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# Paraprofessional Perceptions of Training and Professional Development

Paige C. Stratton  
stratto4@marshall.edu

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Paraprofessional Perceptions of Training and Professional Development

**Paraprofessional Perceptions of Training and Professional Development**

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**Paige C. Stratton**

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## Paraprofessional Perceptions of Training and Professional Development

### Abstract

Paraprofessionals, also called teacher's aides, in Lincoln and Putnam counties in West Virginia were surveyed to gain their perceptions of the effectiveness of the state's training requirements and professional development. Questions on how well the current requirements prepares paraprofessionals for their jobs and what should be added yielded moderately positive opinions with suggestions for classes on individual disabilities and a practicum being added. Questions on professional development showed moderately positive opinions on the effectiveness of current professional development. The majority of participants felt that additional training would improve their job performance. Training in specific disabilities and interventions was viewed as more helpful than clerical and other general knowledge topics, although more than fifty percent indicated training in these topics would be helpful too.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Paraprofessionals, teaching assistants, and teacher's aides are all titles referring to the same position. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation defines a paraprofessional as a school employee under the supervision of a certified teacher ("No Child Left Behind Act," 2001). Limited budgets and a shortage of qualified professionals has led administrators to increase the use of paraprofessionals to stretch the time and resources of special educators (Chopra, Banerjee, DiPalma, Merrill, & Ferguson, 2013; Suter & Giangreco, 2009). This situation has led to an increase in the numbers of paraprofessionals serving students in special education, with 60% of our states employing more paraprofessionals than special educators (Suter & Giangreco, 2009). Vermont alone has tripled its number of paraprofessionals in the past 30 years (Suter & Giangreco, 2009).

Traditionally these employees took care of classroom housekeeping, student hygiene care and lunch monitoring (Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010; Jones, Ratcliff, Sheehan, & Hunt, 2012; Suter & Giangreco, 2009). Today they review educational material, handle student behaviors, present new material lessons planned or scripted by teachers in addition to many other duties (Giangreco et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2012; Suter & Giangreco, 2009). The question of what training paraprofessionals need to fulfill these duties and how to deliver that training has begun to be addressed by the education and legislative community over the past decade.

### **Statement of the Problem**

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Paraprofessionals often feel a lack of respect from coworkers and administrators (Giangreco et al., 2010; B. McKenzie, 2011). Their roles are so poorly defined that teachers, administrators, parents, and even the paraprofessionals themselves often do not understand what their responsibilities are (Giangreco et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2012; Suter & Giangreco, 2009). This confusion and the impression their jobs are undervalued combine with lack of proper training leading to high turnover, job dissatisfaction, and incorrectly or inappropriately delivered instruction (Giangreco et al., 2010; B. McKenzie, 2011). When a paraprofessional is assigned to one child, the amount of their instruction time from the paraprofessional can rise to levels higher than that of the child's special education teacher. In Vermont, Suter and Giangreco (2009) found a discrepancy of 38% of instruction time with the paraprofessional, but only 16% with the special educator when the student was in an inclusive classroom with a one on one paraprofessional. Few paraprofessionals have the necessary training in special education interventions and practices to be responsible for this amount of instruction (Suter & Giangreco, 2009).

Including paraprofessionals in paid training days on subjects they feel are important in their jobs helps raise satisfaction and lowers turnover (B. McKenzie, 2011). Providing time for collaboration with the teachers they assist helps build teamwork and mutual respect (Jones et al., 2012; B. McKenzie, 2011). Ongoing training on appropriate instruction delivery and behavioral interventions helps lower inaccurate instruction and develops paraprofessionals' class and behavioral management skills (Giangreco et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2012).

NCLB requires paraprofessionals to have two years of education beyond high school or pass a proficiency test of their state's choosing ("No Child Left Behind Act," 2001).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004) recognized the use and

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importance of paraprofessionals in special education. IDEA 2004 noted students in special education have the most complex needs and need highly qualified service providers ("Building the Legacy: IDEA 2004," 2006). It mandated all service providers, including paraprofessionals, have training that enables them to do their jobs correctly ("Building the Legacy: IDEA 2004," 2006). However, it left the task of defining qualifications and training requirements to each state, providing no unifying national requirements for paraprofessional certification or systematic professional development training ("Building the Legacy: IDEA 2004," 2006).

By leaving the definitions, guideline development, and implementation to the states, IDEA created diverse paraprofessional certification and development programs across the country without any consensus (Breton, 2010). Some states have developed exemplary programs, but the majority have little research or review on their success or progress towards IDEA 2004's requirements (Breton, 2010; Giangreco et al., 2010) Maine has developed a leveled classification for paraprofessionals that includes training, responsibility, and supervision requirements for each level (Breton, 2010). However, many states, like Vermont, are still struggling to define the roles and training needs of their paraprofessional (Suter & Giangreco, 2009). Developing a consensus on general paraprofessional training needs and identifying beneficial training programs requires each state's programs and progress to be studied (Breton, 2010). An important part of identifying paraprofessional training needs and effectiveness is investigating their perceptions of how the certification and developmental training they receive prepares them to fulfill their responsibilities.

### **Purpose of the Study**

## Paraprofessional Perceptions of Training and Professional Development

As an Appalachian, economically disadvantaged state, West Virginia faces challenges meeting the needs of very rural, mountainous, and spread out communities. Special education certifications are on the critical needs list for most counties in West Virginia, demonstrating a need for special education professionals and highlighting the importance of the training and qualifications of the West Virginian paraprofessionals that support the professionals they have ("West Virginia Critical Needs List,") . West Virginia currently requires 33 college hours in areas of math, reading, writing, classroom management, special education, computer literacy, and human growth and development in addition to a high school diploma or equivalency and a passing score on a proficiency exam for classroom aides (Teach West Virginia, 2013). An alternative route, usually for aides hired before IDEA 2004, requires 315 clock hours of professional development training (Teach West Virginia, 2013). There are substitutions for different requirements, such as substituting the Praxis I for the basic skills proficiency exam, but these do not alter the overall time and training requirements. (Teach West Virginia, 2013).

This study focuses on paraprofessional perceptions of how well the prequalification and ongoing training prepares them to perform their jobs in two West Virginia counties. A survey will be sent to the paraprofessionals in these counties. In addition to demographic information, the survey will measure perceptions on the qualifications for their jobs and the professional development training they receive. Collected data will be analyzed to determine perceptions of effectiveness of type of training, subject of training, delivery mode of training and needed training.

### **Rationale for the Study**

## Paraprofessional Perceptions of Training and Professional Development

By surveying a group of West Virginia's paraprofessionals' perceptions on how well their precertification requirements prepared them for their jobs, the usefulness of offered professional development trainings in those jobs, and desired training topics, data on current training and further needs can be gathered. This can add to the national information base data from a state with a unique mix of challenges.

Using paraprofessionals in special education is a popular solution in today's education environment (Giangreco et al., 2010). However, it raises many questions, including how appropriately trained they are (Jones et al., 2012; Suter & Giangreco, 2009). Truly ascertaining our progress in equipping paraprofessionals for their job requires information on what is being done and how well it is working. (Breton, 2010). By surveying a group of West Virginia's paraprofessionals' perceptions on how well their precertification requirements prepared them for their jobs, the usefulness of offered professional development trainings, and desired training topics, data on current training and further needs can be gathered. This can add to the national information base data from a state with a unique mix of challenges.

### **Research Question**

What are West Virginia paraprofessionals' in Lincoln and Putnam counties perceptions of the effectiveness of precertification and professional development training on job performance?

## **Chapter 2**

As the international community has recognized the need for inclusive, research based instruction for students with disabilities, the demand for special education professionals in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom has risen faster than it can be met (Abbott, McConkey, & Dobbins, 2011; Chopra et al., 2013; Giangreco et al., 2010; Hancock, Hall, Cable, & Eyr, 2010; Suter & Giangreco, 2009). A common solution to this problem is the use of paraprofessionals to assist professionals in delivery. The evolving roles of paraprofessionals, also called teacher's aides, teacher assistants, or para-educators, in special education delivery has prompted questions about their qualifications to perform their duties. Effective training requirements on both broad topics and specific intervention needs are being explored on both state and local levels across the nation.

The American legislature has begun to address paraprofessionals' roles and training in the special education laws of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and 2004's Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004). These laws have given general guidance to training and requirements for paraprofessionals, with specifics left to the states (Breton, 2010; "Building the Legacy: IDEA 2004," 2006; "No Child Left Behind Act," 2001). West Virginia has defined a specific set of employment requirements for paraprofessionals and continues to examine professional development ("Teach West Virginia," 2007).

## **International**

## Paraprofessional Perceptions of Training and Professional Development

Research on the use, roles, and responsibilities of paraprofessionals has been conducted in countries as diverse as Israel, Cyprus, and Australia (Ford, 2007; Hefziba Lifshitz, 2008; Panayiotis Angelides\*, 2009). Governments use this information to develop laws or check reaction to laws. Educators look for the best, most efficient practices for their own systems and cultures.

### **Hong Kong**

An example of emerging paraprofessional roles is the Hong Kong private school system. In 1994 the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) issued the Salamanca Statement and a Framework for Action to encourage the countries of the world to embrace inclusion ("The UNESCO Salamanca Statement," 2013). In 2007 Hong Kong began shifting towards inclusion, honoring the Salamanca Statement (Rose & Forlin, 2010). However, there are no current government regulations nor is there a hard push for inclusion in the public schools (Rose & Forlin, 2010). The private Hong Kong system, predominantly for English speaking students, is beginning to include students with special needs, and with this adding paraprofessionals to their staff. Those paraprofessionals are finding role confusion and a deep need for training in such areas as managing behavior, information on different disabilities, and general special education practices (Rose & Forlin, 2010). Rose and Forlin (2010) surveyed 97 paraprofessionals, 54 attending a basic training class and 47 attending an advanced class. They found that the majority, 96% of the basic class and 82 % of the advanced class, perceived training essential or very important (Rose & Forlin, 2010). To a lesser degree paraprofessionals agreed, 67% of the basic class and 61% of the advanced, with the need for required qualifications for paraprofessionals (Rose & Forlin, 2010).

## **United Kingdom**

The number of paraprofessionals in the UK, including Ireland, Wales, and England, tripled between 1997 and 2005 (Tucker, 2009), making up a quarter of the educational workforce by 2013 (Webster, Blatchford, & Russell, 2013). Three main problems that have arisen from this increase are a confusion of roles between paraprofessionals and teachers, development of proper qualification definitions and programs, and possible adverse effects of inadequately trained paraprofessionals (Abbott et al., 2011; Burgess & Mayes, 2009; Hancock et al., 2010; Tucker, 2009; Webster et al., 2013).

In an attempt to answer some of these concerns while providing coverage for teacher planning periods, the UK developed the position of High Level Teacher Assistants and funded a training program in 2005 (Burgess & Mayes, 2009; Hancock et al., 2010). While the initial training program for this was formal and extensive, both formal and informal training with subjects more tailored to fit the local situation has been found to produce positive results as well, prompting the English government to leave training subjects and deliveries up to the local areas (Webster et al., 2013).

## **Paraprofessional Roles and Qualifications in America**

### **IDEA 2004 and State Variance**

IDEA 2004 recognized the use and importance of paraprofessionals in special education. The law noted students in special education have the most complex needs and need highly qualified service providers ("Building the Legacy: IDEA 2004," 2006). It mandated all service providers, including paraprofessionals, have training that enables them to do their jobs correctly ("Building the Legacy: IDEA 2004," 2006). However, it left the task of defining qualifications

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and training requirements to each state, providing no unifying national requirements for paraprofessional certification or systematic professional development training ("Building the Legacy: IDEA 2004," 2006).

By leaving the definitions and guidelines to the states, IDEA has created a patchwork of paraprofessional certification and development programs across the country (Breton, 2010). The lack of national unity is demonstrated by the fact that only 13 states have mandated certification or credentialing requirements for paraprofessionals, and 7 of these have not changed their standards since 1970 (Dillon & Ebmeier, 2009). However, many states, like Maine and West Virginia, have developed specific employment standards and guidelines (Breton, 2010; "Teach West Virginia," 2007). Maine's includes training, responsibilities, and supervision requirements with each of its classification levels and has a 53% above fair rating from its paraprofessionals on the requirements (Breton, 2010). Colorado has developed training programs that draw from the local populations to meet its needs as a state with difficult terrain (Chopra et al., 2013). Rhode Island requires good character, a high school diploma or GED, 30-40 hour training program, and either passing the Para-Pro test or 48 college hours (Hauerwas & Goessling, 2008). While these states have defined qualifications, the majority have little research or review on their success or progress towards IDEA 2004's requirements (Breton, 2010; Suter & Giangreco, 2009).

In addition to developing qualifications for new paraprofessionals, states had until 2006 to train their existing paraprofessionals in order to meet No Child Left Behind's Title 1 requirements (Forbush & Morgan, 2004). Many states, such as Utah, Idaho, Pennsylvania, and Oregon developed distance learning programs as alternatives to college classes or paying for travel to workshops and seminars (Deardorff, Glasenapp, Schalock, & Udell, 2007; Forbush &

Morgan, 2004). Missouri compiled a list of training resources to meet the qualification needs of paraprofessionals that can also be used in professional development and precertification training (Missouri Univ, 2005).

### **Role Confusion**

Paraprofessionals often have role confusion, qualification ambiguity, and lack of proper training (Breton, 2010; Capizzi & Da Fonte, 2012; Causton-Theoharis, Giangreco, Doyle, & Vadasy, 2007; Fisher & Pleasants, 2012; Giangreco et al., 2010; Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2008; Jones et al., 2012; B. McKenzie, 2011; Suter & Giangreco, 2009). There is so little paraprofessional role understanding amongst administrators that a lengthy interview instrument involving different state requirements and group definitions was well reviewed (Dillon & Ebmeier, 2009).

Causto-Theoharis, Glangreco, Doyle, and Vadasy (2007) summed up the teacher and paraprofessional roles in their comparison to the chief chef and Sous-chef of a restaurant. The chief is responsible for planning and cooking most of the meal while the sous-chef is an assistant who is to follow the chief's directions (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2007). A teacher is responsible for planning and delivering the instruction, while the paraprofessional is responsible for supporting them by following their directions and plans (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2007). Teachers are supposed to give clear instructions on paraprofessional tasks and specific, frequent feedback on task performance (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2007).

Unfortunately, things have not proven so simple or definitive in the classroom. Despite legal mandates that special educators should be the instruction deliverer and paraprofessionals play a supporting role, the inequity of numbers and lack of training has blurred the lines between

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the two (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012; Giangreco et al., 2010; Suter & Giangreco, 2009). In Vermont, special education teachers spent only 39% of their time in direct instruction where paraprofessionals spent 58% (Suter & Giangreco, 2009). Fisher and Pleasants (2012) found that up to 11% of paraprofessionals were actually making lesson plans in one unidentified state, a definite teacher responsibility.

As states strive to improve their special education, positive solutions to role confusion are being found. The state of Maine lists responsibilities along with specific educational qualifications for each level of their teaching assistants (Breton, 2010). Many preschool teachers and paraprofessionals model good teamwork and attitudes that foster proper roles (Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2008). Allowing time for meeting with teachers and including paraprofessionals in staff meetings and trainings helps reduce confusion (B. McKenzie, 2011). A quarter of Capizzi and Da Fonte's Collaborative Classroom Support Plan (2012), an instrument designed to help develop a collaborative team between teachers and paraprofessionals, is dedicated to defining roles and responsibilities.

## **Training**

### **Training Programs and Supports**

Proper training is one of the biggest concerns in the growing role of paraprofessionals. When done right, professional development training can raise moral and cut turnover rates, as well as increase efficiency and effectiveness (B. McKenzie, 2011). Paraprofessionals need to be included in staff development, with either the same training or equally supported training (Hauerwas & Goessling, 2008; Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2008; B. McKenzie, 2011). When administrations set aside resources for appropriate training on topics paraprofessionals need in

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addition to encouraging outside training opportunities they show paraprofessionals their positions are valued and promotes team work (B. McKenzie, 2011).

While many different training delivery styles have been tried to meet the needs of different communities, there are some commonalities between good programs. Workshops with follow ups, local college courses, online distance learning, courses on compact discs, and embedded teacher provided training all have had success in providing retained skill training (Deardorff et al., 2007; Forbush & Morgan, 2004; Hauerwas & Goessling, 2008; B. McKenzie, 2011).

One of the most important commonalities in successful training programs is the importance of quality, frequent feedback from teachers who interact with paraprofessionals daily following hands on interactive training (Hall, Grundon, Pope, & Romero, 2010; Mazurik-Charles & Stefanou, 2010). Jones, Ratcliff, Sheehan, and Hunt (2012) showed it takes more than a onetime training workshop to learn how to deliver a scripted lesson correctly when so little improved in scripted delivery after their training workshop. The use of video modeling and recording paraprofessionals during performance of the desired skill for feedback review later has proven effective in raising skill retention (Robinson, 2011).

Checklists can help teachers provide feedback on how skills are being implemented (Carnahan, Williamson, Clarke, & Sorensen, 2009; Casey & McWilliam, 2011). When training to use a Zone Defense Schedule (ZDS) to improve transitions, teachers used checklists including items like material preparedness, making sure an adult is present at each activity before transitioning, and giving students transition warnings (Casey & McWilliam, 2011). Checklist evaluation forms like the one included in Carnahan, Williamson, Clarke, and Sorenson's (2009)

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teaching guide give paraprofessionals a running record of which steps they are accomplishing and which ones need attention.

### **General versus Specific Training Needs**

Any training and development plan needs to cover certain areas for all paraprofessionals. Several areas including child development, professional collaboration, family interactions, instructional skills, assessment skills, classroom management, and behavior management have been identified in different states (Breton, 2010; Deardorff et al., 2007; Hauerwas & Goessling, 2008; Missouri Univ, 2005; "Teach West Virginia," 2007) Before they can present a teacher prepared review lesson well, they need to be taught how to manage behavior of individuals and groups as well as some basic underlying principles of why and how to teach (Jones et al., 2012; Keller, Bucholz, & Brady, 2007; O'Keeffe, Slocum, & Magnusson, 2013; Wasburn-Moses, Euljung, & Kaldenberg, 2013).

Training paraprofessionals in the practices that make up a good lesson, such as praise, presentation rate, and correction, helps raise the effectiveness of presentations (O'Keeffe et al., 2013). In addition to learning how to present a lesson, the paraprofessional needs to know how to help the individual student learn and use the skills of learning independently (Keller et al., 2007). Understanding these skills themselves helps paras generalize practice of them across both academics and behavior for the children they serve (Keller et al., 2007).

Although there are general skills that apply to all paraprofessional positions, the roles and responsibilities of the positions they fill are so diverse that training specialized to the position's specific duties and children is needed. Paraprofessionals who work with students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) need training in Applied Behavior Analysis interventions

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where those who work with students who are visually impaired need training on braille, sighted guiding, and tactile graphics (Mazurik-Charles & Stefanou, 2010; A. R. McKenzie & Lewis, 2008). If a paraprofessional is going to record information for Response To Intervention (RTI) progress monitoring they need to know why they are asked to do it a certain way (Hauerwas & Goessling, 2008). These are just a few examples of the diverse training needs paraprofessionals have. These needs are so diverse, the English government was prompted to leave training requirements to the local areas (Hancock et al., 2010). There are numerous studies for individual disability needs and successful specific skill trainings, all of which contribute to general training knowledge and show paraprofessionals can be properly trained to make an educational difference for students with special needs.

The use of one on one paraprofessionals for children with an ASD has raised questions of aide dependence, isolation from peers, and encouraging general educators to pass their duties to the child to the paraprofessional (Hall et al., 2010; Mazurik-Charles & Stefanou, 2010; Robinson, 2011; Symes & Humphrey, 2011; Tucker, 2009). Paraprofessionals have been successfully trained to deliver Pivotal Response Training (PRI), social skills training, and other behavior strategies for students with an ASD (Hall et al., 2010; Mazurik-Charles & Stefanou, 2010; Robinson, 2011). Training in these skills reduces hovering, increases engagement for the student overall, and allows the skill to be taught in the natural setting which increases generalization and reduces isolation (Robinson, 2011).

Specific disabilities are not the only areas of situation specific training paraprofessionals need. Understanding the reasoning behind how and why they are asked to do things improves their ability to perform their duties (Hauerwas & Goessling, 2008; Keller et al., 2007; O'Keeffe

et al., 2013). One paraprofessional in Hawerwas and Goessling's study (2008) expressed actual excitement at finally understanding why she collected the data she did.

West Virginia has defined requirements and provided professional development to its paraprofessionals, but little research has been done to assess the impact and effectiveness of these measures. Part of this research in this area will include paraprofessional perceptions from around the state. Paraprofessionals in Lincoln and Putnam counties will have differences in their perceptions relating to the effectiveness of their training on their support roles.

### **Conclusion**

Paraprofessionals have become an integral part of special education. They fill many roles, such as one on one aides, small review group leaders, RTI and intervention data recorders, RTI intervention deliverers, tutors, monitors, and a host of other duties. Without them, we do not have the manpower to deliver interventions our children need. Without proper training and qualifications for them, our educators are left with weak supports that can actually be detrimental to the very students they are to help. Where paraprofessionals fit, how they are trained, and what they do are questions being asked worldwide.

### **Chapter 3**

West Virginia has defined requirements and provided professional development to its paraprofessionals, but little research has been done to assess the impact and effectiveness of their efforts. Part of this research in this area will include paraprofessional perceptions from around the state. Paraprofessionals in Lincoln and Putnam counties will have differences in their perceptions relating to the effectiveness of their training on their support roles. This study aims to collect some of these attitudes and perceptions, adding information on the current state of paraprofessional training and support in our state.

#### **Research Questions**

The main focus of this study are the perceptions of paraprofessionals in these counties in regard to the effectiveness of their training. How do they perceive the effectiveness of the required training to qualify for their jobs and their professional development training? In addition to answering this question, the study will also gather suggestions for improvement from the paraprofessionals.

#### **Research Design**

##### **Participants**

Participants in this study are West Virginia paraprofessionals assisting in special education in Lincoln and Putnam counties, excluding interpreters. They work in Pre K to high school settings including self- contained classrooms, general education classrooms, resource rooms, or a combination of these.

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### **Instrument**

A survey was developed to obtain the perceptions of paraprofessionals in these counties. It is included in the Appendix. There are 48 questions divided into 3 sections.

The first section gathers demographics such as what type of class setting they work in, which qualification route they took, what disabilities they work with, and which county they work in. Names of the paraprofessionals and their schools are not asked to avoid information that could identify them personally. The county they work in was necessary so each county could receive an aggregate report that does not include other counties information.

The second section asks about perceptions of the state qualifications for paraprofessionals. The questions are designed using a four point Likert scale. Questions 9 – 16 address how the paraprofessionals feel the qualifications helped prepare them in their individual positions in terms of team work, record keeping, disabilities, and duties in general. Question 17 is an open ended question asking what if anything needs to be changed or added to the state qualifications.

Section three focuses on professional development. The questions are designed to see how they feel about different training delivery methods and the adequacy of their professional development training. Questions 18 through 27 are yes or no questions about training attendance, setting, and delivery. Numbers 28 through 47 use a 4 point Likert scale to assess perceptions on the effects of funding for training, availability and quality of training, training delivery style, training topics, and willingness to pay for and attend training on their own time. The open ended question, number 48, asks what they would like to receive training in.

## **Procedure**

The administrator responsible for special education in each county was contacted for permission to administer the survey to the paraprofessionals. Each paraprofessional was sent a packet containing an anonymous consent letter, a survey, and a return envelope through the county's central office mail system. In order to protect confidentiality, each school was sent either a sealed box for Lincoln County, or a large sealed envelope of Putnam County to collect the surveys in. A slit was cut in each container so the paraprofessionals could deposit their return envelopes with the surveys. On March 14 these containers were returned to the main office through the county's central mail system and collected by the researcher.

## **Threats and Limitations**

This study is only generalizable as far as the attitudes and perceptions of Putnam and Lincoln county paraprofessionals match those of paraprofessionals in the rest of the case. Most of West Virginia is rural, but there are denser areas of population like Morgantown and Huntington which could produce differences in perceptions. Putnam County has more dense pockets than Lincoln, possibly offsetting some of this limitation.

Weather also played a role in possible threats. Due to numerous cancelled school days, it is difficult to discern if the respondents had the full time desired to reply. In consideration of this, surveys turned in during the week after the due date were accepted.

## Chapter 4

Knowledge of paraprofessional perceptions and attitudes on their qualification requirements and professional development can help in ascertaining how the current requirements and development training are performing. The questions in the survey were designed to gain paraprofessional perceptions about how well the state qualifications prepared them for their jobs, how well their professional development improves their competencies, what types of training deliveries they prefer, and what types of training they desire. Additional information on their job situations and the training they have received was collected to provide background.

A total of 62 paraprofessionals returned their surveys, providing a 71% return rate. Of these participants, 39% were hired before IDEA 2004, with 34 percent using college classes and 79% using clock hour training to qualify for their positions. The majority, 40%, serve in self-contained classrooms with 15 % in general education classrooms, 6% in resource classrooms, and 34 % in a combination of these with 35% assigned to a single student. Paraprofessionals encounter multiple conditions throughout the day. Autism and Learning Disabilities both were reported by an 84% of paraprofessionals, followed closely by Emotional and Behavioral Disorders with 81%. Other category report rates included Communication disorders with 79%, Intellectual Disabilities and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorders at 66%, physical disabilities with 61%, hearing impairments at 31%, and visual impairment at 29%.

Section 2 of the survey concentrated on how paraprofessionals perceived the success of qualification requirements in preparing them to do their jobs and what they felt needed to be added to these requirements. The participants felt that overall the qualifications had prepared

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them well, with 55% agreeing and 27% strongly agreeing with this. However 11% disagreed and 2% strongly disagreed. Responses shifted slightly when asked if the current requirements were sufficient with 19% strongly agreeing, 50% agreeing, 16% disagreeing, and 2% strongly disagreeing. When asked if requirements needed to be added 18% strongly agreed, 55% agreed, 21% disagreed, and 2% strongly disagreed. Table 4.1 shows the results of how paraprofessionals feel qualifications prepared them in different aspects of their jobs.

The leading suggestions, equally occurring, for additions to the current state qualifications were more classes on different disabilities and a practicum program involving different classrooms and disabilities. Behavior management classes and special needs technology classes were equally suggested second. Other suggestions involved training on safety concerns specific to special needs students and Individualized Education Plans (IEP). Many paraprofessionals stressed making sure that information presented in qualification training was up to date.

Section 3 first gained information on the professional development training participants had attended. Almost all, 98%, of the participants have attended in-service training in the past two years, with 80% attending in their own school. County in-service training was rated adequate by 64% of the respondents. Job related workshops have been attended by 71% of the participants, with 26% of those including feedback and follow up. Fifty two percent of the participants had joined the teachers they assist in training. On the job training has occurred for 47%, and 39% have received training on specific skills from the teachers they assist.

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**Table 4.1 Qualification Preparedness for Different Job Aspects**

Job Aspect	Strongly Agree X %	Agree X %	Disagree X %	Strongly Disagree X %	Responses N
Q9 Your qualification training prepared you to work as a team with teachers and other aides.	19 33	33 57	3 5	3 5	58
Q10 Your qualification training prepared you to work with all the conditions and disabilities you encounter.	17 30	25 45	10 18	4 7	56
Q11 Your qualification training prepared you to complete all record keeping required in your position.	13 22	33 56	10 17	3 5	59
Q12 Your qualification training prepared you to meet your student's needs.	22 38	30 51	4 7	2 3	58

Encouragement to pursue outside training courses was indicated with 17% strongly agreeing, 55% agreeing, 23% disagreeing and 2% strongly disagreeing that they were.

Participants indicated their perceptions of local resources by strongly agreeing, 19%, agreeing, 42%, disagreeing, 27%, or strongly disagreeing 8% to their adequacy. On their own time 37% of the participants have attended outside county suggested trainings, with 24% attending training

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beyond that suggested. Training on their own time was acceptable to 48% of respondents, and 26% were willing to pay their own travel expenses if necessary.

Training can be delivered in various forms, by various people, in various settings. Preferences on workshops, on the job training, training with follow up sessions and feedback, training by the teachers the paraprofessionals assist, and training with the teachers they assist were questioned in section 3. These results are found in Table 4.2.

Perceptions on the adequacy of different topics of training was measured by a 4 point Likert scale rating “I feel I receive adequate training on or for” statements for each topic. The results are displayed in Table 4.3.

The majority of respondents felt training would improve their job performance with 37% strongly agreeing, 40% agreeing, 19% disagreeing, and 2% strongly disagreeing. General knowledge training need was indicated by 18% strongly agreeing, 39% agreeing, 37 disagreeing, and 2% strongly disagreeing. The desire for training on individual interventions or disabilities was indicated by 29% strongly agreeing, 47% agreeing, 21% disagreeing, and 2% strongly disagreeing.

The most requested training topic was Autism; with 12 requests it was almost double the next topic. Behavior management was the next most requested, with 7 requests. Training on the use of different technologies used in special education, such as Board Maker and iPads was requested 4 times, as well as training on IEPs. Other specific disability training request were Down syndrome, Behavior Disorders, and Intellectual Disabilities. Different aspects of severe handicaps were mentioned by those who deal with these.

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<b>Table 4.2 Training Style Preferences</b>									
Training Type or Aspect	Respondent	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
		X	%	X	%	X	%	X	%
Q32 I prefer workshop style training.	60	14	23	39	65	5	8	2	3
Q33 I prefer on the job training.	60	19	32	37	62	4	7	0	0
Q34 I prefer training with follow up sessions and feedback.	58	12	21	39	67	6	7	1	2
Q35 I prefer to attend training sessions with the teachers I work with.	57	16	28	38	67	3	5	0	0
Q36 I refer training conducted by the teachers I work with.	56	10	18	24	43	20	36	2	4

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<b>Table 4.3 Perceptions of Training Adequacy</b>					
Training Topic	Responses	Strongly	Agree	Disagree	Strongly
		Agree	X %	X %	Disagree
		X %			X %
Q37 I feel I receive adequate training on record keeping to meet my positions demands.	60	15 25	31 52	11 18	3 5
Q38 I feel I receive adequate training to be a contributing member of the special education team.	58	17 29	29 50	11 19	1 2
Q39 I feel I receive adequate training on team work.	61	19 31	30 49	12 18	0 0
Q40 I feel I receive adequate training to work with all the conditions and disabilities I encounter.	60	16 27	17 28	23 38	4 7
Q41 I feel I receive adequate training in all the interventions I am asked to help implement.	60	15 25	24 40	18 30	3 5
Q42 I feel I receive adequate training to meet the individual needs of the students I assist.	59	17 29	26 44	16 27	0 0
Q43 I feel I receive adequate training to meet the roles and responsibilities of my position.	58	18 31	29 50	11 19	0 0

## **Chapter 5**

This study was designed to gain perceptions paraprofessionals in Putnam and Lincoln counties on the training requirements and professional development for their jobs. The results of a survey distributed to paraprofessionals in the two counties are discussed here with the study's limitations and further research suggestions. This information was gathered to add to the knowledge base on the current state of training for paraprofessionals in West Virginia.

### **Interpretation and Implications of Results**

The spread between different teaching environments reflects the continuum of service environments. Those assigned to a single student were almost entirely in one county, representing practices in that county rather than an overall trend. All disability categories were reported to some degree or another, showing the large span of what paraprofessionals encounter daily.

Paraprofessional attitudes on the effectiveness of the training requirements for their positions were positive overall. While the majority were satisfied with the training requirements, a majority still felt more should be required. The training for areas like teamwork and student needs was viewed as most effective. While still having a positive majority, the areas of specific disabilities and record keeping showed room for improvement. This supports the suggestions of adding more classes on different disabilities. It also follows the diverse disabilities that the participants reported encountering in their jobs. The suggestion of adding a practicum or student teaching session was an interesting one that would provide valuable experience. Overall, the perceptions of West Virginia's training requirements reported here are good, with the acknowledgement for room to improve.

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Almost all the participants had attended county in service training for professional development, including workshops and on the job training, some of which included feedback. The majority felt they were encouraged to attend outside training, with a slim majority feeling the local training resources were adequate. A fairly large minority are willing to use their own time and resources for further training.

From the training they have attended, paraprofessionals have formed some definite opinions on how the training is delivered. On the job training was liked by only slightly more than workshops, making both types acceptable. A large majority stressed the preference for feedback and follow-up, showing desire to learn and use the training, as well as a way to improve training effectiveness. The juxtaposition of opinions on being trained by versus training with the teachers they work with was striking. A large majority, 95 %, want to attend the same trainings with their teachers. This may give a sense of equality, strengthening the team. However only a slim majority, 61%, preferred being trained by the teacher they worked with. Perhaps this is due to stress when a team doesn't work well, or it takes time from an already busy schedule.

The large agreement that training would improve their job performance shows the importance of and desire for professional development. The larger desire for training on specific disabilities and interventions over general information is supported by the lower ratings of training adequacy in areas like intervention implementation, working with different conditions and disabilities, and meeting student's needs. While training in general knowledge topics like record keeping, team work, and roles had higher adequacy ratings, half the respondents still felt this type of training would be helpful. This gives a positive impression of the current status of professional development, with room for improvement. The high request for autism training and

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other requests of specific disabilities supports the lower adequacy ratings of the specific disability training.

On a state level these results insinuate that the state's training requirements are doing a moderate job for preparing those who enter into the paraprofessional profession. They feel prepared for their clerical duties and working with a team. However, adding more specific training in both different disabilities such as autism and classroom technology would prepare new candidates better. Adding a practicum to the requirements would enable potential paraprofessionals to practice putting their training to work before they are actually responsible for a classroom. It could also raise confidence levels from the practice and moral levels by placing value on the skills of current paraprofessionals.

Professional development in these two counties appears to be moderately successful. The paraprofessionals feel their professional development training is useful for their jobs. They feel well trained to work with their teachers and keep records. However, they also feel that they need more specific, up to date information to manage the behaviors of the diverse disabilities they work with. Providing workshops on behavior management and on the job training for intervention implementation would be welcomed. Training the teacher and the paraprofessional together on classroom technology and similar topics would also be well received.

### **Limitations**

There were only 2 counties surveyed, producing the largest limitation. West Virginia has diverse socioeconomic and cultural areas. These two counties, while somewhat different in socioeconomics, are both in southern West Virginia. There may be different perceptions in the northern part of the state, or the eastern panhandle. The differences from these more rural

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counties and counties that contain cities like Huntington, Morgantown, and Charleston could be significant as well.

Decisions based on this study would be very limited. Besides only containing information on two counties, it has to be remembered that this is information on paraprofessional opinions only. Teacher opinions and other factors are important in decision making. A great deal more research needs to be done.

Understanding of definitions of terms needs to be considered. A concrete example of this was a note on top of one of the surveys. It read "I am not a paraprofessional, I'm a teacher's aide, but they said I should still take it." This note indicates there could be confusion over meaning of terms like paraprofessionals.

### **Further Research**

There is a great deal of further research to be done. As many counties as possible should be surveyed before a consensus is formed. Teacher opinions need to be gathered. Information on exact training topics, deliveries, and requirements need to be gathered so what is being provided can be directly compared to opinions. Scores and intervention implementation success need to be compared to the opinions. All of this needs to be done to make a true assessment of West Virginia's paraprofessional training effectiveness.

A more in-depth survey needs to be developed as a follow up. It needs to investigate what they consider in rating certain aspects, other aspects that need to be considered in determining effectiveness, and their favorite or least favorite. Role definitions and what duties are required in their jobs needs to be investigated. More open ended questions need to be included in the follow up survey.

### **Conclusion**

Paraprofessionals in Lincoln and Putnam counties have a moderately positive perspective of the state's training requirements and their professional development. Adding this information and future information collected in this state to the main body of information in this country will help in assessing the effectiveness of our country's paraprofessional training, expand effective programs across appropriate areas, eliminate unsuccessful policies, and provide quality training in developing quality paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals have become a very important part of the special education team, and it is important to the success of the special education program that they are properly trained to fulfill their duties.

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**Appendix**

**Paraprofessional Questionnaire: Please return by March 14**

**Section 1**

1. Which county do you work in?            Lincoln            Putnam
2. Were you hired before 2004?    Yes    No
3. Do you work in    preschool       elementary       middle            high
4. Do you work in (please circle all that apply)  
      a self-contained classroom  
      a general education classroom  
      a resource room  
      a combination of those above  
      other \_\_\_\_\_
5. Are you assigned to a single student?    Yes    No
6. Please circle all the conditions and disabilities you encounter on a daily basis  
      Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)            Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder  
      Communication Disorders                    Emotional or Behavioral Disorders  
      Intellectual Disabilities (MI)                Hearing Impairment  
      Learning Disabilities                         Physical Disabilities  
      Visual Impairment                            Other
7. Did you take college classes to qualify for your position?            Yes    No
8. Did you use clock hour training (in-service training) to qualify for your position?  
      Yes    No

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### Section 2

Please circle your response.

9. Your qualification training prepared you to work as a team with teachers and other aides.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

10. Your qualification training prepared you to work with all the conditions and disabilities you encounter.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

11. Your qualification training prepared you to complete all record keeping required in your position.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

12. Your qualification training prepared you to meet your students' needs.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

13. Your qualification training prepared you to meet the duties required in your position.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

14. Your qualification training prepared you to fulfill your position overall.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

15. The state qualifications for your position are sufficient to fulfill its requirements.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

16. There are skill requirements that need to be added to the state qualifications in order to fulfill the position.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

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17. What skills, knowledge, or other requirements do you feel should be added to the state qualifications for your position?

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### Section 3

Please circle your answer.

18. Have you attended job related training in the past two years? Yes No
19. Have you attended any in-service training at your school in the past two years?  
Yes No
20. Have you attended any in-service training in your county in the past two years?  
Yes No
21. Have you attended any county supported job related training (example: a nonpaid Saturday workshop) on your own time in the past two years? Yes No
22. Have you attended any non-county supported (examples: workshop with a local organization, speaker at a local college, or a college class) job related training on your own time in the past two years? Yes No
23. Have you attended any job related workshops in the past two years? Yes No
24. Have you attended any job related workshops with follow up observation in your daily job and feedback? Yes No
25. Have you attended any training with the teachers you assist? Yes No
26. Have the teachers you assist trained you on any specific skills? Yes No

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27. Have you received any on the job training in the past two years?      Yes      No

28. I am only willing to travel for training if my expenses are covered.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

29. The county offers adequate in-service training for my position.

strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

30. We are encouraged to take advantage of community training resources (examples: local college courses and workshops, local organization training workshops and speakers)

strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

31. There are adequate local training resources to meet the needs of my position.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

32. I prefer workshop style training.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

33. I prefer on the job training.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

34. I prefer training with follow up sessions and feedback.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

35. I prefer to attend training sessions with the teachers I work with.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

36. I prefer training conducted by the teachers I work with.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

37. I feel I receive adequate training on record keeping to meet my positions demands.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

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38. I feel I receive adequate training to be a contributing member of the special education team.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

39. I feel I receive adequate training on team work.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

40. I feel I receive adequate training to work with all the conditions and disabilities I encounter.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

41. I feel I receive adequate training in all the interventions I am asked to help implement.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

42. I feel I receive adequate training to meet the individual needs of the students I assist.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

43. I feel I receive adequate training to meet the roles and responsibilities of my position.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

44. I feel with more training I could do a better job.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

45. I feel I need more general knowledge training.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

46. I feel I need more intervention or disability specific training.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

47. I will not attend training on my own time.

Strongly agree      agree      disagree      strongly disagree

48. I would like training on the following topics

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