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An Examination of the Current Status of Paraprofessionals through their Lens: Role, Training, and Supervision

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Revisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 allowed for districts to hire teachers' aides to assist in the educational process. These teachers' aides, known as paraprofessionals or paraeducators, have increased in number since 1997 and now play an important role in helping students with disabilities. The purpose of the current study is to diagnose the current situation of paraprofessionals in special education within the four key aspects of appropriate role, inappropriate role, training, and supervision. A total of 47 paraprofessionals participated in the survey. Using the paraprofessionals' perspectives on what the challenges and demanding areas were, we aim to establish a basis for providing teachers and school administrators guidelines to better support paraprofessionals who work with students with disabilities. Future research and limitations are discussed.

Keywords: paraprofessionals, roles, responsibilities, training, supervision

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), reauthorized in 2004 from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1990) has served as a guideline for educating students with disabilities. The new provisions of IDEA, in conjunction with other legislation such as No Child Left Behind (2001), Every Student Succeeds Act (2018), and Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-192; 1975), mandate that all children are to receive an education from a highly qualified adult regardless of disabilities. Thornton, Peltier, and Medina (2007) pointed out that highly qualified adults should be a team including a highly qualified and licensed special education teacher and related professionals that accommodates their educational needs. Steinbrecher, McKeown, and Walther-Thomas (2013) defined these "highly qualified teachers" as teachers that are knowledgeable and capable of supporting children's learning based on each child's unique challenges and educational needs. Despite the educational right that children with disabilities to have access to a team of professionals qualified to assist the children in the educational process public schools have had a consistent shortage of special education

teachers (White, 2004). One of the reasons for this shortage has been a high ratio of students to teachers, which has made it challenging to meet the needs of all students in the caseload (Friend & Cook, 2013, p. 246).

In an effort to help ease the burden on the special education teachers and, ultimately, to promote a quality education for students with disabilities, an amendment to IDEA in 1997 first mandated school districts to hire teachers' aides to assist in the educational process (Shyman, 2010). This amendment's aim was to ensure students with disabilities' education rights in the least restrictive environment (Katsiyannis et al., 2000). The reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 also included this amendment and defined teachers' aids as paraprofessionals or paraeducators; and based on the amendment in IDEA (2004), Katsiyannis et al. (2000) defined paraprofessionals are "school personnel who provide instruction or other direct services to children under the supervision of teachers or other licensed professionals" (p. 297).

Since the first amendment to IDEA in 1997, when the role of the paraprofessional was first included in the wording of the law, many studies have reported that large numbers of paraprofessionals have been employed by school districts (Brock & Carter, 2015; Dover, 2002; Fisher & Pleasants, 2012; Katsiyannis, Hodge, & Langford, 2000; Suter & Giangreco, 2009). In 2014, over 415,000 paraprofessionals were employed by school districts, while under 340,000 special education teachers were employed (US Department of Education, 2017), which shows that there are approximately eight paraprofessionals employed for every seven special education teachers employed. As the number of paraprofessionals has continually increased, a growing body of research has explored future directions for paraprofessionals and has focused on aspects of their challenges, expected roles, responsibilities, and training (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012). Many questions and concerns still prevail as to qualification criteria, training, and the role of paraprofessionals in the educational process. (Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2001).

Previous Research: Qualification Criteria and Challenges

IDEA (2004) requires that paraprofessionals need to meet state standards, be trained accordingly, and be supervised by a teacher or other qualified personal (IDEA Subchapter II, Section 1412 (a)(14)(B)), but leaves particulars about acceptable criteria or training up to the states and the local education agencies (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012). Within this federal law requirement, Giangreco, Doyle, and Suter (2012) provided guidelines for local educational agencies to help ensure that paraprofessionals are being used effectively in the classrooms. The four key points outlined in the guidelines are that (1) the paraprofessionals' role is clearly defined (appropriate role), (2) paraprofessionals are not asked to do something that is not appropriate for their role (inappropriate role), (3) paraprofessionals are appropriately trained (training), and (4) paraprofessionals are supervised in fulfilling their assignments (supervision).

Appropriate role. Giangreco et al. (2012) stated that the roles of paraprofessionals and teachers need to be clearly defined in order to support the effective use of paraprofessionals. A case in the Office of Civil Rights (Katsiyannis, Hodge, & Lanford, 2000) requested that school districts specify the responsibilities

of professionals in response to parents' requests regarding fulfilling the needs of their children. Many studies have also attempted to clarify the role of paraprofessionals; however, as there has been an increasing trend in the number of paraprofessionals and their roles have had to undergo a rapid transformation directly related to the teaching and learning process (Groom, 2006), much confusion still exists.

Riggs and Mueller (2001) surveyed paraprofessionals to determine if they had a clear understanding of their job expectations and roles when they first accepted employment. Some reported that they were given written descriptions of job expectations; however, the findings indicated that a majority did not find the descriptions helpful and still did not know what exactly paraprofessionals are required to do in education. Riggs and Mueller's (2011) work showed that paraprofessionals did not fully understand about the roles they are expected to fulfill. This lack of role clarification could be a cause of workplace stress for paraprofessionals (Shyman, 2010). According to Shyman (2010), lack of role clarification was one of the four biggest predictors for the emotional exhaustion in paraprofessionals. Knowing that emotional exhaustion has been one of the biggest catalysts in turnover for teachers (30-40% within the first five years; Shyman, 2010), Shyman (2010) suggested that the same might be said for paraprofessionals.

Not only have paraprofessionals been shown to be unclear about what their roles are, special education teachers also have not had a clear understanding about these roles (Douglas, Chapin, & Nolan, 2016; Dover, 2002; Wallace, Shin, & Bartholomay, 2001; Katsiyannis, Hodge, & Lanford, 2000; Jones, Ratliff, Sheehan, & Hunt 2012). Special education teachers need training on how they can best support the paraprofessionals under their supervision because teachers cannot support paraprofessionals to fill their roles when supervising teachers do not know these roles are. Both teachers and paraprofessionals need clear definitions of paraprofessionals' roles and expectations. Devlin (2008) suggested that teachers should create a team with the paraprofessionals they are supervising to make sure the paraprofessionals are confident in their assignments. Although providing written job descriptions has not been successful enough to ease confusion (Riggs & Mueller, 2001), Devlin (2008) recommended that each teacher creates a description of each paraprofessional's assignment (e.g., what they are to do and what is expected of them).

Inappropriate role. Since many paraprofessionals have failed to have a clear understanding of their job expectations, some do things that are outside or beyond their intended job descriptions in trying to fulfill assignments that are unclear to them (Giangreco & Broer, 2007). Several studies (e.g., Giangreco & Broer, 2007; Fisher & Pleasants, 2012; Suter & Giangreco, 2009) found that the paraprofessionals surveyed responded that planning lessons (more than 25%) and making decisions about curriculum adaptation without consulting a supervisor (70%) were a part of their assignment. In fact, Suter and Giangreco (2009) found that paraprofessionals spent more time on instruction (58% of their time) than special education teachers spend on instruction for students in general education settings (39% of their time). In addition, the study also found that 11% of the schools surveyed reported that the paraprofessionals they hired were actually

making decisions about instruction without special education teachers' supervision, while 66% of the schools reported this only happens sometimes. This situation could go against the federal regulations in that these core instruction-related tasks (e.g., planning/designing lessons and making decisions about curriculum) are critical parts of individualized education plans (IEPs), which require expertise and professional experience. These tasks are also teachers' unique and specialized areas that must be completed by special education teachers along with other certified professional team members (e.g., psychologists, clinic experts, and therapists).

Using paraprofessionals in inappropriate roles can have an adverse impact on students with disabilities. Broer et al. (2005) interviewed students with intellectual disabilities who were assigned a paraprofessional to assist their education in the classroom. One of their findings was that students with disabilities in general education classrooms relied so heavily on paraprofessionals that they were not able to understand lessons without them being retaught by paraprofessionals. This relates to concerns that a fair amount of teacher's role has been shifted to the paraprofessional. Special education teachers are responsible to accommodate students' academic needs by adjusting the level of instruction in initial teaching or reteaching in order to guarantee students' right to receive a quality education.

Downing, Ryndak, and Clark (2000) also expressed concerns about paraprofessionals' co-leading teaching and making decisions along with special education teachers. According to Downing et al. (2000), paraprofessionals were actively involved in decision making that directly affected students' education even though they thought of themselves as the least-trained members of teams. All of this indicates a need to establish clear roles and expectations of paraprofessionals and to clearly indicate their roles not only to the paraprofessionals themselves but to other related members of the community such as teachers and administrators. A clear understanding of the roles of paraprofessionals will also reduce any confusion to students as well as teachers.

Training. Each state determines its own requirements for becoming a paraprofessional (IDEA, 2004), and paraprofessionals are legally required to be continuously trained and supported by certified professionals for the services they are assigned to in each student's IEP (Douglas, Chapin, & Nolan, 2016; Katsiyannis, Hodge, & Langford, 2000). Types, methods, and components of training can differ across states and school districts and can depend on the paraprofessionals' assignments. For example, some school districts have the teachers provide paraprofessionals' training while others provide district-wide training (Friend & Cook, 2013). Some training may focus on how to execute evidence-based practice to better support special education teachers in teaching students (Brock & Carter, 2015; Trautman, 2004), while other training may focus in particular on classroom management for paraprofessionals who are being assigned this task (Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2001). While training aspects may be different, it is important that all paraprofessionals receive training for their specific job assignments.

Despite the fact that paraprofessionals need to be properly trained, the amount of training

paraprofessionals receive is very small. Several surveys (e.g., Brock & Carter, 2015; Katsiyannis, Hodge, & Langford, 2000; Riggs & Muller, 2001; Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl, 2001) conducted with paraprofessionals, parents, teachers, and administrators have indicated that paraprofessionals themselves felt they were not sufficiently trained or confident. Even worse, few received pre-service or introductory training prior to employment. Some parents even observed that paraprofessionals needed to be re-trained to provide services for their children. The importance of training for paraprofessionals was more understood by paraprofessionals and parents than by teachers and administrators. This may be due to a lack of social recognition, in that paraprofessionals were unlikely to be accepted as a trained group involved in students' education. A lack of systemized support, financial aid, and resources has also made it difficult to provide training for paraprofessionals (Riggs & Muller, 2001).

Supervision. IDEA (2004) states that paraprofessionals need to be supervised by a certificated or licensed teacher or other professional. While school administrations are ultimately in charge of the supervision of paraprofessionals, special education teachers do more of the direct supervision of paraprofessionals in order to ensure that paraprofessionals are effectively assisting students in learning situations (Carnahan, Williamson, Clarke, & Sorensen, 2009; Katsiyannis, Hodge, & Langford, 2000). Supervision also allows teachers to help paraprofessionals develop the skills needed (Brock & Carter, 2015; Brown, Gatmaintan, & Harjusola-Webb, 2013; DaFonte & Caprizzi, 2015; Robinson, 2011).

However, there have been concerns raised about paraprofessionals not being properly supervised. Riggs and Muller (2001) and Shyman (2010) found that most paraprofessionals interviewed responded that the quality of their supervision from teachers was not satisfactory or helpful. Approximately 25% indicated that they did not receive daily supervision, and more than half of them had not been observed by their supervisors more than a few times during their employment, which could lead to questions about whether the provisions of IDEA were being met in practice. Moreover, most paraprofessionals were not even sure who their supervisors were, indicating that no systematic and hierarchical structure had been established to support them. The confusion got worse when working one on one in a general education classroom where both a general education teacher and a special education teacher were involved in making educational decisions about students. Douglas, Chapin, and Nolan (2016) found that paraprofessionals who worked with students with disabilities in a general education setting spent much of their day away from the special education teacher and were supervised 7% of the time by the special education teacher. Therefore, clear roles and expectations need to be provided not only for paraprofessionals but for their supervisors.

Study Purpose

Recognizing the concerns about paraprofessionals that have been raised in previous studies, the purpose of the current study is to diagnose the current situation of paraprofessionals in special education within the four key aspects of appropriate role, inappropriate role, training, and supervision suggested by Giangreco et al. (2012). From the paraprofessionals' perspectives on what the challenges and demanding areas were, we aim to establish

a basis for providing teachers and school administrators guidelines to better support paraprofessionals who work with students with disabilities. Following questions guided this study:

1. How are appropriate and inappropriate roles for paraprofessionals being explained to them, if they are being explained at all, and is that information helpful?
2. In what areas do paraprofessionals feel they need the most training, and in what way would they like that training delivered?
3. Do paraprofessionals communicate adequately with those who supervise them?

Method

The survey was conducted in a rural unified school district (Pre-school through Grade 12) in southern California. This school district was identified as needing differentiated assistance by the first California Dashboard release in Fall 2017 due to achievement gaps between students with and without disabilities on the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress tests; students with disabilities also showed higher suspension rates than students without disabilities. The school district at that time had an enrollment of 5,085 students, including 747 (14.69%) students who had been identified as having disabilities and who had IEPs. The district employed 46 full-time special education teachers, 130 paraprofessionals to support students with disabilities, and additional speech and language pathologists, adaptive physical education specialists, and occupational therapists.

The school district offered several non-mandatory forms of training to paraprofessionals. Topics for this training included behavior didactics and discrete trials (four four-hour evening classes during school days to discuss and address students' behavior), crisis prevention institute (CPI; Friday evening and all-day Saturday), and applied behavior analysis (during school hours).

Participants

A total of 47 paraprofessionals employed by the rural school district in Southern California, United States voluntarily participated in the present study. Of the participants, 36.1% (n = 17) held associate degrees or higher while 17% (n = 8) had only completed high school. The participants varied greatly in years of experience as paraprofessionals: less than a year (n = 6), 1-3 years (n = 14), 4-6 years (n = 8), 7-10 years (n = 9), 11-19 years (n = 7), and 20 or more years (n = 3). The participants worked in various settings, with over half of the participants (n = 24) working in a special day classrooms (SDC) public schools, 23.4% (n = 11) in general education settings, 21.28% (n = 10) in other settings, and 4.26% (n = 2) in settings they were not sure about. The grade levels in which the participants worked were as follows: 61.70% (n = 29) paraprofessionals worked with secondary school students (Grades 6 to 12) and 38.3% (n = 18) with preschool to elementary school students (age 3 through Grade 5). Lastly, 23.4% (n = 11) of the participants worked one on one with students.

Measure

The lead researcher developed a survey with the purpose of answering the research questions posed for the study. Three surveys developed and used in previous studies to examine multiple

aspects of paraprofessionals' work (Archibald, 2008; Connecticut State Department of Education, 2013; Stratton, 2014) served as a basis to structure a format and develop survey items. The surveys from the Connecticut State Department of Education (2013) and Stratton (2014) were developed as measures to evaluate paraprofessionals' efficiency, satisfactory, and responsibilities in their roles. And the survey created by Archibald (2008) with the purpose of examining the impact of the No Child Left Behind law on the role and responsibilities of paraprofessionals. Considering the four aspects of the study framework (appropriate role, inappropriate role, training, and supervision), we sampled a total of 43 questions, including 25 questions from the Connecticut State Department of Education (2013), 8 from Archibald (2008) and 10 from Stratton (2014); and among the items, some items were adjusted to the study purpose. All items were thoroughly discussed with the director of the school district and the special education local plan area and reviewed by a special education expert. As a result, 4 items added to explore future directions for increasing retention of paraprofessionals, and 14 items were revised to explore types and areas of support needed in training and any concerns or challenges in paraprofessionals' current employment for that specific school district.

The survey included a total of 47 items and was developed into six main sections: (1) background information about the participants, (2) general feelings and attitudes about their assignments, (3) appropriate and inappropriate role clarifications, training, and supervision they received, (4) possible factors that help or hinder retention, (5) future potential training and suggestions, and (6) open-ended questions. For the second section about general feelings and attitudes, 21 statements were included that used a 5-point Likert scale to rate each statement.

Data Collection and Analysis

After the survey items were finalized, the survey was created online so that participants have easier and completely anonymous access. On behalf of the researcher, the district distributed the online link for the survey to paraprofessionals who were employed by the school district and willing to participate. Prior to the survey, information and expectations about the study (e.g., study purpose and confidentiality) were explained to the potential participants. Participants were given three days to complete the survey. For the data analysis, only completed surveys were used. Frequency count was used for most of the items, and for open-ended items, two researchers independently evaluated them and discussed their evaluations afterward.

Results

Questions about participants' general feelings and attitudes regarding their assignments, contributions, confidence, and collaboration and support were asked to measure the satisfaction level in their assignments (see Table 1). Overall, the average scores across the 21 statements asked ranged from between 3.70 and 4.72, indicating that the participants had fairly positive attitudes about and satisfaction with their working positions.

Table 1.
Complete Results from the Ranking Section

Statement	Not at all (1)	A little bit (2)	A moderate amount (3)	A fair amount (4)	A whole lot (5)	Average
Assignment						
There is a clear academic vision for the room I work in.	1	3	8	13	22	4.11
I understand the vision of the room I am in.	0	5	2	9	31	4.40
The room I work in is a caring and nurturing place.	0	2	3	9	34	4.66
Expectations are high in the room I work in.	0	2	10	11	24	4.21
Contribution						
I feel my contributions in the room I am in are important.	0	1	5	6	35	4.60
I feel that I contribute to student learning.	0	0	3	9	34	4.59
Confidence						
I feel comfortable assisting the teacher in academic support.	1	1	2	5	38	4.66
I feel comfortable managing students' behavior under the teacher's supervision.	0	2	4	4	37	4.62
I feel comfortable carrying out assessment activities requested by the teacher.	0	0	1	11	35	4.72
I have adequate understanding of my roles and responsibilities.	0	0	3	10	34	4.66
My professional development is tailored to the students' needs.	1	2	7	8	29	4.32
I am comfortable using technology to support student learning.	1	3	3	10	30	4.36
I feel adequately trained to do my job.	2	4	2	13	25	4.20
I am adequately trained to be an effective paraprofessional.	1	1	6	16	23	4.26
I feel respected by the teacher I work with.	0	0	3	7	37	4.72
Collaboration and Support						
The teacher encourages collaboration in the room to increase student learning.	2	3	7	9	26	41.5
The teacher gives me regular and helpful feedback about my assignments.	2	3	9	10	24	4.13
The staff I work with let the staff in the room know what is expected of them.	0	2	11	14	20	4.20
I am given opportunities for professional development.	3	7	6	12	19	3.70

I effectively collaborate with the teacher I currently work with.	0	1	4	7	35	4.47
The teacher encourages my career development.	3	5	8	8	23	3.91

Among the four sections, satisfaction level (i.e., the percentage of a fair amount and a whole lot satisfactory levels; at or above 4 points in Likert scale) was the highest in contribution (90.32%), followed by confidence (88.15%), assignment (80.95%), and collaboration and support (73.14%). Although a little more than 73% of participants responded that they received a fair amount to a whole lot of collaboration opportunities and supports, it was noticeable that 11.79% were still not agreeable (not at all or a little bit) and 17.11% were neutral. In particular, participants showed the lowest satisfaction level in support of promoting their professional development, which was covered in two statements, "I am given opportunities for professional development" and "The teacher encourages my career".

Additionally, participants were asked about areas where they struggle in their current positions. Their responses indicated that most of the participants (70%; n = 32) experienced struggles in classroom management (n = 16), instruction of curriculum (n = 8), and time management (e.g., getting everything done on time; n = 8). Other areas of struggle included collaboration, not knowing how to help in the classroom, student motivation, and perceived lack of rigorous curriculum (see table 2).

Roles

Participants were asked how adequately they understood their roles and responsibilities ("I have an adequate understanding of my roles and responsibilities"). A total of 72% (n = 34) of the participants reported that they felt they had a great understanding of their roles and responsibilities followed by 28% (n = 13) who had moderate to fair amount of understanding. None of the participants reported that they did not understand their role or only understood it a little bit. In the next section of the survey, the participants were asked if the expected roles and responsibilities for their current assignment were provided, and, if they were, in what ways. Among the participants, 23% (n = 11) were provided written expectations about roles and responsibilities when they first start working in their current position, which they found helpful. Information about classrooms to which the participants were assigned was given verbally (74%), only in written form (11%), or in both verbal and written form (4%). Interestingly, 13% (n = 6) indicated that they were never given information about what was expected from them in the classroom. Participants who received written information additionally reported that information was given by means of a book, a quick synopsis of the students' behavioral needs and copies of students' IEP goals, a schedule, a teacher- or supervisor-written document about expectations of students and teachers, and other instructional aids.

Table 2.
Areas of Need Reported from Paraprofessionals

Areas of Need	%
Area of Struggle (Ranking)	
Instruction of curriculum	17.78
Classroom management	35.36
Getting everything done that needs to be done	17.78
Not knowing how to help in the classroom	6.67
Collaboration	6.67
Not enough academics provided	2.22
Student motivation	4.44
No concerns	8.89
Total	100.00
Area of Concern (Open-Ended)	
Training	39.47
Collaboration	21.05
More work hours for paraprofessionals	5.26
Increase communication for district	5.26
Understanding of job expectations and consequences	18.42
Paraprofessional retention	2.63
Need for other staff to be trained and understand paraprofessionals' role	2.63
Increase academic activities and classroom resources	5.26
Total	100.00

Professional Development and Training

The importance of providing professional development to increase the retention rate of participants was represented with an average of 4.28 out of 5 on the Likert scale, indicating that participants viewed professional development and training as critical factors to remaining their position. This was even strongly supported by more than half of the participants (53%; n = 25). While most of the participants realized the importance of professional development and training, three statements were asked regarding how much they are trained for the position ("I feel adequately trained to do my job," "I am adequately trained to be an effective paraprofessional," and "I am given opportunities for professional development"). In the first two statements, 82.8% of participants expressed that they felt they were trained with more than a fair amount of adequacy, while 8.6% were not confident about preparedness for the position. In addition, in another statement about whether they were given opportunities for professional development, 66% responded that they were provided more than a fair amount of opportunities for professional development to be trained for their current assignment, while the remaining 34% felt that they lacked opportunities professional development.

We also explored types of training or professional development paraprofessionals have received and wish to receive in the future. For training and professional development that they had received, the findings show that a majority of the participants had received behavior didactic training (81%; n = 38) and CPI training (72%; n = 34) that the school district had developed for employee education. Applied behavior analysis (ABA) training was also provided to 15% (n = 7) of the participants, six types of training (implicit bias, suicide prevention, MOVE International mobility training, or other Autism Spectrum Disorder training) were provided to less than 5% of participants, and 4% (n = 2) responded that they had received no training at all to support their working position (see figure 1 for a list of types of training).

In addition, for future professional development and training, we found that there was a high need in behavior management (64%), academic support (43%), collaborative communication skills (40%), assessments (38%), and time management (23%). Fewer than three participants expressed the need for CPI, ABA, visual impairment, and refresher training (see figure 2).

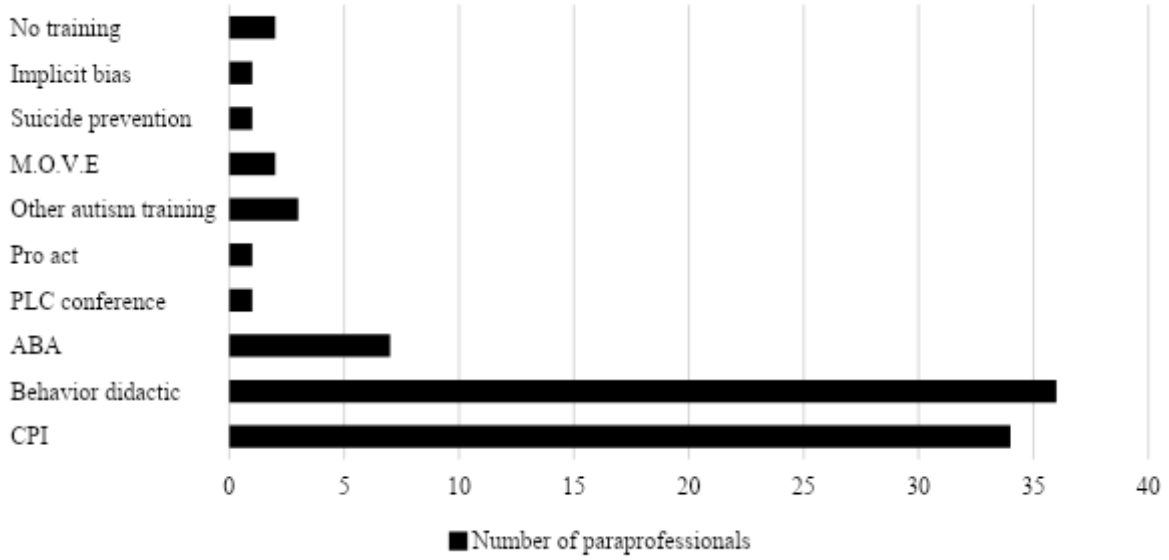

Figure 1. Types of Training Paraprofessionals Have Taken

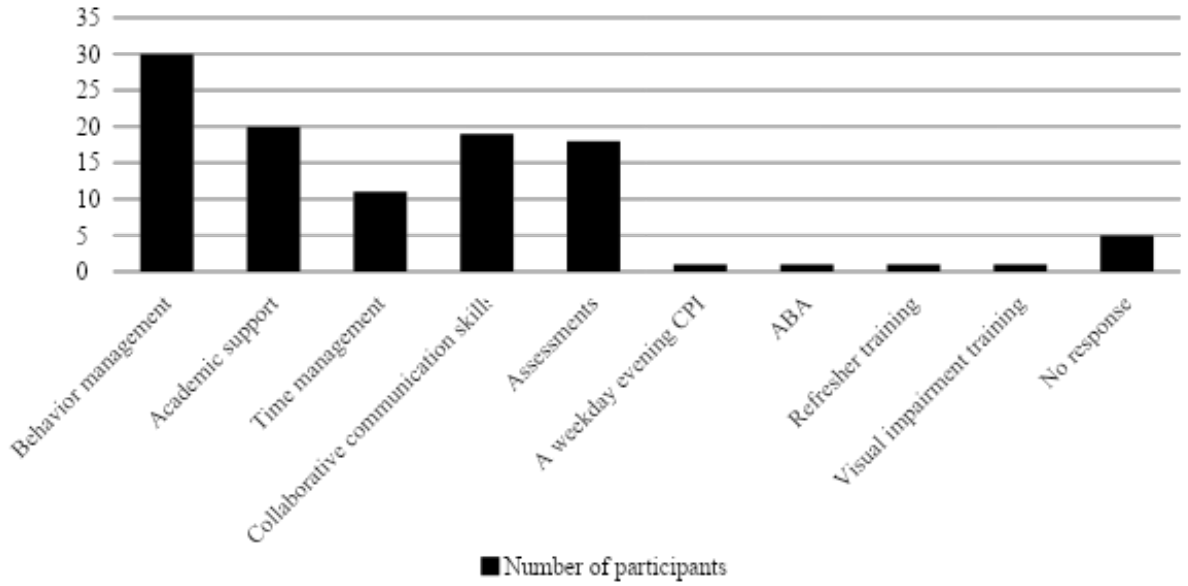

Figure 2. Areas of Training Paraprofessionals Reported They Would Like to Receive

Moreover, we also examined two aspects of the administration of training and professional development. First, participants were asked about their preferred forms of training and professional development. There was no distinguishable difference across participants' preferred forms of training. 68% of the participants preferred lecture/discussion sessions (n = 32) followed by 62% for on-the-job training (n = 29) and 60% for a hybrid of lecture/discussion and on the job (n = 28), while only 40% preferred online training (n = 19). Second, participants were asked about the best time to administer or receive training. Similar to the preferences in the form of training, there was no clear difference in preference for time. Attending training on weekdays after school was most preferred (n = 32), followed by training during the school day (n = 27) and training on the weekend (n = 24).

Supervision and Collaboration

We also examined how the struggles reported by paraprofessionals were addressed by supervisors. One question asked about opportunities for communication with supervisors about concerns, and more than half of the participants (53%; n = 25) reported that they have talked to teachers about their concerns, while 28% of participants reported that they had brought concerns up with an administrator and only 6% had nothing done regarding their concerns. These concerns or issues were mostly addressed through communication in either verbal or written form. Less than 8% of participants did not feel their concerns had been resolved after talking with supervising teachers or administrators.

In addition to examining how paraprofessionals' concerns were handled, collaboration opportunities and time with teachers were considered a part of supervision. Sixty-two percent (n = 29) of participants reported that they had time to collaborate with the teacher they work with. When the results were broken down by grade level (elementary and secondary),

more participants who worked at the secondary grade level had more opportunities and time for collaboration (66% for secondary, 56% for elementary). Fisher's exact test indicated that a difference between two grade levels on collaboration time was not significantly different ($\alpha = .05, \chi^2 = .38, p = 0.54$). When the results were broken down by role type (one-on-one and classroom paraprofessionals), more classroom paraprofessionals (participants who work with more than one student; 67%) had more collaboration time than one-on-one paraprofessionals. Fisher's exact test indicated that a difference between the two role types of collaboration time was not significantly different ($\alpha = .05, \chi^2 = 2.04, p = 0.15$).

Lastly, we asked for any suggestions or comments to increase the retention of paraprofessionals. Thirty-two percent (n = 15) of the participants pointed out the importance of variety training for paraprofessionals, followed by improvement of collaboration opportunities (n = 8), clarification of definition of paraprofessionals including role expectations for paraprofessionals (n = 7), communication (n = 2), and time (n = 2). Other comments included an increase in appropriate academic activities and needed supplies.

Discussion

The present study surveyed paraprofessionals in order to diagnose the current situation of paraprofessionals in special education. Based on examining the challenges, concerns, and demanding areas from the paraprofessionals' perspectives, we aimed to provide a solution for teachers and school administrators to better support the paraprofessionals and ultimately increase retention. Four main areas, appropriate role, inappropriate role, training, and professional development, and supervision were thoroughly examined through paraprofessionals' perspectives. Our findings confirmed the previous findings while making several unique contributions to the current body of literature. Most participants in the study had responsible attitudes about their positions but expressed a particular need for training and professional development.

First, we found that information about roles and expectations was not clearly or efficiently provided. Some participants indicated that they had not been provided any information regarding their current assignment either verbally or in writing. Although more than 70% of participants received information about their roles, those who received verbal information did not find it useful. They indicated that verbally delivered information about roles caused them a great deal of confusion because they lacked permanent materials they could go back to and review. The participants who received information via written material found it helpful in understanding their current assignments.

Regardless of receiving information that was poorly delivered or not receiving any information about their roles, most of the participants responded that they had more than a fair amount of understanding about their roles and expectations. This was evidenced by 72% of participants reporting that they had a good understanding of their roles, which should not be a major concern that affects retention. This finding contradicts previous studies (e.g., Riggs & Mueller, 2001), where authors viewed a lack of understanding of roles as being a significant factor to consider.

Second, among the three areas of concern, role clarification, professional development and training, and supervision, professional development and training was the most significant area that needed to be improved. A majority of participants responded that they had few opportunities for professional development and training appropriate to their assignments. The number of professional development or training opportunities the participants received varied from none to an average of two per year. Most of the professional development and training opportunities were district developed or facilitated, which was discovered to be the most efficient way to further train paraprofessionals.

For types of training provided, the most needed and demanding areas were behavior and classroom management (e.g., behavior didactic class), followed by strategies in academic support, communication skills, and assessment. This confirms the previous findings of the study by Riggs and Mueller (2001) that paraprofessionals desired more training in behavior and classroom management and academic support strategies, as these were the areas in which they struggled the most. Although most of them felt fairly confident and comfortable assisting the teacher with academic instruction, paraprofessionals also wanted to be trained in supporting students in academics. In addition, paraprofessionals also wanted to receive training or professional development in collaborative communication skills. When looking at their responses to open-ended items, we found that effective communication helped immensely in resolving and addressing paraprofessionals' concerns. This was not limited to communication with supervising teachers but also included communication with administrators, staff, principals, or other related colleagues. Moreover, paraprofessionals wanted to be trained in assessments, which brings up the question of whether administering assessments should be or has been requested as a part of paraprofessionals' roles and duties.

We found that paraprofessionals preferred a hybrid method of delivery of professional development and training where they are taught skills and strategies through a combination of learner-centered discussion and instructor-centered lecture and where they have a chance to follow up in their classroom to ensure they are implementing the strategy correctly. Several studies (Brock & Carter, 2015; DaFonte & Caprizzi, 2015; Robinson, 2011; Brown, Gatmaintan, & Harjusola-Webb, 2013) have noted that supervisors' feedback on paraprofessionals' performance in the classroom increased their ability to implement research-based strategies. It is interesting to notice that the paraprofessionals would like to be trained in the same manner that has been shown to be effective. Currently, the school district in this study does not provide classroom follow-up training, and also lacked follow-up services to keep their performance monitored and evaluated. In addition to various types of quality training and professional development, this indicates that training should embed follow-up monitoring or coaching systems to better support paraprofessionals.

Additionally, we discovered that the time that training was offered was an important factor to consider. Most paraprofessionals would prefer training to be on the weekdays after school. Behavior didactic training was provided on weekdays after school, which may be the reason why this training had a high attendance rate. In

contrast, CPI training, which was offered on Friday evenings and Saturdays had the fewest number of paraprofessionals attend. Although the school district provided incentives for training done outside of work hours by providing hourly financial compensation to those who do training outside of their regularly scheduled hours, the findings showed that offering as many training and professional development opportunities as possible during regular hours or after school on weekdays will increase paraprofessionals' attendance rate.

In addition to the need for training for paraprofessionals, we found that related professionals such as administrators and teachers also need to be trained to supervise and understand paraprofessionals' roles in better ways. After collaborating for two years with a school district, Jones et al. (2012) also found that not only should paraprofessionals be trained, but teachers and paraprofessionals be trained separately then together as a team.

Third, collaboration played an important role in increasing paraprofessionals' understanding of their roles. A majority of participants reported that they had time to collaborate with their supervising teachers. These collaboration opportunities were not different between elementary and secondary settings and between one-on-one paraprofessionals and paraprofessionals who work with more than one student. We found it important that supervising teachers and administrators should be proactive in communicating with paraprofessionals on a regular basis or when concerns arise. As the results indicated, few participants felt their concerns were solved after they communicated with administrators, while they were fairly satisfied after communicating with supervising teachers.

Limitations and Future Direction

We found several limitations in this study as a part of an action research project. Although the survey was created using the previous survey items, we had a lack of validity and reliability information. Participants were recruited from one district, which may limit the findings from being generalized across other districts or states. Moreover, because participating in the survey was voluntary, results may not have accurately captured the current situation.

As the current study serves as a pilot study that explores the current challenges that paraprofessionals face, future studies are necessary to find more systematic ways of supporting paraprofessionals and developing a strategic plan to increase retention. Based on the diagnosis of the current situation, future studies can also examine paraprofessionals' attitudes and changes in retention by implementing a greater amount and greater variety of methods of training and professional development in order to solve the challenges and concerns addressed. Ultimately, future studies can also determine whether more qualified paraprofessionals can benefit students with disabilities in a variety of aspects such as academic performance and behavior.

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