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The Career Advancement and Working Conditions of Multilingual Paraprofessionals in Special Education

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ABSTRACT

There is a critical issue of special education teacher shortages in the United States. Student populations, many of whom are multilingual and have disabilities, continue to grow while there is a decrease in the teaching workforce. One policy initiative developed to combat the teacher shortage is the Assistant to Teacher Program. The Assistant to Teacher Program is a school district policy that aims to fill high-need teacher vacancies by supporting paraprofessionals to become certified teachers in a career advancement cohort. This qualitative study examines the working experiences of multilingual paraprofessionals in special education and their perceptions of the Assistant to Teacher program within their school district. A thematic analysis reveals the bureaucratic and financial obstacles that multilingual paraprofessionals encounter in their career advancement, and their working conditions specific to special education as linguistic liaisons. Findings from the study are then linked to recommended policy actions intended to mitigate special education workforce disparities.

KEYWORDS

alternative route preparation, paraprofessionals, multilingualism, special education teacher shortage

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There is an intensifying national dilemma of special education teacher shortage across the United States (Peyton et al., 2021). According to recent statistics, 48 states and the District of Columbia, which includes 98% of the nation's PK-12 school districts (U.S. Department of Education, 2020), report shortages of special educators (CEEDAR Center, 2020). As the teaching workforce decreases, student populations continue to grow which include PK-12 students receiving special education services (National Education Association, 2019). Additionally, linguistic diversity is increasing in PK-12 public schools. Over 21% of respondents to the U.S Census Bureau

(2020) identified speaking a language different from English at home. Although many multilingual learners may be fluent in English as well as in their dominant home language(s), 10% of all students within the United States receive English language services that aim to advance their language acquisition (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). For a variety of reasons, there continues to be disproportionate representation of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse in special education programs (Gollnick & Chin, 2021).

One recommendation for supporting students who are culturally and linguistically diverse within special education is to diversify the teaching workforce and to provide supportive pathways into teaching (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Historically, multilingual students who have teachers who are also multilingual are more likely to make stronger academic gains than those students who have monolingual teachers (Ellis, 2004). Embedding students' home language learning experiences into instruction and providing culturally relevant practices when communicating with families may be contributing factors to these positive student outcomes (Wagner, 2021). However, current statistics show that while one-fifth of students in the United States are multilingual, only one-eighth of their teachers are also multilingual (Williams et al., 2016). Staffing an educational workforce with multilingual teachers is needed within special education to meet the academic and linguistic demands of the growing multilingual student population. One promising path towards acquiring certified special education teachers is to look within PK-12 settings at multilingual paraprofessionals who work with students with disabilities.

Multilingual Paraprofessionals and Teachers

Previous researchers have examined the role of paraprofessionals within special education and have identified them as an asset to the PK-12 school system (Delgado et al., 2021; Stockall, 2014). Paraprofessionals serve as essential personnel within special education as they assist students with disabilities to maintain and generalize their learned skills, organize the classroom environment to support teachers, and often perform small group instruction under the guidance of teachers (Biggs et al., 2019; Stockall, 2014). Additionally, paraprofessionals also create more time for teacher instruction when they teach independence and self-advocacy skills to students with disabilities (Delgado et al., 2021). Multilingual paraprofessionals are a unique subset of the paraprofessional population, due to their cultural wealth and proficiency in English and other language(s) (Yosso, 2005).

In short, multilingualism has both social and cultural benefits in PK-12 schools. First, multilingual teachers or paraprofessionals have multiple sources of information due to their ability to communicate in at least two languages (Kroll & Dussias, 2017). This skill is beneficial when communicating with non-English speaking students and their families who may share a common language with the multilingual teacher. In terms of language development quality, when teachers use students' home languages to explain academic concepts, there are also potential benefits for students to increase English language learning (Hindman & Wasik, 2015). For example, when multilingual teachers are familiar with and embed cognates (sets of words that are similar in English and the student's home language) into instruction, students gain English vocabulary skills (Tonzar et al., 2009). Furthermore, multilingual teachers' own language learning experience is a resource and a powerful contributor to conceptions of language, language use, and language learning (Ellis, 2004). Even when multilingual teachers or paraprofessionals do not share the same language as multilingual students, their lived experiences of acquiring another language benefit students' social and emotional well-being. The concept, commonly referred to as funds of

knowledge, is based on the premise that multilingual individuals have a wealth of cultural knowledge which they derive from their lived experiences (Marshall & Toohey, 2010). As such, multilingual communities serve as a resource for classroom teaching and reject the deficit mindset that students whose home language differs from English lack critical knowledge (Moll, 2019). Despite these benefits, there is an ongoing need for more multilingual teachers. Many schools have multilingual educators, yet they are paraprofessionals and not leading instructors (Williams et al., 2016). While some paraprofessionals remain in their instructional assistant role, some opt to advance their career and become certified teachers (Williams et al., 2016). One alternative route preparation path designed for paraprofessionals to become certified teachers is called Grow Your Own (GYO) Programs.

Grow Your Own Programs

A state credentialed alternative teaching licensure path for paraprofessionals to become certified teachers is one way to address the special education teacher shortage (Day et al., 2023). These policy initiatives are sometimes referred to as "Grow Your Own Programs." In this type of preparation program, school districts provide financial support and mentorship for paraprofessionals to advance their career and become certified teachers. GYO programs are one model of an alternative route preparation program designed to offer additional access to the teaching profession through homegrown pathways. These homegrown pathways consist of recruiting local community members (e.g., paraprofessionals, activists, parents, uncertified school staff, high school students) to become certified teachers through collaborative partnerships between teacher preparation programs, school districts, and community organizations (Garcia & Muñiz, 2019). Some GYO models in school districts target recruitment of paraprofessionals due to their successful employment in their current role. For example, the District of Columbia has allocated funds from the Teacher Preparation Emergency Act of 2021 to train paraprofessionals in the Relay Graduate School of Education to become teachers. The GYO program in the District of Columbia will serve paraprofessionals that are currently employed through a two-year residency program that results in a Master of Arts in teaching (MAT) and a teaching license (see www.osse.dc.gov). The purpose of this GYO and other similar GYO programs recruiting paraprofessionals is to strengthen the teacher pipeline and fulfilling high-needed teacher vacancies.

Despite the heightened special education teacher shortage, there has not been a GYO program to date that has exclusively recruited multilingual paraprofessionals who service students with disabilities. Additionally, there is limited research involving multilingual paraprofessionals working within special education. If we want to elevate this potential workforce to combat the special education teacher shortage, an understanding of the actual experiences of multilingual paraprofessionals is needed. This study features the voices of three multilingual paraprofessionals sharing their working experiences in an elementary school and their journey towards career advancement as certified special teachers/specialists in a GYO program. The purpose of our study was to investigate the funds of knowledge of multilingual school personnel, with the specific examination the experiences of multilingual paraprofessionals in special education and their perceptions of their GYO program within their school district. We investigated two research questions: (a) What are the experiences of multilingual paraprofessionals servicing students with disabilities in an elementary school? (b) What are their perceptions and experiences within their school district's GYO Program?

Method

A qualitative study was employed to explore the lived experiences of three multilingual paraprofessionals in servicing students with disabilities and their perceptions of career advancement to become certified special education teachers. A qualitative research design was purposefully chosen because of its capacity to examine the contextual and experiential influences of participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants included three paraprofessionals who worked at the same elementary school, participated in a GYO program, and achieved special education teacher/specialist certification. Semi-structured interviews were the primary data source used in this study. In addition, document analysis and observational data were used to inform the interconnectivity of multilingual paraprofessionals within the GYO program, and the influence that other school factors have on these paraprofessionals' working experiences. The GYO program featured in this study is the Assistant to Teacher Program. A description of this program and its subcomponents are provided for context.

The Assistant to Teacher Program

The program referenced in this investigation was called the "Assistant to Teacher" school district personnel program. Also commonly classified as a type of GYO program, the Assistant to Teacher Program recruited PK-12 employed paraprofessionals to become certified teachers through a university-school partnership. It was a school district cohort for paraprofessionals who wish to advance their careers by earning their teaching license in a selected area of specialization to become certified teachers. The Assistant to Teacher program provided paraprofessionals career mentorship, higher education course credit consultation, and full financial assistance for tuition. The eligibility, commitment, and participation requirements of the program are provided below.

Eligibility

Interested paraprofessionals were eligible to apply to the Assistant to Teacher program if they meet the following requirements: (a) employed for at least three consecutive years at the school district; (b) interested in being a teacher at this school district; and (c) satisfactory performance reviews and evaluations. Eligible participants were encouraged to apply through a detailed application process which consisted of an initial application form and interview. The written application consisted of the participant's resume, a written goal statement and short essay related to education, transcripts with relevant coursework, and two professional references. School district and university representatives reviewed applications and selected highly qualified candidates for an interview. Finally, the school district's human resources department and representatives from the local participating universities decided who would participate in the Assistant to Teacher program. If a paraprofessional was selected after the application process, they were required to sign a contract to ensure commitment.

Commitment

Following the application process and acceptance into the program, the participant signed a contract agreeing to: (a) complete the program; (b) earn a C or above in university teacher preparation coursework; (c) forward semester transcripts to the school district human resources

office after course completion to receive full tuition reimbursement; (d) gain a teaching licensure in an area of concentration approved by the state; (e) actively seek teaching opportunities when the licensure is obtained; and (f) become employed in the school district for at least three years from completion of the program. Failure to meet any of these requirements would result in the loss of scholarship and tuition would need to be repaid.

Participation

Participation in the Assistant to Teacher program included teacher preparation coursework with the affiliated university and advisory meetings with school district representatives. Coursework hours varied depending on participants' education and the state requirements for coursework under the chosen licensure area. For example, some paraprofessionals had their associate degree and applied to an undergraduate teacher preparation program to earn a Bachelor of Education; whereas other paraprofessionals already had a bachelor's degree and applied to graduate level teacher preparation programs to earn a Master of Education. Advisory meetings with school district personnel consisted of initial planning meetings, check-ins, resume building sessions, and mock interviews. Participation in the Assistant to Teacher program ranged from one to five years depending on the paraprofessional's additional coursework requirements.

Setting

The setting for this study was in an urban PK-5 elementary school in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The elementary school had 650 enrolled PK-5 students and was in a large school district with approximately 30,000 students annually enrolled. This elementary school was purposefully selected due to a large special education faculty population, several multilingual paraprofessionals, a large and varied special education student population (15%), and was in a school district that had a type of GYO program referred to herein as the Assistant to Teacher Program. Students attending the school identified as Asian (11%), Black/African American (15%), Hispanic (27%), White (41%), and Multiple races (6%). Many students (40%) spoke multiple languages, as there were over 40 different languages represented in the elementary school. Common home languages of students consisted of Spanish (22%), Amharic (6%), and Arabic (5%).

Participants

A purposeful sampling method was employed to recruit paraprofessionals within the elementary school (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants were required to meet the following criteria: (a) employed as paraprofessionals; (b) worked with special education students; (c) spoke another language in addition to English; (d) were considering or acquiring special education teaching license; and (e) expressed interest in the GYO program. After obtaining IRB approval, participants who met the selection criteria were recruited via email. Those from the school who agreed to participate (n = 3) were diverse in terms of age, linguistic background, and years of experience. All three participants were female and had been in the school district for at least 3 years. Their experience ranged from 4 to 14 years as paraprofessionals in PK-12 schools, and they all worked with students with disabilities. All participants had previously earned their bachelor's degree and

opted to pursue a Master of Education degree within special education. Pseudonyms have been used (see Table 1).

Table 1. ***Paraprofessional Participant Data***

Name	Age	Experience	Languages	Educational Background	Status of Special Education License
Cynthia	44	7 years	English, Spanish	B.S., Psychology	In process; Early Childhood Special Education
Lena	43	14 years	English, Malayalam, Hindi	B.Ed., Elementary Education; M.Ed., Assistive Technology	Inquired only about GYO program
Regina	27	4 years	English, Spanish	B.Ed., Early Childhood Education	In process; Early Childhood Special Education and PK-12 English Learners

Cynthia

Cynthia was a 44-year-old woman fluent in English and Spanish. She had migrated from South America as a young teenager to the United States, where she attended high school and later earned her bachelor's degree in psychology. Cynthia reported that she remembered how it felt to move to a new country, learn a new language, and adjust to new customs. Drawing from her own experience, she stated that she is passionate about helping multilinguals assimilate into the school so that they feel welcomed and have a positive learning experience. In Cynthia's paraprofessional role at the time of the study was as a "floater," which she described as someone who goes to different PK-5th grade classrooms to service students with disabilities. She reported that her schedule varied; sometimes, she supported students who accessed the general curriculum in inclusive classrooms while other times, she supported students who received adapted curriculum in sheltered special education classrooms. Her daily duties included helping students complete their academic work, implementing behavioral intervention plans, and helping students transition to various classrooms and activities. At the time of the study, Cynthia had seven years of experience servicing students with disabilities and had been participating in the Assistant to Teacher program for two years with intent to obtain a state teaching license in Early Childhood Special Education.

Lena

Lena was a 43-year-old woman fluent in English, Malayalam, and Hindi. She migrated to the United States from India as a young adult. Lena reported valuing the United States education system but referred to her education in India as her foundation. In India, she graduated from secondary school with honors and recalled learning multiple languages at a young age to be of great economic importance. This consisted of her acquiring her first language in Malayalam (her state language), Hindi (her national language), and English (the academic language in her school) all at a young age. Lena had earned a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and at the time of the study had recently earned her master's degree in Assistive Technology. She had 14 years of experience servicing students with disabilities and served in many paraprofessional roles during her career. This consisted of servicing students with low-incidence disabilities (e.g., Deaf and Hard of Hearing) as well as students with high-incidence disabilities (e.g., ADHD, Autism spectrum disorder, Learning disability) in an early childhood classroom. Lena inquired about the Assistant to Teacher program in her school district, but ultimately decided not to participate.

Regina

Regina was a 27-year-old woman fluent in English and Spanish. She was born in the United States and grew up in a bilingual home. She attended school in the United States for the entirety of her academic career, where she earned her bachelor's degree in early childhood education. At the time of the study, Regina had four years of experience servicing students with disabilities within the PK-12 school system and reported that she had additional experience servicing students in summer camps. At the time of the study, she serviced English language learners with disabilities in grades 1-5. Regina reported sometimes going into content-area classrooms to support students with their independent or group academic work. She also assisted English learners with disabilities in small, instructional remediation groups to review vocabulary. She reported collaborating with general educators, English learner teachers, and special education teachers to meet the various needs of students. At the time of the study, Regina was in her first year of the Assistant to Teacher program with intent to earn a dual teaching license in English learner/Early Childhood Special Education.

Data Collection

After obtaining participant consent, an initial demographic survey was completed by each participant followed by a semi structured interview. The demographic survey was administered by a Google Form and recorded participants' age, home language, first language, and/or preferred language; previous level of education; and the years of PK-12 working experience. Semi-structured interviews, conducted by the first author, served as the primary data source for informing the research questions. The purpose of the 1-hour interviews was to elicit descriptive information about their working experiences in special education and to document their unique participation in the GYO program. The interview protocol consisted of 25 questions that asked about the school community, relationships (i.e., with students, special education teachers, school administrators, and school district personnel). Questions also asked about job characteristics and day-to-day experiences within special education. Interviews were conducted 1:1 and recorded via Zoom. At the beginning of each interview, the first author developed a rapport with each participant by disclosing that she had also participated in a career advancement program when she was a paraprofessional who wanted to become a teacher.

Secondary data sources included documents such as information about the GYO program, instructions as to how to complete the GYO application, and the actual application. In addition, the first author conducted a 30 to 60 min observation of each multilingual paraprofessional working with students with disabilities. These took place prior to the interviews. The purpose of these observations was to better understand the school environment, participants' described roles and activities at the school, and to possibly cross verify content shared during the interviews. The interviewer took anecdotal field notes of the observations.

Data Analysis

A comprehensive thematic analysis of the interview data was completed with cross verification made with the secondary data sources (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The thematic analysis included transcribing the recorded interviews and reading over the transcripts to build familiarity with the content. This review was then followed by open coding. For one of the transcriptions, open coding was individually conducted by the lead author and a researcher who was not part of data collection. Each individual used an excel spreadsheet. Codes were initially deductively developed under the key constructs of school community and job characteristics reported from the participants. Then, the two researchers met to discuss the developed codes and considered their similarities and differences before collapsing codes or renaming codes, as needed. When relevant, the lead author shared observational field notes data or clarified GYO programmatic references with the other individual. From there, inductive axial codes were formed under theoretical discussion to align with the two research questions: (a) What are the experiences of three multilingual paraprofessionals of special education at their elementary school? and (b) What are their perceptions of and experiences with the GYO program in their school district? The axial codes were then reorganized under "barriers" of multilingual paraprofessionals servicing student with disabilities and "motivation" to remain in it or advance their careers. Qualitative analysis was then repeated for the other two participants' transcripts. After establishing a mutual agreement surrounding the axial codes, relationships were determined to then form categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Direct quotes from the interview transcripts were then identified to support each generated code and organized on one Excel spreadsheet (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

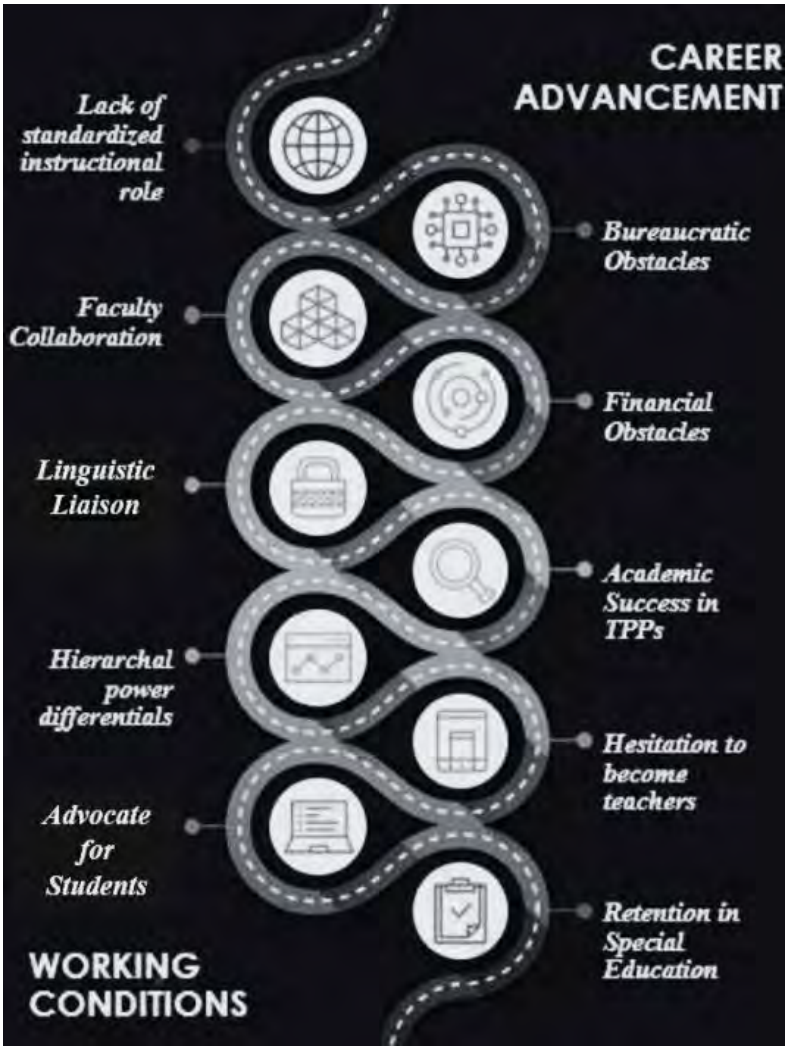
Trustworthiness

To enhance credibility in this study, several qualitative trustworthiness strategies were employed. First, member checking was administered with the participants to ensure that their viewpoints were accurately represented (Court et al., 2017). Participants received copies of their interview transcripts and they were given the opportunity to authenticate their shared responses, add any additional responses, and retract any of their previous responses that were misrepresented. Second, method source and investigator triangulation strategies were conducted to enhance trustworthiness. Method source triangulation consisted of the collection of multiple data sources about the same phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The multiple method sources used in this study included the primary data source, the semi-structured interviews, the work observational notes, and the Assistant to Teacher program information documents. The secondary data sources provided needed context and further verified the information obtained in the interviews. Third, triangulation involved the participation of two investigators for data analysis involving development of the initial codes, codebook, categories, and themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Findings

The thematic results from the study's participants were disaggregated by the two research questions: multilingual paraprofessionals' working experiences and their career advancement. For research question one (i.e., working experiences), the themes consisted of paraprofessionals experiencing (a) a lack of a standardized role; (b) faculty collaboration; (c) serving as a linguistic liaison and advocate for students; and (d) hierarchal differential powers. For research question two (i.e., career advancement), the themes consisted of the paraprofessionals' (a) perceptions of the GYO program; (b) bureaucratic and financial obstacles they encountered; and (c) academic success in university coursework. Each theme per research question is presented below followed by an overarching theme of *persistence in special education* (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Persistence of Multilingual Paraprofessionals in Special Education



Note. The paraprofessionals' persistence in special education was the overarching theme present in the analysis. Their persistence consisted of their expressed desire to remain as paraprofessionals despite their working conditions and career advancement experiences. Image was created using Microsoft Office Publisher.

Working Experiences

Lack of standardized role

All three paraprofessionals expressed that their working roles as paraprofessionals often varied within the school system. They expressed frustration that their work schedules frequently changed, and were given little instructional resources, and provided inadequate professional development to meet their students 'academic needs. For example, Lena stated the following:

> So as an instructional assistant, I have more than one role. And not only do I support the teacher, but I also am the teacher a lot of times. So, anything that a teacher does. My day starts with intervention groups, and I wish I had more resources to help these students, especially the EL [English learner] students. I have been struggling a little bit with that in the morning.

Cynthia also reiterated her various roles and her inconsistent schedule within special education:

> In my case, I'm a floater, so I go to different classrooms. I have been for the past few years. But this year, since it has been so different, I've been with pre-K, with the [special education] communications program just for a bit for like forty-five minutes and then third grade and fifth grade. So, it's been very different. Sometimes I get very attached to my students, so when I have a changing schedule, which I always do, but sometimes if they remove me from a student, I suffer, it's just so heartbreaking for me.

Participants during the interviews consistently emphasized that they met the academic, linguistic, and behavioral needs of students in a variety of ways. They expressed that they learned through "trial and error" while on the job and were given little to no formal professional development training. School observations confirmed that teachers had designated professional learning days with a variety of options, but paraprofessionals were rarely given any opportunities. Instead, they would be expected to organize classrooms on these designated professional learning days.

Faculty Collaboration

The three paraprofessionals reported that collaboration with teachers was a key factor of their job. They all reported positive experiences working with general and special education teachers to meet the instructional needs of their students. Regina noted that:

> I've actually collaborated with them [special education teachers] a lot on just finding visuals and also if they've adapted like a word problem. I may take that from them because remember, the language is just too heavy [referring to multilingual students with disabilities]. And that has helped a lot, especially with first grade. Now they're like learning the academic vocabulary. And I just wasn't sure exactly how to simplify them. But a first grade [general education] teacher provided like examples which helped me. Not even just like them providing materials, even just seeing what they're doing. I'm able to pull inspiration a lot of times.

Additionally, Cynthia stated:

> …and also [I enjoy] working as a team with my colleagues. When I am part of a teacher team I work well with, that's just very special because I feel that we're working with a common goal, which is to help the student.

However, all participants in this study also reported challenges working with some teachers and expressed specific concern over the large workload of special education teachers. Lena reported:

> You know, it's just like a basket of fruit. There are great teachers and they're so-so teachers and then there are teachers that don't want to work. So, it's like as an assistant, you're helpless. There's only so much you can do. So that's really where I'm drawn.

Cynthia also said:

> Okay, I have had good experiences and bad experiences. There was one department in the school where I did not feel appreciated, and I did not feel that people particularly cared about me. I did not feel accepted for who I was, for who I am. And that was not the best.

Therefore, while the paraprofessionals reported some positive experiences with teachers, all reported times of frustration and instances of disrespect.

Linguistic Liaison and Advocate for Students

A common theme among the working experiences of the study's participants was how they advocated for their students with disabilities. Some reported that they specifically advocated for their multilingual students with disabilities due to their personal English language acquisition experience. Additionally, all three paraprofessionals reported that communicating with families was particularly critical for their students' success during COVID-19 online learning. Cynthia related her language acquisition experience as a benefit to advocate for all her multilingual students with disabilities:

> I came here when I was 16, I can feel I can still feel like the connection with the students, you know, being new in the country and not knowing the language and everything, you know, that's it's very nice to be able to talk to the student to say, yeah, I've been there. And if other children look at them the wrong way or something you, I have to, like, stop myself from saying something to them. You know, I tried to always, like, help them, but I really become like I feel like in a way, I am their number one advocate. I want what's best for them and I want them to be accepted and integrated.

Regina reiterated that communication with families was especially essential during the COVID-19 shift to online instruction:

> …at least virtually keeping that connection with mom, talking to the mom frequently and making sure she knows, hey, this is what's going on and working with mom to come up with a good home plan, because her problem is that the mom has to work. So, she's home with the older siblings and she didn't have a desk at first to work out by herself. She just didn't have the right learning environment. So, it wasn't just creating a good learning environment at home, but also just doing frequent check ins.

Hierarchical Power Differentials

The participants expressed that their title as a paraprofessional was not taken as seriously on the job compared to certified school personnel. These types of hierarchical power differentials within the school were expressed by all three participants in this study. Paraprofessionals frequently experienced a lack of communication, support, and resources from administration.

Lena referenced an occasion when she asked for help from administration:

> We can ask once, we can ask twice, we can ask thrice, we'll be lucky if we get help. I have no voice. I can say things, but I cannot I mean, I'm not guaranteed that I will be heard. I want for all the students, not just my special ed students, but that help is not going to come.

Regina referred how school communication was infrequently shared with paraprofessionals:

> I do wish there was more transparency in general towards assistants because I mean, I know we maybe don't always know as much as homeroom teachers, but we're not... [pause] sorry for my words... Stupid. And so, when admin in general treats us like we can't handle certain knowledge, that's just it feels disrespectful.

Cynthia reported feeling disrespected when she was not given a safe working space during COVID-19:

> I felt completely disrespected, that my time was not valued, and I think I shared that with you from you know, I was not very clear about my schedule. And I emailed administration and then they responded, and I asked, so do I have to go home next week or this week when I will have to go? And they responded that very same morning. Yes. You're supposed you expected to be in school. So, I was working from home and I had to go to school. I went there. There was no place for me to be. There was no room for me. I mean, I understand that I'm an assistant, but I'm still somebody who wants to be safe. And if you ask me to go to school, have a room for me, just like you do for everybody else.

The paraprofessionals' working experiences in this study were also associated with hierarchical power within their school community. Two of the paraprofessionals reported instances of being respected and working as a team with teachers. In contrast, all paraprofessionals (n = 3) reported a lack of trust and appreciation from their administration that inhibited their working role. The three paraprofessionals also reported a lack of respect from the school district. They felt that their paraprofessional title was not taken as seriously in the education sector compared to certified school personnel. The lack of a standardized role, minimal collaboration with other school personnel, communication with students and families, and this experience of hierarchal power differentials all contributed to the working morale of the three multilingual paraprofessionals within their school community.

Career Advancement

During their career advancement to become certified special education teachers or specialists, participants expressed (a) bureaucratic obstacles, (b) financial obstacles, (c) academic success, and (d) retention in special education.

Bureaucratic Obstacles

All three paraprofessionals held a bachelor's degree and reported earning top grades in graduate level teacher preparation classes. Yet, they all reported bureaucratic issues with the Assistant to Teacher program (e.g., long applications, communication with school district leadership, unclear commitment guidelines), difficulty navigating the complex state teacher licensure requirements, and having to complete teacher preparation requirements after work hours. Therefore, while there were some positive aspects of the Assistant to Teacher Program, there were many recommendations for improvement made by the participants. They described the demands of working full-time as a paraprofessional, attending graduate school, and participating in the Assistant to Teacher program as strenuous. For example, Cynthia stated:

> I want to make sure I learn everything the best I can [referring to the Assistant to Teacher program] and also focus on my school [special education teacher preparation courses at the university], and work, and my family. I do not want to take too many classes and then be like, overwhelmed and I cannot do anything right.

Financial Obstacles

The concept of financial barriers was consistently reported by all participants and verified by the document analysis. First, paraprofessional salaries are not comparable to the demand of local cost of living. Paraprofessional salaries in the school district ranged from $22,619.52 to $45,697.19 depending on their educational level and experience. Yet, median homes in this school district are reported at $634,950. As a result, two participants did not live within the school district and endured a long commute. However, despite these factors, the three participants did not report frustration over their initial salaries. They reported that they were aware of it when they first accepted the position but then expressed a feeling of being deceived and irritated when their salary steps were frozen in their school district. Regina referenced salary:

> It's still low money, but it's better than I actually thought. I think my concern is that it seems like going forward, there's not going to be... There's a lot of freezes and an assistant salary is already low enough. So over time, having freezes and not doing step increases and not doing certain things is going to be more impactful to assistants. And so right now I'm fine with my salary. I just feel like going forward, as you gain more experience, you should be doing those step increases. And that's not happening.

There were also financial barriers within the Assistant to Teacher program. Within the program, paraprofessionals reported paying the initial tuition at their chosen teacher preparation university, with the promise it would be fully reimbursed after they submitted their final grades. However, the participants in the program reported unstable tuition reimbursement and the associated stress of carrying an additional financial burden. Financial obstacles were a contributing factor to how they perceived and experienced the opportunity for career advancement.

Academic Success in University Coursework

All participants reported success and pride with their teacher preparation coursework in their respective universities. Participants were not explicitly asked about their perceptions of their teacher preparation coursework, but they all disclosed that they received high grades in their teacher preparation coursework and worked hard to sustain their high accolades while balancing work and family responsibilities. For example, Cynthia stated:

> I've been getting straight A's, you know, that's why I have been taking one class at a time. But I want to make sure to learn everything the best that I can and also be able to focus on school, my work, and my family. I want to do things right.

Participants also reported taking classes in the evenings and in summers to fulfill state teaching license requirements. Teacher preparation courses were taught at several local universities depending on the paraprofessional's pursued teacher/specialist certification. Courses were taught in several modalities including in-person, hybrid, asynchronous, and synchronous instruction.

Retention in Special Education

The overarching theme of the three paraprofessionals' retention in special education, whether as a paraprofessional, teacher, or specialist, was evident within the data. First, participants reported their perception of the special education teachers' workload within their school. All three participants reported that special education teachers have a large workload, poor work-to-life balance, and are under-appreciated within the school community. For example, Cynthia stated:

> They're [special education teachers] very busy and they have so much going on and not only do they have to teach, but they have to write IEPs and they have to go to the meetings and they have a lot of things, a lot of paperwork and a lot of extra hours that they have to work. And that's with all teachers, of course. But special education teachers also have to write the IEPs and they have to make the changes and they have to go to the meetings. So, yeah, they have a big workload, and I don't know if they're appreciated for what they do.

Furthermore, when the participants were asked about their projected role as a certified special education teacher or specialist, they all expressed their doubts. The two paraprofessionals who were enrolled in the program reported that they did not feel prepared to become a teacher, wanted to continue taking more teacher preparation coursework in their universities, and did not plan on applying to teacher positions while they had their provisional license. Lena announced she would not be advancing her career:

> In five years, I just see myself continuing what I'm doing. I work with the teacher now and we are on the same page, we have the same thoughts and ideas as far as helping families and students go. And that is what matters to me the most, just not just having a voice or part, but actually being able to help students improve their education, and their overall lives and family situations.

Throughout data analysis, there was a ubiquitous theme for all paraprofessionals. Despite harsh working conditions and varying job obstacles, all participants planned to remain in the special education field as paraprofessionals in the near or permanent future. While they were frustrated with low salary, a lack of respect, and insufficient training, the daily support they provided students and families influenced their retention. For example, Cynthia stated:

> We really love what we do, and we just get so invested in our students. And it's just very rewarding, especially when if a student is non-verbal and you see progress, you know, like even if they have or if they are verbal, but they just have some disabilities, and you see their progress and you see that they get attached to you and they trust you and everything that's just so rewarding.

Discussion

Previous researchers have suggested that paraprofessionals hold an important role in the education of students with disabilities (Stockall, 2014) and are often connectors between the school and community (Chopra, 2004). Although tapping into the paraprofessional workforce to increase teacher diversity is not a new idea (e.g., Williams et al., 2016; Villegas & Clewell, 1998), to our knowledge no investigations to date have examined the experiences or perceptions of multilingual paraprofessionals becoming certified special education teachers through a GYO program. Findings shared in this qualitative study can contribute to conversations around the working experiences of multilingual paraprofessionals serving students with disabilities and add to the larger national discussions about teacher recruitment, diversifying the teacher workforce, and the retention of special education teachers.

Consistent with prior research conducted on paraprofessionals in special education, we found that the three multilingual paraprofessionals in our study reported the importance of faculty collaboration, unstandardized working roles, and hierarchal differential powers. Our findings extend research by positing that multilingual paraprofessionals, who specifically work with students with disabilities, do serve as linguistic connectors between (a) students and teachers; (b) families and teachers; and (c) families and the comprehensive school community. Findings also

revealed the bureaucratic and financial obstacles the multilingual paraprofessionals faced during their career advancement to become special education teachers. However, contrary to previous literature (Williams et al., 2016), these multilingual paraprofessionals did not report academic obstacles but rather pride and success in their teacher preparation coursework. This transformative finding is essential in viewing multilingual paraprofessionals' linguistic abilities as an asset in teacher preparation. Therefore, we recommend that teacher preparation leaders move away from the harmful deficit assumption that an individual's multilingualism will impair success in an academic teacher preparation program, and instead value multilingual identities as cultural wealth.

Based on the shared findings, the three multilingual paraprofessionals in this study are clearly valuable personnel within special education and their participating school community. The three participants in this study reported plans to continue servicing students with disabilities. However, all disclosed they would remain in their current paraprofessional role supporting special education students, as they expressed doubts about becoming special education teachers. Participants reported a wariness to shift to those critical special education teacher vacancies which their alternative route program aimed for them to do. It should be noted that the multilingual GYO participants had not completed their alternative route program to acquire a special education license at the conclusion of the study. Specifically, Cynthia and Regina had ongoing mentorship and teacher preparation coursework to fulfill at their affiliated universities.

We recommend that future researchers investigate longitudinal outcomes for paraprofessionals participating in GYO programs. Additional studies, both quantitative and qualitative, are needed to evaluate the long-term impacts of GYO after participants complete the program and enter into the workforce (e.g., teacher quality, teacher retention, teacher attrition). Furthermore, we encourage education leaders to leverage research-based longitudinal outcomes to improve both GYO program infrastructure and GYO special education teachers' working conditions. The participants in this study reported both bureaucratic and financial obstacles participating in their GYO program. If this notion holds true in other studies, we strongly recommend education leaders and policymakers alleviate these burdens to continue the paraprofessional-teacher pipeline. To fully address the special education teacher shortage, more robust studies and supporting policies are warranted within GYO programs.

Limitations

There were several limitations to our findings. First, we had a small sample of participants ($n = 3$) as the recruitment of participants was challenging and limited to one elementary school in one school district. Additionally, since the three participants were a part of one school setting, it would have been beneficial to take a deeper dive into the school culture which certainly influenced the decisions and actions of the three participants. However, the lead author was limited to only three observations, another limitation of the study. Access to engage in more day-to-day observations of the school and the participants could possibly have helped to make more sense of the contexts, activities, and histories related to their experiences in the school and with the GYO program. As a result, participants' experiences and perspectives are largely informed by the interview data since there was limited access and resources to increase the number of observations. Given the small sample, more investigations are needed to reveal the experiences of multilingual paraprofessionals who work with students with disabilities and participate in similar GYO programs. Further research should also include participants who work in secondary settings and represent a diversity

of languages, genders, and years of experience. Our sample consisted of women only and those who spoke either Spanish or Hindi, in addition to English.

Conclusion

PK-12 schools need more linguistically diverse special education teachers in the United States. Teacher preparation programs, school district initiatives, and state licensure requirements fall short of this demand. While a GYO program for paraprofessionals is one policy initiative that addresses this issue, it does not fully alleviate it. Bureaucratic and financial obstacles within the GYO programs and poor working conditions within special education hinder the career transition of multilingual paraprofessionals to become special education teachers. As a result, continuous improvements are required to promote multilingual paraprofessionals to complete the career advancement transition. Further examination of this complex workforce issue and its intersectionality within special education is warranted.

In addition, when multilingual paraprofessionals matriculate into special education teaching positions, it is necessary to examine why multilingual paraprofessionals are not fulfilling vacant special education teacher positions after achieving certification. More research is needed to determine not only the impact of GYO programs, but also the impact of teacher preparation programs, state licensure policies, and special education working experiences on the retention of those who advance their careers. Finally, we recommend policymakers to invest in diversifying the education special education teacher workforce to meet this critical demand. The diverse knowledge and vast experiences of multilingual paraprofessionals make them ideal candidates for the special education teacher workforce. Their stories must be told, and their needs must be met as they embark on becoming special education teachers who service students with disabilities.

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