

Challenging and Rewarding: Being Both a Paraprofessional and a Preservice Teacher during a Global Pandemic

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Abstract: The role of the preservice teacher, during the final semester of the collegiate journey, has typically consisted of a fixed amount of time spent in one classroom as an opportunity to learn the day-to-day operations. This includes lesson planning, classroom management, and all other duties of the assigned teacher. Factor in a global pandemic, and the process shifts. In this study, the researchers present a new dynamic to the preservice teacher experience – serving as a paraprofessional. This qualitative analysis provides a snapshot of four preservice teachers’ experiences in this newly developed dual role of student teacher and paraprofessional during a pandemic.

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Introduction

Preservice teachers have spent years entering the school setting with a cooperating teacher and a university supervisor, spending their time shadowing one or two professionals, focusing on learning the routine of the classroom, gaining experience in the development and implementation of lesson plans, and striving to learn best practices in classroom environment. In the year 2020, there was a shift in this experience. Both teachers and preservice teachers found themselves forced out of their classrooms and providing instruction in the online environment through the utilization on learning platforms, such as Moodle. Suddenly, the traditional experience of going to physical building each day took a sharp turn to providing instruction from home, causing a shift in the way the student teaching experience was implemented.

One opportunity that presented itself was that of preservice teachers branching out beyond shadowing their assigned teacher and filling the role of the paraprofessional in the special education setting. In the role of paraprofessional, preservice teachers became more of a colleague than mentor/mentee due to the change in teaching sparked by, again, the pandemic. In this study, this unique experience in working in a dual role is shared and discussed from four preservice teachers, looking at both the advantages and disadvantages of this temporary hybrid position.

Literature Review

Preservice Teachers and Responsibilities

Preservice teachers slowly gain responsibilities within the classroom as they learn and grow. An important part of the student teaching experience is the aspect of lesson planning and putting them into practice

(Courey et al., 2013). As preservice teachers write and implement multiple lesson plans, they learn what the responsibilities are like for a classroom teacher (Sawyer & Myers, 2018). In this experience, preservice teachers begin to implement pedagogies from their coursework and evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies (Daniels et al., 2016). This practice often begins with a few lesson plans per week and shifts to multiple plans per day as preservice teachers move through the student teaching experience.

Reflection is a powerful tool within teacher education and is something that preservice teachers can use to better understand their practices to improve upon them (Kaya & Öz, 2021). Reflection creates an active learning process for preservice teachers to learn new ideas and continue their professional development. Hong et al. (2019) conducted a study with 25 preservice teachers where they found that "preservice teachers were able to significantly enhance their reflective capacity by increasing their "teaching concerns about learners" from the first to the second phase" of their preservice teacher experiences (p. 117). A common practice for reflection lies within journaling and the discussion of journal entries with either the cooperating teacher or the university supervisor.

As lessons are implemented in the classroom, preservice teachers also need to manage the classroom. These management strategies often come from the mentor teacher and are gained through observation or one-on-one conversations between preservice teacher and mentor teacher (Sempowicz & Hudson, 2011). As a result, mentor teachers often influence the way a preservice teacher will manage a classroom. As the preservice teacher familiarizes themselves with the nature of the classroom, they adopt the management styles of the mentor teacher as it is what the students have come to know.

Interactions between mentor teachers are an essential aspect of a preservice teacher's many responsibilities. The relationship that is built can affect the entire experience. The mentor teacher is an "irreplaceable contributor to the professional preparation of teachers and serves as an integral part of the teaching practice experience in terms of providing support, direction, role-modeling and supervision for student teachers" (Lojdová, 2020, p.177). Beyond the classroom, mentor teachers shape how preservice teachers interact with parents, the school, and the community (Lojdová, 2020). Research has shown across the past two decades that mentor teachers directly influence preservice teachers' thoughts and practices (Brandon & Butler, 2012; Bunting, 1988; Zeichner & Gore, 1990). This supports the notion that creating a solid relationship with a mentor teacher will allow for deeper, more comfortable learning of the preservice teacher.

Preservice Teachers and Special Education

One aspect of the preservice teacher experience lies within the area of special education. Even for those preservice teachers not seeking Special Education Certification, working with students with disabilities in the classroom setting is expected for today's preservice teachers as inclusion continues to be at the forefront of education. Yu and Park (2020) examined preservice teachers' perceptions in working with students with disabilities and found that one-on-one interactions with these students helped them shape their attitudes. This study lends itself to the study at hand as the participants found themselves working with students with disabilities, yet in a different capacity as paraprofessionals in addition to their role as a preservice teacher.

Additional studies, some from other parts of the world, support these interactions. For example, in Sweden, Uusimaki et al. (2020) studied preservice teachers' perceptions on "attitudes, concerns, and intentions to include children with disabilities in regular classrooms" (p. 23) While in Australia, Goddard and Evans (2018) evaluated preservice training and its impact on perceptions of preservice teachers concerning students with disabilities. Both of these studies indicate that while there may be concern about working with students with disabilities, attitudes were typically positive and there were signs of efficacy. It is studies of this nature that demonstrate the need for all teachers, including preservice teachers, to have a strong knowledgebase founded in the basics of special education.

These studies demonstrate the need for preservice teachers to understand best practices in working with students with disabilities in the regular classroom setting. One way in which preservice teachers develop a richer understanding of how to meet the needs of our embedded students best involves collaboration with paraprofessionals in the classroom setting.

Paraprofessionals in the Classroom

When assistance is needed either for the teacher with the implementation of a lesson or activity; or with students in a one-on-one fashion, paraprofessionals are often called upon to serve. There are varying titles for paraprofessionals, including terms such as "paraeducator, instructional assistant, educational assistant, one-on-one aide, teaching assistant, or paraprofessional", which will be used hereafter (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 195). Despite the varying titles, the work of the paraprofessional is streamlined to support the teaching staff in which they are assigned. Paraprofessionals typically work under the supervision of a teacher or another

professional within the school setting, most often in the special education classroom (Douglas et al., 2019; Stewart, 2019). This directly relates to the additional responsibilities found within the special education classroom, highlighting the need for assistance to ensure meeting students' needs.

The paraprofessional duties can vary from general assistance in whole or small group settings to individualized instruction for students struggling in some fashion. With the increase of students with disabilities in the general classrooms, paraprofessionals have transitioned into a more teacher-like role, specifically when working with students on the autism spectrum (Mason et al., 2020; Wermer et al., 2018). Due to the role they play in the daily interactions with students and the impact they have in student academic success and social interactions, paraprofessionals have become a necessity in the classroom (Brown & Stanton-Chapman, 2017; Tarry & Cox, 2013). This shift in responsibilities has triggered a shift in the work between professional educators and paraprofessionals.

One common theme among the literature relating to the changing role of the paraprofessional lies within the need for strong collaboration between professional educators and paraprofessionals (Biggs et al., 2016; Douglas et al., 2019; Hendrix et al., 2019). With the increase of students with disabilities in the classroom setting, the need for interventions to deal with these behaviors remains critical. Hendrix et al. (2019) acknowledge that "students with disruptive behavior can be a challenge for school staff and negatively affect the classroom environment, and yet it is incumbent upon educators to prevent, manage, and respond to behaviors in a way that minimizes classroom disruption and maximizes academic instruction" (p. 214). These behaviors are often addressed in tandem between teachers and paraprofessionals, highlighting the value of

the paraprofessional in working with students with disabilities.

Preservice Teachers as Paraprofessionals: A New Model

The premise of this study lies in a new initiative for preservice teachers and their ability to learn in a dual role – classroom teacher and paraprofessional. As it was a global pandemic that opened the door for this multi-faceted experience there is, perhaps, the opportunity to continue offering preservice teachers this unique experience. There is an apparent need for research on this topic and this paper is a step in providing data on personal reflection of preservice teachers serving in the paraprofessional role.

Methodology

The qualitative methodology used for this study was a phenomenological approach to illuminate the specific lived experiences of four preservice teachers who were simultaneously paraprofessionals during the Covid-19 pandemic in the 2020-2021 school year (Alase, 2017). This study utilized thematic coding by identifying text from the preservice teachers' journals that organically had common themes and which created a coding key. A second round of coding was conducted utilizing the key for all journals (Saldaña, 2021).

Participants

The four participants who took part in this study were seniors enrolled in the same university in Pennsylvania who dual majored in Elementary and Early Childhood Education as well as Special Education. All four participants are female. The participants were able to start the academic school year as paraprofessionals because of the pandemic. They were still in their senior year of

college, but due to remote classes from the university, the participants were able to manage their time accordingly to fulfill both roles of college students and paraprofessionals. They were also given the opportunity to be paraprofessionals and preservice teachers simultaneously because of the pandemic. Without COVID-19, the elementary school may not have been in such a need for staff, and the higher education officials involved may not have been so accommodating.

Research Question

The research question that guided this study was: What were the benefits and challenges of being a paraprofessional and preservice teacher during the Covid-19 Pandemic during the 2020-2021 school year?

Findings

Through data analysis, the main themes that emerged were balance and lack of prep time, comfort and confidence, learning experiences, and gratefulness. This section will detail these findings.

Balance and Lack of Prep Time

Becoming a paraprofessional and a preservice teacher simultaneously generates a lot of responsibilities at once. Student A, B, C, and D all agreed that balance is a key component to obtain while completing both responsibilities. At times, it was very difficult to balance each individual duty during a hectic school day and could wear a person down both physically and mentally. Additionally, a lack and loss of preparation time throughout the school day happens when they are working both responsibilities at once. Much of the time the paraprofessional/preservice teachers were taking work home that included lesson planning, preparing materials, grading assignments, and more when

they were off the clock and on their own free time. Finding the right balance and equilibrium can help a professional succeed in this unique position. The solution to this dilemma is some adjustment periods, figuring out an adaptable schedule, and patience.

The global Covid-19 pandemic has changed the world as people know it, especially inside of the school systems. These are very unprecedented times and not one single school day looks the exact same. There are many new challenges with teaching, lesson planning, creating activities, and more because of the regulations and rules schools must abide by. Arguably the biggest challenge for an educator thus far has been creating lessons in which students are provided with proper distancing and individualized equipment and materials. Creativity is an essential quality to have as an educator, now more than ever, to be able to generate and design safe lessons that are still meaningful and engaging for all students involved. These flexible accommodations allowed the paraprofessional/preservice teachers to become more adaptable, flexible, and innovative.

Comfort and Confidence

Taking on the role of a paraprofessional has impacted and further prepared the participants for their student teaching experience. Familiarity with the staff, students, and school system allowed each participant to feel a level of comfort when making the transition from paraprofessional to preservice teacher. Participant A stated, "Being a para has opened so many doors for me to see a variety of grades, classes, teaching methods, and more while also modifying lessons and activities for my students." Being a paraprofessional includes adapting and individualizing materials for students with a wide range of instructional levels. Three out of the four participants discussed in their

journals how their experience with differentiating instruction supported their roles as a preservice teacher in both their general and special education placements. Participant D stated that because of her experiences individualizing instruction for the students on her paraprofessional caseload, she was able to recognize how to “bridge the gap” between students who are higher achieving and those who succeed at an average or lower rate. The participants have seen first-hand how a student may struggle in a general education setting and therefore require a least restrictive environment for a percentage of the day and/or specially designed instruction to promote success.

Taking on both roles in a global pandemic has only added to the experiences the participants received. Communication skills were strengthened as it was a necessity for professional staff to constantly be in contact to ensure the students were being delivered a consistent and proper education during lockdown. These skills were translated to student teaching by communicating with cooperating teachers and families. The participants and other staff used journals, logs, and emails to record student data and discuss instructional strategies. Along with other teachers and professional staff, the participants discovered digital platforms that they were able to implement within their student teaching to satisfy the COVID-19 protocols. The participants still needed to modify the materials for each student within the confines of the new technology. Being a paraprofessional before also becoming a preservice teacher, has positively impacted the instructional outcomes of the participants' lessons and supported them in their responsibilities as a preservice teacher.

Learning Experiences

Being a paraprofessional prior and along with student teaching bestowed the

participants with a variety of learning experiences. Three of the participants were set in an elementary setting for a duration of their time while the fourth participant got to experience both a high school and an elementary setting. Three out of the four participants expressed how much they learned about modifying and adapting materials. The high school placement, Participant C, had the opportunity to work with the district's health teacher to modify the class materials and assessments for a Life Skills student. “It is a chance to constantly expand your knowledge. I never saw myself working in a high school setting, but now that I am placed in one loving it would be an understatement”, stated Participant C. This unique situation also gave our participants the opportunity to see the time and investment teachers put into their students outside of the general curriculum. Participant D enlightened us on how her cooperating teacher would buy all the necessary hygiene materials, along with clothes, to ensure her students were taken care of during the school day. Finally, our teacher candidates learned the true meaning of juggling. The world of education grants us to work with a diverse population of students and all the necessities that come with them. “I remember in elementary school I tried to learn how to juggle; while I still cannot juggle handkerchiefs or balls, I can definitely juggle students and all the goals that come with each one” expressed Participant C.

The participants learned a whole new side of the education system with this situation occurring during a pandemic. In correspondence with having to juggle many different tasks of a teacher, the teacher candidates experienced both in-person and virtual learning. Participant A quoted, “I have learned many tricks of how to juggle preparation and instruction for students who are there and those that are not. I have had to gather belongings and two weeks of

instructional materials for students who have been exposed. I have taught virtual learning. I have modified lessons and assignments to be interactive online. I thought that this experience during a pandemic would be completely overwhelming; however, I believe that it has taught me more than I could've ever imagined." The pandemic enabled our participants to expand their knowledge on ways to use technology in the classroom. All the participants stated how busy their days were, but the learning experience that came out of it made it all worth it.

Gratefulness

A common theme in the data is how grateful the participants were for having the paraprofessional/student teaching opportunity. The participants mention their appreciation for things such as the opportunity, experience, and exposure. For example, participant C stated, "I become more confident in my teaching every day and I can thank my work as a para for that as well. Paraprofessionals are so much more than just an aide in a room, they truly are the glue that holds rooms together." Participant B said, "I feel that this opportunity was once in a lifetime, and I am overjoyed that I got this experience!" Participant A expressed their gratitude by saying, "I have more responsibility. However, I love the responsibility! Overall, I am so very thankful for the opportunity to do both!" These are just a few of the examples from the data that show how grateful the participants were!

Along with the Coronavirus creating this opportunity to play both roles, it also created some of the other experiences the participants mentioned they were grateful for. For example, in-person and remote learning. The pandemic made things possible for these participants that most would not have the opportunity to do.

Limitations

This study is not generalizable due to the nature of the unique situation and time during a global pandemic. Replication of the study is also difficult with the rare circumstances the students faced.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that a pandemic was the motivator in providing some preservice teachers with a rare chance to work in a dual capacity during the preservice teaching portion of their studies, the findings demonstrate both positive and negative attributes to this experience. While there is a need for strong need for time management, the strengths of this opportunity outweighed the concern for lack of time. Working in the paraprofessional role allowed for growth in terms of knowledge of making modifications or addressing accommodations for students with disabilities. The participants indicated that they were able to improve communication and the common theme of gratitude for the experience indicates support for further exploration in the feasibility in offering this opportunity for teacher candidates during a traditional school year, with a pandemic sparking the need and instead, relying on the value of the experience to prove its worth.

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