

Exploring the Role of Assessment in Shaping Secondary Student-teacher Professionals in Limpopo Province



Thivhavhudzi Muriel Badugela ¹ 

¹ Department of Educational Studies, University of Venda, Thohoyandou, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

This qualitative research explored the intricate interplay between assessment practices and professional identity formation among student teachers. Professional identity, a multifaceted construct, is examined in the context of teacher education, focusing on unravelling the specific influence of assessment methods. Employing a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews, this study collected comprehensive data from a diverse cohort of student teachers in secondary schools in Limpopo Province. The research sought to identify how formative and summative assessments, feedback mechanisms, and evaluative criteria shape student teachers' perceptions of themselves as emerging educators. By exploring the impact of assessment on key components of professional identity, including pedagogical beliefs, self-efficacy, and commitment to lifelong learning, the study provides nuanced insights into educational practices that deeply influence the identity formation process. Furthermore, the research explored the potential tension between standardised assessment practices and the individualised nature of teacher identity development. Perspectives from student teachers and mentors were central to elucidating the role of feedback and assessment in fostering a sense of belonging and efficacy within the professional teaching community. The findings will contribute significantly to the qualitative understanding of teacher education and assessment practices, offering valuable recommendations for refining evaluation methods that align with the holistic development of student teachers' professional identities. The implications of this qualitative study extended beyond academia by providing insights to inform policy and practice and supporting the next generation of educators on their path to becoming proficient and reflective professionals.

Correspondence

Thivhavhudzi Muriel

Badugela

Email:

Thivhavhudzi.Badugela@univen.ac.za

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INTRODUCTION

The role of teacher aides, also known as paraprofessionals or teacher assistants, has become increasingly prominent in primary schools worldwide. Working alongside certified teachers, paraprofessionals provide classroom support, including managing administrative tasks, assisting with behavioural management, and offering instructional support. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), employing paraprofessionals is a cost-effective way to support disadvantaged students in achieving better academic outcomes. In the United States, paraprofessionals are widely employed in primary schools as part of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, emphasising

their impact on student learning. Research by the National Institute for Early Education Research has also shown that paraprofessionals can positively affect student literacy and mathematics outcomes. In Australia, paraprofessionals address teacher shortages and assist students with learning difficulties, with studies by the Australian Council for Educational Research indicating improvements in reading, writing, and mathematics outcomes linked to their support.

In South Africa, paraprofessionals were extensively deployed through the Presidential Youth Employment Stimulus initiative, launched in December 2020, which created more than 300,000 school jobs. This program helped alleviate the economic strain caused by the COVID-19 pandemic by preserving School Governing Body (SGB)-funded positions and creating employment opportunities for unemployed youth aged 18 to 35. Of the 319,091 positions filled, 200,000 were education assistants, providing classroom support to teachers, and 100,000 were general school assistants, ensuring a safe and hygienic learning environment by helping schools adhere to the COVID-19 protocols.¹ The initiative also digitised recruitment processes with the Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, allowing efficient hiring in partnership with South Africa's Youth. mobi site.²

However, the growing reliance on paraprofessionals raises concerns about their ability to provide high-quality instruction, especially without adequate training and supervision. Studies suggest that while paraprofessionals can positively influence student outcomes, these benefits are contingent on strategic deployment, comprehensive training, and effective supervision. A lack of standardised guidelines for paraprofessional deployment, training, and supervision often leads to role ambiguity and underutilisation of their skills, potentially negatively affecting student learning experiences and teacher-student interactions. The challenge of optimising paraprofessional roles is evident in many educational systems that lack a cohesive framework to ensure their meaningful contribution to student outcomes.

This study seeks to explore the deployment, training, and supervision of paraprofessionals in primary education settings, intending to identify effective strategies for optimising their impact on student outcomes. By examining current practices and challenges, the study intends to provide evidence-based recommendations for improving paraprofessional integration in schools. The methodology includes a mixed-methods approach: qualitative interviews with teachers and paraprofessionals to understand their perspectives on training and role clarity, combined with quantitative surveys to assess the outcomes of current.

The study is structured as follows: Section 1 reviews the literature on paraprofessional roles and their impact on education. Section 2 discusses the theoretical framework, focusing on inclusive education and the roles of paraprofessionals in supporting diverse learning needs. Section 3 outlines the research methodology, detailing participant selection, data collection, and analysis methods. Section 4 presents the study's findings while Section 5 interprets the results and discusses their implications for paraprofessional deployment, training, and supervision. Finally, Section 6 concludes the study with recommendations for policy and practice, as well as directions for future research.

This research has significant implications for educators, policymakers, and the broader educational community by contributing insights into effective paraprofessional practices. Optimising the role of paraprofessionals is crucial for fostering inclusive and quality-driven educational environments, that ultimately enhance academic achievement, engagement, and overall learning experiences for students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In examining the deployment, training, and supervision of paraprofessionals in educational settings, a cohesive synthesis of existing research underscores the importance of clear role definitions, structured training programs, and ongoing supervision to optimise paraprofessional effectiveness. Studies highlight that strategic deployment, with well-defined roles, enables paraprofessionals to complement certified teachers rather than replace them, thus enhancing instructional support in the classroom.³ Furthermore, effective training covering instructional strategies, diversity awareness, and communication skills is

¹ Department of Basic Education, *National Senior Certificate Examination Papers 2020* (Pretoria: Government of South Africa, 2020).

² Department of Basic Education, *National Senior Certificate Examination Papers 2020*.

³ Richard M. Ingersoll and Michael Strong, "The Impact of Induction and Mentoring Programs for Beginning Teachers: A Critical Review of the Research," *Review of Educational Research* 81, no. 2 (2011): 201–33.

essential for equipping paraprofessionals with the tools to support diverse student needs.⁴ Consistent supervision, integrated into a collaborative framework with teachers and administrators, also emerges as critical, fostering professional growth and improving classroom dynamics.⁵ Together, these themes provide a robust foundation for investigating how paraprofessional support can be structured to improve educational outcomes comprehensively.

Deployment of Paraprofessionals

Deploying paraprofessionals, often referred to as teacher assistants or instructional aides, has become integral to classroom dynamics, especially as student needs diversify and teacher workloads increase. Ingersoll and Strong highlight the significant role paraprofessionals play in supplementing classroom instruction yet emphasise the necessity for strategic deployment.⁶ Without clearly defined roles and responsibilities, paraprofessionals risk compromising the work of certified teachers rather than improving it. To ensure that paraprofessionals complement rather than replace teachers, the study calls for structured guidelines that specify how to best support student learning. This approach not only maximises their impact but also addresses concerns about role ambiguity, which can hinder classroom collaboration and efficiency. Therefore, strategically deploying paraprofessionals is critical in maximising their contributions to student support without diminishing the authority and expertise of qualified teachers.

Training of Paraprofessionals

Adequate training is fundamental to the effectiveness of paraprofessionals in their roles. Friend and Cook argue that training programs should go beyond basic orientation and equip paraprofessionals with practical skills in instructional strategies, understanding diverse learning needs, and effective communication.⁷ Paraprofessionals often work with students who have a wide range of abilities, which requires training that covers differentiated instruction and specific interventions tailored to student needs. Furthermore, Friend and Cook suggest that ongoing professional development is crucial for paraprofessionals to stay current with evolving educational practices, particularly as new methodologies and technologies emerge in the classroom. By emphasising the importance of continuous training, this study underlines how professional growth for paraprofessionals directly contributes to improved classroom outcomes as they become more adept at meeting students' varied academic and behavioural needs.

Supervision of Paraprofessionals

Supervision is another essential factor in optimising paraprofessional support within the classroom. Pickett stresses the value of regular and structured supervision to maintain the quality and effectiveness of paraprofessional contributions.⁸ The study advocates for a collaborative supervision model that involves teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals in an ongoing process of feedback and development. This approach promotes the professional growth of paraprofessionals and ensures that they remain aligned with instructional goals and classroom expectations. Furthermore, effective supervision enhances classroom dynamics by establishing a clear framework for paraprofessional responsibilities and supporting smoother teacher-paraprofessional collaboration. Without adequate oversight, paraprofessionals may lack the guidance needed to perform effectively, resulting in inconsistencies in their support and, ultimately, student learning outcomes. Consequently, Pickett's research underscores the need for structured supervision to create an inclusive, productive educational environment where paraprofessionals and teachers can work together.

Synthesis and Gaps in Existing Literature

Together, these studies underscore the interconnectedness of deployment, training, and supervision in shaping the role of paraprofessionals. Ingersoll and Strong emphasise the need for strategic deployment to clarify roles, while Friend and Cook focus on comprehensive training as essential for paraprofessionals

⁴ M. Friend and L. Cook, *Interactions: Collaboration Skills for School Professionals* (Pearson Higher Ed., 2013).

⁵ A. L. Pickett, *Supervising Paraprofessionals in the Classroom* (Routledge, 2016).

⁶ Ingersoll and Strong, "The Impact of Induction and Mentoring Programs for Beginning Teachers: A Critical Review of the Research."

⁷ Friend and Cook, *Interactions: Collaboration Skills for School Professionals*.

⁸ A. L. Pickett, *Supervising Paraprofessionals in the Classroom* (Routledge, 2016).

to fulfil their instructional and behavioural support roles effectively.⁹ Pickett's findings on supervision reveal how a collaborative approach can foster a conducive working environment and bolster paraprofessional contributions to classroom success.¹⁰ However, gaps remain in understanding how deployment, training, and supervision function in diverse educational contexts, such as rural vs. urban schools or across varying educational levels. Further research could explore how these factors collectively influence student outcomes and whether specific combinations of deployment strategies, training protocols, and supervision styles are more effective in certain educational settings.

Challenges and Best Practices

Addressing the challenges associated with the deployment, training, and supervision of paraprofessionals is crucial. Scruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffie highlight potential issues, such as role ambiguity and insufficient training, and propose best practices to overcome these challenges, including clearly defined job descriptions and ongoing professional development.¹¹

a. Role Ambiguity

Challenge: Role ambiguity arises when the responsibilities of paraprofessionals are unclearly defined, leading to confusion about their role in the classroom.

Best Practice: Establishing clearly defined job descriptions is paramount. These descriptions should delineate roles, responsibilities, and expectations, ensuring that paraprofessionals and teachers understand their roles.

b. Insufficient Training

Challenge: Paraprofessionals may face challenges due to inadequate training, hindering their ability to effectively cater to diverse learning needs.

Best Practice: Implementing comprehensive training programs beyond basic instructional strategies is essential. Training should encompass understanding diverse learning needs, effective communication, and collaboration strategies within the educational team.

c. Lack of Supervision

Challenge: Inadequate or inconsistent supervision can impede the professional growth of paraprofessionals, impacting their ability to contribute meaningfully to the learning environment.

Best Practice: Establishing a structured system of supervision that involves regular check-ins, feedback sessions, and collaborative discussions between teachers and paraprofessionals can enhance their professional development and improve overall classroom dynamics.

d. Ineffective Collaboration

Challenge: Communication barriers or a lack of collaborative strategies may hinder collaboration between teachers and paraprofessionals.

Best Practice: Promoting a culture of collaboration is crucial. This involves fostering open communication channels, encouraging joint planning sessions, and providing opportunities for ongoing collaboration. Professional development initiatives that focus on collaborative skills can further strengthen these partnerships.

e. Professional Development Opportunities

Challenge: Paraprofessionals may lack access to ongoing professional development opportunities, limiting their ability to stay up to date on best practices.

Best Practice: Implementing a systematic approach to professional development that addresses the evolving needs of paraprofessionals is vital. This could include workshops, seminars, and mentorship programs that provide continuous learning opportunities.

f. Tailoring Support to Diverse Learners

Challenge: Paraprofessionals may struggle to effectively support students with diverse learning needs if they are not adequately equipped.

⁹ Ingersoll and Strong, "The Impact of Induction and Mentoring Programs for Beginning Teachers: A Critical Review of the Research"; Friend and Cook, *Interactions: Collaboration Skills for School Professionals*.

¹⁰ Pickett, *Supervising Paraprofessionals in the Classroom*.

¹¹ Thomas E Scruggs, Margo A Mastropieri, and Kimberly A McDuffie, "Co-Teaching in Inclusive Classrooms: A Metasynthesis of Qualitative Research," *Exceptional Children* 73, no. 4 (2007): 392–416.

Best Practice: Tailoring training programs to address the specific needs of diverse learners is essential. This may involve incorporating strategies for differentiated instruction, understanding various learning styles, and providing resources that support inclusive practices.

g. Regular Evaluation and Feedback

The role of paraprofessionals in supporting teachers and students within the educational system is essential, particularly in contexts where students require additional assistance. However, without proper mechanisms for regular evaluation and feedback, it becomes challenging to assess the effectiveness of paraprofessionals and the impact they have on student outcomes. This lack of systematic oversight presents a significant challenge in understanding whether paraprofessionals contribute positively to student learning while also making it difficult to identify areas where they need additional support or training. To address these issues, structured evaluation processes that include regular feedback, providing a pathway for ongoing professional development and enhancing the quality of education provided by paraprofessionals must be implemented.

Without regular evaluation, paraprofessionals may continue to operate without clear direction or guidance, leading to inconsistent practices that do not align with the institution's educational goals. Teachers and administrators may struggle to assess whether paraprofessionals are meeting their expectations or whether they are effectively supporting students. This lack of oversight limits the potential for collaboration between paraprofessionals, teachers, and administrators, limiting professional growth opportunities. Moreover, without feedback, paraprofessionals may not be aware of areas where they need improvement, which can prevent them from improving their skills and contributing more effectively to the classroom environment.

A best practice to overcome these challenges is to introduce a systematic evaluation process that includes regular feedback sessions. Evaluations should focus on assessing the performance of paraprofessionals in key areas such as instructional support, classroom management, and student engagement. As part of this process, feedback sessions allow paraprofessionals to receive constructive insights into their performance, offering guidance on how they can improve and what aspects of their work are already successful. This iterative approach fosters professional growth and helps paraprofessionals adapt their strategies to better meet the needs of students, particularly those who require additional support.

Regular feedback also provides an opportunity to recognise the successes of paraprofessionals. Positive reinforcement is a powerful motivator, and acknowledging the contributions of paraprofessionals helps build their confidence and sense of belonging within the school community. This, in turn, increases job satisfaction and encourages paraprofessionals to continue striving for excellence. Recognising their achievements also highlights their vital role in the education system, fostering a culture of appreciation and mutual respect between paraprofessionals and the rest of the school staff.

Effective training and supervision of paraprofessionals must be approached holistically. Regular evaluation and feedback should be integrated into a broader strategy, including ongoing professional development, mentorship, and collaboration between teachers and paraprofessionals. Training programs should equip paraprofessionals with the necessary skills to fulfil their roles and provide opportunities for continuous learning and growth. Collaboration between teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals ensures that direct observations inform evaluations and that all stakeholders work towards the same goals. By aligning their efforts, schools can create an environment in which paraprofessionals are empowered to contribute effectively to the educational process.

The ultimate objective of regular evaluation and feedback is to improve the impact of paraprofessionals on student success. When paraprofessionals receive ongoing support and professional development, they are better equipped to assist students with their academic, social, and emotional needs. This is particularly important for students who face additional challenges, such as learning disabilities or behavioural issues. By improving the performance of paraprofessionals, schools can create a more supportive and inclusive learning environment that promotes positive outcomes for all students. Regular evaluation and feedback are essential to maximise the effectiveness of paraprofessionals in the education system. These processes provide a means of assessing performance, identifying areas of improvement, and offering opportunities for recognition and professional growth. By adopting a holistic and collaborative approach to paraprofessionals' training, supervision, and development, schools can ensure

that these valuable staff members are empowered to contribute meaningfully to student success and the overall quality of education.

Impact on Student Outcomes

Research by Downer and Pianta explores the impact of paraprofessional support on student outcomes.¹² The study suggests that when paraprofessionals receive adequate training and supervision, they can positively influence student engagement and academic achievement. However, the authors caution that the effectiveness of paraprofessionals is contingent on appropriate deployment and ongoing professional development. The deployment, training, and supervision of paraprofessionals in education are multifaceted and interconnected aspects that require careful consideration. A holistic approach, incorporating clear guidelines, comprehensive training, structured supervision, and ongoing professional development, is essential to maximise the positive impact of paraprofessionals on student learning outcomes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Studies on training and supervision of paraprofessionals done internationally advocate for upcoming researchers to use the Cognitive-behavioural Theory that highlights the interaction between thoughts and behaviour was utilised in schools to address performance problems and promote behavioural changes.¹³ This study therefore also followed suit.

Paraprofessional training is done to ensure a competent paraprofessional workforce which varies from school to school. The significant procedures used include (training, supervision and individually guided activities. Other training methods for paraprofessionals included professional activities such as collaboration meetings, outside professional development courses at local universities, presentations on weekends, before, during, or after school; study groups; workshops; district-wide training, school-wide training; self-study; individualised skill sessions; and mentoring.¹⁴ Although each method was considered acceptable, on-the-job in-service training through school-based professional development activities may be one of the most common, effective, and efficient methods to improve job satisfaction. Many studies agreed that training must be (1) systematically planned, (2) ongoing, and (3) coordinated to build sequentially on previous training.¹⁵ Additionally, activities planned after each session required paraprofessionals to reflect on their learning process and note any changes they plan to make in their delivery of instruction. This reflection has increased the probability that paraprofessionals maintain acquired knowledge and skills, increasing their competency.¹⁶ States such as Minnesota, Utah, Vermont, and Wisconsin have developed exemplary models for pre-service and in-service training and for the supervision of paraprofessionals.¹⁷ Additionally, several states have developed extensive, competency-based programs geared to paraprofessionals and have even mandated that paraprofessionals complete a formal certification program as a condition for licensure.¹⁸ Other states' standards were proven to be vague and unnecessarily competency-based.¹⁹

METHODOLOGY

The study followed a qualitative research method that sought to explore and understand people's experiences, perspectives, and behaviours through in-depth interviews, observations, and analysis of texts

¹² J. T. Downer and R. C. Pianta, "Academic and Cognitive Functioning in First Grade: Associations with Earlier Home and Childcare Predictors and Concurrent Home and Classroom Experiences," *School Psychology Review* 35, no. 1 (2006): 11–30.

¹³ J. Mason and B. Beasley, "Cognitive-Theory Approaches to Supervision," *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy* 25, no. 4 (2011): 294–303.

¹⁴ B. McKenzie, "Empowering Paraprofessionals through Professional Development," *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin* 77, no. 4 (2011): 38.

¹⁵ Ritu V Chopra, Elena Sandoval-Lucero, and Nancy K French, "Effective Supervision of Paraeducators: Multiple Benefits and Outcomes," *National Teacher Education Journal* 4, no. 2 (2011).

¹⁶ Zhanna B Preston, *Challenging Behaviors: Perceived Training Needs of Special Education Paraprofessionals* (Brandman University, 2015).

¹⁷ W.w Breton, "Special Education Paraprofessionals: Perceptions of Preservice Preparation, Supervision, and Ongoing Developmental Training," *International Journal of Special Education* 25 (January 1, 2010): 34–45.

¹⁸ C. Mohniki, "Paraprofessionals Resource and Research Centre," Nebraska Department of Education, 2013, <http://paracenter.org/policy-and-legislation/statepolicies/nebrask>.

¹⁹ Preston, *Challenging Behaviors: Perceived Training Needs of Special Education Paraprofessionals*.

and documents. The deployment of paraprofessionals refers to the process of assigning non-professional staff to perform specific tasks or roles within an organisation or community. Qualitative research methods were used to explore the deployment of paraprofessionals in various settings, such as healthcare, education, social services, and community development. Qualitative studies were used to provide rich insights into the experiences and perspectives of paraprofessionals, as well as the challenges and opportunities associated with their training and supervision. According to the interpretivist approach, it is essential for the researcher as a social actor to appreciate the differences between people. Moreover, interpretivist purposive study focused on meaning and employed multiple methods to reflect different aspects of the issue. The interpretivist framework was used to seek to describe and interpret people's subjective experiences and perceptions of a phenomenon. This method can help explore how paraprofessionals experience their roles and responsibilities and their interactions with other professionals.²⁰

The scope of the study was limited. Twenty paraprofessionals and ten teachers from two Secondary schools in Limpopo Province were included. According to the literature, special education teachers provide direct training and supervision to paraprofessionals.²¹ Therefore, purposeful sampling, as described by Creswell, included all purposively selected education teachers and paraprofessionals from two schools in the education department in the district.²² All education teachers and paraprofessionals received formal invitations describing the study and participants' rights. The researcher conducted focus group interviews. The participants selected for the interviews were teachers and paraprofessionals in the selected schools. The paraprofessionals represented all levels and types of educational programs available in the schools. The researcher recorded the interviews using Zoom computer software and then sent the recordings to a Rev.com professional transcription service. Next, the researcher uploaded the transcriptions to NVivo for thematic analysis. The researcher conducted a member check to validate the findings.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion of findings is grouped and categorised under the following research questions,

- a. What competencies are essential to demonstrate to work effectively with paraprofessionals?
- b. What are the training and supervision requirements for paraprofessionals at the school level?

Answering these research questions can help organisations and policymakers make informed decisions about the deployment of paraprofessionals effectively and ethically. The objectives were: to examine the impact of paraprofessional deployment on service delivery to schools, that is helping learners with homework, classwork and other tasks assigned to them and to explore the training and supervision needs of paraprofessionals to ensure quality development. Participants drew connections between school, circuit and district training and guidelines in every competency. For example, many participants discussed how initial and ongoing training offered jointly to teachers and paraprofessionals could help develop work ethics skills. *"I think there should be joint training sessions between teachers and paraprofessionals that could significantly improve our ability to collaborate effectively and help both groups develop stronger work ethics."* A teacher proposed mandatory initial training for new teams of teachers and paraprofessionals to address communication skills in learners. She recommended that training would be required for the first days, such as if a new person joined the team or if there was a challenge in the relationship. *"The district offered ongoing training programs that included both teachers and paraprofessionals, it would ensure that everyone is aligned with the same expectations and work standards."* Half of the participants discussed the provision of shared time as a means of support, explicitly having dedicated time for teachers and paraprofessionals to meet to discuss how things are going, learn and apply strategies to strengthen their relationship and attend meetings and training together. Teachers consistently wanted more time with their paraprofessionals and looked to schools and districts to help facilitate this time. For example, one teacher shared, *"See, we never have time. There are*

²⁰ John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th ed. (London: Sage, 2018).

²¹ Preston, *Challenging Behaviors: Perceived Training Needs of Special Education Paraprofessionals*; Matthew Jay Ramsey, "A Case Study Analysis of Paraprofessional Work, Training, and Supervision in Inclusive Elementary Schools" (University of Kansas, 2013).

²² Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*.

very few times where the three of us are together alone . . . So, if there were time in general . . . to go over what's going well, what's not going well, how can we fix this?" Just that time alone is essential. The participants drew connections to how this dedicated time might support the work of teachers with paraprofessionals.

What types of professional development training would teachers and paraprofessionals be interested in receiving?

The teacher's response indicated that a wide variety of training would interest them. Nine of ten teachers were inclined towards in-service training from within the district, and seven of ten teachers felt they would benefit from professional workshops. Four of 10 teachers mentioned that *"it would be beneficial to receive training on supervising paraprofessionals about twice a year, while seven teachers thought it should be more frequent"*. The paraprofessionals had an overwhelming response to the types of training they would like to participate in. Eighteen of twenty participants revealed that they would enjoy in-service supervision and training by the district, and sixteen of twenty who answered said they would benefit from professional workshops. Seventeen of twenty paraprofessionals reported that it would be optimum to receive training once a month or more because they are at school for a few months. Eight respondents thought training should be provided continuously. Four paraprofessionals commented that the training should be continuous and/or as needed. One respondent commented that the pieces of activity should not be mandatory and should have reasonable minimum requirements. One paraprofessional was concerned about the time of day the training might be offered as it was for a few hours.

Who do special education teachers and paraprofessionals consider responsible for supervising paraprofessionals?

Eight teachers indicated that they believed teachers are accountable for supervising paraprofessionals who provide services to the students in their programs. *I believe it's the teachers' responsibility to supervise the paraprofessionals working with students in our programs."* Two of the ten teachers reported not knowing who oversaw the paraprofessionals. Thirteen paraprofessionals felt that the responsible supervisor, who is the school manager (principal), should have the mandate to carry out the task. *"The principal should be responsible for supervising paraprofessionals, but they don't have the time to regularly observe their work."*

Three of the 20 paraprofessionals reported that technically they did not know who their supervisor was. One teacher and one paraprofessional identified the principal as the academic supervisor of the paraprofessionals. Still, both felt that the principal did not have the opportunity to observe the paraprofessionals' work regularly. *"We were never clearly told who oversees paraprofessionals, so I'm unsure about who actually manages them."*

The findings of this study indicated that paraprofessionals perceived that the optimum professional training and supervision system in their school district would include pre-service training before any new assignment. Pre-service training would also include an introduction to the job description, the fundamental education law, and training specific to the paraprofessionals' unique position in schools. The paraprofessionals also indicated that they felt training should include information about their services in nutrition programs.

DISCUSSION

The findings are organised and discussed according to the study's primary research questions: What competencies are essential for working effectively with paraprofessionals?

What are the training and supervision requirements for paraprofessionals at the school level?

Answering these questions will inform school administrators, educators, and policymakers on how to deploy paraprofessionals effectively and ethically, to optimise their impact on student support and classroom dynamics. The study's objectives were twofold: to examine the impact of paraprofessional deployment on school service delivery, particularly in assisting students with homework, classwork, and other assigned tasks, and to explore the training and supervision needs of paraprofessionals to ensure high-quality development and integration within school environments.

Competencies Essential for Working Effectively with Paraprofessionals

The study revealed that teachers and paraprofessionals recognise the need for specific competencies to work collaboratively in a school setting. Participants consistently emphasised the importance of communication skills, a strong work ethic, and collaborative strategies as core competencies for effective teamwork. Many participants advocated for joint training between teachers and paraprofessionals, which would help both groups develop essential interpersonal and professional skills and foster a shared understanding of work ethics.

A teacher underscored the significance of mandatory initial training sessions for all new teams of teachers and paraprofessionals, suggesting that these sessions focus on building communication skills to support interactions with students and improve teamwork. Another participant pointed out that having ongoing training programs that include both teachers and paraprofessionals could align them with unified standards and expectations. This echoes the findings of previous studies that emphasise the value of consistent professional development to foster strong, cohesive working relationships among educational staff members.²³

Furthermore, teachers highlighted the importance of designated, shared time to collaborate with paraprofessionals. Half of the participants discussed the value of scheduled meeting times to strengthen teacher-paraprofessional relationships, share feedback, and refine collaborative strategies. One teacher noted, “There are very few times where the three of us are together alone ... so, if there was time in general ... to go over what’s going well, what’s not going well, how can we fix this?” This underscores the significance of regular, dedicated time for team building, which supports findings in the literature that collaborative planning time enhances the effectiveness of teacher-paraprofessional partnerships.²⁴

Training and Supervision Requirements for Paraprofessionals

The study highlights that, while teachers and paraprofessionals value professional development, they have specific preferences for training format, frequency, and content. Nine out of ten teachers preferred in-service training within the school district, while seven expressed interest in professional workshops. Importantly, teachers felt that training in supervision of paraprofessionals should be offered regularly; four teachers advocated for training twice a year, while seven believed that it should occur more frequently.

Paraprofessionals, similarly, showed an overwhelming interest in district-provided in-service supervision and professional workshops. Nearly all paraprofessional participants (18 out of 20) valued receiving monthly or continuous training, seeing it as critical given their limited tenure at school. Respondents noted that while continuous training is ideal, practical challenges such as timing and the non-mandatory nature of certain sessions could impact participation. These preferences align with research indicating that regular, tailored training is essential for maintaining paraprofessionals' effectiveness in supporting diverse classroom needs (DBE, 2020).

Participants' insights also highlighted the importance of pre-service training, which they felt should include clear introductions to job descriptions, education laws, and any school-specific policies. Several paraprofessionals expressed a need for training that addresses their instructional responsibilities and extends to areas such as school nutrition programs, which they are frequently involved in. By requesting training in specific domains, paraprofessionals signal their desire for a more structured, comprehensive orientation process, reflecting existing literature that associates pre-service training with improved paraprofessional efficacy.²⁵

Responsibility for Supervising Paraprofessionals

There was a notable variation in perceptions of who should be responsible for supervising paraprofessionals. Eight out of ten teachers felt that supervising paraprofessionals working with students

²³ J. Webster, “Functional Skills - Skills Our Students Need to Gain Independence,” May 12, 2017, <https://www.thoughtco.com/functional-skills-for-students-independence>.

²⁴ Australian Council for Educational Research, *Supporting Paraprofessionals in Schools: A Review of the Research and Best Practices* (ACER Press, 2021).

²⁵ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators* (OECD Publishing, 2021).

in their programs should be part of teachers' responsibilities, stating, "I believe it's the teachers' responsibility to supervise the paraprofessionals working with students in our programs." However, two teachers expressed uncertainty about who supervised paraprofessionals, reflecting a gap in clearly defined roles.

Among paraprofessionals, 13 out of 20 participants believed that the principal should have supervisory responsibilities, though some noted that the principals lacked time for regular oversight. This finding reveals an important discrepancy in expectations between teachers, paraprofessionals, and school leadership regarding supervisory roles. The lack of clarity in supervision aligns with the literature on role ambiguity in educational support roles, which can lead to inefficiencies and missed opportunities for effective collaboration (DBE, 2020).

One teacher and one paraprofessional acknowledged the principal as the academic supervisor, though both observed that principals rarely had time to observe paraprofessionals' work closely. Without clear supervisory structures, paraprofessionals reported feeling unsure about performance expectations, contributing to role ambiguity that ultimately hinders classroom optimal functioning. Findings from Webster emphasise the need for a defined supervisory chain to guide paraprofessionals, suggesting that role clarity is integral to sustaining effective partnerships in education.²⁶

Interpretation and Significance of Findings

The findings of this study suggest that while paraprofessionals play a vital role in supporting teachers and students, structured training, clear supervision, and time for collaborative planning are needed. The study confirms much of the literature on the importance of competency development and professional support for paraprofessionals to contribute effectively within schools.²⁷ Teachers and paraprofessionals voiced the necessity of shared learning opportunities and collaborative planning time, shown in the literature to enhance instructional effectiveness and workplace harmony.²⁸

Additionally, the findings highlight a need for school policies that provide a consistent framework for paraprofessional training and supervision. Participants' responses pointed to a lack of clarity around supervisory roles, with varying opinions on whether teachers, principals, or other staff should oversee paraprofessionals. This echoes existing research that indicates that role ambiguity can undermine the contributions of paraprofessionals, emphasising the importance of defined supervisory responsibilities to improve their effectiveness.²⁹

The findings of this study underscore the significance of systematic training, dedicated collaboration time, and clear supervisory structures for paraprofessionals within primary schools. Establishing well-defined roles, regular training, and structured supervision can enhance paraprofessional effectiveness, ultimately benefiting teachers and students. For educators and policymakers, these insights guide the development of supportive environments where paraprofessionals can flourish, contributing to a more inclusive and effective educational system. This research adds to the literature by providing specific recommendations for structuring paraprofessional roles and underscores the critical importance of collaborative practices in education. Future research should investigate how policy frameworks can standardise these practices across school districts to ensure a high-quality, cohesive approach to paraprofessional support. Deployment of paraprofessionals refers to assigning non-certified or non-licensed personnel to perform specific tasks in educational, healthcare, or social service settings. Paraprofessionals are teacher assistants, instructional aides, nursing aides, or community health workers. The deployment of paraprofessionals has been a subject of debate among policymakers, educators, and practitioners. While some argue that paraprofessionals can enhance the quality and efficiency of services by providing additional support and resources, others express concerns about the qualifications, training, and supervision of paraprofessionals.

One potential benefit of deploying paraprofessionals is increasing access to services for underserved populations. For example, paraprofessionals can assist teachers in providing individualised instruction to students with disabilities or English language learners. Paraprofessionals can liaise between

²⁶ Webster, "Functional Skills - Skills Our Students Need to Gain Independence."

²⁷ Australian Council for Educational Research, *Supporting Paraprofessionals in Schools: A Review of the Research and Best Practices*.

²⁸ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators*.

²⁹ Department of Basic Education, *National Senior Certificate Examination Papers 2020*.

patients and providers, help patients manage chronic conditions, or provide preventive care in community settings. In social services, paraprofessionals can offer counselling, advocacy, or outreach to vulnerable populations such as homeless individuals or domestic violence victims.

However, the deployment of paraprofessionals also presents several challenges. One concern is the quality of the services provided by paraprofessionals. Without adequate training and supervision, paraprofessionals may not have the necessary skills or knowledge to perform their duties effectively. Another issue is the potential for confusion or conflict of roles between paraprofessionals and licensed professionals. Paraprofessionals may feel undervalued or overburdened if assigned tasks beyond their scope of practice. At the same time, teachers may be hesitant to delegate responsibilities to paraprofessionals if they perceive them as unqualified. To address these challenges, some recommendations have been made on the deployment of paraprofessionals. These include providing adequate training and supervision opportunities for paraprofessionals to ensure that they have the necessary skills and knowledge to perform their duties.

- Ensuring adequate supervision and support for paraprofessionals, including regular feedback, evaluation, and mentoring.
- Encouraging collaboration and communication between paraprofessionals and teacher professionals to promote a team-based approach to service delivery.
- In addition, the deployment of paraprofessionals can increase access to services for underserved populations. However, it challenges quality, training, supervision, and role clarification. To maximise the potential benefits of paraprofessional deployment while minimising risks, it is essential to establish clear roles and responsibilities, provide adequate training and support, and encourage collaboration between paraprofessionals and trained professionals. Research on the deployment, training, and supervision of paraprofessionals is essential because it can inform policy and practice decisions related to workforce development, service delivery, and quality improvement.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study reveal significant ambiguity and confusion among teachers and paraprofessionals regarding the exact roles, supervision, and support requirements for paraprofessionals within the school system. This lack of clarity is reflected in the differing perceptions between teachers and paraprofessionals regarding who oversees paraprofessional work. This leads to inconsistent practices and uncertainty about the quality and extent of supervision and support. This confusion likely stems from limited communication and a lack of formal and structured guidelines from the school administration. The absence of clear role delineation has created role ambiguity, a known issue in educational settings that can contribute to job dissatisfaction, reduced efficacy, and diminished job performance.³⁰

The implications extend beyond immediate role clarity issues, as they also underscore a systemic gap in paraprofessionals' structured supervision and training. Notably, teachers and paraprofessionals in this study expressed concerns regarding the sufficiency of current training programs. They questioned the standards the Department of Basic Education (DBE) set forth for paraprofessional training. This aligns with research suggesting that unclear expectations and insufficient training may impede the ability of paraprofessionals to effectively support students, particularly those with special needs or in inclusive education settings.³¹

Need for Clear Communication and Defined Roles

The discrepancies in understanding between teachers and paraprofessionals concerning oversight responsibilities highlight an urgent need for clearer communication channels within schools and a comprehensive role-definition framework. In their research on inclusive education support, Symes and Humphrey found that paraprofessionals often experience role confusion when their tasks overlap with

³⁰ M. F. Giangreco and S. M. Broer, "The Changing Roles of Paraprofessionals in Inclusive Classrooms," *Remedial and Special Education* 42, no. 4 (2021): 230–40; Rob Webster, Anthony Russell, and Peter Blatchford, *Maximising the Impact of Teaching Assistants: Guidance for School Leaders and Teachers* (Routledge, 2015).

³¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators* (OECD Publishing, 2021); Australian Council for Educational Research, *Supporting Paraprofessionals in Schools: A Review of the Research and Best Practices*.

those of certified teachers, especially in cases where there is no structured oversight or clearly defined boundaries.³² Similarly, Giangreco and Broer emphasised that without defined responsibilities, paraprofessionals may unintentionally take on instructional roles beyond their qualifications, which may dilute the quality of instruction students receive.³³ For schools, therefore, establishing a clear, standard protocol for role assignments and oversight can foster a more cohesive working environment, reduce redundancy, and ultimately improve the learning experience for students.

Training Standards and Professional Development Gaps

The findings of this study also expose a pressing need to examine and reform paraprofessional training standards. Currently, both teachers and paraprofessionals express uncertainty regarding the expectations for professional development, highlighting concerns over whether existing programs align with DBE requirements. The lack of structured, continuous training for paraprofessionals mirrors findings by Webster et al., who identified similar gaps in training quality and access in U.K. schools.³⁴ They argued that ongoing professional development is essential to equip paraprofessionals with the skills to handle evolving classroom demands, yet these opportunities are often inconsistently available.

Additionally, the transient nature of paraprofessional positions—where personnel turnover is high—compounds the challenge of maintaining consistency in training. As paraprofessionals frequently come and go, schools face the challenge of ensuring that all paraprofessionals receive comprehensive training. High turnover has been shown to create skill gaps, impacting paraprofessional performance and affecting teachers' workloads and student outcomes.³⁵ Thus, this study's findings align with calls from the literature for institutions to establish pre-service and ongoing professional development programs that are adaptive to frequent staff changes and include clear, accessible training pathways.³⁶

Insufficient Awareness of Training Needs

An equally concerning implication is the finding that many schools, circuits, and districts may lack awareness of the specific training needs of their paraprofessionals. Some paraprofessionals in this study indicated they were uncertain where to begin seeking training or support, underscoring a significant gap in accessible resources and information. This aligns with research by Brock and Carter, who found that paraprofessionals often have limited access to professional development opportunities, leaving them inadequately prepared for their roles, especially in specialised settings.³⁷ The lack of a structured approach to assessing and addressing paraprofessionals' training needs suggests that schools may inadvertently fail to provide sufficient support, particularly to new or less experienced paraprofessionals.

Moreover, Brock and Carter argued that training and professional development should be made and actively encouraged and facilitated by school leadership to mitigate issues related to role ambiguity and job dissatisfaction.³⁸ The present study reinforces these insights, showing that schools risk underutilising an essential part of their educational workforce without a proactive, systemic approach to evaluating and meeting paraprofessionals' training needs.

Recommendations for a Systematic, Structured Approach

This study's findings imply a critical need for a systematic and structured approach to paraprofessional training and supervision, which could address many of the issues highlighted. Schools and educational districts must prioritise developing comprehensive training programs that align with DBE standards and are adaptable to frequent staff turnover. This involves establishing mandatory pre-service training for all paraprofessionals, followed by continuous in-service professional development opportunities. By

³² W. Symes and N. Humphrey, "The Role of Teaching Assistants in Inclusive Education: Perceptions of Teachers, Parents, and TAs in a Secondary School," *Educational Psychology in Practice* 36, no. 1 (2020): 41–58.

³³ Giangreco and Broer, "The Changing Roles of Paraprofessionals in Inclusive Classrooms."

³⁴ Webster, Russell, and Blatchford, *Maximising the Impact of Teaching Assistants: Guidance for School Leaders and Teachers*.

³⁵ M. F. Giangreco, M. B. Doyle, and J. C. Suter, "Teaching Assistant Support in Inclusive Classrooms: Issues of Role Ambiguity and Expectations," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 24, no. 7 (2020): 730–45.

³⁶ Australian Council for Educational Research, *Supporting Paraprofessionals in Schools: A Review of the Research and Best Practices*.

³⁷ M. E. Brock and E. W. Carter, "Preparing Paraprofessionals to Support Students with Disabilities: A Meta-Analysis of Professional Development Outcomes," *Journal of Special Education* 56, no. 2 (2022): 79–95.

³⁸ Brock and Carter, "Preparing Paraprofessionals to Support Students with Disabilities: A Meta-Analysis of Professional Development Outcomes."

ensuring that paraprofessionals have access to consistent and relevant training, schools can better equip them to fulfil their roles effectively.

Furthermore, Giangreco and Broer advocate for integrating joint training sessions where both teachers and paraprofessionals can build communication and collaboration skills.³⁹ The study participants in this research echoed this sentiment, noting that joint training would enable both groups to develop stronger professional relationships and a shared understanding of classroom expectations. Establishing such a practice within schools could reduce role ambiguity, improve teamwork, and lead to more cohesive support systems for students, as confirmed by prior studies in inclusive education.⁴⁰

Impact on Educational Quality and Student Support

Without addressing the gaps identified, the effectiveness of paraprofessional support remains compromised, ultimately impacting the quality of education students receive. Research by Webster et al. highlights that the contributions of paraprofessionals are most beneficial when their roles are clear, well-supported, and integrated into the broader teaching team.⁴¹ By ensuring that paraprofessionals receive adequate training and support, schools can maximise the value they bring to classroom environments, particularly in supporting students with additional needs.

Therefore, the implications of this study extend beyond immediate supervisory or training concerns, highlighting a broader need for policies that standardise paraprofessional roles and supervision practices across schools. Such policies can foster a more inclusive and supportive educational system where paraprofessionals, teachers, and students benefit from clear communication, shared goals, and structured professional support.⁴²

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the implications above, several key recommendations emerge for improving paraprofessional support and training. One critical area to address is clearer communication about roles and responsibilities. The ambiguity around who supervises paraprofessionals can be resolved by developing and disseminating clear role descriptions that detail specific duties and supervision structures. These guidelines should be shared through formal orientation sessions, allowing teachers and paraprofessionals to better understand each other's roles and responsibilities. In addition, open discussions should be encouraged to ensure everyone is on the same page. Establishing a formal chain of command, with clearly defined lines of accountability, would help eliminate any confusion over paraprofessional oversight.

Another essential recommendation is the development of more comprehensive and accessible training programs for paraprofessionals. Many schools lack a systematic approach to paraprofessional development, leading to inconsistent training and preparation. To address this, schools and districts should create centralised training modules that cover fundamental skills such as classroom management, instructional support, and behaviour management. These training programs should be available online and in workshops, so that paraprofessionals can access them regardless of location or schedule. It is also essential that training is not limited to a one-time session. Paraprofessionals should have access to ongoing professional development opportunities, allowing them to keep up with their skills and meet DBE standards over time. Mentorship programs could be established to further support new paraprofessionals, pairing them with more experienced colleagues who can provide guidance and ensure consistent learning within the school environment.

To guarantee that paraprofessionals are adequately prepared for their roles, schools should implement a system of regular assessments. Annual skill audits would help identify gaps in paraprofessional training, allowing schools to provide targeted professional development based on individual needs. Moreover, each paraprofessional should work with supervisors to create a professional growth plan that outlines their training needs and career goals. Additionally, districts should regularly

³⁹ Giangreco and Broer, "The Changing Roles of Paraprofessionals in Inclusive Classrooms."

⁴⁰ Symes and Humphrey, "The Role of Teaching Assistants in Inclusive Education: Perceptions of Teachers, Parents, and TAs in a Secondary School."

⁴¹ Webster, Russell, and Blatchford, *Maximising the Impact of Teaching Assistants: Guidance for School Leaders and Teachers*.

⁴² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators*.

assess the effectiveness of their training programs to ensure they remain aligned with the evolving needs of paraprofessionals and students. Given the high turnover among paraprofessionals, improving retention is another important recommendation. The transient nature of these positions exacerbates training inconsistencies, affecting students' overall quality of support. Schools can address this issue by offering certification programs in partnership with local colleges or educational institutions, providing paraprofessionals with formal recognition of their skills and encouraging longer-term commitment to their roles. Schools should also review compensation and benefits packages to ensure they are competitive, which could include professional development funds and access to health care. Additionally, creating internal pathways for career advancement, such as promoting paraprofessionals to senior positions or helping them transition into teaching roles with additional training, would offer greater career stability and motivation for staff to stay within the system.

A further issue to address is the lack of awareness among paraprofessionals of the available training resources. Many paraprofessionals may be unsure where to start when seeking development opportunities. To address this, schools and districts should create a centralised information hub where paraprofessionals can easily access resources related to professional development, DBE standards, and training programs. Regular informational workshops, both in-person and online, could also help raise awareness of these opportunities, making it easier for paraprofessionals to pursue further training. Finally, improving collaboration between teachers and paraprofessionals is essential to improve the quality of student support. Currently, lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities may prevent effective teamwork in the classroom. Schools should offer joint professional development sessions to foster collaboration where teachers and paraprofessionals can learn and train. These sessions would encourage alignment in instructional practices and strengthen communication. Team-building activities and planning sessions could further facilitate a collaborative culture, allowing teachers and paraprofessionals to share feedback, set goals, and work together to improve classroom support. Addressing the gaps in paraprofessional supervision and training requires a multi-faceted approach. By clarifying roles and responsibilities, developing comprehensive training programs, implementing regular assessments, and improving career development and retention efforts, schools can ensure that paraprofessionals are well-equipped to fulfil their roles. Furthermore, increasing awareness of training resources and fostering collaboration between teachers and paraprofessionals will help enhance the overall effectiveness of paraprofessional support, ultimately improving students' quality of education.

CONCLUSION

The study underscores the critical role of paraprofessionals in supporting diverse classroom needs and improving student learning experiences. However, the findings reveal that ambiguous role expectations and inconsistent guidance limit the full potential of these essential staff members. Teachers and paraprofessionals identified a pressing need for clearer role definitions, standardised communication from school administrations, and robust training frameworks to provide paraprofessionals with the skills and confidence needed to support varied student needs effectively. Additionally, the findings point to inconsistencies in supervisory practices, which contribute to role uncertainty and hinder the effective integration of paraprofessionals into instructional settings.

Addressing these challenges is essential to maximise the effectiveness of paraprofessionals and improve educational outcomes. Schools and policymakers must prioritise structured and continuous professional development programs that provide paraprofessionals with core competencies and ongoing support. Establishing clear, standardised guidelines for the supervision and integration of paraprofessionals into classroom activities would create a more collaborative, cohesive environment for teachers and support staff. Overall, this study contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the need for strategic improvements in paraprofessionals' deployment, training, and supervision. Implementing these recommendations could foster an educational environment where paraprofessionals are empowered to contribute meaningfully to student success and help build a more inclusive and effective educational system.

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ABOUT AUTHOR

Dr. Thivhavhudzi Muriel Badugela

Since joining the University of Venda, Muriel has lectured on the Sociology of Education and Curriculum studies. Muriel attended National and international conferences, presenting papers. Muriel published book chapters and papers in peer-reviewed journals. Before joining the university, she taught at a secondary school for 28 years and worked as a Principal at Tshiluwi Primary School. Since 2018, Muriel has been a Lecturer and researcher at the Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education. Qualifications: STD-Makhado, B.A-Unisa, Bed Hons-Northwest, Med- Curriculum Studies Unisa, ACE-English, Technology Education -Unisa, Travel &Tourism -SACTE; PhD-African studies _Univen.