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Training and Burnout Among Paraprofessionals who work with Children with Emotional Behavioral Disorders



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Field Liaison: Laura Benesch, MSW, LGSW

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Purpose and Significance

- To assist the Waseca school district in addressing the training and self-care needs of paraprofessionals, keeping the overall mission in mind of empowering students to succeed in the academic environment.
- This project examined the training received and factors related to subsequent professional burnout among paraprofessionals in Waseca schools.

Literature Review Highlights

- More than 88% of those who supervised paraprofessionals reported that “real-life experience” served as the primary source of their knowledge and ability to supervise paraprofessionals, rather than in-service training, college courses, or help from administrators (French, 2001).
- Job demand is commonly reported as a significant contributor to the development of emotional exhaustion for paraprofessionals (Shyman, 2010).
- Stress, workload, lack of respect, administrative issues, and constant program changes contribute to paraprofessionals leaving their jobs (Tillery, 2003).
- Paraprofessional turnover puts strain on teachers, jeopardizes working relationships, impacts program continuity for students and the relationships between paraprofessionals, teachers, and students (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007).

Methodology

- All participants in the study were paraprofessional employees of the Waseca School District.
- A mixed-methods design, including both qualitative and quantitative elements, was utilized. This included a cross sectional electronic survey and a focus group.
- The focus group intended to learn about the experiences of four paraprofessionals in the Waseca School District. After the focus group was completed, common themes identified what was going well for the paraprofessionals and what could be improved.

Common Themes

Strengths

Understanding student wants and needs - *“I think we’ve all learned to “read” the ones we work with the most often. Like how to meet their needs and understand them. Each of us knows a different kid a bit differently.”*

Patience - *“Patience is a virtue. I think we have a lot of patience.”*

Rewards of the Job

Academic Success - *“Or like mine [student] who didn’t go to mainstream at all last year, or very seldom, is now in mainstream most of the day, and you have kids that call him over and do stuff with him. Or when he’s in Phy Ed he’s laughing, smiling, and participating. Not at a high level, but a small level. To see him smile and interact with the mainstream kids, it lights me up.”*

What Keeps Them Coming Back?

“For me it’s the fact that I believe I make a difference.”

“I love my job, I really do.”

“Back to the fact of what brings us back every day, I would say coworkers because I’ve benefited so much from these two. Since I’ve started they’ve taught me so much. Everyone has taught me so much. I’m benefiting from this job for future purposes.”

Challenges

Working as a team - *“What I find difficult is that you have like 6 or 7 different adults in a situation where you’re going to have 6 or 7 different opinions. It’s hard to mesh those together and work as a team.”*

Consistency - *“It’s very hard to keep consistency in the classroom that we work in. Every day is completely different.”*

Training

No specialized training - *“There is little training, but not specializing in our room to each of our kid’s needs.”*

“Five years ago there was zero training. It was all kind of common sense.”

Trainings that would be beneficial

- CPI training (Crisis Prevention Institute);
- Medications, including what they are for, what the side effects are, and how long it takes to work;
- How to deal with certain behaviors;
- Workshops that deal with specific student diagnoses;
- Workshops on mental health diagnoses;
- Components of an Individual Education Plan.

Key Findings

- While a lack of consistency in their position is a challenge, paraprofessionals take pride in their work and value student success.
- The focus group revealed paraprofessionals felt their training did not adequately prepare them for their position.
- Unclear job expectations and organizational changes were areas that frequently cause stress.
- More training is needed to ensure paraprofessionals have opportunities to enhance their professional development.

Recommendations

- Paraprofessionals lack clarity about what their role is. The district should explicitly communicate what they see as the role of the paraprofessionals.
- The district should develop additional trainings and offer a variety of trainings from different disciplines on an ongoing basis that promote the development of the paraprofessionals, utilizing a team approach.
- Paraprofessionals should receive instruction around issues of understanding each individual child’s needs so that appropriate instructional modifications can be made to best accommodate the students.
- District administrators may want to provide additional outlets for paraprofessionals to communicate with administration and other staff (perhaps routine task groups that balance both process and content).

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