

Article

Professional Development Pilot Program for Paraprofessionals in a Special Education Setting: A Qualitative Exploration of Their Experiences

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Abstract

Paraprofessionals play a crucial role in supporting both teachers and students within a classroom, even though the specifics of their duties vary. While their responsibilities involve supporting student achievement, research has shed light that many paraprofessionals feel unprepared for their responsibilities in the classroom. This study aimed to address a gap in the existing literature by exploring how a professional development program that mirrors the trainings special education teachers receive would impact paraprofessionals and help them feel more prepared for their responsibilities in the classroom. Employing a generic qualitative methodology, this study sought to capture the experiences of 43 paraprofessionals. Data collection involved an online open-ended questionnaire at the start and conclusion of the school year. The study's outcomes revealed five patterns in the data: (a) paraprofessionals struggled with collaborating with classroom teams at the start of the school year, (b) paraprofessionals struggled with managing student behavior at the start of the school year, (c) professional development was helpful to most of the paraprofessionals, (d) professional development led to better preparedness to address challenging behavior, and (e) professional development led to better preparedness to address the instructional needs of students with disabilities. Following a thorough analysis and synthesis, these patterns were condensed into two general themes: the importance of professional development for paraprofessionals and the importance of presenting the professional development that teachers receive on a continuous basis to paraprofessionals as well. These findings are significant for school leaders and educators, as they highlight the importance of providing professional development to paraprofessionals while supporting students with disabilities.

Keywords: paraprofessional; special education; autism; qualitative research design; generic qualitative research; education; professional development



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1. Introduction

Paraprofessionals are support staff who often work in special education classrooms. These support staff are hired to support special education teachers, as they deliver instruction and support students with various services they receive. Paraprofessionals implement students' individualized education plans (IEPs). They provide instruction in one-to-one settings as well as small group settings [1–3]. Paraprofessionals are often tasked with addressing challenging behavior and following specific curricula designed to improve

instructional outcomes for students with disabilities. While paraprofessionals do not make formal decisions in the classroom, they support academics and the social and vocational needs of students [4,5].

The presence of paraprofessionals in classrooms strongly influences student support and achievement [6,7]. These assistants aid teachers in various capacities, including material preparation, student interaction, and care. They support the diverse needs of students with emotional disturbances, cognitive or physical disabilities, autism, and other special requirements, allowing them to fulfill multiple roles within the classroom [8–10].

Paraprofessionals operate in different settings, either by supporting students in inclusive classrooms alongside general education settings or in self-contained classrooms with fewer students instructed by special education teachers [11]. At times, their role may not be fully defined or understood [12].

Research highlights ongoing challenges related to paraprofessional overreliance and the need for alternative support strategies in inclusive classrooms [13,14]. Paraprofessionals often take on complex roles without clear guidelines, which can impact student outcomes. Studies also provide insights into how students with intellectual disabilities perceive their paraprofessional support, offering valuable perspectives [15,16]. Meanwhile, questions arise about the adequacy of qualifications and training required for teacher assistants, underscoring variability across [17–20].

Their support services continue to evolve. With expanding roles, a lack of clarity regarding their exact responsibilities may develop [21–23]. Studies indicate immediate benefits for students receiving paraprofessional support, including aiding in instructional progress, small group activities, and language assistance, as well as documenting progress [24–27]. They also assist in daily living skills, accompany students to therapy sessions, support behavior intervention plans, assist students with medical needs, aid in bilingual education, and foster social, cognitive, emotional, and communication skills development [8,28–30].

Professional Development

Professional development for paraprofessionals is crucial, yet guidelines and structured training programs do not seem to be available [31]. Studies emphasize the need for specialized training in areas like literacy instruction, behavior management, and administering academic tests to ensure reliability [32,33]. Properly trained paraprofessionals significantly impact student learning and behavior, but the lack of follow-up or ongoing coaching after professional development remains a concern [17].

Teachers play a crucial role in training and supervising paraprofessionals, but their preparedness in this aspect sometimes falls short [12]. Preparing teachers to supervise paraprofessionals effectively is essential, as insufficient training for supervisors can limit the benefits of paraprofessional support. Collaboration, communication, and positive reinforcement are highlighted as essential strategies for an effective classroom team [34].

While paraprofessionals provide invaluable support, there are complexities and challenges to consider. Without proper training, errors and misunderstandings in handling academic and behavior challenges can occur. Addressing their training needs and exploring alternative support methods are crucial for ensuring the best outcomes for students with disabilities. However, further research into paraprofessionals' perceptions and beliefs about their training and support is necessary to improve their effectiveness in the classroom.

While many paraprofessionals work with students who exhibit severe challenging behaviors, it is crucial that they have the knowledge and skills necessary to apply interventions and practices that are supported by research. Without proper training, errors and misunderstandings in handling academic and behavior challenges can occur [28,35].

Addressing their training needs and exploring alternative support methods are crucial for ensuring the best outcomes for students with disabilities [36]. However, further research into paraprofessionals' perceptions and beliefs about their training and support is necessary to improve their effectiveness in the classroom.

In a survey conducted, paraprofessionals reported significant advantages from full-day professional development [37]. However, there was frequently little to no follow-up or coaching following professional development, despite the fact that it helped the paraprofessionals acquire new skills and informed their capacity to support the students [38,39]. According to a different study, children's social skills interactions increased, and paraprofessionals receiving professional training in social skills training methodologies saw instant benefits [40]. Implementation with fidelity was also the outcome of appropriate training. With training, paraprofessionals were able to successfully administer the social skills curriculum with their pupils because they were more proficient in the language and understood it better [41].

Teacher Professional development in special education settings is essential for ensuring that teachers are equipped with the right tools that cater to the needs of their students with disabilities. Teachers of students with disabilities require specialized trainings to meet the academic and language needs of the students [42]. In addition, teachers who design instruction for students with disabilities often work with curricula that are designed for students who are typically developing. As a result, additional trainings are often required to help teachers tailor and adapt instruction to meet the needs of students in a special class [29]. For example, in a study conducted, teachers in elementary grade classes shared that they perceived their need for professional development to be even greater when adapting the curriculum and including students in all activities throughout the day [43]. In addition, teachers must also be prepared to meet the social-emotional needs of their students in this setting [44]. Whether a child has been through trauma, abuse, neglect, or other issues, training and expertise are required to meet the needs of the students in special education settings.

Paraprofessionals do not receive the same trainings that teachers receive in a special education setting. Often, teachers have training and professional development time throughout the school day, while paraprofessionals support and work with the students. There are various disparities in the workplace when it comes to paraprofessional preparedness to work with students with disabilities. When exploring the perceptions of paraprofessionals, it was also revealed that they feel unprepared because of the lack of trainings [45]. Another study revealed that paraprofessionals felt that they needed additional support, specifically in the areas of behavior management and academic instruction. These areas require specialized support for students, and the lack of trainings resulted in paraprofessionals not being prepared to meet their students' needs [46].

2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to address a gap in the literature related to providing adequate training to paraprofessionals to prepare them for their role in the classroom. This study also serves as a follow-up study to the findings of a previous qualitative study, which suggests that research should focus on building trainings for paraprofessionals to help them support their students with disabilities [46]. As a result, this study set out to explore the impact of paraprofessionals receiving trainings identical to those that teachers receive during a full school year.

3. Methods

This study is a follow-up to a previous study conducted to determine the needs of paraprofessionals. With a deep interest in improving support for our students with disabili-

ties, the authors conducted a study in 2024 to explore the professional development needs of paraprofessionals. The results of the study revealed that paraprofessionals required more trainings in general. More specifically, paraprofessionals revealed that trainings were needed in the area of behavior and instruction [46]. Therefore, the current study set out to pilot a training program specifically designed for paraprofessionals. It mirrored the trainings that teachers received related to instructional strategies and teaching students with disabilities, as well as behavior management, understanding the function of behavior, and supporting positive student behaviors. The research question of this study is as follows: How do paraprofessionals perceive the impact of a professional development program mirroring the trainings special education teachers receive on their preparedness to fulfill their responsibilities in a special education classroom?

A qualitative methodology was utilized for this project. The goal of qualitative methodology is to explore participants' ideas, experiences, and perceptions related to a given topic [47]. Generic qualitative research methodology is a type of qualitative research that examines phenomena that do not precisely fit the requirements of other methodologies [48]. Individuals' accounts of their experiences are prioritized in generic qualitative research [47].

3.1. Sampling

Purposive sampling was used in this study to gather participants who met the inclusion criteria of the study. Purposeful sampling is the selection of participants who have a particular experience or knowledge of the topic being studied [49]. An email was sent to principals to share the recruitment information with their paraprofessionals. Forty-three volunteer paraprofessionals participated in the training program. The paraprofessionals participated in an open-ended questionnaire online before and after the training program.

The inclusion criteria of this study are consistent with the requirements of being a current paraprofessional working in a classroom for students with disabilities. The participants had to work in a special education classroom that was self-contained and not part of an inclusive general education setting. There was also a requirement for paraprofessionals to hold the position for a minimum of three years. Interested paraprofessionals who fit the requirements for inclusion filled out a link to an online survey prior to and after participating in a series of professional development trainings. To protect their identity, each participant was given a unique number. No personal data or information was collected.

3.2. Data Collection

Six questions were part of the virtual questionnaire, administered via Microsoft Forms, which the participants were asked to complete. The questionnaire was independently designed by the researchers to aggregate research-specific data. The questionnaire was administered prior to the pilot professional development program and after the pilot professional development program to capture the participants' preparedness to address their student needs in the classroom and measure the impact of the professional development program. Written responses were collected to capture the paraprofessionals' thoughts and experiences.

The professional development program consisted of 10 45-min whole-group virtual sessions conducted throughout the course of the school year. The format of the session included an introduction, a share-out of examples of the implementation of prior session information, a presentation of new information, and closing remarks.

Each session targeted instructional strategies and behavior management techniques. The sessions included developing student-driven objectives, curriculum-specific instructional strategies, center-based learning strategies, communication support strategies, data-

driven decision making, behavior management techniques in the classroom, behavior management resources to provide parents, collaboration techniques, Social–Emotional Learning (SEL), student support in whole-group settings, and SEL student support during one-to-one instruction. SEL refers to the development of skills that are necessary for students to regulate their emotions, bring about self-awareness, and promote interpersonal relationships [50].

3.3. Data Security

No personally identifiable information was obtained from the participants while the researchers collected the data. In order to facilitate thematic analysis of the responses during the data analysis phase, each participant was given a participant ID number. The ability to withdraw from the study at any moment was granted to the participants, who also signed an informed consent form. All of the data were kept safe on a password-protected computer that was accessible only to the researchers.

3.4. Data Analysis

Using a coding system, inductive thematic analysis allows researchers to develop themes and patterns without attempting to fit the responses into preestablished categories [51]. The authors of this study investigated the attitudes and perceptions of paraprofessionals. Thus, a composite synthesis and definition were created using the responses to the open-ended questionnaire related to their perceptions prior to and after participating in the professional development program.

4. Findings

The findings of the thematic analysis revealed five patterns within the data received from paraprofessionals are outlined in Table 1 below. The five patterns identified were as follows: (1a) paraprofessionals initially struggled to collaborate effectively with classroom teams at the beginning of the school year; (1b) paraprofessionals faced challenges managing student behavior early in the school year; (2a) professional development was beneficial for the majority of paraprofessionals; (2b) professional development enhanced their preparedness to address challenging behavior; and (2c) professional development improved their readiness to meet the instructional needs of students with disabilities.

Table 1. Summary of themes and patterns.

Themes	Patterns
1. Importance of Professional Development for Paraprofessionals	(1a) Paraprofessionals initially struggled to collaborate effectively with classroom teams at the beginning of the school year.
	(1b) Paraprofessionals faced challenges managing student behavior early in the school year.
2. Necessity of Providing Paraprofessionals with Ongoing Professional Development Similar to Teachers	(2a) Professional development was beneficial for the majority of paraprofessionals.
	(2b) Professional development enhanced their preparedness to address challenging behavior.
	(2c) Professional development improved readiness to meet the instructional needs of students with disabilities.

The five patterns were subsequently condensed into two overarching themes: the importance of professional development for paraprofessionals and the necessity of provid-

ing paraprofessionals with the ongoing professional development that teachers regularly receive. Teachers participate in specialized training consistently, designed to support them in meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Given their integral role as members of the classroom team, paraprofessionals must also have access to these trainings to enhance their collaboration, behavior management, and instructional support.

4.1. Theme 1: Importance of Professional Development for Paraprofessionals

Paraprofessionals received a questionnaire to complete prior to receiving professional development and after receiving professional development trainings, which was identical to that of their classroom teacher. Paraprofessionals shared that prior to receiving the trainings, they struggled with collaborating with classroom teams at the start of the school year (Participants 1, 6, 15, 17, 24, 28, and 30). Paraprofessionals also stated that they had specific struggles in the classroom in the absence of trainings (Participants 15, 18, and 19), and the struggles were often related to managing student behavior at the start of the school year (Participants 1 and 33). While behavior management was highly stressful, personalizing and adapting lesson materials was also challenging for the paraprofessionals (Participants 12, 16, 20, 21, 28, and 29).

The challenge of personalizing instruction for students with disabilities in the classroom is a result of the need for students to truly receive personalized instruction related to their developmental levels [52]. Every student connects to the material and comprehends it through their unique learning style, and instruction must be tailored accordingly.

4.2. Theme 2: Importance of Presenting Teacher Professional Development to Paraprofessionals

The introduction of professional development for paraprofessionals that mirrored the training provided to teachers marked a transformative shift in the educational environment for paraprofessionals (Participants 2, 9, and 10). By offering explicit guidance, support, and resources, paraprofessionals became better equipped to address both student behavior and academic needs (Participants 3, 4, 36, 37, and 38). Paraprofessionals reported that this alignment not only empowered them to support teachers more effectively in the classroom but also enhanced the overall learning experience of students (Participants 5, 7, 8, 11, and 13). Sharing the same foundational knowledge as teachers enables paraprofessionals to collaborate more efficiently, ensuring that all students receive the individualized attention necessary for success (Participants 14, 18, 19, 22, and 23). Ultimately, this investment in professional development fostered a more cohesive educational team, leading to improved student outcomes and a more positive school culture.

Pattern 2a demonstrated that professional development was helpful to most paraprofessionals. It provided many essential skills and knowledge that enhanced their classroom effectiveness (Participants 5, 7, 8, 11, 13, 35, 39, and 40). This training equipped them with strategies to overcome various challenges, contributing to a more supportive learning environment. By applying best practices and techniques, paraprofessionals were able to effectively deliver instruction during small group activities (Participants 35, 39, and 40), which promoted better collaboration with teachers and improved outcomes for the students they served (Participants 14, 18, 19, 22, 23, 25, 26, and 43).

Pattern 2b highlighted that professional development significantly improved paraprofessionals' preparedness to address challenging behaviors. Targeted training enhanced their ability to support students with autism by deepening their understanding of autism spectrum disorders and effective behavior management strategies (Participants 27, 31, 32, 34, 41, and 42). The sessions provided practical tools to identify triggers and implement proactive interventions, fostering a more positive and structured learning environment (Participants 6, 15, 17, 23, 25, 26, and 43). Consequently, paraprofessionals became more

skilled at responding to students' unique behavioral needs, which improved both behavior management and student engagement. Additionally, paraprofessionals shared their training insights with colleagues, helping to build a more informed classroom team (Participants 1, 2, 4, and 19). This professional development empowered paraprofessionals to play a critical role in promoting positive outcomes for students with autism.

Pattern 2c showed that professional development enhanced paraprofessionals' preparedness to meet the instructional needs of students with disabilities. Training focused on the curriculum, instruction, scaffolding, and instructional support, specifically for paraprofessionals working with students with autism (Participants 5, 7, 12, 13, 36, 37, and 42). Through comprehensive sessions on differentiated instruction and curriculum adaptations, paraprofessionals learned how to effectively modify lessons to address diverse student needs (Participants 9, 11, 15, 18, 23, and 25). Access to valuable resources such as visual aids, assistive technologies, and behavior management tools further equipped them with strategies to enhance student engagement and learning (Participants 38 and 40). As a result, paraprofessionals gained confidence in implementing scaffolding techniques and instructional support, leading to improved academic outcomes for students with autism and other disabilities (Participants 14, 22, 28, and 31). This targeted professional development not only strengthened the paraprofessionals' skills but also contributed to a more inclusive and supportive educational environment.

5. Implications for Practice

These findings are significant for school leaders and educators, as they underscore the importance of providing professional development for paraprofessionals who support students with disabilities. By investing in targeted training, school leaders can enhance the knowledge and preparedness of paraprofessionals, ultimately improving the educational experience of students. Furthermore, school leaders can learn to design and schedule professional development opportunities that maximize the effectiveness of paraprofessionals, ensuring that they are equipped with essential skills and strategies.

These findings highlight the importance of professional development for paraprofessionals. School leaders can design targeted training to enhance paraprofessionals' skills and improve student outcomes. Special education coordinators, instructional coaches, and parents can use these insights to support paraprofessionals effectively. Empowerment strategies for paraprofessionals are critical.

Other stakeholders, such as special education coordinators, instructional coaches, and parents, would also benefit from this information, as it can inform their practices and expectations. Special education coordinators can utilize these insights to develop comprehensive support systems, while instructional coaches can tailor their guidance to meet the specific needs of paraprofessionals. Parents, on the other hand, can gain a better understanding of the training their children's paraprofessionals receive, fostering stronger partnerships between home and school.

6. Discussions

The launch of professional development for paraprofessionals, mirroring that of teachers, was a transformative step that provided them with explicit direction, support, and resources to better address student behavior and academic needs. This training equipped paraprofessionals with essential skills and strategies, enhancing their effectiveness in the classroom and fostering improved collaboration with teachers, ultimately benefiting student outcomes. Additionally, targeted training on autism spectrum disorders and behavior management significantly prepared paraprofessionals to handle challenging behaviors, leading to a more positive learning environment. Furthermore, professional

development sessions focused on the curriculum, instruction, scaffolds, and instructional support enhanced their ability to meet the diverse instructional needs of students with disabilities. By gaining confidence and acquiring practical tools, paraprofessionals played a crucial role in promoting positive educational experiences, resulting in a more inclusive and supportive school culture.

7. Suggestions for Future Research

Limitations of the study include the fact that the study focused only on the paraprofessionals who participated in the training program. Future research should focus on comparing the outcomes of paraprofessionals who undergo professional development with those who do not. This analysis would help quantify the specific benefits of training programs, providing valuable insights into how professional development impacts the effectiveness of paraprofessionals in supporting students with disabilities. By establishing a clear comparison, researchers can identify measurable improvements in student engagement, academic performance, and behavior management, ultimately demonstrating the value of investing in professional development.

Another recommendation for future research would be to explore the perceptions and experiences of various stakeholders, including teachers, paraprofessionals, and parents, regarding the effectiveness of professional development programs. By gathering qualitative data from these groups, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of how professional development influences the collaborative efforts between paraprofessionals and educators, as well as the overall impact on student outcomes. This research highlights areas for improvement and provides recommendations for enhancing training programs to better meet the needs of all the stakeholders involved in the educational process.

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