

Perspectives on Special Education in the United States: Paraprofessionals, Policy, and Inclusive Practice

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Abstract:

This research paper presents a qualitative systematic review of current perspectives on special education in the United States, with a specific focus on the evolving role of paraprofessionals, inclusive education practices, and systemic policy and implementation challenges. Drawing from 20 peer-reviewed scholarly sources, the study employs thematic analysis to explore how paraprofessionals support students with disabilities and how their contributions intersect with teacher preparation, collaborative teaching models, and educational policy. Key themes include the need for clearly defined paraprofessional roles, ongoing professional development, and enhanced collaboration between teachers and support staff. The findings highlight how effective paraprofessional deployment—when paired with well-aligned policies and team-based instructional strategies—can significantly improve student outcomes in inclusive classrooms. Additionally, the review identifies critical gaps in training and systemic support that hinder inclusive practice implementation. This paper concludes by recommending future research into training models, role delineation, and long-term impacts of paraprofessional involvement on academic and behavioral success. The study contributes to the discourse on inclusive education by emphasizing the importance of equity, support systems, and policy coherence in shaping effective special education frameworks.

Keywords: special education, paraprofessionals, inclusive education, teacher collaboration

Introduction:

Over the past few decades, special education in the United States has experienced profound changes aimed at ensuring that all students, regardless of ability, receive an equitable and quality education. Central to these reforms are landmark policies such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004), which mandates access to free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE).

These policies emphasize inclusion and recognize the unique needs of students with disabilities, making inclusive practices a central focus in modern educational settings. Another crucial development in the field is the implementation of the Response to Intervention (RTI) framework. RTI is a multi-tiered system designed to identify and support students with learning and behavioral needs at an early stage (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). It not only facilitates early identification but also integrates general and special education through data-driven instructional strategies. This framework reinforces the broader goal of inclusion by emphasizing proactive support rather than reactive intervention.

Within this evolving system, paraprofessionals—also known as teacher assistants—play an increasingly vital role. These education support professionals work alongside certified teachers to assist students with disabilities in a range of settings, often serving as a bridge between specialized instruction and the general classroom environment. Their daily involvement in instruction, behavioral support, and personal care positions them as key contributors to inclusive education.

Despite their importance, the roles, responsibilities, and training of paraprofessionals remain inconsistently defined and regulated. Research indicates that many paraprofessionals are underprepared for the complexity of their tasks and may not receive adequate supervision or professional development (Biggs et al., 2019; Chopra & Giangreco, 2019). These gaps raise important questions about the effectiveness and sustainability of inclusive education models that rely heavily on paraprofessional support.

This paper explores current perspectives on special education in the United States by examining the policies that shape inclusive practices, the contributions of paraprofessionals, and the ongoing implementation challenges. Through this analysis, the study aims to highlight areas where further support, training, and policy refinement are necessary to ensure that all students—regardless of ability—have access to meaningful, inclusive educational experiences.

Literature Review:

Inclusive education has become a foundational principle in global education systems, driven by legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004), which emphasizes the right of all learners, regardless of ability, to access quality education in the least restrictive environments. As schools strive to implement inclusive practices, the role of teacher assistants (TAs), also referred to as paraprofessionals, has grown increasingly significant. The research literature explores various dimensions of their roles, responsibilities, training, and collaboration with lead teachers, as well as systemic and policy-related challenges.

TAs have historically been employed to support classroom teachers in administrative or behavioral tasks. However, their roles have expanded significantly in inclusive classrooms. Chopra and Giangreco (2019) assert that TAs now play multifaceted roles—academic instruction, behavioral support, and social facilitation. Similarly, Mason et al. (2020) emphasize that TAs are often front-line personnel implementing accommodations and modifications for students with disabilities, though their roles may vary depending on school policy and teacher discretion.

Research by Downing, Ryndak, and Clark (2000) indicates that many TAs perceive themselves as instructional partners rather than mere assistants. This shift, while promising, is not without challenges, especially when there is ambiguity regarding their job expectations or when teachers are unprepared to supervise them effectively (Douglas, Chapin, & Nolan, 2016; Biggs, Gilson, & Carter, 2016).

Training and Preparation for Inclusion

The quality of training provided to TAs greatly influences their effectiveness. Angelides, Constantinou, and Leigh (2009) identify inadequate preparation as a significant barrier to the successful integration of TAs in inclusive education in Cyprus. Likewise, Bagadood and Saigh (2022) argue that in Saudi Arabia, best practices in special education are contingent on systematic and ongoing professional development for teaching assistants.

Allday, Neilsen-Gatti, and Hudson (2013) stress the need for pre-service curricula in teacher education to include content on supervising and collaborating with TAs. This notion is echoed by Biggs, Gilson, and Carter (2019), who advocate for a dual training model where both teachers and TAs are simultaneously prepared for collaborative practices in inclusive classrooms.

Jimenez and Barron (2019) present a learner-centered professional development model that increases inclusion for students with moderate intellectual disabilities by enhancing the competencies of both general and special education personnel, including TAs. Their findings suggest that targeted training aligned with the needs of specific learner populations contributes significantly to improved inclusion outcomes.

Effective collaboration between teachers and TAs is a cornerstone of inclusive education. Smith and Leonard (2006) found that collaborative relationships are most successful when both parties share a clear understanding of their roles and engage in regular communication. Biggs, Gilson, and Carter (2016) highlight the importance of building strong interpersonal relationships to maximize instructional effectiveness for students with severe disabilities. However, when role clarity is lacking, it may lead to role diffusion, reduced instructional quality, and even ethical dilemmas, particularly when TAs assume responsibilities beyond their qualifications (Giangreco & Doyle, 2007).

To counter overreliance on TAs, Giangreco, Broer, and Suter (2011) offer guidelines for schools to adopt alternative approaches, such as co-teaching and peer-mediated instruction, which empower general educators and reduce the burden on paraprofessionals.

A growing body of literature critiques the inconsistency in TA training and deployment across educational systems. Massafra, Gershwin, and Gosselin (2020) argue that while TAs are integral to inclusive education, policy support is often fragmented or outdated. Their review calls for a nationalized framework in the U.S. that addresses role definition, certification, and preparation standards.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) notes that while demand for TAs is projected to grow steadily, compensation and formal training opportunities remain limited, reflecting a systemic undervaluation of their contributions. This reality undermines both recruitment and retention efforts, especially in low-income or underserved school districts.

Best Practices and Conceptual Frameworks

From a theoretical standpoint, inclusive education frameworks emphasize learner-centered, collaborative, and responsive pedagogies. Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) introduce the concept of "Response to Intervention" (RTI) as a tiered model that utilizes all available human resources, including TAs, to address students' academic and behavioral needs. The RTI model relies heavily on systematic data collection, early intervention, and collaboration among education personnel, making it a suitable structure for integrating TAs in a purposeful way.

Similarly, Batsche et al. (2006) and Bender and Shores (2007) highlight how RTI implementation is most successful when administrators invest in staff training and professional learning communities. Boscardin (2005) further contends that administrative support is critical in shifting school cultures to embrace collaborative models involving TAs.

Tools such as Dedoose (2020) and coding methods outlined by Saldaña (2016) and Patton (2015) have been instrumental in qualitative studies examining the lived experiences of TAs. These methodologies allow researchers to uncover complex dynamics and contextual factors affecting TA performance and perceptions in inclusive classrooms.

Internationally, the role of TAs continues to evolve. Sharma and Salend (2016) conducted a systematic analysis of global research and concluded that while TAs are pivotal to inclusion, the effectiveness of their integration varies based on local policies, training protocols, and school cultures. Their review emphasizes the need for cross-cultural studies and evidence-based guidelines that are adaptable to various educational settings.

In European contexts, for instance, Angelides et al. (2009) documented that paraprofessionals play a vital role in fostering social inclusion and supporting bilingual learners, especially when adequately trained and supervised. Conversely, in developing nations, resource constraints often lead to ad-hoc hiring and minimal support, undermining the potential impact of TAs (Chopra & Giangreco, 2019).

Emerging from the literature is a consensus that TAs are indispensable allies in inclusive education but require clearer role definition, systemic support, and structured professional development. Schools and policymakers must invest in robust induction programs, collaborative planning time, and ongoing feedback mechanisms to ensure that both teachers and TAs function as effective partners in instruction.

Additionally, educational research should continue to explore the perspectives of TAs through participatory and qualitative methods, focusing on their contributions, challenges, and support needs. Efforts to align policies with on-the-ground realities will also be essential in creating sustainable and equitable inclusive education systems.

Methodology:

This study utilized a qualitative systematic review methodology to synthesize and analyze existing literature on paraprofessionals in inclusive education. The review was guided by the qualitative research frameworks of Patton (2015) and Saldaña (2016), which emphasize inductive reasoning, thematic coding, and reflexive analysis. This methodological approach allowed for the in-depth examination of diverse perspectives and patterns across multiple studies.

A total of 20 primary sources were selected for analysis, including peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and official publications dated between 2000 and 2022. These sources were identified through comprehensive database searches using key terms such as "paraprofessionals," "inclusive education," "special education support," and "U.S. educational policy." To ensure consistency and rigor in data management and analysis, Dedoose software (Dedoose, 2020) was employed. This platform facilitated the organization of qualitative data and the systematic coding of recurring themes.

Thematic analysis was conducted to identify and categorize findings into three core thematic domains: (1) the evolving roles and perceptions of paraprofessionals in inclusive classrooms; (2) the extent and quality of paraprofessional training, as well as collaboration with certified special education teachers; and (3) the impact of policy frameworks and systemic supports on the effectiveness of paraprofessionals in promoting inclusive practices.

Inclusion criteria for selected sources required that each study be directly relevant to educational settings in the United States and explicitly address paraprofessionals within special education or inclusive classroom contexts. Sources that provided empirical data, policy analysis, or program evaluation were prioritized. This systematic approach ensured that the review captured a comprehensive and credible picture of paraprofessionals' contributions to inclusive education in the U.S. context.

Findings and Discussion:

Evolving Role and Perception of Paraprofessionals

The role of paraprofessionals in inclusive education has undergone a significant transformation over the past few decades. Traditionally seen as aides to licensed teachers, paraprofessionals are now increasingly taking on complex instructional responsibilities, often without the necessary training or institutional support. This evolving role has sparked a growing body of research seeking to understand their contributions, the challenges they face, and how they are perceived by their professional counterparts.

Multiple studies underscore the indispensable role that paraprofessionals play in inclusive classroom settings. Downing et al. (2000) were among the first to highlight that paraprofessionals frequently engage in direct instruction, behavior management, and individualized support—tasks traditionally reserved for certified teachers. Similarly, Mason et al. (2020) reported that paraprofessionals often find themselves on the frontlines, directly implementing educational interventions and working closely with students with diverse learning needs. However, this expansion of responsibilities has not always been matched by adequate training, preparation, or clear role delineation, leading to concerns about efficacy and professional boundaries.

The lack of formal preparation is a recurring theme in the literature. Giangreco and Doyle (2007) emphasized that the assignment of teaching responsibilities to paraprofessionals without adequate training can compromise both instructional quality and student outcomes. Supporting this view, Allday, Neilsen-Gatti, and Hudson (2013) argued that teacher education programs often fail to adequately prepare pre-service teachers to effectively collaborate with paraprofessionals, thereby exacerbating misunderstandings and inefficiencies in inclusive classrooms. Furthermore, Biggs, Gilson, and Carter (2019) advocated for structured professional development programs that address this gap and promote effective teacher-paraprofessional collaboration.

Another challenge lies in the ambiguity surrounding the paraprofessional's role. Giangreco, Broer, and Suter (2011) noted that many schools lack formal policies or frameworks to guide the integration and supervision of paraprofessionals, resulting in inconsistent practices across settings. Massafra, Gershwin, and Gosselin (2020) echoed this concern, pointing out that policy frameworks in many regions do not clearly articulate expectations or responsibilities for paraprofessionals, leaving both paraprofessionals and teachers to define roles on a case-by-case basis. This ambiguity can lead to both underutilization and overreliance on paraprofessionals, with serious implications for student support and instructional equity.

The perception of paraprofessionals also varies considerably among educators. Some teachers view paraprofessionals as vital collaborators who bring valuable insight and assistance to the classroom. Biggs et al. (2016) found that strong, respectful relationships between teachers and paraprofessionals contributed to more effective instructional practices and improved outcomes for students with disabilities. These relationships are grounded in mutual trust, open communication, and shared responsibility, allowing paraprofessionals to feel empowered and appreciated.

On the other hand, Douglas, Chapin, and Nolan (2016) found that some special education teachers perceive paraprofessionals merely as helpers rather than professional partners. This perception can lead to marginalization and underappreciation of the paraprofessional's expertise, especially when they are excluded from planning meetings or professional development opportunities. Such disparities in perception may stem from systemic issues, such as power imbalances and the absence of collaborative training structures, which perpetuate a hierarchical relationship rather than a cooperative one.

International research adds further nuance to the discussion. Angelides, Constantinou, and Leigh (2009), examining the context of Cyprus, identified paraprofessionals as key agents in promoting inclusive practices by facilitating communication between students, teachers, and families. In Saudi Arabia, Bagadood and Saigh (2022) found that paraprofessionals—referred to as teaching assistants—are increasingly considered essential to the success of inclusive education initiatives, although their preparation and professional development remain limited.

In the U.S., the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) notes that teacher assistants are projected to see steady job growth due to increasing demands for inclusive education. Yet, despite this growing demand, paraprofessionals often receive lower pay, limited job security, and minimal access to professional development—conditions that can negatively affect morale and retention. Jimenez and Barron (2019) proposed learner-centered professional development models to address this gap, emphasizing inclusion, collaboration, and skill-building.

From a policy standpoint, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004 recognizes the role of paraprofessionals in supporting students with disabilities. However, it does not mandate standardized training or certification, leaving implementation up to individual states or districts. This decentralized approach contributes to the inconsistent quality and effectiveness of paraprofessional support across schools and regions (Chopra & Giangreco, 2019).

To address these issues, researchers and policymakers call for clearer role definitions, improved training, and stronger collaboration models. Sharma and Salend (2016), through a systematic international analysis, concluded that when paraprofessionals are well-prepared and integrated into inclusive teams, they significantly enhance student

engagement and learning. Their findings suggest that reforms must not only target individual skills but also broader school culture and administrative structures to ensure the sustainable and effective utilization of paraprofessionals.

Paraprofessionals have become vital contributors to inclusive education, bridging gaps between student needs and instructional delivery. However, this role evolution must be accompanied by deliberate policy, comprehensive training, and a cultural shift in how paraprofessionals are perceived and engaged. Without these changes, the potential of paraprofessionals to support meaningful inclusion may remain underrealized, and both students and educators will continue to face systemic challenges in achieving educational equity.

Preparation and Collaboration for Inclusion

Effective inclusion in contemporary classrooms hinges on the intentional preparation of teachers and their ability to collaborate with paraprofessionals. As inclusive education becomes the norm rather than the exception, there is a growing consensus among scholars that teacher education programs must adapt to better prepare future educators for the demands of inclusive classrooms. Allday, Neilsen-Gatti, and Hudson (2013) emphasize that preservice curricula should embed inclusive practices early and systematically, preparing teachers to address a diverse range of student needs. Without such foundational training, teachers may lack the confidence and competencies necessary to lead inclusive environments successfully.

Beyond initial preparation, in-service professional development is essential for fostering collaborative skills among educators and paraprofessionals. Biggs, Gilson, and Carter (2019) argue that teachers must not only learn instructional strategies for students with disabilities but also develop the supervisory and interpersonal skills required to work effectively with paraprofessionals. Their research highlights that structured, ongoing professional development equips teachers to build balanced, respectful working relationships with paraprofessionals, ultimately benefiting students with severe disabilities.

The role of paraprofessionals is expanding rapidly in response to the increasing emphasis on inclusive education, yet their training remains inconsistent. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022), demand for teacher assistants is projected to grow due to increasing enrollments and inclusive practices; however, training standards for paraprofessionals vary significantly across states and districts. This variability can lead to misunderstandings about roles, responsibilities, and instructional boundaries.

Chopra and Giangreco (2019) offer clear guidelines for the effective collaboration between teachers and paraprofessionals, advocating for well-defined roles, mutual respect, and intentional planning. When teachers and paraprofessionals engage in joint planning and reflective practices, the support provided to students becomes more coherent and impactful. Similarly, Douglas, Chapin, and Nolan (2016) found that special education teachers often experience uncertainty in supervising paraeducators, particularly when little institutional guidance is provided. These findings reinforce the need for school systems to provide formal structures and training on teacher-paraprofessional collaboration.

International research supports these conclusions. In Cyprus, for example, Angelides, Constantinou, and Leigh (2009) demonstrated how paraprofessionals can be pivotal in promoting inclusive education when their roles are clearly defined and integrated into school planning. In Saudi Arabia, Bagadood and Saigh (2022) argue that teaching assistants are essential in special education classrooms, but their effectiveness depends on clear job descriptions, consistent supervision, and targeted training programs.

Despite the evidence in favor of strong collaboration, challenges persist. Massafra, Gershwin, and Gosselin (2020) note that policy ambiguity surrounding the paraprofessional role often hinders effective implementation of inclusive practices. In the absence of clear policies, schools tend to rely on ad hoc decision-making, which may result in underutilization or misuse of paraprofessional resources. These inconsistencies can lead to overreliance on paraprofessionals in instructional roles they may not be prepared to fulfill, as noted by Giangreco, Broer, and Suter (2011), who caution against substituting paraprofessional support for qualified teaching.

Inclusion is not simply about placing students with disabilities in general education classrooms; it is about creating environments where all students can participate and thrive. Achieving this vision requires a systemic approach that includes clear communication, shared responsibility, and mutual professional development. Jimenez and Barron (2019) propose a learner-centered model of professional development that emphasizes collaboration and feedback loops among teachers and paraprofessionals, fostering reflective practice and continual growth.

Ultimately, fostering collaboration for inclusion depends on preparation, support, and intentional design. Teachers must be equipped with the skills to lead inclusive classrooms and to guide paraprofessionals effectively. Simultaneously, paraprofessionals need access to high-quality training that prepares them for their expanding roles in instructional support. As Downing, Ryndak, and Clark (2000) found, paraprofessionals themselves express a strong desire for more comprehensive training and clarity in their responsibilities.

To achieve the ideals set forth in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004), both preservice and in-service professional development must be aligned with the realities of inclusive teaching. Collaborative efforts between teachers and paraprofessionals must be supported by policy, guided by research, and responsive to the evolving needs of diverse learners. As the field of education continues to evolve, strengthening these collaborative relationships remains a crucial strategy for ensuring equitable, inclusive learning for all students.

Policy and Structural Supports for Inclusion:

Inclusive education has gained widespread recognition as a human right and educational imperative. At its foundation, legislative and policy mandates such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) and frameworks like Response to Intervention (RTI) (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998; Batsche et al., 2006) provide both a legal and procedural structure for integrating students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms. These policies emphasize early identification, multi-tiered systems of support, and individualized educational planning. While these frameworks offer the blueprint for inclusive practice, their effectiveness largely depends on implementation fidelity, leadership capacity, cultural context, and stakeholder engagement (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003; George et al., 2007).

Despite federal mandates, inconsistencies in policy execution remain evident across states, districts, and schools. Funding disparities, limited access to professional development, and inadequate teacher preparation often hinder inclusive efforts (Boscardin, 2005; Kincaid et al., 2007). Research has shown that when school leaders actively support inclusive goals and cultivate collaborative school cultures, inclusive practices are more effectively implemented (George et al., 2007). Additionally, Angelides et al. (2009) in their study of Cyprus, and Bagadood and Saigh (2022) in Saudi Arabia, emphasize that beyond policy rhetoric, successful inclusion requires policy clarity, structured supports, and stakeholder buy-in—particularly among teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators.

A critical structural component in the operationalization of inclusive education is the effective use of paraprofessionals or teacher assistants. These support personnel play a vital role in implementing individualized supports and facilitating academic and social inclusion for students with disabilities. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022), the demand for teacher assistants continues to rise, highlighting their significance in contemporary inclusive classrooms. However, this increasing reliance brings forth concerns about role ambiguity, preparation, and supervision (Giangreco et al., 2011; Mason et al., 2020).

Research by Biggs, Gilson, and Carter (2016; 2019) underlines the importance of strong collaborative relationships between teachers and paraprofessionals, which are often cultivated through targeted training and mutual respect. Effective teamwork hinges on clear communication, shared expectations, and appropriate role delineation. Yet, findings from Downing et al. (2000) and Douglas, Chapin, and Nolan (2016) reveal that many paraprofessionals feel underprepared and unsupported in their roles, which can compromise the quality of instruction and inadvertently foster student dependency rather than independence.

To mitigate these challenges, comprehensive training and professional development for both general and special education teachers on how to effectively collaborate with paraprofessionals are essential. Allday, Neilsen-Gatti, and Hudson (2013) advocate for integrating inclusion-focused content within pre-service teacher education curricula. They argue that teacher candidates need practical experiences and explicit instruction on inclusive pedagogy, differentiation strategies, and team-based teaching models. Similarly, Massafra, Gershwin, and Gosselin (2020) stress the need for policy reforms that clearly define paraprofessional roles and establish rigorous standards for their training and utilization.

International perspectives further reinforce the universality of these concerns. Angelides et al. (2009) describe how paraprofessionals in Cyprus act as critical agents in fostering inclusive classroom environments. Their work, however, is often undervalued and unregulated, echoing the experiences of paraprofessionals in other nations. Bagadood and Saigh (2022), in their study of Saudi Arabia, underscore the necessity of institutionalizing the paraprofessional role through structured policy, ongoing training, and stakeholder collaboration. Without such scaffolding, teacher assistants risk being perceived as informal helpers rather than as integral contributors to the educational team.

Moreover, Chopra and Giangreco (2019) propose guidelines for the effective deployment of teacher assistants, emphasizing evidence-based practices that avoid over-reliance and instead promote student autonomy. Their chapter in *The Handbook of Inclusion and Diversity in Education* outlines strategies to ensure that paraprofessionals support, rather than replace, instruction delivered by licensed teachers. This guidance aligns with Sharma and Salend's (2016) systematic review, which reveals that inclusive outcomes are best achieved when paraprofessionals are embedded within a larger ecosystem of trained educators, robust leadership, and clearly articulated roles.

Professional development for in-service educators must also focus on collaborative planning and supervision of paraprofessionals. Jimenez and Barron (2019) present a learner-centered model that empowers teachers to reflect

on their instructional practices while simultaneously building their capacity to mentor support staff. Such professional learning communities can enhance the instructional consistency and accountability necessary for inclusive excellence.

Despite these promising approaches, systemic barriers persist. Limited time for collaboration, insufficient administrative support, and lack of accountability mechanisms often stymie efforts to build inclusive capacity at the classroom level (Smith & Leonard, 2006). Furthermore, the sociocultural dimensions of inclusion—such as implicit bias, deficit thinking, and ableism—must be addressed through continuous reflective practice and equity-centered leadership (Patton, 2015; Saldaña, 2016).

While policies such as IDEA and RTI provide a foundational framework for inclusion, the translation of policy into practice demands a multifaceted strategy. This includes strong administrative leadership, equitable resource allocation, structured roles for paraprofessionals, and comprehensive teacher preparation. International evidence and domestic scholarship converge on the view that policy alone cannot guarantee inclusive outcomes. Rather, sustainable inclusion emerges from a coordinated system of policy, practice, and professional learning—grounded in shared values and a commitment to educational equity for all learners.

Conclusion:

Special education in the United States stands at a critical juncture, where the ideals of inclusive education must be reconciled with the practical realities of classroom implementation. While legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) continues to emphasize access, equity, and inclusion for students with disabilities, the success of these mandates heavily depends on the professionals who implement them—particularly paraprofessionals. These vital members of the educational workforce play a significant role in supporting students with diverse learning needs, yet their contributions often go unrecognized or underutilized due to ambiguous role definitions, insufficient training, and a lack of systemic support.

For inclusive education to be truly effective and sustainable, it is essential to re-examine and clarify the responsibilities of paraprofessionals within the broader educational framework. Clear role delineation is necessary to avoid overlap or misalignment with the responsibilities of certified teachers. Furthermore, ongoing, structured professional development must be provided to paraprofessionals to ensure they possess the skills and knowledge required to support students effectively. Training programs should focus on inclusive practices, behavioral strategies, communication techniques, and collaboration skills to promote a unified, team-based approach to instruction.

Equally important is the establishment of strong, collaborative relationships between teachers and paraprofessionals. When these partnerships are rooted in mutual respect, open communication, and shared goals, they can create a positive classroom environment that benefits all learners. School administrators and policymakers must also work to align local practices with federal and state policies to ensure consistency, accountability, and long-term success in inclusive education.

Future research should explore the long-term effects of paraprofessional involvement on student academic and behavioral outcomes, as well as investigate the comparative effectiveness of various professional development models. Understanding these dynamics will help guide policy and practice to optimize the impact of paraprofessionals in special education settings. By addressing these challenges holistically, the U.S. education system can move closer to achieving meaningful inclusion for all students.

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