Professional Development for Paraprofessionals on Inclusive Practices using Disability Studies in Education

AUTHORS

Michelle L. Damiani
Casey L. Woodfield
Brent C. Elder
Justin E. Freedman

ABSTRACT

Paraprofessionals serve a critically significant role on educational teams, yet often receive the least amount of training among educational professionals. This article details an online paraprofessional learning series created by a team of special education faculty. The professional development series draws on a disability studies in education (DSE) approach and high leverage practices to situate paraprofessionals as active contributors to inclusion as a social justice imperative. Aligned to the Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) Core Competencies for special education paraeducators (2022), topics addressed in the series are: (a) foundations of inclusive education, (b) learner development and characteristics, (c) supporting UDL in the inclusive classroom, (d) supporting specialized instruction for the inclusive classroom, and (e) learning environments and behavior support. We offer research-based strategies to build paraprofessionals capacity for inclusion through a lens of social justice and equity. This article can serve as a resource for paraprofessionals, and a model of bridging research-to-practice for special education faculty and administrators seeking to increase continuity across pre-and in-service teacher preparation and paraprofessional professional development.

KEYWORDS
Disability Studies in Education; inclusive education; paraprofessionals; professional development

Access to quality inclusive education is foundational to meaningful educational outcomes and full inclusion of people with disabilities in society. Paraprofessionals[1] serve a critically important role in schools as members of educational teams, and as providers of direct support to students. As teacher educators committed to inclusive education, we recognize that "the paraeducator is often the key to how inclusive a student's education is...by how they support social interactions, make academic content accessible, and support the comfort needs of the student" (Rapp et al., n.p). Yet, while these educational professionals frequently work with students who have some of the most complex needs, paraprofessionals receive the least amount of training (Brown & Stanton-Chapman, 2017, Biggs et al., 2016, Carter et al., 2009, Walker et al., 2017).

In effort to address this gap, we, as a team of preservice special education faculty, developed an online professional development learning series focused on building paraprofessionals' knowledge and skills for effectively and inclusively supporting all students. In this theory-to-practice article, we discuss a professional development example that models integrating disability studies in education (DSE) approaches to inclusive education and high leverage practices in ways that complement the equity-oriented preparation provided to teacher candidates in a dual certification (elementary and special education) inclusive teacher education program. Through both, we offer an opportunity to increase continuity of practice. Our work could therefore be useful to

---

[1] We use the term "paraprofessional" throughout this article acknowledging that this professional role may be titled in various ways across states and school districts (e.g., paraprofessional, paraeducator, instructional assistant, teaching assistant).

special education faculty in higher education, administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, as well as those who support pre- and in-service teachers. Ultimately, this work has potential to build capacity among and across educational teams through a lens of inclusive education as a vehicle of equity and social justice.

In this article, we detail the structure and content of the online professional development modules situated in a DSE framework. We also describe research and practice-based strategies to support paraprofessionals in providing effective service to their students. Specifically, we provide the following:

1. A rationale for this necessary addition to the professional development and training literature for paraprofessionals to support inclusive classroom practices;

2. A conceptual framework for a paraprofessional professional development learning series situated in a DSE framework and current best practices for inclusive education;

3. An outline of professional development content aligned with the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Core Competencies[2] for Special Education Paraeducators (2022);

4. An example of implementation within a professional development school district

Our work toward more inclusive educational practice aligns with the federal mandates of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2004), and the goal of improving inclusive outcomes for students with disabilities. For over three decades, research has shown the academic and social benefits of inclusive education (i.e., educating students with and without disabilities in age- and grade-appropriate classrooms) with the necessary supports (McLeskey et al., 2012; Sailor & McCart, 2014). Despite this evidence, students identified with disabilities are routinely educated in segregated classrooms, and many school decisions are made based on their perceived deficits (Jackson et al., 2009). Additionally, even with IDEA (2004) mandating the least restrictive environment, there remains a national overreliance on segregated settings (National Council on Disability [NCD], 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2021b). Further, research shows students with fewer support needs often spend 80 percent or more[3] of their school day in general education classrooms, while students with more complex support needs often spend less than 50 percent of their school day in inclusive settings (McLeskey et al., 2012). This is particularly true for students with intellectual and multiple disabilities, who are primarily placed in segregated special education classrooms (NCD, 2018). Federal mandates combined with high rates of segregation of students with disabilities provide evidence that professional development on inclusive education is widely needed.

To address some of these gaps in inclusive service delivery nationwide, the NCD (2018) recommended the following:

1. Prepare teachers, administrators, and related service providers to implement effective schoolwide, equity-based educational services; and

2. Build state and local capacity for sustainable inclusive education practices. (p. 10).

The absence of specific reference to paraprofessionals in these recommendations is noteworthy. This omission is symptomatic of a larger gap in practice where paraprofessionals are assigned to classrooms or students with the highest support needs yet provided the least amount of training (Brown & Stanton-Chapman, 2017, Biggs et al., 2016, Carter et al., 2009, Walker et al., 2017). According to the Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA] (2015), paraprofessionals are not required to have prior experience working in education or with individuals with disabilities. Further, states are not required to provide professional development for paraprofessionals around inclusive education specifically. Hiring and retaining paraprofessionals also continues to be a challenge due to lack of training, administrative support, respect, and low pay and benefits (Brown, & Stanton-Chapman, 2017; Giangreco et al., 2002; Tillery et al., 2003). The professional development learning series outlined in this article therefore reflects our attempt to address the gaps in literature and practice by intentionally and explicitly exposing paraprofessionals to professional development that aligns with the preparation of the teachers with whom they are poised to collaborate with to sustain inclusive schools. Specifically, we offer an accessible paraprofessional learning series grounded in research-based strategies that promote effective inclusive education, including (a) Universal Design for Learning (UDL), (b) cooperative learning, (c) differentiated instruction, (d) data-based instructional decision-making, (e) positive behavior interventions and supports, (f) peer-assisted learning, (g) culturally responsive teaching, and (f) multi-tiered systems of supports (NCD, 2018).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This content of this paraprofessional learning series embeds theoretical ideas

---

[2] At the time we developed the PD series, these were referred to as "Professional Standards." For clarity and consistency, we use the most updated set of guidelines, i.e., "Core Competencies."

[3] States are required to report: (a) participation in general education classes 80 percent or more of the day, (b) participation in general education classes 40-79 percent of the day, and (c) participation in general education classes less than 40 percent of the day (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

that are central to the field of DSE. Threaded throughout all modules is the concept that disability is a socially constructed phenomenon, rather than an individual attribute of students, as well as a recognition of the ways that the educational system relies on and privileges nondisabled ways of being by design (Baglieri et al., 2011; Taylor, 2006). This framework highlights the need for professional development that offers alternative perspectives to the static, deficit-based views of disability that paraprofessionals are likely to become enculturated to in schools through policies, practices, and attitudes that promote disability as an objective fact: a perspective authoritatively reinforced by Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). In particular, IEPs can serve as institutional biographies of students, rooted in the legally mandated presumption that a student's disability can and has been identified as a deficit within the student (Boyd et al., 2015). Emphasizing how individual characteristics become constructed through culturally- and politically-based notions of ability and disability is essential for countering the medicalized approach to disability in schools that is grounded in identification and remediation processes that stigmatize students labeled with disabilities (Baglieri et al., 2011).

A second key component of the theoretical framing of this paraprofessional learning series is the introduction of inclusive education as a philosophical foundation of education. Inclusive education has frequently been conceptualized in research and practice as a development in special education that is chiefly concerned with physical placement of students identified as having disabilities and the delivery of services in schools (Baglieri et al., 2011). The content of our professional development series aligns with a contrasting view of inclusive education as an attempt to change the culture and pedagogy of schools and society towards the goal of countering patterns of exclusion for all students (Danforth & Naraian, 2016). We therefore present inclusive education as an educational foundation grounded in continual, critical inquiry into attitudes and practices that affect all students' access to meaningful and dignifying education.

Recognizing that many pre-service and in-service teachers do not get exposure to DSE concepts, the modules intentionally begin with that theoretical foundation. Providing opportunities for teachers to confront their own beliefs and biases is also a way of addressing attitudinal barriers; which according to inclusion research remain the most significant limitation to inclusive educational opportunities for students with disabilities (Elder et al., 2015). The topics of the first two modules are less about skill or strategies, and more about asking paraprofessionals to develop their "why"—their purpose for, and their commitment to—supporting students with disabilities inclusively in schools. Drawing on adult learning theory, the design of these modules recognizes and responds to the fact that learning is not passive and that adult learners want to have more opportunities for self-direction and ownership over their learning (Knowles, 1984).

Another important element of Knowles' (1984) theory of andragogy as it relates to adult education is that adults bring a wealth of knowledge to the learning process, including their own experiences of education and an understanding of themselves as learners. In fact, many educational professionals report personal experiences that led them to pursue a career in education. In a DSE-centered response, an individual's sense of purpose in the profession may be affirmed or challenged when reflecting from a social justice lens (Baglieri et al., 2011). Ultimately, the decision that paraprofessionals come to about this theoretical question is going to drive their practice with students, therefore it is necessary for them to personally and professionally grapple with their beliefs and the impact on students as an essential foundation for implementing educational supports and strategies.

In the following sections, we detail the content of each of the five modules that comprise this paraprofessional learning series. This article may be useful in conjunction with the online modules as (a) a deep dive resource for participants using the online learning series that might be interested in a supporting academic article, (b) an illustrative overview for administration considering options to meet the professional development needs of their faculty and staff and (c) a guide for teacher educators designing professional development opportunities that align with the goal of sustaining inclusive practices.

DESIGN OF THE MODULES

We organized the paraprofessional learning series described in this article into five asynchronous online modules that are aligned to the CEC's Core Competencies for paraeducators (2022). Our decisions around module design respond to the need for a professional development format that is flexible in terms of length, location, school schedules, and resources (e.g., access to research, supplemental materials, "deeper dive" activities). We intentionally crafted modules in alignment with adult learning theory (Knowles, 1984) with the intent that they involve active engagement with learning and application to their everyday job role experience. Specifically, each module contains opportunities for some kind of activity, reflection, or applied practice. Each module also contains optional deeper dive activities with format choices that are audio, video, and

TABLE 1: Professional Learning Modules

Module	Topics addressed	CEC Core Competency areas	Selected Practical Activities Embedded
1	Introduction to inclusive education; presuming competence; historical and legal foundations for inclusive education; new understandings of disability	(2) Learner Development and Individual Learning Differences (7) Collaboration with Team Members	-Guiding question: "Why did you become a paraprofessional?" -Resources on the disability rights movement and disability studies (e.g. the social model, understanding ableism)
2	Overview of learner development and characteristics	(2) Learner Development and Individual Learning Differences	-Video or text choice for understanding special education categories and inclusive classroom supports
3	UDL in the inclusive classroom; multiple means of: engagement; representation; action and expression	(4) Assessment (5) Instructional Supports and Strategies (7) Collaboration with Team Members	-Team action item–identify strength-based approaches, and teammates for collaboration -UDL examples, interactive guidelines, and the myth of average TedTalk video.
4	Specialized instruction for the inclusive classroom; legal foundations; modification of English Language Arts (ELA), math, science, and social studies	(3) Special Education Services and Supports in the Learning Environment (4) Assessment (5) Instructional Supports and Strategies (7) Collaboration with Team Members	-Create your own on-the-go modification bag for classroom use -Make content area modifications to implement in practice
5	Learning environments and behavior support; constructs of behavior in schools; multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS); social emotional learning (SEL)	(1) Professional Learning and Ethical Practice (6) Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Supports (7) Collaboration with Team Members	-Planning humanistic support for a student, identifying need and action steps

text based and that allow for more in-depth exploration of topical content. We recognize the need for effective professional development (online or in-person) that goes beyond "sit and get" or "one and done" approaches to content delivery, to professional development that is relevant to educators current classroom needs and includes opportunities to plan for implementing new practices (Wilkin-son et al., 2021; Zarate & Barcus, 2022).

The needs of adult learners, in particular educational professionals, and the design of the modules is also aligned with UDL principles (CAST, 2021) to model the kind of learner-led experiences we aim to equip paraprofessionals with the tools to contribute to through their role as critical supports for students. Similarly to the way in which UDL aims to develop expert learners who are purposeful and motivated, resourceful and knowledgeable, and strategic and goal-directed, responding to adult learners creates an opportunity to build on adults increased self-direction and experience, to allow learners freedom to make learning choices that engage them in activity, reflection, and practice opportunities with attention to what and

how they receive information. Thus, we designed the modules to model UDL with attention to the needs of educational professionals, while also modeling use of UDL in the delivery of the content. Our intent is that paraprofessionals will be able to experience relevant learning, make decisions in that learning, and take away specific skills or strategies that they can immediately apply in the field with their students.

Through the series, our aim is to enhance paraprofessionals' capacity to collaborate with teachers and administrators to support diverse populations of students through a DSE-informed lens of inclusive education as imperative to social justice and equity. See Table 1 for an overview of module topics, alignment to the CEC's Core Competencies (2022), and practical activities embedded in the modules. Each module consists of short (10-20 minute) captioned videos organized by theme, live links to supplementary resources (i.e., short articles, videos, podcasts, etc.) and instructions for "deeper dive" activities for participants to take ownership of their continued learning. Following each module, participants are prompted to take a brief multiple-choice assessment. Upon completion of all five modules, paraprofessionals receive a certificate documenting their participation.

Module 1: Introduction to Inclusive Education
Module 1A: Introduction

We begin the series by highlighting the problems inherent in exclusionary practices and placements for students with disabilities based on current data and the legal foundations of inclusive education. We discuss professional responsibilities of paraprofessionals, and explicitly situate collaboration among educational professionals as an imperative and expectation. A guided

> **Through the series, our aim is to enhance paraprofessionals' capacity to collaborate with teachers and administrators to support diverse populations of students through a DSE-informed lens of inclusive education as imperative to social justice and equity.**

read of Van der Klift and Kunc (2019) asks paraprofessionals to (re)consider "helping" dynamics, with attention to how responses to disability in schools promote attitudes and actions that contribute to the degree to which students experience marginalization or belonging. Then, drawing on Kunc's (1992) seminal piece on belonging, participants consider how schools invert Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1970) by transposing Maslow's third and fourth levels (i.e., belonging, love, and self-esteem, respectively), thus creating contexts in which students must earn the right to belong. We emphasize that this reordering and exclusion occurs when schools fail to develop cultures of belonging, and, in particular, do not provide students with disabilities intentional opportunities to develop a sense of purpose as valued members of inclusive classrooms and school communities.

Module 1B: Inclusion and Presuming Competence

Carrying the thread of Kunc's (1992) foundational work, Module 1B begins by establishing shared understanding

that "When inclusive education is fully embraced, we abandon the idea that children have to become 'normal' in order to contribute to the world… We begin to look beyond typical ways of becoming valued members of the community" which ultimately supports the broader goal of cultivating "an authentic sense of belonging" for all children (p. 38-39). We invite paraprofessionals to consider this definition as a guide for their participation in the series and to do the necessary work of confronting assumptions about disability and difference. We then introduce the foundational concept of Donnellan's (1984) criterion of the least dangerous assumption which "holds that in the absence of conclusive data, educational decisions ought to be based on assumptions that, if incorrect, will have the least dangerous effect on the likelihood that students will be able to function independently as adults" (p. 141). This criterion urges educational professionals to resist deficit-based perspectives of students' capabilities and confront limiting constructions of intelligence. We detail ways that paraprofessionals can leverage instruction, environments and supports to reduce barriers to learning. This module concludes by emphasizing presuming competence (Biklen & Burke, 2006) — the assumption that each student has the ability to learn when given necessary support and opportunities–*as* the least dangerous assumption.

Module 1C: Historical and Legal Foundations for Inclusive Education

In order to understand more socially just ways of moving forward within the field of inclusive education, it is important to understand the history of marginalization of disabled people (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012). Understanding varied approaches to lan-

guage, such as person-first (people with disabilities) and identity-first (disabled people) frames is important for paraprofessionals because it is an aspect of disability rights that can inform the ways they interact with and about students. In this module, we discuss the Disability Rights Movement and its connection with other rights-based movements (e.g., Civil Rights Movement, Women's Liberation Movement) and the legal foundations for inclusive education.[4] By grounding in history and the law, we aim for paraprofessionals to recognize that discourse around inclusive education must not focus on *if,* but rather *how* students with disabilities will be included in general education classrooms.

Module 1D: New Understandings of Disability

Many educators have not been substantively exposed to ways of thinking about disability outside the predominant understanding of disability as a deficit. We support participants to expand their conceptualizations of disability in schools by introducing sociocultural perspectives of disability and offering explicit explanations for how such views build upon or contrast more conventional ideas. Module 1D introduces participants to the field of DSE and sociocultural perspectives on disability that have emerged from it. Drawing on inclusive teacher education texts by DSE scholars Baglieri (2017) and Baglieri and Lalvani (2019), we provide examples of a social model of disability and the many ways that ableism, or discrimination based on ability or disability, can manifest in schools (e.g., physical structures, attitudes, language). As a follow-up to the legal foundations addressed in the prior module, we introduce the idea of moving "beyond compliance:" striving for practices that

are not only compliant with the law, but that aim for dignifying access to the general education curriculum and classroom (Ben-Moshe et al., 2005).

Module 2: Learner Development and Characteristics
Module 2A: Learner Development and Characteristics Overview

The purpose of this module is to introduce paraprofessionals to characteristics often associated with students identified with disabilities, while recognizing the pitfalls of generalizations. Module 2A begins with a discussion of disability categories as defined in schools by the eligibility criteria for special education. We then ask paraprofessionals to consider both the beneficial functions (e.g., facilitating access to services) and potential harms of labeling students as having a disability (e.g., leading to an overemphasis on a child's inabilities). Through reflective prompts, we offer opportunities for participants to recognize that while disability labels communicate general information, they can be harmful if taken as the defining characteristics of students. We provide suggestions for participants to learn about students' individual needs and preferences through an ecological approach (i.e., attending to their behavior and performance in relation to aspects of the learning environment). Module 2A concludes by addressing the importance of moving away from deficit-based language (e.g., "suffers from") and euphemisms (e.g., "special needs student") towards person-first language, identify-first language, and language that emphasizes tools that students use (e.g., "student who uses a wheelchair").

Module 2B: Learner Development and Characteristics in the Classroom

In Module 2B, we offer more specific

strategies for responding to a range of student needs. We introduce a strengths-based approach as foundational to supporting students (Elder et al., 2018). Using a hypothetical IEP excerpt, we contrast a deficit-based description of a student to a strengths-based version. We highlight how deficit-based descriptions often focus on what the child is unable to do, make comparisons to students without disabilities, and overlook the impact of the environment or role of supports. In contrast, we demonstrate how a strengths-based approach identifies what a student *can* do, or is working towards, and emphasizes the impact of specific contexts and supports (i.e., tools, accommodations, modifications, and peer support) on the student's performance. Since paraprofessionals are likely to observe students across multiple environments, they are poised to note how students respond to the presence or absence of various supports. Using strengths-based approaches positions paraprofessionals as educational team members who can provide actionable input about adapting classrooms to support a student's meaningful participation and progress.

Module 2B also covers common academic and behavioral needs that paraprofessionals may support in the classroom. Drawing on Baglieri and Shapiro's (2017) DSE-informed approaches to creating inclusive environments, we highlight the following areas: literacy, mathematics, receptive and expressive communication, behavior (social and emotional), sensory, physical movement, and motor planning. For each area, we describe examples of characteristics and needs, followed by common supports (e.g., accommodations, modifications, assistive technology, related services). This content is intentionally organized around broad

---

[4] For legal cases, see: Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District, 2017; IDEA, 2004; Girty v. School District of Valley Grove, 2001; Oberti v. the Clementon Board of Education, 1993.

areas of need, rather than specific disability labels, to reinforce the importance of resisting assumptions that all students identified with the same disability have the same needs. In each area we highlight practical examples of supports that paraprofessionals may implement.

Module 3: UDL in the Inclusive Classroom
Module 3A: Introduction to UDL

The purpose of Module 3A is to expose paraprofessionals to an overview of UDL (CAST, 2021) and offer insight into their role in incorporating UDL principles into practice in inclusive classrooms. UDL is commonly part of teacher preparation programs and professional development, but paraprofessionals often do not receive that same training. Because UDL can be applied across all educational environments to support inclusion of students with a diverse range of needs, understanding this framework can bolster collaboration between paraprofessionals and teachers in implementing inclusive practices. The aim of UDL is thus not to minimize difference but to (re)construct learning environments that welcome and enhance such diversity through incorporating flexibility and choice. DSE scholars have both embraced UDL and pushed the boundaries of its operationalization in inclusive education (Baglieri, 2020; Dolmage, 2015), however at its core there remains a commitment to "purposefully deploying UDL as counternarrative and radical multiplicity" (Baglieri, 2020, p. 64). Throughout these modules, we situate UDL as a DSE-aligned approach to proactively planning for learner variability as a means to more socially just, inclusive schools.

In Module 3A, participants reflect on their own learning experiences as an entry point to the three principles around which the UDL framework is organized: (a) Providing Multiple Means of Engagement, (b) Providing Multiple Means of Representation, and (c) Providing Multiple Means of Action and Expression, each of which we explore in sub-modules. We make clear that the UDL guidelines are not prescriptive. Rather, they offer places to start thinking differently about education, away from changing the learner and instead changing the environment. The module begins with an overview of UDL, starting with its origins in architectural universal design principles that aim to design physical spaces to meet the widest range of needs possible to reduce barriers to access (Meyer et al., 2014). Paraprofessionals then learn about the UDL Principles and their connection to "scientific insights into how humans learn" (CAST, 2018). Participants then consider the importance of proactively building in support and choice for all students, rather than retroactively modifying instruction for a few. We conclude with strategies for identifying common classroom barriers, navigating the interactive UDL guidelines, and collaborating with teachers to create more inclusive classrooms.

Modules 3B, 3C, and 3D: The UDL Principles

The remainder of the UDL modules offer in-depth overviews of each UDL principle, concrete examples for practice and opportunities to apply strategies to their work with students. The goal in each sub-module is for participants to dive deeper into the UDL principle and identify one strategy to integrate into their practice at a time. In this way, we draw on Tobin & Behling's (2018) "plus one approach" to encourage paraprofessionals to recognize areas where application of UDL will have the greatest impact within their sphere of influence (p. 169). At the end of each sub-module, we offer exploration activities, such as structured independent engagement with the interactive UDL guidelines (2018), and conversation starters for discus-

sion with colleagues. We transparently provide participants with the chance to experience universally designed learning activities, while calling attention to the role UDL can play in deconstructing restrictive norms in schools. As integral members of educational teams, providing paraprofessionals tools to ground their practice in a UDL approach positions them to more effectively collaborate and creatively support a wide range of learners.

Module 4: Specialized Instruction for the Inclusive Classroom
Module 4A: Introduction and Legal Foundation

The purpose of Module 4A is to expose paraprofessionals to what specially designed instruction (SDI) looks like in practice and establish that all educational professionals share responsibility to remove barriers to participation for students with disabilities by routinely providing accommodations and modifications. To underscore the importance of providing accommodations and modifications we frame SDI through IDEA (2004) statute regulations which state,

> Specially designed instruction means adapting, as appropriate to the needs of an eligible child under this part, the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction—
> (i) To address the unique needs of the child that result from the child's disability; and
> (ii) To ensure access of the child to the general curriculum, so that the child can meet the educational standards within the jurisdiction of the public agency that apply to all children. (Sec. 300.39 (b) (3) (i))

In addition to providing a legal grounding for SDI, we frame access to academic content through a DSE lens by emphasizing the need to remove barriers to participation for students

with disabilities in schools (Baglieri et al., 2011). Specifically, we discuss the ways that elements like unmodified schoolwork, deficit-based perspectives, untrained paraprofessionals, and rigid policies serve as barriers for students with disabilities. We emphasize that it is among paraprofessionals' responsibilities to change how they support students, rather than force students to adapt to the ways they prefer to offer support (Elder, 2020).

In this initial module, we introduce accommodations as adaptations that level the playing field in classrooms and offer examples within each of the areas that accommodations can change: (a) how materials are presented, (b) how students are to respond to instruction and show understanding, (c) where students are taught within inclusive classrooms, (d) how much time students have to complete tasks, (e) the order in which assignments are completed, and (f) how students keep themselves organized (San Francisco Public Schools, 2019; Vanderbilt University, 2021). We then make clear that while accommodations *do not* change what is being taught, modifications *do* change academic content (i.e., alter the playing field) and can be made across subject areas and activities. Given that paraprofessionals are often tasked with adapting content on the spot, we introduce the strategy of creating modification bags, or collections of supplies that are useful for making quick modifications. We then invite participants to create a modification bag with household items and/or supplies they have access to in school.

Modules 4B, 4C, 4D, and 4E: Content-Specific Examples of Modifications

In the remaining SDI sub-modules we break down specific modifications across curricula and make DSE-informed interdisciplinary connections to ELA, math, science, and social studies. We

highlight examples like, (a) filling in one letter, rather than writing the entire word on a spelling test (ELA), (b) solving single-digit instead of triple-digit problems (math), (c) putting experiment directions in the correct sequence instead of filling out a lab worksheet (science), (d) identifying colors and cardinal directions on a map of the U.S. colonies instead of answering comprehension questions (social studies) (Vanderbilt University, 2021).

Module 5: Learning Environments and Behavior Support

Paraprofessionals serve in a range of roles related to implementing multi-tiered systems of support and students' IEPs including providing positive, consistent, respectful classroom learning environments (Bambara et al., 2015; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; McLeskey et al., 2017), supporting co-teaching (Friend, 2014), removing academic and environmental barriers to access and inclusion (CAST, 2018), conducting systematic evaluation for behavior support plans (Bambara et al., 2015; Downing et al., 2015); as well as utilizing strengths-based approaches (Elder et al., 2018) and restorative practices (Smith et al., 2015). This culminating content is delivered as one module that draws on prior learning and highlights current frameworks to underscore the importance of understanding and supporting student behavior and wellness as fundamental to the paraprofessional role.

Module 5 Part I: Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

MTSS "is a data-driven, problem-solving framework to improve outcomes for all students" that relies on use of evidence-based practices (Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2021, para. 1). Response to Intervention (RtI) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) are examples of MTSS centered on academ-

ic instruction and behavior, respectively. These tiered intervention-based frameworks are designed to help educators assess the needs of all students and responsively provide differentiated levels of support, which also impact the responsibilities of paraprofessionals. Yet social norms around how behavior is understood inextricably influence the policies and practices used to respond to behavior in schools. DSE-informed approaches to inclusive education require more critical ways of understanding and supporting behavior. While MTSS models have seen some positive outcomes such as increased academic achievement and reduced suspension and dropout rates (Center on PBIS, 2021), there has also been overgeneralized application of these systems (Ferri, 2015). DSE scholars have raised concerns about how these missteps have re-inscribed racism and ableism through inequitable practices and may undermine inclusion (Bornstein, 2017; Ferri, 2012). Thus, part of this module involves a metacognitive activity in which participants identify their assumptions about behavior. Recognition that behavior is both socially constructed, and a form of communication serve as foundational ideas for this portion of the learning series.

Module 5 Part II: Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

We draw on the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's (CASEL) framework for applying evidence based SEL strategies which utilizes the relational ecology of schools (Brown, 2018). CASEL's framework revolves around five key competencies: (a) relationship skills; (b) social awareness; (c) self-awareness; (d) self-management; and (e) responsible decision-making. CASEL cornerstones its work on making "evidence-based social and emotional learning an integral part of education" so that all students have foundational skills needed to grow their social and emo-

tional lives and develop relationships in our increasingly complex world (2021, n.p.). We introduce paraprofessionals to SEL elements through a multi-tiered support model where Tier 1 (base) begins with building positive relationships and designing culturally responsive supports so that all students have opportunities to practice identifying emotions and managing responses or actions. We emphasize the importance of these supports in centering the potential of SEL to "... address various forms of inequity and empower young people and adults to co-create thriving schools and contribute to safe, healthy, and just communities" (CASEL, 2021).

Module 5 Part III: Behavior Support

Throughout this module, we encourage paraprofessionals to consider the communicative intent of students' behaviors and identify actionable next steps for supporting their students in restorative ways. We offer examples, discussion prompts and resources that center humanistic behavior supports (Causton et al., 2015) such as utilizing students as collaborative problem solvers, providing choice, and acting from a place of curiosity, empathy and care. We conclude with an activity that asks participants to identify a behavior of a specific student and reflect on: questions to enhance their own understanding of the behavior, collaboration opportunities, and strategies that simultaneously support the student's needs while maintaining their dignity. It is our hope that with this concluding synthesis activity, paraprofessionals draw on the content of this module, as well as their learning throughout the entire series, to recognize barriers, center students' identity and strengths, and plan proactively.

EXAMPLE APPLICATION OF THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SERIES

As special education faculty associated with a Professional Development School (PDS) District, we had the opportunity to bring this paraprofessional learning series to district and building level administration in three partner schools. Noting the value of providing this professional development to all paraprofessionals, administration committed to integrate the series into their professional development offerings across the three schools. This commitment involved: (a) informing faculty and staff, (b) scheduling time and space for paraprofessionals to devote to the training during paid PD hours (e.g., during minimum days for parent-teacher conference week), and (c) coordinating use of district laptops for large group training in each building. The asynchronous modules allowed participants to work at their own pace while also fostering a shared professional development experience and space for collaborative dialogue. The existing district-university partnership meant that paraprofessionals had the added benefit of opportunities to engage with some of the faculty module designers, who maintain a regular presence on site as part of their role bridging research and practice. This field-based application created space to implement theory to practice in a local school district. As PDSs that host clinical interns, this implementation of the professional development series for paraprofessionals further strengthened connections between what preservice teachers saw in their practicum experiences and what they were learning about in their DSE-oriented coursework. This example application modeled whole-school approaches to collaboration and continuous learning opportunities for all educational professionals.

While district-provided laptops and a common space in which paraprofessionals could progress through the modules at their own pace and bounce ideas off one another was good in theory, in practice it provided unanticipated challenges. At both school sites where we piloted the modules, some paraprofessionals could not attend each day of professional development, so they had to find time throughout subsequent school days to complete the modules. Additionally, some paraprofessionals were not as experienced with technology and online learning, so their pace was slower, and some did not complete the modules even though they attended each day of professional development. This meant they also had to find additional time to complete the modules during a future school day.

Also, at one school where we piloted the professional development modules, one paraprofessional skipped ahead in the modules and just completed the quizzes. This paraprofessional then proceeded to encourage other paraprofessionals to do the same to finish the modules in a shorter amount of time, thus negating the entire purpose of providing time for paraprofessionals to complete the professional development. The mandate for short-form, autoscored, multiple choice module quizzes was a barrier imposed by the professional development request. To support these issues we found it useful to pause the professional development, bring everyone together and discuss the ways in which paraprofessionals can and should engage with the content in order to gain the most from experience. Centering students with disabilities and how they can benefit from paraprofessionals taking up the module content and applying it in their school helped refocus the group on professional development goals. Opportunities also arose during implementation which were made possible by the fact that paraprofessionals were working through the online learning modules flexibly, but in a shared space. At another school where the pilot occurred, when paraprofessionals finished segments some of them moved into unprompted reflective discussions with each other and/or with the facilitator. In

one instance, the modules helped a paraprofessional make sense of her students' rights, but also raised a question for her about how a school incident was being handled with her child. She expressed that her new knowledge of the legal foundation and potential supports could assist her in navigating this situation with the school on behalf of her child.

From the pilot implementation, we share a few of the lessons learned from these challenges which might be helpful to others. We felt there needed to be some additional structure to how paraprofessionals started and completed modules. For example, we could have done a very short mini-lecture on module content before having paraprofessionals work on them independently. This could keep everyone on track and authentically engaging in module tasks while facilitators check more individually on each paraprofessional's progress. For those who finish the module early, they could be redirected to engage in a "deeper dive" activity or invited to a facilitated debrief discussion. We could also consider a semi-structured agenda for each day where paraprofessionals were engaging with one to two specific modules each day, thus allowing for flexible individual pacing, but mitigating the urge to rush through all five modules to completion. Another consideration could be to end each day with a reflective question or action idea from the embedded activities that could be used as a launch to start the session the next day. These adjustments would model differentiated learning related to the content, create an action-oriented element of accountability, and respond to the need for active self-directed learning for educators that is underscored in the literature, and reinforced from our pilot implementation.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Our aims in writing this article include offering a resource to accompany to the learning series, as well as providing special education faculty and school administrators with a resource to conceptualize how to align professional development for paraprofessionals with current trends in teacher education, enhance consistency across educational teams and contribute to inclusion of students with disabilities in schools. By explicating our module design we offer a model for filling a need in an area where there has been limited training and/or professional development provided.

Paraprofessionals who take up these DSE-informed perspectives and inclusive approaches in their practice are positioned to view disability as a valuable form of diversity and consider students through a lens of competence and possibility. As such, paraprofessionals may develop stronger relationships with students with disabilities and their families and understand how to provide more equitable opportunities to those that they serve. We hope that paraprofessionals who engage with this content will recognize these approaches as social justice imperatives, and thus be more likely to implement DSE-informed inclusive practices on an ongoing basis. Providing this type of professional development may also support paraprofessionals to become more informed and inclusive practitioners, which may in turn develop their sense of professional purpose and belonging in the field.

Students with disabilities may be better supported in classrooms informed by consistency across teacher preparation and in-service professional development. Paraprofessionals with more robust professional development on inclusive practices may be able to collaborate more actively alongside special education teachers as members of educational teams, increase the independence (and interdependence) of students with disabilities in general education classrooms, and offer more global support to *all* students in any given setting.

As teacher educators, we know the importance of providing pre-service and in-service educators with models of inclusive content they can use to assist paraprofessionals in dissolving the barriers between special and general education in their respective school sites. New teachers need to be prepared to take up the collaborative expectations and support of paraprofessionals in applying DSE-informed inclusive practices, which can ultimately, and most importantly, increase access and achievement of all students in inclusive classrooms (Giangreco et al., 2010).

For administrators and school districts, this particular professional development option for paraprofessionals is not only free of charge, but offered in a flexible format conducive to tailoring to school district calendars. Ultimately, professional development opportunities that enhance paraprofessionals' role in sustaining inclusive education within an equity-oriented DSE framework can contribute to more cohesive practice, foster a culture of schooling that cultivates collaboration across educational teams, and increase time that students with disabilities spend in general education classrooms with necessary and respectful supports.

REFERENCES

Baglieri, S. (2020). Toward inclusive education? Focusing a critical lens on Universal Design for Learning. *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies, 9*(5), 42-74. https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v9i5.690

Baglieri, S., & Lalvani, P. (2019). *Undoing ableism: Teaching about disability in K-12 classrooms*. New York, NY: Routledge. http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781351002868

Baglieri, S., & Shapiro, A. (2017). *Disability studies and the inclusive classroom: Critical practices for embracing diversity in education*. New York, NY: Routledge. http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781315642543

Baglieri, S., Valle, J. W., Connor, D. J., & Gallagher, D. J. (2011). Disability studies in education: The need for a plurality of perspectives on disability. *Remedial and*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michelle L. Damiani, Ph.D.

Michelle L. Damiani, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor of Inclusive Education at Rowan University in the Interdisciplinary and Inclusive Education Department. Dr. Damiani's research uses a disability studies in education framework to explore disability as an aspect of diversity in the teacher workforce that contributes to understanding school structures, pedagogical approaches, and inclusive practices. She is also engaged in research around developing sustainable international inclusive education practices that build capacity among all education partners. Dr. Damiani is the corresponding author for this article and can be reached at damiani@rowan.edu. https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3255-7156

Casey L. Woodfield, Ph.D.

Casey L. Woodfield, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor of Special Education at Rowan University in the Interdisciplinary and Inclusive Education Department. Dr. Woodfield's work centers communication and inclusion as inextricably connected imperatives. Using a disability studies framework her research explores the nuances of communication support partnerships, inclusive educational practice, and transformative qualitative methods. https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5545-055X

Brent C. Elder, Ph.D.

Brent C. Elder, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Special Education at Rowan University in the Interdisciplinary and Inclusive Education Department. Dr. Elder's research focuses on the development of sustainable inclusive education practices in under-resourced schools. Specifically, in his work he utilizes a critical disability studies lens to examine the intersections of disability, poverty, and education. https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2638-6143

Justin E. Freedman, Ph.D.

Justin E. Freedman, Ph.D. is an instructor of Special and Inclusive Education at Rowan University in the Interdisciplinary and Inclusive Education Department. Dr. Freedman's research focuses on clinical simulations to support self-advocacy and the application of Universal Design in teacher education, and in the delivery of disability-related accommodations. https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0598-9586

Special Education, 32(4), 267-278. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932510362200

Bambara, L. M., Janney, R., & Snell, M. E. (2015). Teachers' guides to inclusive practices: Behavior Support (3rd). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co, Inc.

Ben-Moshe, L., Cory, R.C., Feldbaum, M., & Sagendorf, K. *Building pedagogical curb cuts: Incorporating disability in the university classroom and curriculum*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press

Biggs, E. E., Gilson, C. B., & Carter, E. W. (2016). Accomplishing more together: Influences to the quality of professional relationships between special educators and paraprofessionals. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 41*(4), 256–272. https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796916665604

Biklen, D., & Burke, J. (2006). Presuming competence. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 39*(2), 166-175. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665680500540376

Bornstein, J. (2017). Can PBIS build justice rather than merely restore order?. In N. Okilwa, M. Khalifa & F. Briscoe (Eds.), *The school to prison pipeline: The role of culture and discipline in school* (pp. 135-167). Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited. 10.1108/S2051-231720174

Boyd, V. A., Ng, S. L., & Schryer, C. F. (2015). Deconstructing language practices: discursive constructions of children in Individual Education Plan resource documents. *Disability & Society, 30*(10), 1537-1553. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2015.1113161

Brown, M.A. (2018). *Creating restorative schools: Setting schools up to succeed*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press.

Brown, T. S., & Stanton-Chapman, T. L. (2017). Experiences of paraprofessionals in US preschool special education and general education classrooms. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs, 17*(1), 18–30. https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12095

Carter, E., O'Rourke, L. O., Sisco, L. G., & Pelsue D. (2009). Knowledge, responsibilities, and training needs of paraprofessionals in elementary and secondary schools. *Remedial and Special Education, 30*(93), 344–359.

Causton, J., Tracy-Bronson, C. P., & MacLeod, K. (2015). Beyond treats and timeouts: Humanistic behavior supports in inclusive classrooms. *International Journal of Whole Schooling, 11*(1), 68-84.

CAST (2018). *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.2*. udlguidelines.cast.org

CEC (2022). *Core competencies for special education paraeducators*. https://exceptionalchildren.org/paraeducators/core-competencies-special-education-paraeducators

Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). (2021). *Tiered framework*. https://www.pbis.org/pbis/tiered-framework

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2021). https://casel.org/

Danforth, S., & Naraian, S. (2015). This new field of inclusive education: Beginning a dialogue on conceptual foundations. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 53*(1), 70–85. https://doi.org/10.1352/1934-9556-53.1.70

Darling-Hammond, L., & Cook-Harvey, C. M. (2018). *Educating the whole child: Improving school climate to support student success*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute. https://doi.org/10.54300/145.655.

Dolmage, J. (2015). Universal design: Places to start. *Disability Studies Quarterly, 35*(2). http://dx.doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v35i2.4632

Donnellan, A. M. (1984). The criterion of the least dangerous assumption. Behavioral Disorders, 9(2), 141–150. https://doi.org/10.1177/019874298400900201

Downing, J. E., Hanreddy, A., Peckham-Hardin, K. D., & Soto, G. (2015). *Teaching communication skills to students with severe disabilities*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H Brookes Publishing Co, Inc.

Elder, B. C. (2020). Necessary first steps: Using professional development schools (PDS) to support more students with disability labels in inclusive classrooms. *School-University Partnerships,13*(1), 32-43. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1249469

Elder, B. C., Damiani, M., & Oswago, B. (2015). From attitudes to practice: Using inclusive teaching strategies in Kenyan primary schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 20*(4), 413-434. doi: 10.1080/13603116.2015.1082648

Elder, B., Rood, C., Damiani, M. L. **(**2018). Writing strength-based IEPs for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. *International Journal of Whole Schooling, 14*(1), 116-155. http://www.wholeschooling.net/Journal_of_Whole_Schooling/articles/14-1%20Elder%20Rood%20&%20Daminani.pdf

Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District (2017). Page 2: *Endrew F. & IEP Standards*. https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/iep01/cresource/q1/p02/

ESSA (2015). *ESSA requirements for Title I paraprofessionals*. https://www.state.nj.us/education/title1/hqs/pp/ppfaq.shtml

Ferguson, P. M., & Nusbaum, E. (2012). Disability studies: What is it and what difference does it make?. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 37*(2), 70-80. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F154079691203700202

Ferri, B.A. (2012). Undermining inclusion? A critical read of response to intervention. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 16*(8), 863-880. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2010.538862

Ferri, B.A. (2015). Response to Intervention: Persisting concerns. In B. Amrhein & K. Ziemen (Eds.). *Diagnostics in the Context of Inclusive Education – Theories, Ambivalences, Operators, Concepts* (pp. 7-21). Klinkhardt, Germany: Verlag.

Friend, M. (2014). Co-teaching: Strategies to improve student outcomes. Port Chester, NY: National Professional Resources, Inc.

Giangreco, M. F., Broer, S. M., & Edelman, S. W. (2002). "That was then, this is now!" Paraprofessional supports for students with disabilities in general education classrooms. *Exceptionality, 10*(1), 47–64. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327035EX1001_4

Giangreco, M. F., Suter, J. C., & Doyle, M. B. (2010). Paraprofessionals in inclusive schools: A review of recent research. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, *20*(1), 41-57. http://doi.org/10.1177/1540796914534622

Girty v. School District of Valley Grove (2001). Girty Ex Rel. Girty v. School Dist., Valley Grove, 163 F. Supp. 2d 527 (W.D. Pa. 2001). https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp2/163/527/2521023/

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004). U.S.C. § 1400 et seq.. https://sites.ed.gov/idea?src=policypage

Jackson, L. B., Ryndak, D. L., & Wehmeyer, M. L. (2009). The dynamic relationship between context, curriculum, and student learning: A case for inclusive education as a research-based practice. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 34*(1), 175-195. https://doi.org/10.2511%-2Frpsd.33.4.175

Knowles, M. and Associates (1984). *Andragogy in action: Applying modern principles of adult learning.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kunc, N. (1992). *The need to belong: Rediscovering Maslow's hierarchy of needs.* (Reprinted from Restructuring for caring and effective education, by R. Villa., J. Thousand., W, Stainback., & S. Stainback. (Eds.)., 1992, Baltimore: Paul Brookes.)

McLeskey, J., Barringer, M-D., Billingsley, B., Brownell, M., Jackson, D., Kennedy, M., Lewis, T., Maheady, L., Rodriguez, J., Scheeler, M. C., Winn, J., & Ziegler, D. (2017, January). *High-leverage practices in special education*. Arlington, VA: *Council for Exceptional Children & CEEDAR Center.*

McLeskey, J., Landers, E., Williamson, P., & Hoppey, D. (2012). Are we moving toward educating students with disabilities in less restrictive settings? *The Journal of Special Education, 46*, 131-140. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466910376670

Meyer, A., Gordon, D., & Rose, D. H. (2014). *Universal design for learning: Theory and practice.* CAST Professional Publishing.

National Council on Disability (NCD). (2018). *IDEA series: The segregation of students with disabilities.* https://ncd.gov/sites/default/files/NCD_Segregation-SWD_508.pdf

Oberti v. the Clementon Board of Education (1993). Oberti v. the Board of Education of the Borough of Clementon. https://www.pubintlaw.org/cases-and-projects/oberti-v-board-of-education-of-the-borough-of-clementon/

Rapp, W.H., Arndt, K.L., & Hildenbrand, S.M. (2019). *Picture inclusion! Snapshots of successful diverse classrooms*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., Inc.

Sailor, W., & McCart, A. (2014). Stars in alignment. *Research & Practices for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 39*(1), 55-64. http://doi.org/10.1177/1540796914534622

San Francisco Public Schools (2019). *Resources on inclusive schools.* https://archive.sfusd.edu/en/programs-and-services/special-education/inclusive-schools/inclusive-schools-resources.html

Taylor, S. (2006). Before it had a name: Exploring the historical roots of disability studies in education. In S. Danforth & S. Gabel (Eds.), *Vital questions facing disability studies in education* (pp. xii-xxiii). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

Tillery, C. Y., Werts, M. G., Roark, R., & Harris, S. (2003). Perceptions of paraeducators on job retention. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 26*(2), 118–127. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F088840640302600205

Tobin, T. J. & Behling, K. T. *Reach everyone, teach everyone: Universal design for learning in higher education*. Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press.

U.S. Department of Education (2021). IDEA Section 618 data products: State level data files. https://www2.ed.gov/programs/osepidea/618-data/state-level-data-files/index.html

Vanderbilt University (2021). *Understanding accommodations.* https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/micro-credential/micro-accommodations/p01/

Van der Klift, E. & Kunc, K. (1994). Hell Bent on Helping. In E. Van der Klift & N. Kunc, *Being realistic isn't realistic: Collected essays on disability, identity, inclusion and innovation* (pp. 149-183). Tellwell Talent.

Walker, V. L., Douglas, K. H., & Chung, Y. C. (2017). An evaluation of paraprofessionals' skills and training needs in supporting students with severe disabilities. *International Journal of Special Education, 32*(3), 460–471.

Wilkinson, S., Freeman, J., Simonsen, B., Sears, S., Byun, S. G., Xu, X., & Luh, H. J. (2021). Professional development for classroom management: a review of the literature. Educational Research and Evaluation, 182-212. https://doi.org/10.1080/13803611.2021.1934034

Zarate, K., & Barcus, C. (2022). The treatment adherence of paraprofessional behavior training programs: a systematic literature review. *European Journal of Psychology of Education,* 0123456789. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-022-00646-5