

Challenging Behaviors: Perceived Training Needs of Special Education Paraprofessionals

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PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

ABSTRACT

Challenging Behaviors: Perceived Training Needs of Special Education Paraprofessionals
by Zhanna B. Preston

Purpose: The purpose of the study was to identify the most challenging and frequently occurring types of student behavioral problems that paraprofessionals in the K-12 public school setting encounter. In addition, the purpose of the study included identifying the most effective ways to prepare special education paraprofessionals to manage the most challenging and frequently occurring student behaviors through effective professional development practices.

Methodology: The mixed methods study primarily involved collecting and analyzing qualitative and quantitative data through on-line surveys of paraprofessionals, special education teachers, and school principals. Phenomenology and grounded theory elements served as the descriptive study's theoretical foundations. A policy Delphi method used an expert panel that represented a diverse group of public school districts in Riverside County, California.

Findings: Analysis of data revealed the 12 most challenging student behavior types, including eight most frequently occurring student behaviors in the k-12 school setting. Key topics and effective professional development delivery methods for special education paraprofessionals in the area of managing challenging behaviors were identified.

Conclusions: As a result of the study and review of prior research, an outline of suggested professional development activities was developed. Effective training delivery methods involving the principles of andragogy were also identified.

Recommendations: Schools and districts must (1) include paraprofessionals', teachers', and principals' input when developing professional development activities for special education paraprofessionals; (2) focus the behavioral training for paraprofessionals on the most challenging

and frequently occurring student behaviors in the k-12 school setting; (3) apply principles of andragogy when providing professional development to paraprofessionals; (4) make a shift from one-day training events to on-going, systematic, research-based, consistent, relevant training that involves practice time, meaningful feedback, modeling, and activities aiming at the higher level thinking skills identified in Bloom's taxonomy.

PREVIEW

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, who give their love and support daily. My brother and I are eternally grateful for having the best childhood filled with enchanting memories, book discussions, trips to the Kazakh and Russian country-side, and delicious food.

They surround me with love and still make me feel like a princess to this day. They have encouraged me to work on my doctoral degree since high school and have never passed up an opportunity to remind me about it and to ask me if I needed any help with “that project.” My brother and I could not wish for better parents.

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: THE PROBLEM.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Background.....	3
Paraprofessionals in Special Education	5
The Term Paraprofessional	6
The Growing Number of Paraprofessionals.....	7
Cost of Utilizing Paraprofessionals for Behavior Support.....	8
The Role of the Paraprofessional	9
Statement of the Research Problem	11
Purpose Statement.....	13
Research Questions	14
The Quality of Research Questions	14
Research Questions	14
Survey Questions Posed in Three Rounds	15
Evolution of Research Questions.....	18
Significance of the Problem.....	19
Definitions.....	21
Delimitations.....	28
Organization of the Study	29
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE	31
Introduction.....	31
Special Education Overview	33
Legal Mandates.....	34
The Current State of Special Education	36
Summary of Literature Related to Special Education Overview	38
Overview of Paraprofessionals in Special Education	38
Paraprofessionals' Title.....	38
The Evolution of the Paraprofessionals' Role in Special Education	39

Need for Paraprofessional Training	41
Summary of the Overview of Paraprofessionals in Special Education.....	44
Behavior Management in Schools	44
Nation-wide Problem	44
Impact on School Accountability.....	46
Individual Behavioral Supports	47
School-wide Behavioral Supports.....	49
Summary of the Behavior Management in Schools.....	52
Training Needs of Paraprofessionals	52
Current State	52
The Positive and Negative Impact of Paraprofessionals.....	53
Adult Learners	55
Growth Mindset	57
Summary of the Training Needs of Paraprofessionals.....	58
Overall Summary of the Literature Review	58
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY.....	60
Introduction.....	60
Purpose Statement.....	61
Research Questions.....	61
Methodology.....	65
Population.....	69
Sample	69
Instrumentation	75
The Delphi Study Method.....	75
The Field Test Expert Panel and the Study Expert Panel	76
Field Test Expert Panel.....	77
Study Expert Panel.....	77
Ethical Considerations and Risks for Participants	78
Validity and Reliability.....	79
Validity	79
Reliability.....	81

Data Collection	82
Data Analysis.....	86
Limitations	88
Significance of the Study	90
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS	92
Introduction.....	92
Purpose Statement.....	92
Research Questions.....	93
Research Questions.....	93
Electronic Survey Questions.....	93
Methodology	97
Population and Sample.....	98
Data Presentation and Analysis	103
Research Question One.....	104
Analysis of Round 1.....	105
Analysis of Round 2.....	110
Analysis of Round 3.....	135
Research Question Two.....	136
Research Question Three.....	142
Summary.....	143
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	145
Summary.....	145
Purpose Statement.....	146
Research Questions.....	147
Methodology.....	147
Major Findings.....	148
Research Question One.....	148
Categorization Criteria.....	149
Research Question Two.....	154

Research Question Three	156
Correlation with Literature Review	157
Triangulation.....	158
Conclusions.....	167
Recommendations for Actions.....	169
Recommendations for Further Research.....	171
Concluding Remarks and Reflections.....	171
REFERENCES.....	173
APPENDICES.....	201

PREVIEW

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Population Sample: Riverside County Districts.....	73
Table 2. Study Participants: Participation Overview.....	101
Table 3. Participation Response Rate by Round and Participant Type.....	102
Table 4. Behavior Types Identified Through Round 1.....	108
Table 5. Round 2 analysis of the challenging level of the On Task/Student Engagement behavior type.....	112
Table 6. Round 2 analysis of the challenging level of the Executive Functioning behavior type.....	113
Table 7. Round 2 analysis of the challenging level of the Prosocial Behaviors behavior type.....	114
Table 8. Round 2 analysis of the challenging level of the Emotion/Stress Management behavior type.....	115
Table 9. Round 2 analysis of the challenging level of the Excessive Reliance on Adult Help behavior type.....	116
Table 10. Round 2 analysis of the challenging level of the Defiance behavior type.....	117
Table 11. Round 2 analysis of the challenging level of the Tantrums behavior type.....	118
Table 12. Round 2 analysis of the challenging level of the Verbal Aggression behavior Type.....	119
Table 13. Round 2 analysis of the challenging level of the Physical Aggression to Self or Others behavior type.....	120
Table 14. Round 2 analysis of the challenging level of the Property Destruction behavior type.....	121
Table 15. Round 2 analysis of the challenging level of the Elopement behavior type.....	122

Table 16. Round 2 analysis of the challenging level of the Self-Stimulatory Behavior type.....	123
Table 17. Round 2 analysis of the frequency rating of the On Task/Student Engagement behavior type.....	124
Table 18. Round 2 analysis of the frequency rating of the Executive Functioning behavior type.....	125
Table 19. Round 2 analysis of the frequency rating of the Prosocial Behaviors behavior type.....	126
Table 20. Round 2 analysis of the frequency rating of the Emotion/Stress Management behavior type.....	127
Table 21. Round 2 analysis of the frequency rating of the Excessive Reliance on Adult Help behavior type.....	128
Table 22. Round 2 analysis of the frequency rating of the Defiance behavior type.....	129
Table 23. Round 2 analysis of the frequency rating of the Tantrums behavior type.....	130
Table 24. Round 2 analysis of the frequency rating of the Verbal Aggression behavior type.....	131
Table 25. Round 2 analysis of the frequency rating of the Physical Aggression to Self or Others behavior type.....	132
Table 26. Round 2 analysis of the frequency rating of the Property Destruction behavior Type.....	133
Table 27. Round 2 analysis of the frequency rating of the Elopement behavior type.....	134
Table 28. Round 2 analysis of the frequency rating of the Self-Stimulatory behavior type.....	135
Table 29. Most challenging student behaviors in Northern Italy.....	160
Table 30. Comparison and correlation of behavior types identified in three studies.....	165

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Special education program options.....	5
Figure 2. Summary of factors leading to the need for a comprehensive, systematic, relevant, and evidence-based staff development for special education paraprofessionals.....	10
Figure 3. Literature review emerging themes.....	33
Figure 4. Sample Selection.....	75
Figure 5. Participant selection criteria for SE administrators.....	99
Figure 6. Study expert panel make-up.....	101
Figure 7. Alignment of survey questions with study research questions.....	104
Figure 8. Rankings for each behavior type by challenging level.....	151
Figure 9. Rankings for each behavior type by frequency level.....	152
Figure 10. Rankings of behavior types based on challenging level and frequency.....	153
Figure 11. Professional development outline.....	170

CHAPTER 1: THE PROBLEM

“If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts he shall end in certainties.” Francis Bacon

Introduction

Public education today faces a number of challenges, each requiring a great degree of expertise and research-based practices to guide its initiatives to keep advancing forward. Closing the achievement gap and providing access to all students despite their individual differences or limited opportunities has long been a national goal. Providing quality education to pupils with disabilities, constituting 13% of all U.S. students (Levenson, 2012), typifies one challenge American public schools face (Levenson, 2012; Osborne & Russo, 2007). Special education has become one of the most complex and highly litigated areas of public education.

Special education, an integral part of general education, is the process of providing eligible students with disabilities between the ages of three through twenty two years with specialized instruction and services tailored to their exceptional needs (Hallahan, Kauffman & Pullen, 2009). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a federal law governing special education, defines special education as

specially designed instruction, at no cost to parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including- (i) instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and in other settings; and (ii) instruction in physical education.

(34 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] 300.39 (a) (1)).

The IDEA defined eligible students as children having one of the thirteen qualifying handicapping conditions: (1) autism; (2) deaf-blindness; (3) deafness; (4) emotional disturbance; (5) hearing impairment; (6) mental retardation; (7) multiple disabilities; (8) orthopedic impairment, (9) other health impairment, (10) specific learning disability; (11) speech or language impairment; (12) traumatic brain injury, (13) visual impairment (34 CFR, 300.8 (c)).

Hallahan, Kauffman, and Pullen (2009) referenced Huefner (2006) and described specialized instruction as “specially designed instruction that meets the unusual needs of an exceptional student” (p. 13), and which may require “special materials, teaching techniques, or equipment and/or facilities” (p. 13). Specialized instruction may include providing regular education curriculum with accommodations and modifications using instructional delivery methods tailored to the individual needs of students with disabilities. Special education related services comprise a non-exhaustive list of “related services which means transportation and such developmental, corrective, and other supportive services as required to assist a child with a disability to benefit special education” (34, CFR, 300.34 (a)). Local Education Agencies (LEAs) may provide special education students with other related services including “speech-language pathology and audiology services, interpreting services, psychological services, physical and occupational therapy, recreation, including rehabilitation counseling, orientation and mobility services, and medical services for diagnostic or evaluation purposes” (34 CFR, 300.34 (a)).

Either as a related special education service or a support provided per the student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) LEAs may assign a personal paraprofessional or a “one-to-one aide” (OAH Case No. 2013120111, 2014, p. 2; OAH Case No. 2011110416., 2012, p. 5;) to an eligible child with a disability.

Driven to meet a number of compliance standards mandated by federal/state laws and required to utilize highly qualified and trained personnel to provide “special materials, teaching techniques, or equipment and/or facilities” (Hallahan, Kauffman & Pullen, 2009, p. 12), special education has become the “most expensive way to help struggling students” (Levenson, 2012, p. 119).

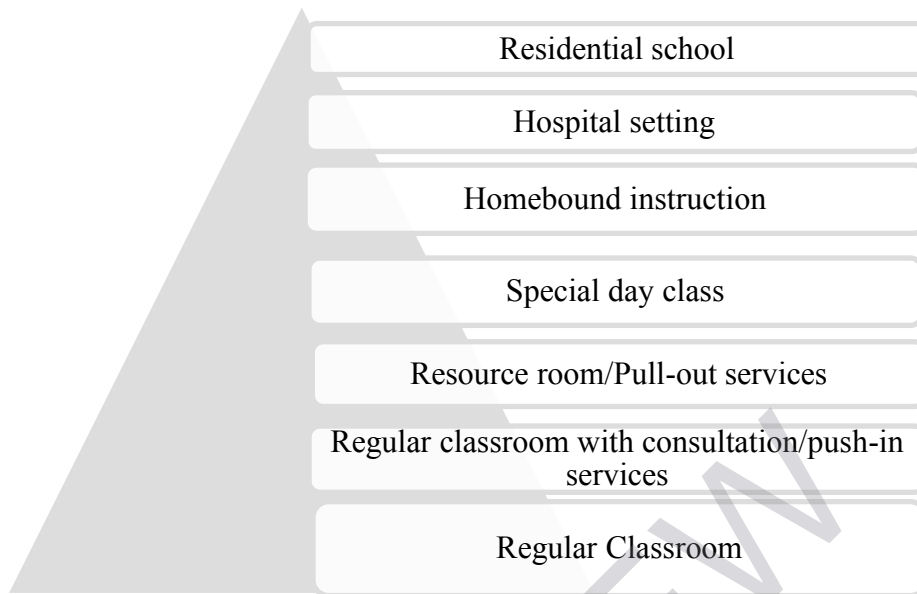
Background

While being one of the “major challenges facing educators today” (Osborne & Russo, 2007, p. 1), special education has not been always incorporated into the American education system. In the United States, specialized instruction and services began emerging in the second half of the 19th century by serving children with visual and hearing impairments (Osborne & Russo, 2007). After a century-long battle led by “advocates of the disabled to gain equal rights” (Osborne & Russo, 2007, p. 7) and as a “direct result of the civil rights movement” (Osborne & Russo, 2007, p. 7), the federal government enacted a legal mandate to provide students with disabilities the right to education (Yell, 2012) by passing the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975. In 1990, the statute was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and was later reauthorized in 1997 and 2004. Legislative actions and subsequent case law turned special education into the most highly litigated area of education governed by an “elaborate and extensive body of statutes, regulations, and court decisions” (Yell, 2012, p. 12), caused its expansion, and complicated the duties its providers performed. Sparked by the Highly Qualified Teacher (HQT) requirement of the 1991 federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act and mandated increased accountability imposed by IDEA 2004, special education case law further emphasized the obligation for Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to supply adequately trained personnel to provide special education services. Adequate training of staff

providing special education services has been brought as an issue for due process hearings (OAH Case No. N 2007020786, 2007; OAH Case No. N 2005120400, 2006; OAH Case No. 2010020281, 2010).

The NCLB pressure to increase all subgroups' student achievement (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002) and the IDEA mandate to furnish a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to students with a wide variety of medical, behavioral, social-emotional, and learning disorders (U.S. Department of Education, 2014) require a cadre of well trained teachers, paraprofessionals, nurses, therapists, administrators and other staff. Special education in the United States today demands that LEAs provide education access to students with special needs through a continuum of placement options, including (a) general education classes at the child's home school, (b) specialized schools, (c) residential treatment facilities, (d) hospitals, and (e) the home setting (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2009). Although the specialization of the placement varies depending on where the student receives the special education services, the requirement that all children receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) applies to all individualized education programs (IEPs). Figure 1 below, adapted from Hallahan and Kauffman's (2006, p. 17) visual representation of special education placements, illustrates the variety of placements children with special needs may experience while receiving specialized instruction and/or services.

Figure 1. Special education program options.



The figure provides a visual representation of the seven special education placement options available for students with disabilities.

Paraprofessionals in Special Education

A variety of credentialed and non-credentialed staff consisting of teachers, paraprofessionals, and speech, occupational, physical, mental health, behavioral and other therapists afford specialized instruction and services to special education students. The number of special education staff has escalated to serve the increasing population of special education students, but paraprofessionals specifically experienced remarkable growth from 525,000 employees in 2003 (Likins, 2003) to over 700,000 in 2006, (Levenson, 2012) and 830,000 in 2014 (Finkel, 2014).

Many special education placement options on the continuum of services are being staffed by special education paraprofessionals assisting teachers in meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Some paraprofessionals are assigned to groups of students who attend general

education classes, resource specialist programs (RSPs), and/or special day classes (SDCs), and some provide one-to-one services to individual students. Special education paraprofessionals are not restricted to specific placements and may be assigned to students in the regular education environment, resource rooms, and specialized classes. They may work in specialized schools and provide services to pupils in hospitals, residential treatment centers, and students' homes. The Code of Federal Regulations (Code of Federal Regulations § 300.156 (iii), 2014) allows paraprofessionals to deliver special education related services in accordance with the requirements set out in state laws:

(iii) Allow paraprofessionals and assistants who are appropriately trained and supervised, in accordance with State law, regulation, or written policy, in meeting the requirements of this part to be used to assist in the provision of special education and related services under this part to children with disabilities. (Code of Federal Regulations § 300.156 (iii)),

The Term Paraprofessional

The term “paraprofessional,” coined by Anna Lou Picket (Ashbacker & Morgan, 2001), is not used consistently and is often substituted with “teacher’s aide”, “teacher’s assistant”, “interventionist”, “paraeducator”, “behavioral aide”, “health aide”, “intensive behavior intervention (IBI) aide”, “applied behavior analysis (ABA) aide”, “designated instruction service (DIS) aide,” “related service (RS) aide,” “instructional aide,” “aide,” or “para.” Giles (2010) posited that the term “paraprofessional,” more commonly used in the past ten years, reflected “a position with increased professional expectations” (p. 9) and has supplanted the popular title of “paraeducator”. The National Education Association (NEA) defined the term paraeducator as “a school employee who works alongside and under the supervision of a licensed or certificated educator to support and assist in providing instructional and other services to children, youth, and

their families” (National Association of Education/NEA, 2014). The term “paraprofessional” is referenced in NCLB (2001) and has prevalently surfaced in more recent literature (Giangreco et al., 2004; Causton-Theoharis et al., 2007; Cobb, 2007; Lane, Carter, & Sisco, 2012; Wenger et al., 2004). The inconsistency of the paraprofessional’s title is ubiquitous across districts, states, and even foreign countries. The current study primarily employed the terms “paraprofessional” and “paraeducator.” However, other terms describing paraprofessionals appeared in the study and are used interchangeably due the inconsistent use of various titles applied to this group of school district employees throughout literature.

The Growing Number of Paraprofessionals

While the number of paraprofessionals has grown significantly in the past five to fifteen years (Giangreco et al., 2004; Hawkins, 2004; Levenson, 2012; Ashbacker & Morgan, 2001), the prevailing gender of this employee group (90%) remains to be female (Ashbacker & Morgan, 2001). School districts continue adding paraprofessionals to their staffs to accommodate the increase of students who exhibit severe behaviors, to maintain safety, and to reduce disruptions in their classrooms, playgrounds, buses, and bus loops (Crone & Horner, 2003; Levenson, 2012). Levenson (2012) found the process of hiring “an ever-expanding army of paraprofessionals” (p. 89), an attempt to include students with behavioral needs in their least restrictive environments, to be a Band-Aid fix achieved through a low cost employee. Notwithstanding the employees’ low cost, the sheer numbers of this employee group greatly affects local education agencies’ (LEAs) budgets.

Cost of Utilizing Paraprofessionals for Behavior Support

Staffing costs are one of the highest public school districts' expenditures that can be spiraled by an increase of paraprofessionals. The growth is explained by the legal mandate of instructing the growing number of students with disabilities in the general education classrooms, or the least restrictive environment (LRE), which often requires additional supports and services, some of which include the adding of paraprofessionals as classroom support (Salisbury & Chambers, 1994; Giangreco, Broer & Edelman, 1999; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997). Harris (2012) referenced the 2011 National Education Association, highlighting the

...continual increase in enrollment of students in special education programs throughout the United States with three out of every four students with an identified educational disability spending part or all of their school day in a general education classroom outside of the special education setting, allowing students with disabilities to access their least restrictive learning environment. (Harris, p. 2)

Levenson (2012), after analyzing paraprofessionals' roles in posing challenges for school budgets, recommended strategies to cut expenditures through focusing special educators on cost effective practices, strengthening general education interventions as preventative measures, defining clear criteria for special education eligibility, and creating cross departmental teams to increase collaboration and accountability within organizations. He estimated the number of paraprofessionals assigned to address behavioral needs to compose "one third to one-half of all aides" (p. 90), costing a midsize district 1.5 million dollars and causing an urban district to spend "10 million on aides for behavioral support" (p. 90) annually. Giangreco et al. (2004) suggested alternative strategies to using paraprofessionals and recommended a "three component administrative model for effective utilization of paraprofessionals" (p. 83) that includes