

***Insights Gained from Special Education Pre-Service Teachers Interviewing
Paraprofessionals***

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Abstract

In this study 25 student teachers receiving endorsement in special education interviewed paraprofessionals and self-rated their ability to perform a variety of paraprofessional supervision tasks. The paraprofessionals expressed desires for increased training and skills in behavior management; increased training in general; communication with special educators; and respect as professionals. The student teachers stated that the interview process helped them set career goals and were helpful in preparing them to supervise paraprofessionals. They rated their ability to supervise paraprofessionals higher after the interviews. The results have implications for teacher preparation programs as the results note that there needs to be coursework that explicitly teaches supervision and management of paraprofessionals and which teaches preservice special educators to be trainers of paraprofessionals, not just teachers of students.

Keywords: Special education, paraprofessionals, preservice, teacher education

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Paraprofessionals are an important component of education, but tend to have ill-defined roles, poor or nonexistent supervision, and may be over-relied upon to work with students with disabilities, even as their numbers rise (Giangreco, 2013). Paraprofessionals, once considered primarily clerical workers, are now called upon to do many jobs in the classroom, including but not limited to one-to-one, large group, and small group instruction, instructional planning, and behavior management (French, 1998; Keller, Bucholz, & Brady, 2007; Sharma & Salend, 2016). They can, in fact, be the primary means of accommodation and inclusion for students with more severe disabilities (Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, & Bovaird, 2007).

Beginning teachers may be called upon to provide paraprofessionals with opportunities for professional development as well as supervision and support (Appl, 2006). This may or may not happen. A study in Maine found that while 60.5% of special education paraprofessionals interacted with their supervising teachers on a weekly basis for purposes of student instruction, 15.9% never had any consultation in the area of student instruction (Breton, 2010). It is important that teachers work with paraprofessionals; “the role of the teacher as the leader of ongoing and daily professional development for paraprofessionals is one that is critical to the field” (Stockall, 2014). When teachers do take the time to train and coach paraprofessionals on techniques, the training can be effective and lead to improved student outcomes (Carnahan, Williamson, Clarke, & Sorensen, 2009; Brock & Carter, 2016; Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010). Some components of teachers working effectively with paraprofessionals include building

a shared philosophy, communicating effectively, training for specific tasks, having regularly scheduled meetings to encourage collaboration, and conducting ongoing performance assessments (Carnahan et al, 2009; Maggin, Wehby, Moore-Partin, Robertson, & Oliver, 2009). Including paraprofessionals on the instructional team and supporting them is linked to lowered paraprofessional turnover (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007).

Despite this, special educators receive almost no training on working with and supervising paraprofessionals (French, 2001; Giangreco et al, 2010; Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl, 2001). There have been calls for college programs to provide instruction on this aspect of the career (Appl, 2006, Wallace et al, 2001; Steckelberg, Vasa, Kemp, Arthaud, Asselin, Swain, & Fennick, 2007).

Student teaching for special education is linked to positive outcomes; special education teachers with longer and more rigorous student teaching experiences are more likely to remain in the field (Connelly & Graham, 2009). However, in student teaching for special educators, where students acquire their hands-on skills for their chosen profession, less than 2% of institutions require that students work with a paraprofessional and some programs do not even discuss this aspect of the career (Conderman, Morin, & Stephens, 2005; Douglas, Chapin, & Nolan, 2016). Therefore, this study sought to gauge the effectiveness of a student teaching practice that would increase students' knowledge of the roles that paraprofessionals play in education, in this case interviewing paraprofessionals about their roles, training, and supervision. Interviews are a valuable aspect of qualitative research that enables the discovery of feelings and interpretations of experiences and past events (Merriam, 2009). This study attempted to 1) incorporate an understanding of the roles and perspectives of paraprofessionals into a special education student teaching experience, 2) collect data on the perspectives of paraprofessionals, and 3) gauge the effect of interaction with paraprofessionals on the perspectives of special education student teachers.

Method

Recruitment and Procedures

The study was vetted and approved by an institutional review board and student participants were trained in use of the consent procedures and interview protocol. The student teachers were recruited for participation from the small public Northeast college where they were completing their degrees. The students were enrolled in coursework and were assigned to complete the interviews as part of their program, but participation in this study was on a voluntary basis. Students who agreed to participate consented to the use of their reflections on the procedure for the study. The student teachers were trained on interview techniques, research ethics, and transcription processes and provided with the interview protocol. The students arranged an interview with a paraprofessional, whom also had the option to consent to have their interview used in this study. (If a student consented to be a part of the study but a paraprofessional did not, the data was not used.) Student teachers conducted, recorded, and transcribed their interviews and reflected in writing on what they learned from the experience. Student teachers also rated themselves both before and after conducting the interviews on their preparedness to work with paraprofessionals on a variety of areas.

Interview protocol

The protocol (see Table 1) was created in collaboration with the first group of student participants. Using a body of research on special education and paraprofessionals (Giangreco, 2013; Giangreco et al 2004; Giangreco 2005; French, 2001) the students and the lead researcher composed questions which would help them understand the experiences of paraprofessionals and improve their supervision abilities.

Table 1
Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about a typical day for you. (What sort of tasks, instruction, etc. do you do?)
2. Describe the training that you've had.
3. What training do you wish you had?
4. What areas of your job do you feel particularly strong in? Why?
5. What areas of your job do you struggle with? Why?
6. How comfortable are you with special education laws?
7. What support do you need for effective behavior management?
8. Who is your direct supervisor? Describe their supervision. (How often do you meet with them? How often would you like to meet with them? Are their expectations clear? Are they consistent? Are they readily available? Do you feel supported?)
9. How would you like to be supervised, supported, or collaborated with?
10. Do you plan your own lessons? Are you confident in delivering academic support or instruction?
11. Is it ever confusing to figure out your role in the general education classroom? Why?
12. What do you enjoy least about your work? Most?
13. What would you want a special educator to know about supervising paraprofessionals?

Participants

25 student teachers and 25 paraprofessionals participated in the study. All 25 student teachers were completing their semester-long student teaching experience and were being licensed to teach and endorsed in both elementary and special education. All 25 student teachers consented to the use of their pre/post data, and 21 consented to the use of their reflections. With the exception of ethnicity, the paraprofessional participants had a variety of backgrounds, as provided in Table 2. (Note: one participant chose to not disclose demographic information).

Table 2
Paraprofessional Demographic Information

		Number of Paraprofessionals (N=25)
Gender	Male	2 (8%)
	Female	22 (85%)
Years in Current Position	Less than Five	11 (48%)
	Five Years or More	13 (52%)
Age	20-30	7 (28%)

	31-40	3 (12%)
	41-50	5 (20%)
	51-60	8 (32%)
	61-70	1 (4%)
Highest Level of Education	High School	3 (12%)
	Some College	4 (16%)
	Associate's	2 (8%)
	Bachelor's	13 (52%)
	Master's	2 (8%)
Ethnicity	White	24 (96%)

Data analysis

The transcribed data was subjected to qualitative analysis using the procedure described by Merriam (2009), in which the data is read and coded and categories and themes are created. Representative quotes were compiled to illuminate the themes. First the paraprofessional interview data was analyzed, then the student reflection data. The quantitative student self-evaluation data was also compiled and analyzed for any changes before and after the interviews were conducted.

Results

Interviews

The paraprofessional participants repeatedly turned to four themes during their interviews: behavior management, training, respect and support, and communication.

Behavior Management

While there were four participants who cited behavior management as a strength, the majority of the responses which referenced behavior management were negative. Seven participants listed it as the weakest aspect of their performance, and the need for behavior training and supervision was repeated throughout the interviews. "I think it is challenging and I also think that we have not had enough training" was one comment which echoed this theme. Eleven participants listed behavior as an area in which they would like more training. "I would like more [training] on emotional and behavioral needs. We see so much in that area because there's so much poverty," said one, with another stating "The training I wish I had would be on behaviors. If anything, I would want more training on how to deal with behaviors and how to motivate kids."

Training

Aside from specific responses about behavior management training, the need and desire for more training overall was a theme that ran throughout the interview responses. "Training? What training?" was the response of one participant when asked what training she had received. Eight of the participants stated that they had received no specific training during their time as paraprofessionals. Others answered this question by discussing other experiences – parenthood, college, career experience – but not actual job-based training. The desire for behavior management training as noted above was accompanied by a call for more training in general, which participants believed would improve their job performance. "We need more training too. It's hard to be thrown into a position and not understand the ways to deal with something," said one participant. Another stated "Without any training, I lost time trying to figure things out. If I

had more training, I feel I would have been able to do more academics and would have been a bigger help to my student sooner. Trying to do it alone was hard.” This was echoed by a participant who stated “We enjoy learning about new topics related to special education. If we are going to be working with students with intensive academic needs, there needs to be some kind of training that we receive in order to continue our own learning to help benefit the students.”

Respect

The need to be respected and supported by special education teachers and other supervisors was a consistent theme throughout the interviews. Fifteen of the participants gave responses in this theme when asked what they would like a special educator to know about supervising paraprofessionals. The paraprofessional participants repeatedly noted feelings of disrespect and a lack of appreciation. “I feel sometimes like I don’t have a brain... they have to decide that we don’t want people who are educated and treat them one way, or we want people that are educated and we treat them equally.” “Sometimes I feel like the teachers don’t believe that paras know much about anything and our opinions are not taken seriously.” “I struggle with how sometimes being perceived as ‘just the para’ and that my voice and the voice for my student or students is not heard. That equal relationship among adults is something that I struggle with.” “I’ll be getting my Master’s so it’s not like we came in off the street in PJs and don’t know what we are doing.” At the same time, a common response was a desire to have that respect and appreciation, summed up by one participant who noted “I think that an assistant or paraprofessional or anybody would want to feel as if they are valued and part of a team. I think it’s nice to feel appreciated.”

Communication

The final theme to come out of the interviews was the importance of communication. Thirteen participants noted this theme when asked how they would like to be supervised, and six noted it as what they would want a special educator to know about supervising paraprofessionals. The paraprofessionals wanted their supervisors to meet with them regularly, to pass along important information, and to receive job feedback. “It’s always important to be honest and to make sure to communicate clearly;” “I would like to meet with [special educators] more often and have more check-ins. Sometimes the expectations aren’t as clear as they need to be;” “I would love to meet at least once a week to discuss academic and behavior issues” were some comments which showed the participants’ desire for frequent communication. Participants wanted to be invited to Team meetings in order to communicate their perspective. “I would like to have more of a voice for my students at their meetings but we are not invited,” noted a participant.

Reflections and Ratings

The student teacher interviewers also had themes develop in their reflections on the experience of conducting the interviews. These themes were goals and the helpfulness of conducting the interview.

Goals

The student teachers felt that they took away practical goals for themselves as far as being paraprofessional supervisors themselves. These goals echoed the above themes, as the student teachers wanted to be sure that they respected and communicated with paraprofessionals and

provided them with training. “It seems clear to me that the two most important things when it comes to supervising paraprofessionals is that they appreciate meaningful trainings that they can apply to their daily tasks as well as clear communication” said one student teacher. “I also know what I should do if I become a special educator to help support my paras. I will make sure that I talk with them and help them when needed.” One summed up their take-aways as “four words for me to remember are communication, collaboration, equality and respect.”

Helpfulness

The reflections were overwhelmingly positive on the experience of conducting the interviews. The student teachers felt that this was a valuable task that improved their preparedness. “I can say that I gained new knowledge about paraeducators and their roles,” said one. “Knowing that I have a job in the fall as a special educator I felt as if she was talking directly to me, preparing me to be the best case manager possible” said another. “Overall, this experience opened up my eyes to a new viewpoint on paraeducators... It has become an experience that will stick with me throughout the entirety of my teaching career.”

Rating data

While the student teachers wrote in their reflections that they found the interviews impactful, this was only borne out in a modest way by their pre- and post- self-rating on their readiness to supervise paraprofessionals. (Note: In cases participants indicated a score in between two rankings, the scores were considered to be the higher of the two rankings for both pre and post data.)

Table 3
Student Pre-Interview and Post-Interview Preparedness Rankings

	Not Prepared		Somewhat Prepared		Prepared		Very Prepared	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
Supervising Paraprofessionals			18	3	6	16	1	6
Academic Instruction			7		16	12	2	13
Collaboration			2		14	8	9	17
Behavior Management			12	2	13	18		5
Academic Planning	1		7	1	16	16	1	8

Table 4
Student Score Averages Pre-Interview and Post-Interview

	Average Pre Score	Average Post Score	Difference
Supervising Paraprofessionals	1.2	2.12	+.82
Academic Instruction	1.8	2.52	+.72

Collaboration	2.2	2.68	+.48
Behavior Management	1.5	2.12	+.62
Academic Planning	1.68	2.28	+.60
Overall	1.70	2.34	+.64

When converting the rankings to a numerical 0-4 scale, overall the average self-ranking of the student participants rose by .64 points. In each category there was a positive differential, indicating that there was at least some growth in self-perception of the ability to perform these tasks with paraprofessionals. However, though the interviews described the interview experience as being transformative, the ratings still show most students as being ‘prepared’ rather than ‘very prepared,’ showing that the growth may have been more in awareness than in practicable skills.

Discussion

Limitations

This study was conducted with a very specific cohort of participants who were not randomly selected. It focused on student teachers and paraprofessionals in one specific Northeastern state. Their experiences may not be comparable to those in other areas of the nation. This study also took place over the same period of time where the student participants were taking education classes and student teaching, meaning that the increased post self-assessment scores may have come from gains in experience or from concurrent coursework rather than directly from the interviews.

Implications for Teacher Preparation

These results have several implications for teacher preparation programs including a) the need for explicit coursework on supervision and management of paraprofessionals and b) the need for teachers to be prepared as trainers and knowledge distributors in their schools.

Coursework on Supervision of Paraprofessionals

The student participants in this study clearly stated that they felt unprepared to supervise paraprofessionals prior to participation in the study. After participation in this study and the completion of concurrent coursework, they felt more prepared, but perhaps not enough to be truly effective supervisors at the beginning of their careers. It has been noted repeatedly in the research that teacher preparation for special education is consistently lacking in training on working with and supervising paraprofessionals (French, 2001; Giangreco et al, 2010; Wallace et al, 2001). The paraprofessional participants in this study returned to themes of things that they wanted and found lacking in their supervising teachers: communication and respect. Special educators in particular are so overwhelmed with their workloads that turnover in the profession is high (Brownell, 2005). Special educators cannot become so overwhelmed by their other responsibilities that they neglect the basic supervision and communication with the paraprofessionals who work with the students on their caseloads. Teacher preparation programs must heed the call to include training in working with paraprofessionals (Appl, 2006, Wallace et al, 2001; Biggs, Gilson, & Carter, 2019; Steckelberg et al, 2007) in order to rectify this gap. Changes in teacher expectations have led to an expectation that special educators will need leadership skills, and explicit instruction in collaboration and communication skills (Smith,

Robb, West, & Tyler, 2010). Special education teacher preparation programs need to include direct instruction in these collaboration skills and their application to paraprofessionals, and the student teaching experience is a particularly apt time for students to practice these skills in a real-life situation.

Teachers as Trainers

The paraprofessionals in this study repeatedly stated their desire for more training. They wanted the knowledge necessary to improve their practice and the outcomes for their students, especially in the area of behavior management. The literature has shown that, while district or school-wide training may be important, the teacher may need to be the primary provider of training for paraeducators (Appl, 2006; Stockall, 2014). While special educators may be primarily focused on the students on their caseload, they can't forget that teaching paraprofessionals can have a trickle-down effect which can lead to improved student outcomes (Carnahan, Williamson, Clarke, & Sorensen, 2009; Brock & Carter, 2016; Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010). Teachers need to be open to passing on what they have learned in their college and professional development programs (specifically in the area of behavior management) to the paraprofessionals whom they supervise in order to fulfill multiple objectives: having a satisfied paraprofessional staff who feel respected and confident; increasing the ultimate state of student outcomes; and having a stronger overall behavior management standard in the classroom and school.

Summary

The voices of paraprofessionals tell a clear story: the need to be treated as professional educators, who need respect and support to do their work to the highest standard. The student teachers who interviewed the paraprofessionals found the experience to be impactful in their awareness and ability to supervise paraprofessionals in such a professional manner. Teacher preparation programs need to incorporate coursework and experiences to make sure that all special educators can enter the profession ready and able to complete this important work.

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