

Responsibilities and Training of Paraprofessionals in Alternative Schools: Implications for Practice

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Abstract: For many years a leading approach to teaching at-risk students and reducing school dropout has been the use of alternative schools. There are unique challenges to providing educational services in alternative schools and teachers in those schools need specialized knowledge and skills to address these challenges. The same can be inferred for paraprofessionals working in alternative schools. In general, the use of paraprofessional support for students in alternative schools has increased over the years. Oftentimes these students exhibit academic and behavioral challenges, and yet much of the research indicates that paraprofessionals working with students with academic and behavioral challenges have little training to do so. The purpose of this study was to examine the roles, responsibilities, and professional development needs of paraprofessionals working with secondary students at alternative schools as perceived by administrators, teachers, and paraprofessionals in those schools.

Appropriate educational services for at-risk students has been a critical issue in U.S. schools for decades (Elrod, Blackburn, Mann, & Thomas, 1999; Matyo-Cepero, 2013; Rumberger & Gottfried, 2016). It is an issue that has been exacerbated even further by the increase in high-stakes testing, school choice, and the implementation of laws such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top (Lagan-Riordan et al., 2011; Ramezani, 2010). Noting that a student can be at risk for many reasons, Dalessio (2012) states, "This does not mean that the students who live with these factors will fail, only that the students may face challenges that other students do not" (p. 2).

One of these challenges is that of staying in school and graduating. Barton (2005) found that students dropping out of school exhibited risk factors such as low grades, excessive absences, behavior problems, and retention at much higher rates than other students. The costs and consequences of school dropout can be severe, for the student and for society. Students who drop out of school have a higher incidence of depression, substance abuse, and incarceration (Mason, 2013; Matyo-Cepero, 2013; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Trolan, 2014). A number of authors have also noted that students who do not graduate from high school are less likely to be employed and more likely to earn lower salaries than high school graduates (Kane, Roy, & Medina, 2013; Roome, 2016; Salinger, 2016; Thompson, 2010).

A very common and consistent approach to increasing the graduation rates of at-risk students is the use of alternative schools (Carr, 2014; Lagan-Riordan et al., 2011; Munoz, 2002; Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian, Justin, & Lequia, 2016). The federal definition of an alternative school is "a public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that cannot be typically met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education or vocational education" (Sable, Plotts, & Mitchell, 2010, p. C-1).

However, the alternative education field lacks a common definition and is divided between the differing philosophies of alternative programs (Bascia & Maton, 2016; Foley & Pang, 2006; Henrich, 2005; Lehr & Lange,

2003; Kellmayer, 1995; Lehr, Soon Tan, & Ysseldkye, 2009; Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006; Wasburn-Moses, 2011). Raywid (1994) was the first to provide a specific typology for alternative schools and noted that there are many types ranging from academic schools of choice to disciplinary schools where students are placed. Building on this typology, Kellmayer (1995) gave a detailed description of how to establish and implement an alternative school. Alternative education encompasses public alternative schools, charter schools for at-risk youth, programs within the juvenile detention centers, community-based schools, programs operated by local school districts, and alternative schools with evening and weekend formats (Bascia & Maton, 2016; Henrich, 2005; Kellmayer, 1995; Quinn et al., 2006).

According to Raywid (1994) there are three types of alternative schools: (a) Type I - Popular Innovations, (b) Type II - Last Chance Programs, and (c) Type III - Remedial Focus. Characteristics of alternative schools vary depending on the differing philosophies of education and whether enrollment is voluntary or involuntary. If the school's philosophy of education is that the student needs to be changed, then the alternative program focuses on reforming the student. Henrich (2005) and Quinn et al. (2006) expanded on Raywid's typology to identify additional characteristics differentiating alternative schools, such as focus, curriculum, and structure.

Voluntary or involuntary student enrollment also has a direct influence on program approaches (Lehr & Lange, 2003). While voluntary placement schools tend to offer more flexible scheduling and utilize more innovative teaching and instructional strategies, involuntary or mandatory placement schools tend to have a more disciplinary approach with a short-term placement focusing on skill building (Foley & Pang, 2006; Hoge, Liaupsin, Umbreit, & Ferro, 2014; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Quinn et al., 2006; Raywid, 1994; Van Acker, 2007).

Raywid (1999) and Wasburn-Moses (2011) presented other factors that contribute to the variance in alternative school programs. Alternative school programs can function differently depending on whether the alternative

school is in an urban or suburban area. Raywid (1994) reported that urban alternative schools focus on programs for minority and poor students who were not successful at traditional schools, whereas suburban alternative schools focus on innovative programs to pursue new ways to teach. Wasburn-Moses (2011) observed that definitions can vary based on “location (e.g., separate classroom or facility), descriptions of curriculum (e.g., student centered or nontraditional), and desired outcomes (e.g., dropout prevention, facilitating receipt of diploma)” (p. 247).

Alternative schools have positive and negative effects. A positive effect is more educational opportunities and a flexibility in structure that is not available in some traditional schools (Foley & Pang, 2006; Hoge et al., 2014). Alternative schools often have a small student enrollment with a strong connection between students and teachers (Quinn et al., 2006; Van Acker, 2007; Wasburn-Moses, 2011) and create personalized environments in which the students feel respected and fairly treated. Many alternative schools have also been successful at reducing dropout rates, truancy, and disruptive behavior (Wasburn-Moses, 2011).

As Foley and Pang (2006) noted, alternative schools continue to be characterized as lacking institutional legitimacy and having image problems. The institutional legitimacy concern may be due to limited accessibility to appropriate resources such as libraries and science laboratories and the lack of licensed and qualified staff (Lehr et al., 2009). Image problems seem to plague alternative schools because the three different types of alternative schools often get combined into a single composite (Van Acker, 2007) termed as dumping grounds for disruptive students (Lehr et al., 2009) or schools for losers (Raywid, 1994; Wasburn-Moses, 2011). Alternative schools have also been viewed negatively because they can unintentionally segregate students from the general education setting (Van Acker, 2007; Wasburn-Moses, 2011).

Many students attending alternative schools share behavioral, social, and emotional traits. Students are often characterized as suffering academically, possessing antisocial attitudes and behaviors, and having problematic relationships (Carlson, 2012; Ramezani, 2010; Wilkerson et al., 2016). In the 80s and 90s student enrollment at alternative schools increased for students who were at risk, students with disabilities, and students unsuccessful at traditional schools due to academic or behavior issues (Foley & Pang, 2006; Hoge et al., 2014; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Quinn et al., 2006; Van Acker, 2007). Students who have been suspended or expelled, have chronic truancy, exhibit physical aggression, are credit deficient, and/or who are pregnant or a parenting teen are likely to attend alternative schools (Knuston, 1999; Ray, 2010). Limited parental involvement is also a characteristic of students attending alternative schools (Foley & Pang, 2006).

In recent years, students with disabilities attending alternative schools have increased in number (Lehr & Lange, 2003; Lehr et al., 2009; Mitchell, Booker, &

Strain, 2011; Wasburn-Moses, 2011). For some students, school staff in the students' interim alternative education setting (IAES) placement must still implement the IEP from the original school. Although school officials assign students with disabilities to alternative schools, the legal mandate of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) still exists (Wilkerson et al., 2016). To insure that these legal mandates are implemented, well-trained, highly qualified teachers and paraprofessionals are critical to alternative educational programs and to the education of students in those programs (Brock & Carter, 2015; Gibson, Paatsch, Toe, Wells & Rawolle, 2015).

There are many studies focusing on training and professional development of teachers at alternative schools (Benedict, Brownwall, Park, Bettini, & Lauterbach, 2014; Foley & Pang, 2006; Hemmer, Madsen, & Tores, 2013; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Quinn et al., 2006; Ricard, Lerma, & Heard, 2013). Yet, despite the increased utilization of paraprofessionals at alternative schools, there is a gap in the literature with regards to their professional development needs (Benedict et al., 2014). Carter, O'Rourke, Sisco, and Pelsue (2009) reported little research has been done on paraprofessionals' responsibilities at alternative schools and noted that research is needed to “explore the skills and competencies needed by paraprofessionals within these settings” (p. 357). Maggin, Wehby, Moore-Partin, Robertson, and Oliver (2009) asked, “How are paraeducators expected to provide quality instruction or support without sufficient training or supervision?” (p. 8).

Jones and Bender (1993); Giangreco, Edleman, Broer and Doyle (2001); and Giangreco (2013) reviewed the literature on the utilization, perceptions, training, and efficacy of paraprofessionals from 1957 to 2013. They reported the need for future research in the areas of specific job-related training for paraprofessionals, paraprofessional support at the secondary level, and collaboration among paraprofessionals and teachers to clarify paraprofessionals' roles in alternative school settings.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine classroom management responsibilities and professional development needs of paraprofessionals working with secondary students with disabilities in inclusive settings at alternative schools designated as Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs (DAEPs). The Safe Schools Act of 1995 mandated that Texas public school districts have DAEPs which serve as alternative education settings for students temporarily removed from their regular instructional setting for disciplinary reasons (Texas Education Agency, 2007; 2015). The researchers were seeking information to assist campus administrators in designing professional development for paraprofessionals based on the needs of the students, the program, and the expressed needs and preferences of paraprofessionals.

Research Questions

The primary research question of the study was: How can secondary campus administrators address the professional development needs pertaining to classroom management of paraprofessionals working with students with disabilities in inclusive settings at alternative schools?

There were two supporting research questions, noted below:

1. What responsibilities and duties do administrators and teachers at alternative schools report are important for paraprofessionals working with students with disabilities in inclusive settings?
2. How do paraprofessionals at alternative schools rate their skills and confidence level to perform assigned duties?

Sampling

A purposive sampling, which is a nonrandom sampling approach, was used. Purposive sampling was most appropriate because it allowed the researchers to deliberately set the criteria for site and participant selection (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012). The criteria set for alternative schools and participants were believed to be representative of the population for the purpose of the study. The researchers invited school staff at six alternative schools in Central Texas to participate. The selection process for alternative schools was similar to a process used by Hoge et al. (2014). To qualify for the study, the alternative school had to be a designated site for the DAEP for the local educational agency (LEA).

The participants for the study were paraprofessionals, teachers, and principals/administrators who provide instruction and/or supervise students with and without disabilities. The participants were divided into three subgroups: Paraprofessionals, Teachers, and Principals/Administrators. For each subgroup, the following numbers of participants were invited to volunteer: Paraprofessionals, 25; Teachers, 98; and Principals/Administrators, 9, for a total of 132 participants. Of the total 132 school staff invited to participate, 56 submitted usable surveys resulting in a total response rate of 42%.

Instruments

The researchers used surveys as the data collection instrument for two primary reasons. Surveys offered the possibility of anonymity and the researchers were able to design questions relative to the study (French, 1998; Gay et al., 2012). The survey used for this study was an adaptation of the needs assessment inventory used by French (1997, 2001, 2003b) who stressed the importance of a team approach when managing and working with paraprofessionals. According to French (2001), several things must be considered when assigning duties and responsibilities to paraprofessionals: the needs of the students, the needs of the program, and the skill level of the paraprofessionals.

This approach formed the framework of the instrument used in this study.

The researchers began with French's (2001) questionnaire, which consisted of 28 items, many with multiple parts. The items were drawn from three sources: (a) practices identified in the literature, (b) findings of a pilot study French conducted, and (c) various state or regional training needs (Passaro, Pickett, Latham, & HongBo, 1991). Fourteen national experts reviewed French's original questionnaire and established content validity. A group of 23 special education teachers then pilot-tested the instrument and gave written comments on items in regard to clarity, terminology, and structure, with the final instrument reflecting recommendations of both groups.

For the current study, the researchers created a matrix of the original 28 multipart items of French's instrument, matching items to one or more of the research questions. Items were adjusted to insure alignment with the questions. A panel of experts then reviewed instrument items, comparing each item to relevant tasks and responsibilities identified in the literature (Carter et al., 2009; French, 2003a; Giangreco, 2003; Ray, 2010). Based upon this review, items were either reworded or eliminated or new items were created, resulting in 11 additional items. The researchers asked a panel of teachers and administrators to review the revised instrument and to give specific feedback on survey items. This review resulted in adjustments in wording and format to specific items and to the overall structure of the survey.

To determine reliability of the instrument, a pilot group of teachers and administrators completed the survey. Two weeks later the same group completed the instrument a second time. The researchers then examined each item to establish the degree to which respondents made the same responses on both the first and second administrations of the survey. Results indicated very little variation between the two sets of responses.

The researchers asked the Teacher and Principal/Administrator subgroups to indicate their perceptions regarding the relative importance of tasks and responsibilities for paraprofessionals working with students with disabilities in inclusive settings. The Paraprofessional subgroup rated their skill and confidence level to perform the tasks. Similar to a study conducted by French (1998), the items on the two subgroup surveys are parallel with slight wording variations to reflect differences in perspectives between the groups.

Results and Discussion

All three subgroups completed the domain sections consisting of tasks/duties administrators and teachers feel are important for paraprofessionals working in inclusive settings and paraprofessionals' skill level/confidence in performing those duties. The researchers organized the analysis according to the research questions and domains for each subgroup.

Duties and Responsibilities of Paraprofessionals

The first question examined addressed the responsibilities and duties which administrators and teachers at alternative schools perceive as important for paraprofessionals at alternative schools. As seen in Table 1, the responsibilities and duties in all seven of the domains were reported as being of moderate importance or above (i.e., ratings of 3, 4, or 5) by the majority of the administrators as evident by the overall domain means being 3.0 or higher. Administrators reported the Ethics Domain, with a mean of 4.7(.26), as having the highest average of tasks and duties rated as important for paraprofessionals, followed by the Behavior Management Domain with an overall mean of 4.4(.59).

The Supervision of Groups of Students Domain and Team Participation/Membership Domain were tied with overall means of 4.1. The Delivery of Instruction Domain and the Clerical Work Domain overall means were 3.9(.29) and 3.6(1.4) respectively, followed by the Activity Preparation/Follow-up Domain with the lowest overall mean of 3.0(.67).

Table 2 displays the teachers' perceived importance of responsibilities and duties. Teachers reported the responsibilities and duties in all seven domains as being of moderate importance or above (i.e., ratings of 3, 4, or 5) by the majority of the teachers as evident by the overall domain means being 3.0 or higher. Teachers reported the Ethics Domain, which had an overall mean of 4.9(.18), as having the most task items rated as very important, followed by the Behavior Management Domain with an overall mean of 4.5(.41). The other domains with overall means of 4.0 or higher were Team Participation/Membership and Delivery of Instruction. Based on the overall domain means for Supervision of Groups of Students, Activity Preparation/Follow-up, and Clerical Work, the majority of teachers did not rate many of the items in these domains as being above moderate importance.

Skill and Confidence Levels of Paraprofessionals

The second question examined addressed paraprofessionals' perception of their skill and confidence level in regard to their performance of assigned tasks. As indicated in Table 3, the majority of paraprofessionals reported they were well prepared and confident to perform their assigned duties as shown by the overall domain means being above the moderate level (i.e., ratings of 4 or 5) for each of the seven domains. The three domains with the highest overall ratings were: Supervision of Groups of Students ($M = 4.9$, $SD = .19$); Ethics ($M = 4.7$, $SD = .31$); and Behavior Management ($M = 4.5$, $SD = .39$). The Ethics Domain was the only domain where all the paraprofessionals reported at least moderate levels (i.e., ratings of 3, 4, or 5) of preparedness and confidence for each item task.

Summary of Results

Overall, campus administrators and teachers were in agreement that the majority of tasks in each of the domains were of moderate importance or above; and the majority of paraprofessionals reported having above moderate skills and confidence to perform the tasks. The data indicated that the domains in which paraprofessionals' responsibilities mainly involved providing support directly to students were rated as being of most importance by administrators and teachers (see Table 4 for domain rankings for subgroups).

These results support the existing literature which indicates that support provided by paraprofessionals is shifting away from being teacher directed to being more student directed (Carter, Sisco, Melekoglu, & Kurkowski, 2007; Carter et al., 2009; Cook & Friend, 2010; French, 1998; 2001; Giangreco et al., 2001; Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010; Jones & Bender, 1993; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). French (2003b) reported that paraprofessionals "frequently provide instructional services alongside the student rather than alongside the teacher" (p. 1). Carter et al. (2009) reported that 97% of paraprofessionals stated they provided one-on-one instruction and instructional support in small groups most frequently.

Although the overall results of the present study do support a shift toward paraprofessionals' responsibilities being more instructional, there appears to be some discrepancies among the subgroups. For example, Clerical Work and Activity Preparation were the domains with the lowest overall means for administrators and teachers. But, for paraprofessionals the Clerical Work Domain had an overall mean higher than the Delivery of Instruction Domain.

The Ethics Domain emerged as being the domain with the most task items rated as very important for paraprofessionals by principals and teachers and the second highest domain in which paraprofessionals reported being highly skilled and very confident at performing. This was of particular surprise because, with the exception of the ethical practices of hiring and supervising paraprofessionals as outlined by IDEA and NCLB (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2006; de Cohen, 2006; French, 2001; Giangreco, 2013; Giangreco et al., 2010; Lehr et al., 2009; Pickett, Likins, & Wallace, 2003; Trautman, 2004; Wasburn-Moses, 2011), research on the training provided to paraprofessionals pertaining to ethical duties and responsibilities seems to be limited.

However, in a study by Carter et al. (2009) paraprofessionals reported they received training on ethical practices for confidential communication about students. It can be concluded from the present study that paraprofessionals are provided professional development regarding ethics as paraprofessionals reported being highly skilled with the responsibility of maintaining confidentiality regarding student information.

Table 1

Overall Domain Means: Principals/Administrators

Domain	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean(SD)
Delivery of Instruction	7	3.40	4.20	3.9(.29)
Activity Preparation/Follow-up	7	2.11	3.78	3.0(.67)
Supervision of Groups of Students	7	3.29	4.83	4.1(.59)
Behavior Management	5	3.50	5.00	4.4(.59)
Ethics	5	4.40	5.00	4.7(.26)
Team Participation/Membership	5	3.00	5.00	4.1(.80)
Clerical Work	5	1.00	4.56	3.6(1.4)

Table 2

Overall Domain Means: Teachers

Domain	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean(SD)
Delivery of Instruction	37	2.80	5.00	4.1(.47)
Activity Preparation/Follow-up	36	1.89	5.00	3.4(.96)
Supervision of Groups of Students	37	1.71	5.00	3.7(.79)
Behavior Management	37	3.50	5.00	4.5(.41)
Ethics	35	4.40	5.00	4.9(.18)
Team Participation/Membership	34	2.60	5.00	4.2(.68)
Clerical Work	35	1.44	5.00	3.4(1.0)

Table 3

Overall Domain Means: Paraprofessionals

Domain	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean(SD)
Delivery of Instruction	12	2.90	5.00	4.3(.71)
Activity Preparation/Follow-up	12	3.00	5.00	4.3(.61)
Supervision of Groups of Students	12	4.43	5.00	4.9(.19)
Behavior Management	12	4.00	5.00	4.5(.39)
Ethics	12	4.00	5.00	4.7(.31)
Team Participation/Membership	12	3.00	5.00	4.4(.54)
Clerical Work	12	3.50	5.00	4.4(.56)

Table 4

Domain Rankings for Subgroups

Administrators/Principals	Teachers	Paraprofessionals
Ethics	Ethics	Supervision of Groups of Students
Behavior Management	Behavior Management	Ethics
Supervision of Groups of Students	Team Preparation/Membership	Behavior Management
Team Preparation/Membership	Delivery of Instruction	Team Preparation/Membership
Delivery of Instruction	Supervision of Groups of Students	Clerical Work
Clerical Work	Activity Preparation/Follow-up	Activity Preparation/Follow-up
Activity Preparation/Follow-up	Clerical Work	Delivery of Instruction

Behavior Management and Supervision of Groups of Students were in the top domains of importance for all three subgroups. This result tends to corroborate the prevalent literature that paraprofessionals are increasingly being given the task of managing the behaviors of and supervising students with the most challenging behaviors (Breton, 2010; Giangreco, 2013; Lehr et al., 2009; Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl, 2001). However, the majority of paraprofessionals in the present study reported being highly skilled and confident in managing the challenging behaviors of students. This result contradicts the findings of Giangreco (2013) who reported paraprofessionals are the least qualified or have little training to effectively manage students who exhibit challenging behaviors.

Although paraprofessionals reported being well prepared and highly confident with behavior management, professional development is still needed in the area of providing behavioral support according to students' IEPs. Two specific task items in the Behavior Management Domain that administrators and teachers reported as being very important for paraprofessionals were to give positive support as directed by plans/IEPs and to assist other students in coping with behaviors of specific students. However, less than a third of paraprofessionals reported being well prepared and highly skilled at performing these tasks.

Supervision of Groups of Students was the domain in which the majority of paraprofessionals reported being well prepared and highly confident to perform. It should be noted that all the paraprofessionals gave themselves the highest rating on the task items requiring supervision in nonacademic areas (e.g., supervise during arrival and departure, lunch, passing periods). This result could be viewed as a contradiction to the prevalent literature which indicates a shift towards more instructional responsibilities.

The contributing factor to the high ratings of supervision in nonacademic areas cannot be determined in this study. However, if paraprofessionals rated this area highly because of being assigned to supervise students in nonacademic settings for the majority of their workday, this would contradict the prevalent literature. But, it would be consistent with the findings of Wallace et al. (2001) that paraprofessionals spent the majority of their day monitoring students in nonacademic settings (e.g., lunchrooms, study halls, playgrounds).

Delivery of Instruction was the domain with the noticeable difference among the subgroups. For the administrators and teachers, delivery of instruction was about midpoint of the other domains with responsibilities they considered very important for paraprofessionals. Surprisingly, of all the domains, paraprofessionals reported being the least prepared and confident at performing these duties. These results support the contentions of Cook and Friend (2010) and Giangreco (2013) that, despite the shift of paraprofessionals towards more responsibility for instruction, paraprofessionals continue to lack the training and the credentials to perform effectively in instructional roles. Based on the contentions of these writers, it can be concluded that the paraprofessionals in the present study lack the necessary training to perform their instructional responsibilities confidently.

In addition, the lack of role clarification regarding instructional responsibilities in the inclusive setting may have also contributed to the paraprofessionals in the present study reporting not being well prepared to perform instructional duties. Role delineation of paraprofessionals regarding the increasing responsibility given to them for delivering instruction has been the focus of several studies. For example, Giangreco et al. (2010) referred to defining appropriate roles for paraprofessionals as "an elusive and

unresolved issue” (p. 52). Carter et al. (2007) suggested that direct support of students “will require clear delineation of paraprofessional roles within the inclusive classroom coupled with well-designed training” (p. 224).

Multiple researchers agree that the instructional process in alternative program classrooms is transforming into a collaborative partnership between teachers and paraprofessionals (Breton, 2010; French, 2003a; Giangreco, 2003; Giangreco et al., 2010; Liston, Nevin, Malian, 2009; Malian, 2011; Riggs and Mueller, 2001). This is supported by the results of the present study. Principals and teachers reported the majority of the duties in the Team Preparation/Follow-Up Domain as being very important. However, there appeared to be a conflict of perceptions with administrators on the importance of paraprofessionals attending parent conferences and other student-focused meetings, such as IEPs for students with identified disabilities, versus preparing the paperwork and maintaining the files for the meetings.

Almost a third of principals in the present study rated paraprofessionals’ attendance at meetings as not important or only somewhat important. But, over half of the principals reported preparing paperwork and maintaining IEP files for the meetings as very important. Based on this evidence, the researchers conclude that in order for paraprofessionals to be more effective at preparing and maintaining the files for these meetings, their attendance at these meetings is just as important.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

A number of implications and recommendations for practice that may be beneficial to alternative school campus administrators and other professionals can be made from this study.

1. **Implication:** There is a noticeable difference between the subgroups regarding Clerical Work and Delivery of Instruction responsibilities. For principals and teachers, Clerical Work and Activity Preparation domains were reported as having the items of least importance and ranked below delivery of instruction. Yet, paraprofessionals reported being more prepared and confident performing clerical duties than instructional duties.
Recommendation: Provide professional development on curriculum and instructional strategies to increase paraprofessionals’ effectiveness and confidence when providing instructional support to students.
2. **Implication:** Paraprofessionals reported being well prepared and highly confident regarding their ethical responsibilities. However, about a fourth of paraprofessionals were not skilled or confident regarding procedures for reporting suspected child abuse.
Recommendation: Professional development regarding ethical responsibilities needs to be

focused more towards district and campus policy regarding procedures for reporting suspected child abuse and neglect.

3. **Implication:** At alternative schools, behavior management and supervision of students are among the top responsibilities of paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals reported being well prepared to handle the responsibilities of supervision in nonacademic settings. Regarding behavior management, paraprofessionals were least prepared and confident at providing support as directed by students’ IEPs.
Recommendation: Professional development should be geared towards modeling what supervision of students looks like in academic settings and on implementing behavior management plans and providing behavior support in accordance with the procedures outlined in IEPs.
4. **Implication:** Role clarification is needed to effectively support all students, including those with disabilities.
Recommendation: Principals need to work with general education and special education teachers to clarify their responsibilities for providing instruction in classrooms; then they need to establish appropriate responsibilities for paraprofessionals. Also, campus and district administrators need to work with state administrators to develop standardized competencies for assessing paraprofessionals’ performance in inclusive settings.
5. **Implication:** There is a disconnect between principals’ perceptions as to the importance of paraprofessionals actually attending parent conferences and other student-focused meetings versus only preparing the necessary paperwork for these meetings.
Recommendation: Paraprofessionals should attend the parent/student conferences of students for which they provide services. Instruction on effectively communicating appropriate information about students’ performance and abilities should be the focus of professional development.

Limitations

Limitations of this study may be the use of surveys as the only means of data collection. Although there are many advantages to using surveys, there are a few disadvantages that may affect the validity. For example, because a survey is a self-report measure, the participants might not answer truthfully. Also, participants may answer incorrectly because of not having a clear understanding of what is being asked. The lack of a standard definition for alternative schools and consistency across DAEPs may also be limitations to this study. To address this, the researchers set clear criteria for DAEP site selection. In addition, the small sample size of this study may generate generalization concerns. However, the researchers selected six different campuses from different LEAs to address this concern.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future researchers need to explore efficient and effective ways to provide professional development to paraprofessionals at disciplinary alternative schools. Some suggestions include consultation model, team-based trainings, Web-based trainings, and university partnerships. Experimental or quasi-experimental research needs to be conducted at alternative schools to determine the best ways to equip paraprofessionals to provide instructional support in classrooms. Also, although the supervision of paraprofessionals at alternative schools was beyond the scope of the present study, future research is recommended in this area. Doing so may lead to district and state administrators developing basic core standards to better prepare paraprofessionals to effectively provide services to students in alternative programs.

Campus administrators should conduct a needs assessment to determine the needs of the students and the program, then use the data to identify and prioritize training needs. In the present study, researchers determined that paraprofessionals needed professional development in the area of providing instructional support to students, with OJT being the preferred delivery method. This study is not an all-inclusive guide for providing professional development for paraprofessionals in disciplinary alternative schools; it is a resource that can be used to augment the process.

As with traditional campuses, principals and administrators at alternative schools have a responsibility to ensure staff members are qualified to perform their assigned tasks (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2006). This will require that paraprofessionals receive appropriate professional development to improve their knowledge and skills. The quality of that professional development can ultimately impact the quality of service they provide to students in alternative programs.

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