



Quality Paraprofessionals Equal Quality Instruction for All Students

*Christina Whalen, PhD, BCBA-D
and Patricia Wright, PhD, MPH*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Paraprofessionals are a pivotal support in special education classrooms and to the successful inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Quality paraprofessionals improve student outcomes, teacher effectiveness, and school climate. Establishing good relationships between teachers and paraprofessionals as well as supporting paraprofessionals in understanding their roles and responsibilities with students is essential. Empowering paraprofessionals requires providing them with the essential skills in evidence-based educational interventions to confidently address problem behaviors, effectively build skills and provide meaningful learning opportunities for students. Career growth and professional development opportunities decrease turnover and improve job satisfaction for paraprofessionals. Unfortunately, professional development is often seen as time-consuming and expensive, and rarely is there time or resources available in school districts to adequately train paraprofessionals. Classroom teachers are often too overwhelmed with their own responsibilities to provide appropriate training and support. With today's technology, on-demand professional development maximizes opportunities for paraprofessionals to acquire skills to provide high quality learning opportunities for all students, and advance in their own careers.

KEYWORDS

Paraprofessional, Student Outcomes, Professional Development, Problem Behavior, Behavior Analysis, Registered Behavioral Technician, On-Demand Training, Behavior Intervention Plan, Functional Behavior Assessment

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The Changing Role of the Paraprofessional

Today, there are more than 1.2 million people working as teaching assistants with about 46% being paraprofessionals and about 71% of those paraprofessionals working with students with disabilities (National Education Association, 2015). In the past, the role of the paraprofessional was more of a clerical role (e.g. copying, filing, creating materials, etc.), student hygiene, and hall/playground/cafeteria monitoring (Jones, Ratcliff, Sheehan, & Hunt, 2012). Today's educational environment has placed increased demands on paraprofessionals. First, there is a greater push for inclusion of students with disabilities. Paraprofessionals are engaged in sophisticated support to promote success in general education settings (Cameron, 2014). In addition, there is greater accountability for schools to provide the necessary supports for students and more qualified paraprofessionals are needed to accomplish this (Chopra, Banerjee, DiPalma, Merrill, & Ferguson, 2013; Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010). This is particularly true in general education classrooms where the paraprofessional often becomes a special education student's primary educator (e.g. Fisher & Pleasants, 2012). With the requirements for evidence-based and inclusive education, there is an increasing demand for special education teachers that has grown faster than the hiring needs can be met (e.g. Chopra, Banerjee, DiPalma, Merrill, & Ferguson, 2013). This shortage of special education teachers often leads to paraprofessionals assuming additional responsibilities (e.g. Fisher & Pleasants, 2012).

Paraprofessionals work in a variety of settings, often working 1:1 with students for at least part of their day. Many paraprofessionals teach in small groups and are responsible for developing lesson plans, teaching skills, developing and administering tests, and grading (Patterson, 2006). At times, they may even teach whole class lessons. About 70% of paraprofessionals work with students with severe disabilities (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012).

Most paraprofessionals believe that their primary role is to manage student behavior problems (Patterson, 2006). This frequently requires them to

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follow a behavior intervention plan and to collect data on a student’s problem behaviors and progress in the student’s acquisition of skills to prevent problem behavior. Skills that paraprofessionals work on with students may include self-management, appropriate behavior, social skills, academic, communication, or other skills determined by the student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP). While teachers typically develop lesson plans and IEPs, paraprofessionals are often implementing them with the student and they may be asked to prepare or even create teaching materials to support the instruction.

Paraprofessionals play an essential role in schools but their role often lacks clear definition. This can lead to confusion from the paraprofessionals themselves, as well from teachers, parents and school administrators about the specific responsibilities of the paraprofessional (Jones, et al., 2012). Establishing clear roles and responsibilities promotes success for all members of the educational team.

Teacher And Paraprofessional Relationships

Quality relationships between teachers and paraprofessionals are critical to create a positive and effective learning environment for students (Council for Exceptional Children, 2012). The U.S. Department of Education (2013) reports that there are approximately 416,798 full-time paraprofessionals working with approximately 378,614 full-time special education teachers in public schools.

Paraprofessionals describe teachers that they have positive relationships with as being patient, empathetic, thoughtful, dedicated, focused on students, open, understanding, flexible, and respectful of paraprofessionals (Biggs, Gilson, & Carter, 2016). In addition, these relationships are stronger when paraprofessionals see teachers as being organized, having skills and knowledge, and demonstrating professionalism and leadership. Similarly, relationships are better when teachers viewed paraprofessionals as being cooperative, amenable, flexible, motivated, willing to learn, understanding, and focused on students. Relationships are less positive when either the teacher or the paraprofessional is perceived to be unprofessional (e.g. using phone during class, not dressing appropriately, or discussing inappropriate topics when students were present).

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In addition to the relationship, it’s important that teachers and paraprofessionals be on the same page regarding what students are learning, what is expected from the paraprofessional, and the measurement of student outcomes. Consistent communication and clear expectations are easier with pre-planned lessons, data collection, and behavior management strategies. Time and effort spent on building the relationship between the teacher and the paraprofessional improves paraprofessional confidence and establishes appropriate leadership in the classroom. The strong relationship between the professionals improves the opportunity for student success.

The Paraprofessional And The Student

Students perform best with paraprofessionals who build trust in 1:1 teaching but who also “back off” and promote independence around other students. Often, inexperienced paraprofessionals will hover or over-prompt students (Feldman & Matos, 2013). While bonding with students is beneficial, being overly present around other students can impair their social opportunities (e.g. Giangreco, Broer, & Suter, 2011). The job of the paraprofessional is to promote learning and skill development, remediate problem behaviors, increase appropriate behaviors, and help facilitate skills that will help the student fit in with their peers and better assimilate into the academic learning environment.

Paraprofessionals have a significant role with students. Often, they spend 1:1 time together. This can create a great bond but can also lead to dependency. Student’s can become prompt-dependent. They may have the skills to complete tasks but they have become reliant on an adult to do it for them or overly guiding them through the activity. This decreases the opportunity for children to achieve the greatest degree of independence. The key to alleviating the prompt dependency issues while still allowing the paraprofessional to build relationships, build skills, and remediate problem behaviors is to ensure that these professionals have the necessary skills to be effective in their positions Proper professional development ensures that paraprofessionals are truly educating students.

Paraprofessionals convey they are not adequately trained or prepared to take on the responsibilities that are required of their position

Essential Skills For Paraprofessionals

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires that each state must develop minimum standards for paraprofessionals, as well as for teachers (National Education Association, 2016). ESSA requires that states implement qualifications for becoming a paraprofessional by having the individual have at least 2 years of college and an Associate’s degree, passing the ETS ParaPro Assessment or equivalent, and participating in an internship or training program prior to working with children. Schools also look for candidates who have a positive attitude toward children, demonstrate an interest in learning and self-improvement, have good interpersonal skills, and demonstrate good communication skills (Trautman, 2004).

Successful paraprofessionals are effective communicators with students, teachers, and parents. This includes the ability to actively participate by listening to others, asking open-ended questions to get a range of information from others, asking closed questions when they need to acquire facts quickly, seeking clarification by reinforcing the speaker to provide more information, paraphrasing original messages to provide clarification, acknowledging others while they are speaking, and providing reflective feedback that acknowledges the speaker’s feelings (Stockall, 2014). Acquiring this significant repertoire of communication skills requires coaching and professional development.

Another essential skill for a paraprofessional is the ability to apply behavior analytic skills to manage problem behaviors, to provide learning opportunities, and to assist in building the skills identified in a child’s IEP. Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is an effective and commonly used approach for special education and inclusive models for students with IEPs (Delano, 2007). Most paraprofessionals work with students with disabilities and many of them are required to implement behavior intervention plans as well as deal with difficult behaviors in the classroom and on the school campus. The ability to manage behavior and teach appropriate replacement skills is essential for a student to

be successful in school. A highly skilled paraprofessional supports the development of these skills in students and promotes a quality learning environment for all learners. Using effective reinforcement, prompting, and

prompt fading are just a few of the skills that paraprofessionals must master. The professional must also be able to implement evidence-based instruction. The ability to provide maintenance and generalization opportunities and to provide opportunities to build communication and social skills are also very important for a paraprofessional. But, it’s not enough to have these skills if the progress is not properly monitored and recorded, they must also learn to accurately record data throughout the day. Progress monitoring of students learning objectives, demonstrating that the student is indeed making progress towards the goals in their IEP is required by the paraprofessional. Learning to collect data and do basic graphing greatly improves the effectiveness and efficiency of Functional Behavior Assessments, Behavior Intervention Plans, and teaching skills to students (Serna, et al., 2015).

On-going learning with on-going assessment has been shown to be more effective than didactic instruction or passive learning and learners see more value in the experience

Paraprofessionals report that they are often left to make important decisions and act independently when working with students due to teacher schedules

Paraprofessional Development

Paraprofessionals convey that they are not adequately trained or prepared to take on the responsibilities that are required of their position (Carter, et al., 2009). Training often comes from various resources including other paraprofessionals, human resources, special education department, special education teachers, a college, outside agencies or professionals, behavior analysts, or other school staff (National Resource Center for Paraeducators, 2012). No Child Left Behind (2002) requires that paraprofessionals are adequately prepared and trained and that they work under the supervision of a certified teacher. However, paraprofessionals report that they are often left to make important decisions and act independently when working with students due to teacher schedules (Giangreco, Broer, & Suter, 2011).

There is a paucity of research on what effective training for paraprofessionals entails but we do know that paraprofessionals with adequate training are more likely to provide quality learning opportunities not only for their target student(s) but for all students (e.g. Hamad et al., 2010; Feldman & Matos, 2013). Training increases the likelihood that they can remediate disruptive behaviors and improve skills that help students take advantage of more learning and social opportunities.

Like any job, career growth provides motivation for engagement and learning. Once basic skills are acquired, a paraprofessional might want to advance their skills and improve the possibility of career advancement. The Registered Behavior Technician (RBT) credential from the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB, 2017) has provided a professionalization for the paraprofessional field. The RBT is for paraprofessionals who wish to demonstrate competency in behavior analysis under the supervision of a certified behavior analyst. Acquiring the credential requires 40 hours of instruction in behavior analysis, demonstration of these skills in an observation conducted by a certified behavior analyst and a competency exam. Many organizations, including schools, are beginning to require this credential to work with students with disabilities. Utilizing certified professionals increases the likelihood that students are receiving quality intervention. Certification also improves the confidence of administrators and parents that students are receiving quality services from paraprofessionals.

Professional development does not necessarily have to be time intensive or expensive to be effective and web-based models may be a viable solution

The Need For On-Demand Training Options

On-demand training provides opportunities to learn the necessary skills with flexible scheduling. On-demand professional development in conjunction with strong coaching and leadership leads to higher quality. Delivery of on-demand training could include video modeling, video self-modeling, didactic instruction via video, narrated PowerPoint presentations, or assigned readings. The issue with some of these methods is that they use passive learning where the person watches the training material. In this situation, there is no way for teachers or administrators to know if the paraprofessional acquired the knowledge within the training. Quality on-demand training includes assessment of knowledge of those receiving training, and requires teachers and administrators to monitor the progress of those engaged in training. On-going learning with on-going assessment has been shown to be more effective than didactic instruction or passive learning and learners see more value in the experience (Felder, 1993). The ability to provide paraprofessionals with on-demand professional development provides convenience and increased

confidence, can reduce costs and decrease time needed for training. Professional development does not necessarily have to be time intensive or expensive to be effective and web-based models may be a viable solution.

Conclusions

On-demand learning using technology is one solution for improving the professional development for paraprofessionals. Minimizing costs and time resources for schools and giving paraprofessionals flexibility to learn at a pace that is reasonable with their work schedule is possible with on-demand learning. For optimal results, professional development should include evidence-based teaching practices such as video modeling and on-going assessment, not just didactic instruction. Progress of paraprofessional training should be visible to teachers and administrators, implementing those learned skills in the classroom with coaching and supervision ensures that knowledge is utilized in the educational setting producing meaningful outcomes for students. Trained paraprofessionals result in improved teacher efficiency, better behavior management of students, improved learning opportunities, and a higher quality of instruction for all students in the classroom.



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