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## Challenges and Best Practices in Supporting Life Skills Students in General Education: A Study of Paraprofessional Experiences

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**Abstract.** Paraprofessionals are crucial to the success of students with life skills needs in the United States, yet little research or practice has examined their experiences. This research examines both the challenges and effective practices related to paraprofessional support in inclusive settings, focusing specifically on managing student behaviour and stressors, and on collaboration and support. A survey study, using a qualitative method, was conducted with paraprofessionals supporting life skills students in general education settings (n=11). The survey results show that behavioural management, unclear roles and responsibilities, and a lack of training and development opportunities are major challenges. Further, participants reported feelings of burnout, low value and challenges related to unclear communication and changes in the teacher's role in delivering student support. Qualitative responses also indicate the importance of structured teamwork, defined roles and responsibilities, and opportunities for training.

However, respondents also report successful strategies, such as effective communication and collaboration within their team, targeted training in behaviour management, and ongoing support. The results highlight the need for better integrated support for paraprofessionals to improve staff and student outcomes. These findings have implications for educational policy and practice regarding training strategies, team collaboration and organisational approaches to support stability and recognition in inclusive settings.

**Keywords:** Paraprofessionals, inclusive education, life skills students, behavior management, teacher-paraprofessional collaboration, professional development, burnout, special education support.

## Introduction

Inclusive education has been a major focus in today's educational systems, with an emphasis on integrating students with diverse learning needs, including those who need life skills instruction, into the regular classroom. This approach reflects a focus on access, participation, and meaningful inclusion, in which students with disabilities are not only in the classroom but also engaged in the same learning environment as their peers. (Walker et al., 2021, p. 243) In this context, paraprofessionals have become a key component in the successful execution of inclusive strategies by offering one-on-one support to students with a range of complex needs and facilitating their inclusion in general education classrooms. (Gilson & Biggs, 2023, p. 3343).

Paraprofessionals are now responsible for working with students who display a plethora of cognitive, behavioural and social-emotional needs, such as those associated with autism spectrum disorder and other developmental disabilities. Their roles can include not only academic support, but also behaviour management, communication support, and social integration. Despite the important contributions they make in the classroom, paraprofessionals often work in environments that offer minimal training, vague role clarity and variable support and collaboration from teachers (Dudek et al., 2025). Studies have shown that a lack of preparation and support can limit the effectiveness of paraprofessionals and affect student and staff experiences (Morin et al., 2022; Morrison et al., 2025).

A common challenge for paraprofessionals is student behaviour, especially in inclusive classrooms where expectations and instructional demands may not align with students' needs. Behaviour support not only needs strategies but also coaching and training. Despite evidence that targeted training can improve practice and engagement (Spurlock et al., 2024; Kroesch et al., 2024), training opportunities remain inconsistent across schools.

Beyond the teaching and behavioural challenges paraprofessionals face, they also report high levels of stress and burnout. Exposure to challenging behaviours, such as aggression and non-compliance, can lead to feelings of burnout and job dissatisfaction. Recent studies have highlighted various workplace stressors, including safety- and role-related stressors, that can affect paraprofessionals' mental health and job satisfaction (Reddy et al., 2024; Wiggs et al., 2024). These issues are also compounded by perceptions of being undervalued and excluded from decision-making, which can affect job satisfaction and identity.

The partnership between paraprofessionals and teachers is another critical issue of inclusive education. Successful collaborations involve strong communication, division of roles, and respect. The inclusion of paraprofessionals in the collaborative planning of instruction ensures they can provide more coordinated and supportive instruction. (Turner & Mansouri, 2022; Biggs et al., 2016). In contrast, poor collaboration and communication practices may result in confusion, inefficiency and a lack of consistency during instruction (Gilson & Biggs, 2024). Improving collaboration practices is therefore important to enhance student learning and staff well-being.

## **Research Problem**

While there is a growing body of research on paraprofessional roles, training and collaboration, there is a need for more context-specific research on the interrelated effects of challenging behaviours, work-related stress, communication and organisational factors among paraprofessionals supporting life skills students in general education classrooms. Most research focuses on these aspects individually or from the perspectives of teachers and administrators, with relatively little attention to paraprofessional experiences. Moreover, there is little research on structural issues such as frequent student reassignment and changing support needs, despite their potential impact on the continuity of support and role clarity, which in turn could affect job stress. Additionally, there is a need for research that not only explores challenges but also clearly identifies effective strategies to improve the performance and collaboration of paraprofessionals working in inclusive classrooms.

## **Research Focus**

The focus of this study is on paraprofessionals supporting life skills students in general education classrooms. It examines the interconnected challenges of behaviour management, workplace stress, role clarity, communication, and collaboration within inclusive educational environments.

The current research addresses these gaps by exploring the challenges and best practices for supporting life skills students in general education classrooms from a paraprofessional perspective. This study seeks to understand the challenges paraprofessionals face, including the factors that lead to stress and burnout, as well as effective strategies to support paraprofessional effectiveness and teamwork. Through the synthesis of qualitative findings, this study adds to our understanding of the factors that contribute to the success of paraprofessionals and students in inclusive classrooms.

This study's findings have significant implications for policy, leadership and training. The study offers insights into systemic challenges and evidence-based strategies, providing a foundation for enhancing training programs, collaboration strategies, and organisational structures to improve paraprofessional interactions and well-being. In conclusion, improving paraprofessional practice is crucial for advancing inclusive education and ensuring that students with life skills needs are supported to succeed in their academic and social environments.

## **Research Aim & Questions**

This study aims to explore the experiences and challenges of paraprofessionals supporting life skills students in general education classrooms in Jefferson High School, with a focus on student behaviour, workplace stress, communication, collaboration, and organisational factors. The study also aims to identify effective strategies and support systems to improve paraprofessional performance, well-being, and collaboration in inclusive educational settings.

1. What challenges do paraprofessionals experience while supporting life skills students in general education classrooms?
2. How do challenging student behaviours affect paraprofessionals' stress levels, job satisfaction, and overall well-being?
3. How do communication and collaboration practices between teachers and paraprofessionals influence classroom support and inclusion?
4. What organisational factors, such as role clarity, training, and student reassignment, impact paraprofessionals' effectiveness in inclusive classrooms?
5. What strategies and support systems do paraprofessionals identify as effective in improving their performance, collaboration, and workplace experience?

## Literature Review

Inclusive education continues to shape educational practices in the United States, particularly for students with disabilities who require life skills instruction and support in general education settings. Paraprofessionals play a critical role in supporting students academically, behaviorally, and socially within these inclusive environments. Their responsibilities often include assisting students with communication, implementing behaviour plans, supporting daily living skills, and facilitating peer interactions. Many paraprofessionals work closely with students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder and other developmental disabilities, requiring individualised and carefully calibrated interventions to support behavioural, social, and academic development (Wilson & Srikanth, 2023). Research has emphasised the importance of structured life skills programs, including health and daily living instruction, in improving independence and functional outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities (Purba & Gusar, 2020). Research has also highlighted the growing role of paraprofessionals in specialised instructional settings, including second language acquisition classrooms, where they provide communication and instructional support to diverse student populations (Pennelle et al., 2023). As schools increasingly rely on paraprofessionals to support students with extensive support needs, researchers have emphasised the importance of understanding their experiences, challenges, and professional support needs (Walker et al. 243–245).

Many paraprofessionals experience a lack of role clarity, which is a common theme in recent literature. They report uncertainty regarding their responsibilities, boundaries, and decision-making authority within inclusive classrooms. This ambiguity in their roles results in confusion, reduces their confidence, and contributes to inconsistent student support. Research by Carly B. Gilson and Elizabeth E. Biggs found that paraprofessionals and teachers often experience difficulties in defining responsibilities and instructional expectations in inclusive settings (3344–3347). Similarly, research on collaborative educational teams emphasised that clearly defined roles and shared expectations improve communication, reduce conflict, and strengthen classroom partnerships between teachers and paraprofessionals (Urbani et al.).

Another significant issue identified in the literature involves paraprofessional preparation and professional development. Paraprofessionals are expected to support students with complex behavioural, cognitive, and social-emotional needs; however, many receive limited formal training before entering the classroom. Some are not even fully oriented regarding their responsibilities or what is expected of them in inclusive educational settings. Studies have shown that paraprofessionals often feel unprepared to manage challenging behaviours or implement instructional interventions effectively (Tabio). A systematic analysis conducted in 2025 highlighted the need for ongoing, context-specific professional development focused on behaviour management, instructional support, and collaboration practices (Tabio). Research on educational implementation challenges also emphasises that school staff require continuous support systems, adaptation strategies, and professional guidance to effectively respond to changing educational demands (Malinao & Miano, 2025). Likewise, a qualitative study examining a professional development pilot program found that paraprofessionals who participated in targeted training reported increased confidence, improved preparedness, and greater effectiveness in supporting students with disabilities (McCoy and Max). Research has also suggested that empathy-focused training may improve paraprofessional relationships with students with multiple disabilities and strengthen classroom support practices (Russel and Genao 143–145).

Behaviour management remains one of the most challenging responsibilities for paraprofessionals working in inclusive classrooms. Students with life skills needs may display aggression, noncompliance, elopement, or other challenging behaviours that require consistent support and intervention. The literature suggests that paraprofessionals frequently serve as frontline responders to behavioural

incidents while receiving minimal training or coaching (Bronstein et al. 170–172). Studies examining paraprofessionals working with students with disruptive behaviour disorders found that effective teacher-paraprofessional relationships are associated with stronger classroom support and better management of challenging behaviours (Bronstein et al. 175). Additionally, paraeducator-delivered interventions have been shown to positively impact students with extensive support needs when paraprofessionals receive proper supervision and evidence-based training (Walker et al. 250–255).

The emotional impact of supporting students with intensive needs has also emerged as a concern in recent research. Paraprofessionals have also reported experiencing stress, burnout, emotional exhaustion, and low job satisfaction due to heavy workloads, challenging student behaviours, unclear expectations, and limited recognition. A research by Squillaci and Hofmann related to burnout in inclusive e

Educational environments indicate that collaborative and organisational factors strongly influence staff well-being. Research also suggests that supportive and transformational leadership practices within schools can improve staff motivation, workplace performance, and organisational climate (Lamcja, 2024). Similarly, related research highlights the importance of teacher-mediated strategies and strong administrative interventions in strengthening staff support systems and reducing teacher turnover in educational settings (Negron, 2025). Recent studies also emphasise the importance of emotional awareness, social-emotional learning, and restorative practices in creating healthier and more supportive educational environments for staff and students (Juang et al., 2025). Although much of the burnout literature has focused on teachers, recent studies increasingly recognise that paraprofessionals experience similar workplace stressors. Lack of administrative support, insufficient planning time, and limited involvement in decision-making processes may further contribute to emotional strain and reduced job satisfaction (McCoy and Max).

Collaboration between teachers and paraprofessionals is another essential factor that influences the effectiveness of inclusive education. Effective collaboration involves open communication, mutual respect, shared problem-solving, and regular planning opportunities. Research has emphasised that cultivating effective teacher-paraprofessional collaboration strengthens classroom support, communication, and instructional consistency in inclusive educational settings (Barnes et al., 2021). Studies have shown that positive collaborative relationships improve paraprofessional self-efficacy and classroom effectiveness (Seim). School-wide innovation in autism-specific education has been shown to reshape professional identity and strengthen educators' sense of purpose and instructional meaning, highlighting the importance of shared vision and coordinated support in inclusive settings (Zakai-Mashiach, 2026). However, hierarchical structures and inconsistent communication patterns may negatively affect teamwork and instructional consistency. Teachers who actively include paraprofessionals in instructional planning and classroom decision-making create more supportive and coordinated learning environments for students with disabilities (Gilson and Biggs 3348–3350; Urbani et al.).

Research has also examined the growing dependence on paraprofessionals in inclusive classrooms and the long-term implications for special education systems. Schools increasingly rely on paraprofessionals to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities due to staffing shortages and increasing demands within special education programs (Walker et al. 243–246). However, many paraprofessionals continue to report low wages, heavy workloads, and limited professional recognition, contributing to high turnover rates and workforce instability (McCoy and Max). Community discussions among special education professionals further highlight concerns about paraprofessional burnout, staffing shortages, and insufficient organisational support in inclusive educational settings (“What Will Special Education Look Like in 10 Years?”).

Although recent literature provides valuable insights into paraprofessional training, collaboration, and workplace challenges, several gaps remain. Much of the current research focuses on teacher perspectives or specific disability categories rather than the lived experiences of paraprofessionals supporting life skills students in general education classrooms (Gilson and Biggs 3342–3344). Additionally, limited research examines how organisational factors such as student reassignment, unclear supervisory structures, and changing classroom expectations affect paraprofessional stress, effectiveness, and job satisfaction.

## Methodology

### Research Design

A qualitative descriptive research design was used to explore paraprofessionals' experiences in supporting Life Skills students in general education classrooms. This design enabled the researchers to collect detailed accounts of participants' day-to-day experiences, challenges, and support systems while providing rich contextual information about their roles and responsibilities.

The study focused on understanding paraprofessionals' experiences with classroom management challenges, communication with teachers, emotional demands, workload concerns, and perceived support systems. Open-ended responses were analysed to identify recurring themes and patterns, while simple descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were used only to summarise common responses among participants.

A qualitative descriptive approach was considered appropriate because it enabled a straightforward and comprehensive description of Life Skills paraprofessionals' experiences at the selected school site.

### Participants

The study sample included general and special education paraprofessionals who work with students with life skills needs in inclusive classrooms. There were 11 survey participants from a single high school, representing 100% of the paraprofessionals assigned to support Life Skills students at the selected high school site. These participants regularly worked with Life Skills students in at least two general education classroom settings each day.

They held a variety of positions, including classroom paraprofessionals and support personnel, with diverse experience. There were those with both recent and long-standing experience, allowing for a range of viewpoints on practices and issues related to paraprofessional work. This provided a better understanding of how experience might impact perceptions of effectiveness, stress and support required.

Participation in the study was voluntary. All paraprofessionals were informed about the purpose of the research and were asked to provide voluntary informed consent prior to participating.

## Table 1

### Profile of the Participants

Participant Number	Paraprofessional's Initial Name	Years Working as a Paraprofessional	School
1	JaMa	1 year	Jefferson High School
2	NaCh	1 year	Jefferson High School
3	MaKi	6 years	Jefferson High School

4	RaPi	2 years	Jefferson High School
5	KeXi	1 year	Jefferson High School
6	BaDeLe	1 year	Jefferson High School
7	ELDi	10 years	Jefferson High School
8	CaEl	5 years	Jefferson High School
9	HoSt	10 years	Jefferson High School
10.	MeHe	2 years	Jefferson High School
11.	ELi	1 year	Jefferson High School

Source: Author's development

### **Setting**

This study was conducted at Jefferson High School in Daly City, California. The school offers a specialised and inclusive Life Skills Program focused on preparing students for greater independence and transition to adulthood. Researchers examined study settings that were inclusive high school education environments where students with life skills needs were included in regular education classrooms. In these environments, general education teachers, special education teachers and paraprofessionals work together to address the academic, social and emotional needs of students.

The role of paraprofessionals here includes providing individualised support, facilitating engagement in class activities, managing behaviour, and assisting students in accessing the curriculum within the general education setting. Their fast-paced and unpredictable nature makes these settings suitable for exploring issues related to workplace challenges, communication practices, emotional demands, and support systems.

The role of paraprofessionals in these settings includes providing individualised support, facilitating engagement in classroom activities, managing behaviour, and assisting students in accessing the curriculum within general education environments. The fast-paced and unpredictable nature of these settings made them appropriate environments for exploring workplace challenges, support systems, communication practices, and emotional demands experienced by paraprofessionals.

### **Data Collection Instrument**

The researchers used a researcher-made questionnaire to collect qualitative data with descriptive frequency support. The questionnaire contained both closed-ended and open-ended items designed to gather information regarding paraprofessionals' experiences supporting Life Skills students in an inclusive high school setting.

The questionnaire had several sections:

- Background information (e.g., role, years of experience)
- Classroom issues (e.g., managing student behaviour, workload)
- Emotional experiences and burnout indicators
- Communication and collaboration with teachers
- Support and professional development
- School practices, including student assignment and reassignment (switching)
- Open-ended questions to understand the concerns, experiences and ideas for improvements

Closed-ended items included multiple-choice and Likert scale questions to identify response patterns using frequencies and percentages. Open-ended questions allowed participants to share their perspectives and experiences in greater depth, providing qualitative insights into their daily responsibilities and challenges.

The researcher-developed questionnaire was based on existing literature on inclusive education, paraprofessional support, workplace stress, collaboration, and student behavioural support. To ensure content validity and appropriateness of the instrument, the questionnaire underwent expert review by the Senior Education Specialist and the Special Education Department Head, both of whom approved the items prior to data collection. Their feedback ensured that the questions were aligned with the study's objectives and appropriate for paraprofessionals working in inclusive educational settings.

Additionally, an item review was conducted to assess the clarity, organisation, and relevance of the questionnaire items. Minor revisions were made to improve wording and eliminate unclear or repetitive items. This process helped strengthen the instrument's consistency and reliability before final administration.

### ***Data Collection Procedure***

The online survey was sent to paraprofessionals in the chosen educational institution. Survey participation was voluntary, and the study's objective was explained to participants before they took part.

The survey took into account ethical considerations such as:

- Anonymity of the participants
- Confidentiality of answers
- Obtaining voluntary informed consent
- Providing participants the right to withdraw from the study.

The data collection period was defined, and participants completed the survey independently.

### ***Data Analysis***

The qualitative analysis was used to provide a richer understanding of the data, ensuring that statistical information was grounded in participants' experiences.

Descriptive frequency data from closed-ended questions were analysed using frequencies and percentages to identify patterns in participants' responses related to workplace challenges, emotional experiences, communication, and support variables. Data were presented in descriptive and graphical formats where appropriate.

Open-ended responses were subjected to thematic analysis. Responses were reviewed, coded, and grouped into key themes, including classroom management, communication and collaboration, emotional well-being, workload concerns, and suggestions for improvement. This enabled the recognition of recurring themes while also capturing the complexity of participants' experiences.

The qualitative analysis and descriptive frequency data were combined to provide a richer understanding of paraprofessionals' experiences, ensuring that descriptive trends were grounded in participants' lived experiences and workplace realities.

## ***Ethical Considerations***

The research adhered to the ethical guidelines for educational research. Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all responses were kept confidential and used only for research purposes.

Approval for the questionnaire and study procedures was obtained from the Senior Education Specialist and the Special Education Department Head prior to data collection. The study design safeguarded participants against physical, emotional, or psychological harm, and all participant responses remained confidential throughout the research process.

## **Results**

This section discusses the survey results using descriptive frequency support and qualitative data to offer a holistic view of paraprofessionals' findings and perspectives on supporting life skills students in general education classrooms. Frequencies and percentages are presented to summarise response patterns among participants, while open-ended responses provide contextual descriptions of their experiences.

### ***Demographics of Survey Respondents***

Eleven paraprofessionals, representing 100% of those supporting Life Skills students at the selected high school site, participated in the study. All participants worked daily with Life Skills students in at least two general education settings. The participants had varying degrees of experience, with some being new to the profession and others having extensive experience. This offered insights into various challenges and support requirements across different experience levels.

### ***Challenges in Supporting Life Skills Students***

Contributors reported a range of challenges with their roles, including managing student behavior, which was the most commonly reported challenge. Many survey participants reported that dealing with challenging, non-compliant, or unpredictable behaviours significantly affected their capacity to support students.

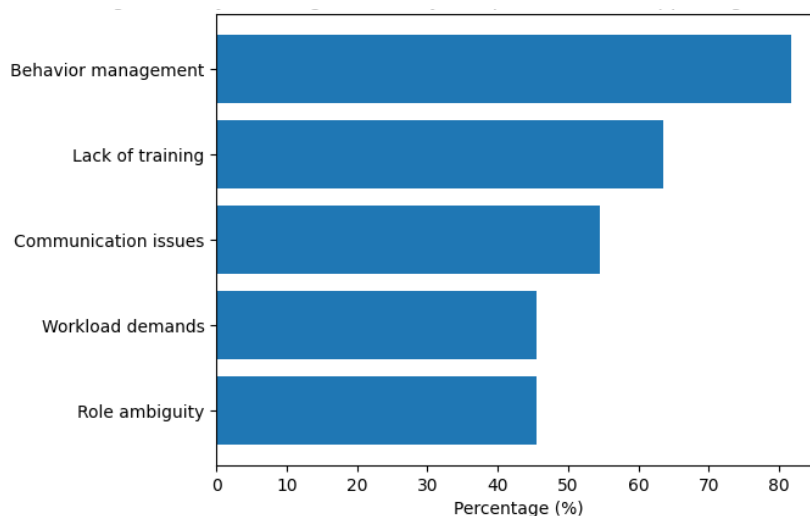
Additional challenges included:

- Ambiguous roles and responsibilities
- Lack of training in behaviour management and specific teaching strategies
- Challenges in meeting the needs of a wide range of students in general education classrooms

These results were corroborated by qualitative responses, in which participants highlighted the challenges of juggling teaching and behaviour management in the classroom environment. As illustrated in Figure 1, behaviour management was identified as the most prevalent challenge, reported by over 80% of participants. This finding aligns with prior research emphasising the complexity of managing student behaviour in inclusive settings and the need for targeted behavioural support strategies.

**Figure 1**

*Key Challenges Faced By Paraprofessionals Supporting Life Skills Students*



Source: Author's development

### ***Emotional Experiences and Burnout***

Results suggest a high degree of emotional stress and burnout among paraprofessionals. Most participants reported feeling emotionally exhausted, particularly in response to behavioural problems and high work demands.

Key emotional outcomes included:

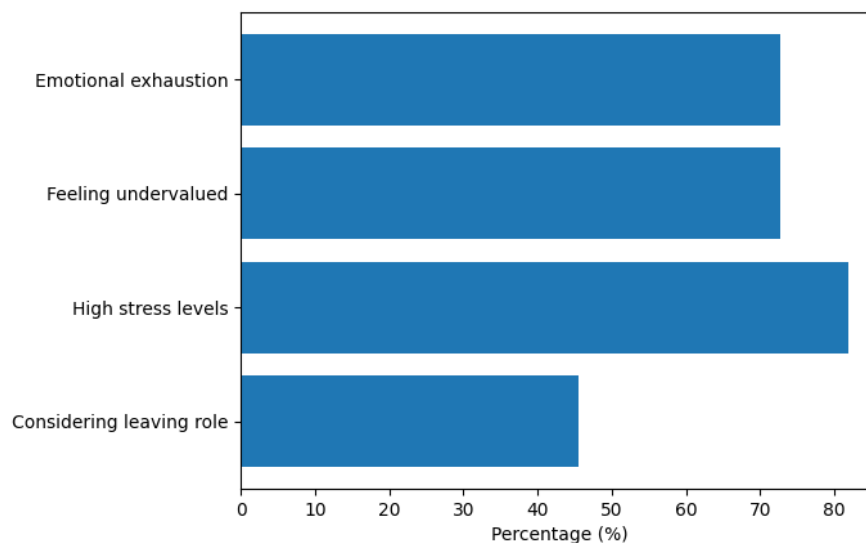
- Experiencing emotional exhaustion at the end of the day
- Feeling stressed about student behaviour and workload
- Feeling unrecognised in the school system

Moreover, some participants reported that these stressors led them to consider resigning from their jobs, suggesting potential implications for student retention and support.

As shown in Figure 2, a substantial proportion of paraprofessionals reported experiencing high levels of stress (81.8%) and emotional exhaustion (72.7%). Additionally, many participants reported feeling undervalued, and a considerable number also reported considering leaving their positions. These findings are consistent with existing literature highlighting the emotional demands and occupational stress associated with paraprofessional roles, particularly in high-need educational settings (Reddy et al., 2024; Wiggs et al., 2024). The prevalence of burnout indicators underscores the need for systemic interventions to improve workplace conditions, professional support, and staff well-being.

**Figure 2**

*Emotional Strain and Burnout Indicators Among Paraprofessionals*



Source: Author's development

**Communication and Collaboration**

Participants' experiences with communication and collaboration between paraprofessionals and teachers were mixed. Some respondents reported strong communication and collaboration, while others reported limited communication and involvement in decision-making.

Key issues identified included:

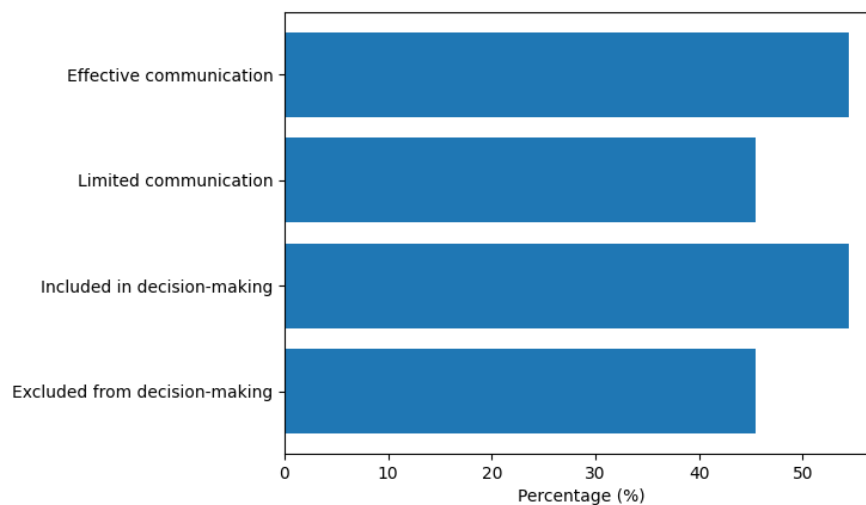
- Infrequent communication about student needs and lessons
- Inability to attend team meetings or planning sessions
- Confusion about the roles and responsibilities in the classroom

Those who felt they had better communication with their teachers also felt more confident in their roles and were more effective in supporting students.

As illustrated in Figure 3 below, perceptions of communication and professional support varied among participants, with just over half reporting effective communication and inclusion in decision-making processes. However, a substantial proportion of paraprofessionals indicated limited communication and exclusion from collaborative planning. These findings are consistent with existing literature emphasizing that inconsistencies in teacher–paraprofessional collaboration can contribute to role ambiguity and reduced effectiveness in inclusive classrooms (Gilson & Biggs, 2024; Morin et al., 2022). The variability observed highlights the need for structured communication systems and clearly defined collaborative practices to ensure consistent and effective support for students.

**Figure 3**

*Communication and Professional Support Among Paraprofessionals*



Source: Author's development

***Needs for Support and Professional Development***

Many participants reported a need for more professional development and support. The most frequently mentioned needs were:

- Behaviour management techniques
- Teaching strategies for students with autism and developmental disabilities
- Team problem-solving and collaboration

Participants noted the need for training and support to strengthen their skills in addressing challenges and improving student learning.

***Effect of Student Assignment and Reassignment (Switching)***

Switching (rotation) was identified as a critical organisational issue affecting paraprofessional performance. A range of switching frequencies was reported, with some participants noting consistent student changes.

Impacts of switching included:

- Limited time to develop strong relationships with students
- Limited ability to understand students' needs and behaviours
- Increased stress and lack of preparation

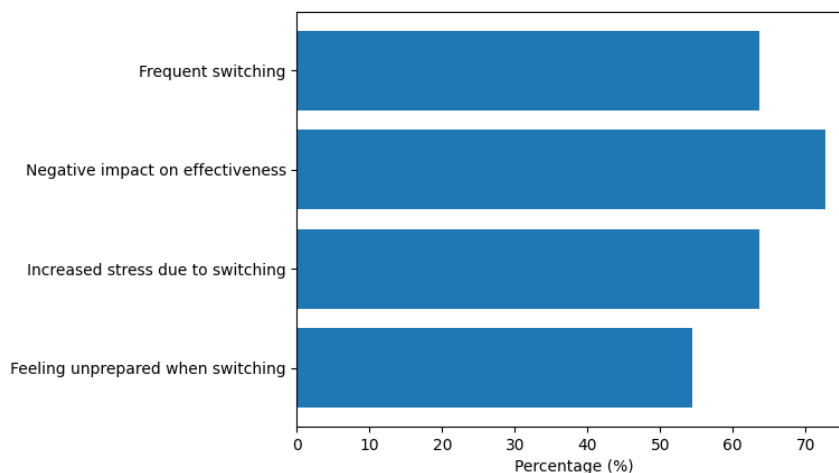
Respondents reported that reassignment of students significantly impacted their effectiveness and students' continuous support. Respondents noted the need for stability and preparation in the case of reassignment.

As presented in Figure 4, frequent student reassignment was reported by a majority of participants and was strongly associated with negative impacts on effectiveness (72.7%) and increased stress levels (63.6%). Additionally, more than half of the respondents indicated feeling unprepared when required to switch between students. These findings highlight the significant influence of organisational structures on paraprofessional performance and align with broader research emphasising the importance of consistency,

preparation, and role clarity in supporting students with complex needs (Wiggs et al., 2024; Reddy et al., 2022). The results suggest that minimizing unnecessary switching and implementing structured transition processes may enhance both paraprofessional effectiveness and student outcomes.

**Figure 4**

*Impact of Student Assignment (Switching) on Paraprofessional Effectiveness*



Source: Author’s development

**Qualitative Findings: Solutions and Best Practices**

The open-ended questions provided valuable information to improve practices. There were some common themes:

- Better communication and collaboration between teachers and paraprofessionals
- Defined and predictable roles
- Greater support and appreciation for paraprofessionals
- Provision of training and development
- Creation of more consistent assignment processes to minimise shuffling

Our survey participants also noted that positive school cultures, marked by cooperation, respect and good communication, were important to their experiences and to their students' success. Table 2 summarises the primary challenges identified in this study and their implications for paraprofessional effectiveness.

Table 2: Summary of Key Challenges and Their Implications for Paraprofessional Effectiveness

Challenge Category	Description	Impact on Paraprofessionals	Implications for Practice
Behavior management	Managing disruptive or complex student behaviors	Increased stress, reduced instructional effectiveness	Need for targeted behavior training
Lack of training	Limited preparation in specialized strategies	Reduced confidence and inconsistency in support	Implementation of structured professional development

Communication issues	Inconsistent collaboration with teachers	Role ambiguity and misaligned support	Establish clear communication systems
Workload demands	High physical and emotional demands	Burnout and fatigue	Balanced workload and support mechanisms
Role ambiguity	Unclear expectations and responsibilities	Reduced job satisfaction and effectiveness	Clearly defined roles and responsibilities

### ***Key Findings***

In sum, the results reveal that paraprofessionals are exposed to a complex set of interrelated issues such as behavioural, emotional, communication and organisational challenges. Simultaneously, the findings show that there are clear and practical "best practices", such as collaboration, training and support, that can support paraprofessional effectiveness and well-being in inclusive classrooms.

### **Discussion**

This study surveyed the challenges and practices for paraprofessionals working with life skills students in their inclusive classrooms. The results show a multifactorial dynamic of behavioural, emotional, interpersonal, and environmental factors affecting paraprofessionals' effectiveness and well-being. This chapter explores their meaning in context of the literature and their implications for practice, policy and research.

### ***Interpretation of Key Findings***

A key theme to emerge in this study is the importance of behaviour management as a key challenge for paraprofessionals. Students' behaviour was consistently noted as a significant source of stress, corroborating research that stresses the importance of explicit behaviour support approaches in inclusive settings. Research indicates that with behaviour-specific training, paraprofessionals' skills in controlling challenging student behaviour and facilitating engagement are enhanced (Spurlock et al., 2024; Kroesch et al., 2024). The present results support this view, suggesting that training deficits contribute to a perception of ineffectiveness and burdensome stress.

The research also identifies emotional distress and burnout, with paraprofessionals feeling exhausted, burned out and underappreciated. This is in line with findings identifying the emotional strains on paraprofessionals, especially in contexts with high levels of student need and low levels of support (Reddy et al., 2024; Wiggs et al., 2024). The emotional strain found in this study highlights the need for workplace well-being programs as an important facet of retaining a high-quality paraprofessional workforce.

Another important finding concerns paraprofessional-teacher communication and collaboration. Some participants reported positive experiences of collaboration, while others shared intermittent communication and a lack of involvement in decision-making. This inconsistency mirrors the literature, which indicates that successful teacher-paraprofessional partnerships are key to providing students with consistent, coordinated support and positive outcomes (Gilson & Biggs, 2024). This study also shows that inadequate communication may contribute to role confusion and decreased self-efficacy among paraprofessionals.

The results also highlight the need for training and development, especially in behaviour management and other instructional strategies. Interviewees expressed a keen interest in ongoing, targeted training, which aligns with findings from previous studies suggesting that preparation improves paraprofessionals' skills and competence (Morin et al., 2022; Morrison et al., 2025). This absence of ongoing, sustained training is a systemic issue that affects staff performance and, ultimately, student outcomes.

One of the most distinctive insights of this study is the recognition of an organisational factor: the effect of frequent student reassignments, or "switches". Interviewees described how inconsistent student assignments reduce their ability to establish rapport with students, identify individual needs and provide continuity of support. This insight adds to the previous literature by identifying an uninvestigated organisational issue that impacts effectiveness and satisfaction. The chaotic nature of the changes prompts calls for more consistent and strategic approaches to school assignments.

### ***Implications for Practice***

The results of this study suggest several practice implications. First, schools need to invest in professional development programs that address behaviour management, strategies for supporting students with autism and inclusive teaching strategies. Professional development should be sustained and embedded in the school environment.

Second, we must improve the working patterns of teachers and paraprofessionals by implementing effective communication strategies, such as team meetings, joint planning and clear expectations regarding roles and responsibilities. Clear roles and expectations can provide clarity and consistency in support for students.

Third, schools need to build organisational strategies that enhance stability, such as student assignment. This includes decreasing unnecessary "switching" and ensuring sufficient transition time when changes are necessary, to enhance paraprofessional and student outcomes.

And finally, increased recognition of paraprofessional well-being. Emotional and recognition support, along with the creation of inclusive school environments, can reduce burnout and turnover. Table 3 presents evidence-based best practices derived from the study findings and supported by existing literature.

**Table 3**

*Recommended Best Practices for Supporting Paraprofessionals in Inclusive Education Settings*

<b>Domain</b>	<b>Best Practice</b>	<b>Expected Outcome</b>	<b>Supporting Evidence</b>
Professional Development	Ongoing training in behavior management and autism strategies	Improved instructional support and behavior management	Spurlock et al. (2024); Kroesch et al. (2024)
Collaboration	Regular team meetings and shared planning	Increased alignment and effectiveness	Gilson & Biggs (2024)
Organizational Support	Stable student assignments and reduced switching	Improved consistency and reduced stress	Wiggs et al. (2024)
Communication	Clear communication channels between staff	Reduced role ambiguity and improved coordination	Morin et al. (2022)

Workplace Well-being	Recognition and emotional support systems	Reduced burnout and improved retention	Reddy et al. (2024)
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### ***Implications for Policy***

Policy implications of these findings include the need for systemic improvements in paraprofessional training and support. Policy frameworks should set standards for paraprofessional training, such as requirements to train in behaviour management and inclusive strategies. They should also foster fair employment conditions, such as fair wages, role definitions, and professional development. With the important role of paraprofessionals in inclusive education, policies should recognise their vital contribution to the team and support them in their roles.

### ***Study Limitations***

There are several limitations to the current study. First, the study's sample size was small, even though it included a limited sample of the entire population of paraprofessionals working in a chosen high school setting, reducing the generalizability of the findings to a larger population. Second, relying on self-reported measures can introduce response bias, as participants' perceptions may not fully reflect reality. Third, the research was situation-specific (educational context), which may restrict the generalizability of the results to other contexts with different structures or resources.

### ***Future Research Directions***

Future research could build on this work by including larger studies of varying educational settings to increase generalizability. Longitudinal studies would offer insight into the longitudinal nature of paraprofessional experiences and the effects of interventions. Experiments testing the impact of particular training programs or structural support would also contribute to knowledge in this area.

We also need to investigate other factors, such as student allocation policies and workload allocation, as evidence indicates these play a crucial role in paraprofessional experiences but are not currently well understood.

In general, this research adds to the emerging literature that recognises the vital contributions of paraprofessionals to inclusive education and that stresses the difficulties they encounter. The study's insights on both barriers and strategies offer guidance for improving support systems, collaboration and working conditions for paraprofessionals. It's important to address these challenges to ensure paraprofessionals can successfully support life skills students and contribute to the success of inclusive classrooms.

## **Conclusion**

### ***Theoretical Contribution***

This research has explored a range of challenges and best practices for paraprofessionals serving life skills students in general education classrooms. It shows that paraprofessionals are critical in supporting inclusive education; however, their ability to deliver support is limited by the demands of students' behaviours, a lack of training, emotional stresses, communication breakdowns and the aforementioned organisational factors. It also provides a unique insight into the organisational factor of frequent student reassignments or "switches", which was previously uninvestigated and is shown to impact the effectiveness

and satisfaction of paraprofessionals (Morin et al., 2022). These interrelated challenges affect not only the well-being of paraprofessionals but also the quality and type of support they can provide for students.

### ***Practical Contribution***

At the same time, the study provides tangible best practices to support paraprofessional performance and retention. These include focused professional development that schools should invest in, including sustained, embedded training programs that address behaviour management, strategies for supporting students with autism, and inclusive teaching strategies (Damiani et al., 2023). Planning and collaborating with teachers to improve working patterns by implementing effective communication strategies, such as joint planning, team meetings, defined roles and responsibilities, and stable student assignments. Organisational support that builds strategies to enhance stability by decreasing unnecessary student “switching” and ensuring sufficient transition time when changes are necessary. These supports help paraprofessionals provide appropriate and consistent support that encourages student motivation and engagement, as well as social inclusion for students with life skills needs.

These results highlight the importance of acknowledging paraprofessionals as members of the educational community and the need to invest in systems to support their professional learning and well-being. Better training structures, communication, and supportive policies are pivotal to the progress of inclusive education. In the end, improving paraprofessional support is about more than sustainability; it is also a critical need to enhance learning outcomes for all students.

### ***Suggestions for Future Research***

Future research should build on this work by diverseconducting larger studies across varying educational settings to enhance the generalizability of the findings. It is also recommended to conduct longitudinal studies to understand the long-term effects of interventions and perform experiments to better understand the evaluation of training initiatives and organisational frameworks. Further investigation is also needed into other organizational factors, such as student allocation policies and workload allocation, which are suggested to play a crucial, but currently not well-understood, role in paraprofessional experiences.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

None

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