequently, paras are not involved in beginning-of-school-year PD due to limited school district budgets, and the hourly pay paras in most districts receive is incredibly insufficient for the difficulty and importance of their job. In the larger PD project, there were multiple times when paras expressed stress, frustration, and unhappiness due to delays with project-related honorariums. One para was crying when she contacted her instructional coach because she was counting on the stipend to pay a cellular phone bill—and the university's delay in processing put her in financial distress. Clearly, we need to reconsider our policies and pay procedures to better support these critical members of the educator workforce.

Supports Provided by Teachers

Although many paras reported that their supervising teachers provided support to them, a small portion of paras reported feeling a lack of support or being neutral about support received. Those who reported neutral feelings indicated they had not asked for support for a variety of reasons. This finding is interesting because a part of a special education teacher's role is to provide support for paras, yet some paras may not be asking for support because they believe their supervising teacher to be too busy to provide it. This may indicate a lack of communication between teachers and paras regarding roles and responsibilities. Additionally, it may indicate the realities that special educators are too busy to adequately support their paras (Brock & Anderson, 2020), that special educators receive too little training on how to support paras (Riggs & Mueller, 2001), and that paras have not been provided with self-advocacy training to allow them to raise their voice when they have support needs. The need to enhance the collaborative relationships between special educators and paras remains a key priority for school districts.

Of the supports paras reported receiving from teachers, the most frequent type mentioned was in the area of instructional materials (e.g., teachers provide paras with resources needed to deliver instruction). In contrast, less than a quarter of paras mentioned receiving support in skill development. While teachers should be providing the appropriate instructional materials to their paras, they should also be providing support with skill development. The Council for Exceptional Children's standards for initial special educator preparation delineate that special educators should

be able to "provide guidance and direction to paraeducators, tutors, and volunteers" (Council for Exceptional Children, 2020). While this notion does make sense (i.e., special educators should provide guidance to the paras in their classroom), it does raise questions about whether special educators are adequately trained to provide this support, whether they are provided ample time to give such support, and whether there are other district-level staff who could or should ensure that paras are adequately prepared for and supported in their role as education support staff for students with disabilities. Some clarity around the specific responsibilities that special educators have in ensuring the paras under their supervision are prepared would be useful in giving guidance to teachers, paras, and district staff.

PD Research Study Experience

It is encouraging that, overall, paras reported having positive experiences with the larger research project thus far, both those paras in the reading conditions and math condition. Some paras mentioned specific components of the research project that contributed to the positive experience. The paras in the reading conditions mentioned positive student outcomes most frequently as a reason for their positive experience. Paras also mentioned the curriculum, their instructional coach, and the training provided as other reasons for a positive experience. Similarly, the paras in the math condition mentioned both positive student outcomes and the curriculum most frequently, followed by their instructional coach, and then the training. This supports the paras' expression of appreciation for providing training and support that is targeted just for them.

It is not surprising that having positive student outcomes is a frequently mentioned positive experience regardless of treatment condition because it indicates that paras want their students to be successful. This also reflects our findings from the paras' reported motivation for participating in our larger research project—helping or supporting students (n = 37; 78.72%). It is also positive to know that paras had positive experiences with the curriculum provided and used.

In alignment with the finding that participants had overall positive experiences with instructional coaches, most paras mentioned the feedback and coaching as the most helpful support, with social and emotional supports as the second most helpful. It is possible that paras appreciated having a person checking in on their progress throughout the intervention and having an additional person to talk to. This could also contribute to the high reports of feeling socially and emotionally supported by their instructional coaches. Having an instructional coach and reporting feelings of social and emotional support could be an indication that paras felt respected and that their voices mattered. Paras expressed gratitude for the responsiveness of their instructional coaches and made statements about how quickly instructional coaches would respond to texts and emails; these, too, could reflect the feeling that paras matter and that the instructional coaches in the study were there to support them at any time.

We asked paras in all of the study conditions to implement intervention four times per week, yet found that, on average, paras delivered intervention two times a week. Accordingly, the most common challenge that paras reported in meeting project expectations was not having enough time to implement the intervention. Nearly half of paras in both reading and math conditions reported this as a barrier, despite the differences between intervention time per session (reading = ~45 minutes, math = ~30 minutes). This "time" barrier could be related to the other most common challenge of having other school responsibilities that pulled them away from being able to implement the intervention in the desired dosage. This challenge is, unfortunately, not surprising given previous research detailing the various duties and responsibilities that paraprofessionals have throughout the day (Brock & Anderson, 2020; Carter et al., 2009; Giangreco et al., 2005; Fisher & Pleasants, 2011). Although such responsibilities may be included in the broader job description, paras frequently get pulled from their primary job of providing support to students with disabilities to provide support

or fill positions elsewhere in the school. This is important to keep in mind when planning for para research studies.

Effectiveness Following PD Research Study

The results from asking paras about the changes they noticed in themselves as a result of participation in the study are both positive and anticipated. Our primary aim of training paras to implement instruction was to affect growth in knowledge and skill. The reported changes in overall effectiveness is encouraging as well. These statements reflected participants' perceived ability to apply what they learned through training and implementation to other students they serve.

There was a small, yet notable difference in the percentage of paras in the reading and math conditions who reported social and emotional changes. A greater percentage of paras in the math condition reported changes in their social and emotional skills as compared to the reading conditions. Paras in the reading conditions received goals and specific feedback related to their knowledge, skills, and overall effectiveness, and thus, may have attended more closely to changes in these areas. On the other hand, paras in the math condition did not receive goal-related feedback, which may have resulted in them more broadly considering the types of changes they experienced.

Unfortunately, there were a small number of paras who specifically stated a lack of noticeable change in themselves. The interviews occurred while our PD study was in its second year; some paras had been a part of the study for over a year, while others had just joined the project weeks before COVID halted our research activities. Without more specific research on how long it takes for paras to notice changes in themselves, some participants might not have been exposed to the training long enough to note changes. Additionally, some paras joined our study with strong skills and foundational knowledge about interventions, which could also explain the lack of notable changes.

The results from asking paras about the changes in their students based on content area gains were expected. This is encouraging and important because the overall job of a para is to support their student with a disability in any skills, content-specific or social and emotional. However, there were a small number of paras who specifically stated a lack of noticeable change in their students. This could be a result of duration of participation in the larger research study at the time of the interview. Additionally, it may be possible student progress was relative to the student's skills at pretest. For example, paras who were paired with students who had lower initial skills may have observed those students' skills progressing at a slower rate compared to other students the para had contact with throughout their day.

Limitations

There are several limitations to take into consideration for this study. First, paras interviewed for this study volunteered to participate in the larger research project and the subsequent interview. It is possible the paras who chose to participate represent an atypical subset of paras. Second, instructional coaches who had a relationship with the paras conducted the interviews. Although this procedure may have supported interviewer–interviewee rapport, it could also have led to potential bias in responding, especially regarding the interview questions about instructional coach support. Third, the interviews occurred while many paras were in the initial or middle phases of the larger study—thus, findings could have been different had all paras completed two full years of participation.

Implications for Practitioners

The results of this study make it clear that paras can be incredibly effective members of the special education team. However, their roles and responsibilities need to be clearly defined. Administrators and special educators need to work with paras to define roles and responsibilities. Next, a plan for

Coaching Form

Name: Intervention: Student(s): Date:

Section 1: Positive Feedback	
Start the meeting on a positive note. Write at least 3 specific praise statements about positive instructional behaviors you observed.	
1. 2. 3.	Meeting Notes
Section 2: Intervention Implementation and Student Data	
Write down notes about how the para implemented the intervention, elements that were implemented well, and areas where there is an opportunity for growth. These statements can focus on instructional delivery, student(s) engagement, and behavior management during the lesson. In addition, include notes on student data (if applicable). Review this section, including student data, prior to moving into Section 3.	
	Meeting Notes
Section 3: Priority Goals and Action items	
Based on the information you wrote in Section 2, write up to three priority goals to improve intervention implementation. For each, also provide an actionable item to support the para in meeting the goal. For example, you may provide a model of implementation, or you may direct the para to a resource that they can access independently.	
1. 2. 3.	Meeting Notes
Section 4: Wrap Up	
Close the meeting on a positive note (Ex. 1 really appreciate all the work you are doing with _____.) Plan for your next meeting/observation (date, time, group, etc.)	
1. 2.	Next meeting/observation

Figure 9.1 Sample Feedback and Coaching Form

initial training and ongoing coaching needs to be developed and implemented. In our study, the ongoing feedback was a feature most paras reported as being beneficial. Following guidance from Brock and Anderson (2020), this PD should include modeling, use of an implementation checklist, and ongoing feedback. Additionally, based on our findings, ensuring that the special educator also provides emotional supports, encouragement, and praise will likely be beneficial. Figure 9.1 is an adapted model of the form instructional coaches in our study used to provide ongoing feedback, and it could be used by special educators to structure postobservation feedback sessions. Finally, a majority of special educators report being unprepared to support paras in their charge (Sobeck et al., 2021). Clearly PD provided to preservice and in-service special and general educators needs to drastically increase the amount of training time spent on this topic.

Implications for Future Research

Based on our findings, we believe there are several promising avenues for future research. First, as our sample is relatively small, replicating and extending upon our study would be important. Second, based on paras' reported needs for additional training and support, research that explores the most effective and efficient models for delivery to paras is critical—for example, is expecting the special educator to be the primary resource for the para more or less effective than providing district-level support (e.g., a train-the-trainer model)? Third, we need a clearer understanding of the amount of

support that paras need to be successful. In our PD study, we provide once-a-week feedback. We need to understand if this is sufficient, too much, or too little—and perhaps it varies based on the para's skill level. Research in this area will help us tailor PD and coaching to individual para's needs. Fourth, exploring optimal scheduling structures and caseloads would be useful, as paras frequently expressed concerns of not having sufficient time to be effective and being consistently redirected during their workday. Fifth, it is clear that individual student behavior challenges do drive paras' concerns about their abilities to be effective interventionists. Additional research on effective methods to increase paras' behavior management skills would be helpful. Finally, research focused on determining the most effective method to train preservice and in-service special and general educators would broaden our understanding of how to prepare educators to effectively support paras. We encourage current and future researchers to continue to explore these critical areas that have the potential to enhance the effectiveness of paras in helping students with disabilities meet IEP goals to optimize their success as they enter postsecondary settings.

Additional Readings and Resources

- Special Issue: Current Status and Future Directions for Training and Supporting Paraprofessionals in the Schools, *Psychology in the Schools*, Volume 58, Issue 4. Available at https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/toc/15206807/2021/58/4
- Working with Paraprofessionals: A Resource for Educators of Students with Disabilities from the Texas Education Agency available at https://projects.esc20.net/upload/shared/20984_Paraprofessional_English_Updated_508.pdf

Author Note

The research described in this article was supported by Grant R324A190240 from the Institute of Education Science with the U.S. Department of Education. Nothing in the article necessarily reflects the positions or policies of the funding agencies, and no official endorsement by them should be inferred.

References

Breton, W. (2010). Special education paraprofessionals: Perceptions of preservice preparation, supervision, and ongoing development training. *International Journal of Special Education*, *25*(1), 34–45. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ890564

Brock, M. E., & Anderson, E. J. (2020). Training paraprofessionals who work with students with intellectual and developmental disabilities: What does the research say? *Psychology in the Schools*, *58*(4), 702–722. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22386

Brock, M. E., & Carter, E. W. (2013). A systematic review of paraprofessional-delivered educational practices to improve outcomes for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, *38*, 211–221. https://doi.org/10.1177/154079691303800401

Brock, M. E., & Carter, E. W. (2015). Effects of a professional development package to prepare special education paraprofessionals to implement evidence-based practice. *The Journal of Special Education*, *49*(1), 39–51. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466913501882

Carter, E. W., O'Rourke, L., Sisco, L. G., & Pelsue, D. (2009). Knowledge, responsibilities, and training needs of paraprofessionals in elementary and secondary schools. *Remedial and Special Education*, *30*(6), 344–359. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932508324399

Causton-Theoharis, J. N., Giangreco, M. F., Doyle, M. B., & Vadasy, P. F. (2007). The "Sous-Chefs" of literacy instruction. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, *40*(1), 56–62. https://doi.org/10.1177/004005990704000107

Council for Exceptional Children. (2020). *Initial preparation standards: Standard 6.6*. https://exceptionalchildren.org/standards/initial-special-education-preparation-standards

Educational Testing Service. (n.d.). *ParaPro Assessment*. www.ets.org/parapro/

Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C § 6301 (2015). www.congress.gov/114/plaws/publ95/PLAW-114publ95.pdf

Fisher, M., & Pleasants, S. L. (2011). Roles, responsibilities, and concerns of paraeducators: Findings from a statewide survey. *Remedial and Special Education*, *33*, 287–297. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932510397762

Giangreco, M. F., Edelman, S. W., Broer, S. M., & Doyle, M. B. (2001). Paraprofessional support of students with disabilities: Literature from the past decade. *Exceptional Children*, *68*, 45–63. https://doi.org/10.1177/001440290106800103

Giangreco, M. F., Yuan, S., McKenzie, B., Cameron, P., & Fialka, J. (2005). "Be careful what you wish for . . .": Five reasons to be concerned about the assignment of individual paraprofessionals. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, *37*(5), 28–34. https://doi.org/10.1177/004005990503700504

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004).

Kurasaki, K. S. (2000). Intercoder reliability for validating conclusions drawn from open-ended interview data. *Field Methods*, *12*, 179–194. https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X0001200301

National Center for Education Statistics. (2007). *Description and employment criteria of instructional paraprofessionals* (Issue Brief). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/2007008.pdf

Reddy, L. A., Alperin, A., & Glover, T. A. (2021). A critical review of the professional development literature for paraprofessionals supporting students with externalizing behavior disorders. *Psychology in the Schools*, *58*(4), 742–763. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22381

Riggs, C. G., & Mueller, P. H. (2001). Employment and utilization of paraeducators in inclusive settings. *The Journal of Special Education*, *35*(1), 54–62. https://doi.org/10.1177/002246690103500106

Sobeck, E. E., Douglas, S. N., Chopra, R., & Morano, S. (2021). Paraeducator supervision in pre-service teacher preparation programs: Results of a national survey. *The Journal of Special Education*, *49*(1), 669–685. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22383

Steckelberg, A. L., Vasa, S. F., Kemp, S. E., Arthaud, T. J., Asselin, S. B., Swain, K., & Fennick, E. (2007). A Web-based training model for preparing teachers to supervise paraeducators. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, *30*(1), 52–55. https://doi.org/10.1177/088840640703000106

U.S. Department of Education. (2008). *33rd annual report to Congress on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2011: Special Education teachers and paraprofessionals employed to serve students ages 6 through 21 under IDEA, Part B.* https://www2.ed.gov/about/reports/annual/osep/2011/parts-b-c/33rd-idea-arc.pdf

U.S. Department of Education. (2020). *42nd annual report to Congress on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2020: Special Education teachers and paraprofessionals employed to serve students ages 6 through 21 under IDEA, Part B.* https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/42nd-arc-for-idea.pdf

Zoom Video Communications, Inc. (2020). *ZOOM cloud meetings* (Version 4.6.9)