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Paraprofessional Training: Working with Students with Disabilities

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Paraprofessional Training: Working with Students with Disabilities

Paraprofessionals, also referred to as teacher assistants, paraeducators, and/or instructional assistants, are considered required personnel within school divisions to carry out essential functions related to special education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 states that paraprofessionals must have the content knowledge and skills to work with students with disabilities. In other words, paraprofessionals must be adequately prepared and trained. This law has required state and local education agencies to develop ways to ensure paraprofessionals have the knowledge to work effectively with students with disabilities.

Paraprofessionals are employed by local school divisions to support classroom teachers and in many cases work with students with disabilities to support them as they access a free and appropriate education. However, Ghore and York-Barr (2007) indicated that paraprofessionals lack adequate job training to more effectively perform job duties and functions. According to Riggs and Mueller (2001) and Hughes and Valle-Riestra (2008), paraprofessionals feel they lack the training needed to perform some job duties that are required. Therefore, school divisions are seeking programs and training materials to support and meet the needs of paraprofessionals and comply with federal guidelines regarding these essential personnel.

The purpose of this literature review is to discuss current research related to paraprofessional training. According to Villa, Thousand, Nevin, and Malgeri (1996), paraprofessionals are an integral part of the inclusion of students with disabilities into the general education setting. The general education setting and curriculum can be defined as the place and content that students without disabilities receive and have access to in schools. Therefore, paraprofessionals require appropriate training and ongoing supports to help facilitate success of students with disabilities who access the general education curriculum (Villa et al., 1996). In

order for students with disabilities to reach their greatest potential, school leaders must analyze the literature related to supports of students included in the general education setting to ensure that the supports in place are adequate and appropriate to maximize opportunities for success.

Summary and Analysis of the Literature

Causton-Theoharis, J. N., & Malmgren, K. W. (2005). Increasing peer interactions for students with severe disabilities via paraprofessional training. *Exceptional Children*, 71(4), 431-444.

Causton-Theoharis and Malmgren (2005) investigated paraprofessional job roles and student integration into the general education setting. The researchers sought to answer the following questions: “Does training of paraprofessionals to facilitate interactions between students with and without disabilities increase the facilitative behaviors of the paraprofessionals? Does training of paraprofessionals increase the quantity of interactions that occur between students with disabilities and their peers?” (Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren, 2005, p.432). Their study was a quantitative, action research study. The researchers used observational data and an instrument to record interactions that were observed during the study. Data were analyzed by examining changes in the mean level and trends across baseline and post intervention. The results of the study had implications for changes in practices within the educational environment.

Causton-Theoharis and Malmgren (2005) used four paraprofessional and student pairs. The pairs worked and were enrolled in two public elementary schools in a Midwestern school district. Causton-Theoharis and Malmgren (2005) reported the years of experience of the paraprofessionals and demographic information about the participants.

The researchers gave some commentary in the article about a parent of a student who was a participant in the study. The parent stated that long after the study was over she was still seeing the positive and long-lasting effects of the peer interactions developed from the study. I feel that this study supported the implications that paraprofessionals need to be trained when working with students with disabilities. The method and design helped answer the research questions presented by the researchers. The study was easy to follow and I think it could be easily replicated. However, I would like to have seen a sample of the instrument the researchers used for collecting observational data so that I could make my own judgments on the instrument and what it measured. This study made me think of a quote by Maya Angelo, “When you know better, you do better.” When paraprofessionals are trained, job performance and student outcomes increase.

Causton-Theoharis and Malmgren (2005) found that small changes in paraprofessional behavior yielded substantial increases in job performance of paraprofessionals and also increased the interaction behavior of students with disabilities and their peers. Peer interactions have substantial implications for the wellbeing of students and academic success. This study emphasized the importance of paraprofessional training.

Giangreco, M. F., Backus, L., CichoskiKelly, E., Sherman, P., & Mavropoulos, Y. (2011).

Paraeducator training materials to facilitate inclusive education: Initial field-test data. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 30(1), 14-23

Giangreco, Backus, CichoskiKelly, Sherman, and Marvropoulous (2011) sought to research training tools used to educate paraprofessionals on job duties in inclusive settings. The research was conducted through the University of Vermont with grant funds provided by the

U.S. Department of Education. Two rural school districts in Vermont and upstate New York were involved in the study.

Giangreco et al. (2011) provided feedback on training materials developed to help paraprofessionals acquire skills necessary to perform job tasks effectively in schools. Paraprofessionals were participants in the study and special educators were the trainers (i.e., course instructors). The paraprofessionals took courses that used training materials from the *Paraeducator Entry-Level Training for Supporting Students with Disabilities and Supporting Students with Challenging Behaviors: A Paraeducator Curriculum*. Instructors used a variety of formats to teach these courses. The courses included a practicum component where paraprofessionals used and related concepts learned in courses on the job. A post-test was conducted to see how much information paraprofessionals retained from the courses. Course instructors and paraprofessionals also provided feedback on the training materials by completing a questionnaire.

While the research design of this study was experimental, the approach in using the one-group posttest-only design provided for weak research data. The authors indicated in the article that they initially were using a pre-and post-test design; however, participants started dropping out when they were asked to show prior knowledge. The participants were not grouped or eliminated from the study according to years of experience or courses/trainings already taken. These were confounding variables that the researchers did not control for during the study. The study could have been more conclusive had the authors chosen a random sample of participants and used a control group to compare with the sample.

This research is a good starting point for future development in research based training materials for paraprofessionals. The hypothesis was supported by the findings because the

researchers indicated through post tests and practicum hours that paraprofessionals were knowledgeable about the skills needed to perform job duties after completing the courses. However, the research did not assess paraprofessional's prior knowledge regarding how to carry out job duties effectively before completing trainings. Therefore, the research may have been more conclusive if it included the assessment of the knowledge of paraprofessionals before and after trainings. In addition, the researchers may have tried to answer questions related to how training of paraprofessionals affects organizations in which they work. There are a variety of training materials available to educate paraprofessionals; however, there are only a few that have been researched.

Giangreco et al. (2011) indicated that paraprofessionals learned and retained concepts to apply to their jobs. Paraprofessionals indicated on questionnaires provided by researchers that the courses were helpful and courses would have been more beneficial if taken when they first started careers as paraprofessionals.

Riggs, C. G. & Muller P.H. (2001). Employment and utilization of paraeducators in inclusive settings. *Journal of Special Education*, 35(1), 54-62.

Riggs and Mueller (2001) conducted a study to gather information on the perceptions paraprofessionals had related to their jobs in inclusive educational settings. The perceptions were said to be directly related to the effectiveness of inclusive settings in which paraprofessionals work. The perceptions that were analyzed included, specific roles and duties of paraprofessionals, ongoing training, and job satisfaction related to retention and colleague relationships within the school community. The information was gathered using a mixed research method design.

Guided qualitative interviews were used with 23 paraprofessionals in a Connecticut school district. These paraprofessionals volunteered to be interviewed as a part of the research study. The qualitative interviews were used to allow paraprofessionals to describe in their own words their job responsibilities, duties, training, and colleague relationships. The quantitative portion of the study consisted of a 100 item survey that 758 Vermont paraprofessionals completed. Twenty non-respondents to the survey were contacted later and their information from the survey was compared with the information received from the first group of Vermont paraprofessionals. The differences in responses were compared.

The findings indicated no statistically significant difference between the first group of responders and the second group. Additionally, 20 of the Vermont paraprofessionals provided further data for the study by completing a time-task log (e.g., time spent on specific duties) while on the job. According to Riggs and Mueller (2001), the actual data from the logs correlated to paraprofessional survey responses within five percent. The quantitative surveys focused on confirming beliefs of paraprofessionals derived from previous studies.

A limitation to this study was the difference in the sample size in the qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys. The participants were not randomly selected or assigned. The information gathered, in my opinion, was difficult to compare because of the differences in the sample of participants and the methodology used. The job responsibilities of paraprofessionals in the two districts were very different. Paraprofessionals in Vermont were assigned more often to specific students rather than a group of students. In addition to the study limitations, the dependent variable was not clearly operationalized. The meaning of the effectiveness of an inclusive program can vary in meaning to different people. Riggs and Muller (2001) study may have been more conclusive had student success in inclusive settings been

coupled with the perceptions of the paraprofessionals that work with the students. Teacher perceptions could have also been included in this study.

Information on each paraprofessional's current job status was not controlled for in the study. Therefore, some responses from paraprofessionals may have been impacted due to situations in the school or in their personal lives. Likewise, surveys with 100 questions may not have been taken seriously or participants may have become fatigued with the quantity of questions.

The results indicated that perceptions of paraprofessionals were similar in both Vermont and Connecticut. Likewise, those perceptions were similar to other studies conducted on the same topic. Paraprofessionals indicated they needed more training on job responsibilities and more ongoing training throughout their careers. In addition, the results suggested that paraprofessionals did not feel respected by colleagues and consulting of their professional opinions rarely occurred. Likewise, job descriptions were usually nonexistent or vague. A disparity among research findings was in the area of job responsibilities. More than half of survey respondents said they were included on team meetings and/or IEP meetings that discussed student educational performance and this was a part of their job responsibilities. Therefore, the research suggested that paraprofessionals in inclusive educational settings would benefit if roles and responsibilities were clearly defined with meaningful training, supervision, and evaluation. Furthermore, if paraprofessional perceptions about their jobs increased, then the effectiveness of inclusive programs would increase.

Chopra, R. V., Sandoval-Lucero, E., Aragon, L., Bernal, C., De Balderas, H., & Carroll, D. (2004). The paraprofessional role of connector. *Remedial & Special Education*, 25(4), 219-231.

The problem that Chopra, Sandoval-Lucero, Aragon, Bernal, De Balderas, and Carroll (2004) researched was the role that paraprofessionals play in their job positions. “The role that the researchers referred to was that of a connector between parents and teachers, parents and community service providers, students and teachers, students and parents and students and their peers” (Chopra et al., 2004, p. 219). For the purposes of this study, the role of connector referred to the relationships paraprofessionals formed and their role as a liaison. According to Chopra et al. (2004), little research had explored the term “connector” as it related to paraprofessionals and their job roles. In addition, these researchers stated that current literature did not take into account the perspectives of paraprofessionals. The research question that they sought to answer was whether paraprofessionals served as connectors to the community and what factors were associated with their performance of that role.

Research conducted by Rueda and DeNeve (1999) and Nittoli and Giloth (1997) (as cited in Chopra et al., 2004) provided the theoretical framework for this study conducted by Chopra et al. (2004). Rueda and DeNeve (1999) (as cited in Chopra et al., 2004) stated that paraprofessionals can serve as a bridge between teachers and students. Likewise, Nittoli and Giloth (1997) (as cited in Chopra et al., 2004) stated that paraprofessionals were able to reach, communicate, and empathize with community members. According to Chopra et al. (2004), while there was literature available on the importance of paraprofessionals as connectors between schools and communities, there was limited research on the actual role they play. Therefore, Chopra et al. (2004) conducted a qualitative research study that consisted of interviews as the data collection method to get a picture of the perceptions paraprofessionals have related to their roles. The researchers taped the interviews and analyzed them later to gather themes and constructs.

Chopra et al. (2004) found that paraprofessionals perceive themselves as a connector between the community, parents, teachers, students, and the school. They see their roles as vital to the development and education of children. This study helped me to think about how important it is to clearly identify a research problem. I want to conduct action research related to paraprofessional training, and studies like these help me to see what other researchers have done and the methodology used to find answers. The focus group interview protocol used in this study was an interesting way to get perceptions of participants. It made me think of the method I will use in my research study to get perceptions of paraprofessionals on the training they receive to perform job duties. The way in which the researchers found themes from interviews seemed to work well and ensured that the data derived gave a real picture of the perceptions of the participants. Due to the lack of research on the topic related to paraprofessionals as connectors, this study did a good job of introducing this concept that may lead the way for future research related to paraprofessionals and the critical roles they play when dealing with parents, teachers, students, and the community.

Chopra et al. (2004) found that paraprofessionals perceive themselves as a connector between the community, parents, teachers, students, and the school. They see their roles as vital to the development and education of children. Therefore, researchers are investigating the job roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals and how these roles relate to student success.

Devlin, P. A. (2002). *The effect of continuous improvement training for teacher-paraprofessional teams on interaction and engagement of special education students in general education classrooms*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Dissertations & Theses: Full Text. (Publication No. AAT 3065543)

Delvin (2002) conducted a quantitative, dissertation study related to paraprofessional training. The researcher conducted a needs assessment with administrators in a rural Michigan school division. In addition, the researcher investigated two elementary schools to understand how paraprofessionals were used and determine training that was needed. The purpose of the study was to see if paraprofessional assistance led to the dependence or success of students with disabilities that were integrated into the general education setting.

Delvin's (2002) study was quasi-experimental in design. The researcher used a pretest-posttest control group design for the study. Paraprofessional, teacher, and student interactions were assessed using a version of the Eco-behavioral Assessment Systems Software (EBASS). EBASS was a program designed to assess the relationship between student behavior, classroom, and teacher variables. In addition to the assessment software, paraprofessionals and teachers were trained using a ten-hour program outlining a process of continuous improvement. The training allowed for brainstorming and plan development to successfully include students with disabilities into the general education setting, with a focus on peer interactions.

Delvin's (2002) research used tools to observe behavior patterns of individuals with disabilities included in the general education setting. The observational component of the research was conducted by using a software system to ensure that observers were observing and collecting similar data. The use of EBASS did allow for inter-rater reliability by calculating this information through results. More than one observer conducted observations on the same student-teacher pairs to reduce biases and consider emerging themes.

Student-teacher pairs were matched by the researcher. However, experimental and control groups were randomly assigned. The research may have been more conclusive if students with similar disabilities were included in the study. The study used individuals with

mild, moderate, and severe disabilities. Therefore, characteristics of the different disabilities and how they manifested themselves in the general education setting were different for each participant, which may have influenced some of the findings.

Delvin (2002) suggested that paraprofessionals and teachers felt they benefited from training. In addition, teacher interactions increased for the experimental group, while paraprofessional interactions with students decreased. The decreases in interactions were seen to be a positive result of the study due to the positive student outcomes that resulted. Students were being instructed more by the classroom teacher and became an integral part of the general education setting. Student and peer interactions also increased with participants from the experimental group and their nondisabled peers.

Delvin (2002) indicated that paraprofessionals and teachers, alike, lack the training needed to include students in the general education setting and enhance their social opportunities with peers. Students with disabilities became more interdependent and less dependent on paraprofessionals when personnel were trained to appropriately collaborate and facilitate successful integration of students into the general education setting. This research has significant implications for schools as inclusion has become an integral component in the education of students with disabilities.

Discussion

The national push in public education in regards to students with disabilities is to “include” them in the general education setting. As a result of this phenomenon, school divisions have sought ways to educate students with and without disabilities in the same setting by tailoring instruction to meet the diverse needs of all students (Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren, 2005). Rozalski, Miller, and Stewart (2011) stated that while there is a push for

students to be included in the general education setting, general education teachers need support in order to provide educational learning opportunities to students with disabilities. To this end, paraprofessional roles have evolved to provide the support needed by general education teachers to provide a free and appropriate public education for students with disabilities in the general education setting. However, paraprofessional's roles, responsibilities, and training programs have not been clearly defined and developed by school personnel (Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren, 2005).

Ghere and York-Barr's (2007) research findings indicated that better practices from state and local educational agencies could have a positive impact on paraprofessional retention, turnover, and job satisfaction. One strategy that school divisions could employ to increase the retention of paraprofessionals, according to Ghere and York-Barr (2007), is to spend more time and resources to train paraprofessionals. When paraprofessionals are trained to perform mandatory job duties, they are more satisfied with their jobs and student success is greater (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007; Delvin 2002).

According to Causton-Theoharis and Malmgren (2005), student success rates in the general education setting are lower due to the ineffectiveness of supports. Therefore, research on paraprofessional training has focused on the importance of formalized training programs, identifying key competencies to focus on during training, research-based training models, training delivery, and the impact of training on job performance, satisfaction, retention, and student success (Riggs & Mueller, 2001; Giangreco et al., 2011; Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren, 2005).

Carter, O'Rourke, Sisco, and Pelsue (2009) suggested that formalized training was essential for paraprofessionals as they began their work in the field of education, as it could have

an impact on job performance. Moreover, Trautman (2002) suggested that paraprofessionals should receive ongoing in-service training. This training should be long range, comprehensive, and systematic. The training programs should be specific to the job duties of paraprofessionals that are required daily. According to Trautman (2002), when paraprofessionals are trained well, the needs of students and staff can be met.

Research-based training programs are an effective way for state and local education agencies to gauge which programs to adapt that would be most beneficial to the work of paraprofessionals. McKenzie (2011) researched a school division in Colorado's paraprofessional training program. Before implementation, paraprofessional retention and job performance was low. However, after implementation of a one day, beginning of the year orientation and follow-up monthly meetings, this Colorado school division saw marked improvements in paraprofessional retention and job performance (McKenzie, 2011).

Giangreco et al. (2011) studied a training program for paraprofessionals as well. Their work tested the knowledge paraprofessionals gained from the training and its relationship to job performance. Riggs and Mueller (2001) found through questionnaires and interviews of paraprofessionals that job satisfaction was directly related to job performance. In addition, adequate training led to favorable job performances. Giangreco et al. (2011) and Riggs and Mueller (2001) researched specific training programs and found that effective training programs may increase job performance, attitudes, and work relationships with paraprofessionals.

According to Causton-Theoharis and Malmgren (2005) and Delvin (2002), the success of students with disabilities may depend on the supports made available to them and the way in which these supports are utilized. Supports that are common in school divisions as students with disabilities are included in the general education setting are paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals

provide ongoing support to students with disabilities in the general education setting. Likewise, according to Chopra et al. (2004), paraprofessional roles include more than working directly with students in the classroom setting. Their roles have developed into a liaison role in some cases which makes their role more complex and the need for training essential. Often times, paraprofessionals are not adequately trained to provide supports and lack ongoing supports to fulfill job duties (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007). Therefore, the research suggests that paraprofessionals who are trained on job roles and responsibilities, specifically how to work with students with disabilities in the general education setting, have better success rates and students become an active member in that setting (Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren, 2005).

Implications for School Leaders

School divisions are mandated through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 to provide training to paraprofessionals to perform job duties. However, specific information related to what the training should entail is not included in the federal mandate. It is up to state and local education agencies to create and supervise training programs for paraprofessionals. Therefore, school leaders are faced with the challenge of deciding how to efficiently and effectively provide training to paraprofessionals in order to perform job duties.

All too often, school divisions implement programs that do not last or are ineffective. There is research available on specific training programs and components of programs that suggest effectiveness. In addition, school leaders can use the research to determine individual needs to implement a training program. As seen in Riggs and Mueller's (2001) research, a needs assessment should be conducted before training is implemented. Interviewing and surveying paraprofessionals, teachers, students, parents, and school administrators may be a good starting point to assess needs.

School leaders must be creative in determining which avenues to take in the implementation of training programs for paraprofessionals. Resources have become less available to schools; therefore, schools will have to use their own funding and resources to provide training. Regardless of what is available, the research suggests that paraprofessionals need and lack adequate training; therefore, this is an essential task that school leaders must find ways to support.

Lynchburg City Schools' has implemented a web-based training program developed by the Commonwealth Autism Group for paraprofessionals who work with students with autism (i.e., <http://edublogs.org>). This program is in its beginning stages of development; however, it is proving to be rigorous and provide valuable information to paraprofessionals related to working with students with autism. A challenge that the school division is currently facing is providing adequate time for paraprofessionals to complete training and providing ongoing supports during and after training completion.

Training paraprofessionals to perform job duties that have a direct relationship to student success is essential. Therefore, school divisions must provide adequate training to these personnel. When paraprofessionals are trained, job performance, satisfaction, and student success increases.

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