

PARAPROFESSIONALS' PERCEPTIONS OF VIOLENCE AND TRAINING:
INVESTIGATING AN UNDERSTUDIED GROUP

by

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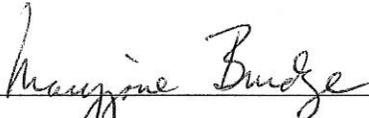
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Chapter 1. Introduction

Violence continues to plague students and teachers all across the United States (Robers, Kemp, & Truman, 2013). A simple search on the Internet or an innocent attempt to watch the news may very well result in a report replete with the details of a violent incident. Historically, when looking at school violence, researchers focused their studies on students, but in the last few years more research has focused on the victimization of teachers (Espelage et al, 2013; Wilson, Douglas & Lyon, 2011). Although these two groups, students and teachers, make up a large part of a school's population, support staff members are also directly affected by school violence (Espelage et al., 2013). Paraprofessionals make up a part of this third understudied population. Their presence in schools continues to grow, and their position often lands them in situations where they may be forced to deal with elevated levels of violence (Brenton, 2010; Giangreco, Suter & Doyle, 2010; Maggin, Wehby, Moore-Partin, Robertson, & Oliver, 2009).

Statement of the Problem

Paraprofessionals are some of the most untrained and least qualified workers in the school setting (Giangreco et al., 2010). Paraprofessionals are also most likely to face a variety of situations for which they are unprepared. Violence against paraprofessionals has not been adequately studied and quantified. However, they frequently work with student populations, such as students with Emotional/Behavior Disorders (EBD) and Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), who are often volatile and likely to perpetrate violence (Espelage et al., 2013).

This is particularly true in one Midwestern high school. In fact, it is unknown to what extent High School A's paraprofessionals experienced student-to-staff violence, what training they have received, and to what degree training or lack of training ameliorated or aggravated their perceptions of and performance at work.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate paraprofessionals' perceptions of the kinds and amount of violence they have experienced while working in school, and paraprofessionals' perceptions of training they have received. This study will add to the current research, already done on teachers, by dissecting the violence perpetrated against paraprofessionals. Although this research falls in line with the research on teacher victimization, it differs in that it looks at paraprofessionals, who, by in large, remain understudied (Brenton, 2010; Giangreco et al., 2010). Though the population is small and specific to a single school, the findings of this study may help to create better training for the support staff locally. It may also inform educational researchers and school districts about the types of violence experienced by paraprofessionals, the connections that exist between training and violence prevention, and the need to include paraprofessionals in developing a collaborative school culture.

Problem Statement

Two main research questions guide this study:

Question One: What are paraprofessionals perceptions of and reactions to student to paraprofessional violence?

Question Two: How has training altered paraprofessionals' perceptions and reactions to student to paraprofessional violence?

Nature of the Study Design

This study will use a qualitative design, case study, in order to effectively explore participants' perceptions of experienced violence and training. This design makes the most sense for this study because the study deals with participants' perceptions of events, the small sample size, and this is an area that is not well known or researched (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Case

study research will also allow the researcher to experience the phenomenon of paraprofessional victimization through direct discussion of participants' experiences (Trochim, 2006).

In order to conduct this study the researcher will use two measurement tools: a questionnaire and a personal interview. The questionnaire was inspired by the work of Mooij (2011) and Wilson et al. (2011). The identities of participants responding to the questionnaire will not be published or linked with answers. This anonymity will allow the population to honestly convey their perceptions about the kinds of violence they have experienced, the kinds of training they have received, and their reactions to these. Follow-up semi-structured interviews with select participants will provide a second, deeper look at paraprofessionals' perceptions and allow for a richer understanding of these than a single instrument would allow (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013).

Significance of the Study

This study begins to build a base of knowledge that shows paraprofessionals' perceptions of the kinds and extent of violence experienced in a school setting. This research remains a largely unexplored frontier. Previous research investigated student and teacher victimization in schools, but it overlooked the acts of violence enacted against paraprofessionals. The addition of this information better explores the scope of violence in schools. This study's investigation of paraprofessionals' perceptions of experienced violence and training can give school personnel, teachers, and other educational professionals insight into the training and experiences of paraprofessionals.

Definitions of Terms

Collaboration: In schools, collaboration often refers to a process in which all stakeholders in a school community work together to create positive changes (Espelage et al., 2013).

IDEA 2004: A United States law that provides certain protections for students with disabilities and requires that adults who work with these students meet certain qualifications and requirements (Individuals with Disabilities Act, 2004).

Paraprofessional: Sometimes referred to in research as teacher aids, teacher's assistants, paraeducators, instructional assistant, educational assistant and classroom assistant. Under the guidance of a teacher, paraprofessionals often assist with classroom management, classroom monitoring, and one-to-one and whole group instruction (Maggin et al., 2009).

Support Staff: Also referred to as auxiliary staff, this encompasses any non-teaching staff that may come into contact with students, including but not limited to: paraprofessionals, cafeteria workers, janitors, and security staff (Espelage et al., 2013).

Training: Often district or teacher implemented; it may be more formal and explicitly linked to a certain activity or procedure, or more informal by way of discussion and model about strategy or behavior management (Maggin et al., 2009).

Violence: For the purposes of this study violence will include any nonphysical threat or unwanted aggression toward an individual. This ranges from verbal threats to intense bodily harm. The categories of violence used for this study include: *nonphysical violence*: name calling, intimidating, threatening, blackmailing, spreading false rumors, making inappropriate gestures and comments; *physical violence*: inappropriate touching, purposefully striking, pushing, kicking, tripping, pinching, fighting, or hitting; and *material violence*: destroying property, spray-painting or dirtying something, hiding something, and stealing (Mooij, 2011; Wilson et al., 2011).

Assumptions

While constructing the research study, the author has taken into account several assumptions. As with most studies employing surveys, the researcher assumes that participants self-reporting will do so truthfully. Another assumption is that paraprofessionals are qualified to work with special needs students under IDEA 2004 and state guidelines. A final assumption is that if a paraprofessional has received training in violence prevention or violence response strategies, she or he will implement that training and use it for the benefit of students and other staff.

Limitations

This study contains several limitations: interest, time, bias, and generalizability. Participants may not want to spend time speaking or answering questions about this topic; this would negatively affect data collection. The researcher only has a limited time to carry out this research; this means that outcomes will be restricted to that set amount of time. The researcher currently works as a paraprofessional and may unintentionally project personal experiences working with violent students into the interpretation of data acquired from other paraprofessionals; furthermore, the validity of data collection and analysis may be compromised by sampling of convenience and lack of a validity check by outside party. The final limitation is that the data obtained in this study will not be generalizable, because it only surveys one small group in a small location.

Delimitations

Several specific delimitations were imposed on this study. The population was selected based on convenience and is only comprised of paraprofessionals from one high school. This study will only look at violence in school or while on the job, not any other violence a

paraprofessional may experience. The measurement tool will not look at student-to-student violence or student-to-teacher violence. The questionnaire will only measure work related consequences of violence. It will not take a significant look into other mental-health issues, however, they will be noted if they seem to directly affect a respondent in this study.

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

Although student-to-student violence and student-to-teacher violence have been well documented and researched in recent years, violence against paraprofessionals still remains a vastly understudied part of the school climate. This study will strive to uncover how violence and how training affects paraprofessionals' perceptions of violence. Chapter 2 dives into the research and presents the historical and current climate of violence, training, and collaboration in the school environment. Chapter 3 explains the methodology for a qualitative case study design.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

This chapter provides background on teacher and school staff victimization by looking into recent research. The problem statement is: It is unknown to what extent High School A's paraprofessionals experienced student to staff violence, what training they have received and to what degree training or lack of training ameliorated or aggravated their perceptions of and performance at work. This statement provided a quick schema through which all literature collection was filtered. The author picked literature and research pertaining to paraprofessionals' roles and training, collaborative schools, and violence against educators and paraprofessionals, with a preference toward literature that related to paraprofessionals. Four main subtopics pervaded the research. These topics were: violence, consequences of violence, training of paraprofessionals, and creating collaborative school culture.

Many of the previously conducted research studies dealing with paraprofessionals focused on training, student inclusion, and building a more collaborative work environment. Although these topics are a large part of the picture and will be discussed, much of the research overlooks a significant and potentially frightening part of a paraprofessionals job, namely, dealing with students who are aggressive and violent. Although some researchers have studied teacher victimization, there is a huge gap in respect to research on paraprofessionals and other auxiliary staff. Researchers have suggested including these other staff members in research, and they insist this is an integral part of revealing the overall picture of violence in the school setting (Espelage et al., 2013; Giangreco et al., 2010).

Victimization of Teachers and Other School Staff

When looking at violence in schools there are two main areas that researchers have focused on: who experienced violence and what constitutes violence. Some of the recently

published research on violence in schools focused on teacher victimization. Many teachers reported that pupils perpetrated varying degrees of violent acts or issued violent threats against them (Ervasti et al., 2012; Espelage, 2013; Wilson et al., 2011). In Wilson et al.'s (2011) research of 731 teachers, 80% experienced violence at least once in their career, 6% were threatened in the previous 12 months, and 4% reported being physically attacked in the previous year. This data aligns closely with the National Center for Education Statistics 2012 findings that showed in the previous 12 months 8.1% of teacher respondents were threatened and 4.3% were physically attacked (Robers, Kemp, & Truman, 2013).

Inclusion of all staff in victimization counts. This victimization is a problem and safety is a concern for teachers and school staff. According to Espelage et al. (2013), much of the previously existing research involving violence in schools focused on student-to-student violence. By excluding teachers and other staff members from their findings, researchers missed the full scope and complexity of the problem and failed to offer adequate solutions to the problem of school violence.

Performing this type of survey with paraprofessionals will be necessary to understand the full scope of school violence. As Espelage et al. (2013) state, "At the present time, information on violence against nonteaching school employees is inadequate for any reasonable examination of this issue" (p. 83). Non-teaching staff suffered violence, but their victimization went mostly unacknowledged or, at least, unrecorded. A study surveying non-teaching staff, paraprofessionals in particular, would begin to fill some of the holes in the literature and contribute to a more rich and full picture of staff victimization.

Defining and measuring violence. Several of the aforementioned studies used survey methods that would translate well to a study about paraprofessionals. Since it is unknown what

kinds of violence and the extent of the violence paraprofessionals experience, a tool must be used that can tabulate and quantify these instances for further interpretation. Wilson et al.'s (2011) research methodology provides future researchers a systematic approach for categorizing and analyzing violence and its consequences. Their research broke down the overarching term violence into three categories: covert violence, which is nonphysical; overt violence, described as "attempted, threatened, or physical violence" (p. 2358) and other violence. They further separated these three categories into individual occurrences of violence such as stalking and personal insults. Likewise, Mooij (2011) dissected violence into six different categories: verbal, material, social, mild physical, severe physical, and sexual. Partitioning the acts of violence allowed these researchers to better make inferences and connections between the kinds of violence perpetrated and who experienced the violence.

Consequences of Victimization

The ramifications of the violence perpetrated against teachers reaches much further than the isolated act. According to Wilson et al. (2011), the violent actions perpetrated against teachers likely disrupted their health and effectiveness. Their collected data showed that teachers who experienced more types of violence suffered more adverse symptoms, and a teacher who endured workplace violence against them reported a heightened level of fear compared with teachers who had not experienced violence at school. This means that the victims of violence were often less effective and more fearful of students than their counterparts who did not experience violence. This heightened level of fear and other adverse symptoms ultimately harms the student, since the teacher's ability to dictate and influence a classroom may be affected (Wilson et al., 2011).

Although many of these researchers make suggestions for better equipping teachers to effectively manage classrooms, they also found that violence was more likely to happen in undefined public spaces (hallways, stairwells, lunchrooms) than defined spaces (classrooms). They encouraged schools to make sure all adults in the school setting were skilled enough to take ownership of these spaces (Espelage et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2011). These findings implicate auxiliary staff as some of the most open to violence since they often work in these public spaces that generally lack the structure of a well organized classroom. Just as researchers have suggested for teachers, auxiliary staff should be prepared and trained to watch for the signs of violence before it happens (Espelage et al., 2013; Hershfeldt, Rosenberg & Bradshaw, 2010). One of the best ways to do this is for schools to adequately train auxiliary staff and, in turn, allow them take an active role in school change policies.

Training and Collaboration

Waldron & McLeskey (2010) assert that two ways of transforming previously marginalized and overlooked staff into stakeholders is through training and collaboration. These solutions shine through as two significant and connected answers to help stagnate the flow of violence in schools. Training and collaboration provide for better instruction and a safer, more structured environment for all students (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). These and other findings indicate that, as elucidated below, teachers were not adequately trained to lead and direct paraprofessionals, paraprofessionals were often not adequately trained or equipped to handle their responsibilities, and they were not integrated into school-wide intervention plans.

Teachers' training and the inclusion of paraprofessionals. Researchers suggested that teachers, paraprofessionals' main supervisors and support, are undertrained in respect to training and supervising paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals, in turn, do not receive the training and

support they need to successfully work with children with disabilities (Brenton, 2010; Giangreco et al., 2010). Espelage et al. (2013) suggested that prevention of violence against teachers should make up part of a school's safety plan. Educators' lack of expertise in classroom management and de-escalation techniques lead to increased occurrences of violent behaviors and an inability to effectively respond when these behaviors arose. They found that students were more likely to act violently when they were in classrooms that lack structure.

One way to avoid this lack of structure is through continued professional development. Waldron and McLeskey (2010) propose that through the sharing of expertise and information, schools would improve teaching practices and delivered quality programs for all students. As school staff worked together, schools became more inclusive and safe. This happened through a process of ownership where all staff, not just teachers, were stakeholders in shaping school policy toward all students (Mooij, 2011; Sautner, 2008). Although this school-wide collaboration could lead to violence reduction, Giangreco et al. (2010) insisted that the inclusion of paraprofessionals in this process of collaboration is "understudied and inadequately understood" (p. 42).

One of the gaps in the research about paraprofessionals involves their inclusion in this collaborative process. More research needs to be done on how to effectively integrate paraprofessionals into conversations and collaborative groups that affect school change, but, as it stands paraprofessionals do not receive the training and support they need to successfully work with children with disabilities (Brenton, 2010; Giangreco et al., 2010). This undertrained and understudied group makes up a large part of a school's special education department and often works directly with students who require a higher level of academic and behavioral support

(Maggin et al., 2009). This deficit of knowledge and training must be remedied if paraprofessionals are to be included in the school-wide collaborative process.

Paraprofessionals perceptions of training. Another glaring gap in the research comes in the form of paraprofessionals perceptions of respect and value in the work place. Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer (2001) found that despite the fact that paraprofessionals worked extensively with special education programs and in one-on-one settings with students, they were often excluded from team meetings. Paraprofessional's expressed caring for these students and desired a chance to voice their input, but often felt unheard. Although newer research would be favorable to a study from 2001, the few that exist have not been peer reviewed or are not as reputable and applicable. Once again, the research showed that paraprofessionals, the work they do, and the challenges they face must become the focus of significant, in-depth research.

Some of the intended outcomes of developing a collaborative culture would relieve the grievances paraprofessionals have shared. They are "...trust and respect among colleagues, improved professional satisfaction, improved instructional practices, better outcomes for all students and social change that is maintained over time" (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010, p. 60). These changes would be good news for paraprofessionals who were often given tasks that they perceived as unsafe and beyond their training or job description (Giangreco et al., 2010).

If paraprofessionals do, in fact, feel untrained and as though they are working beyond their bounds, then a strong focus on training paraprofessionals is needed to ensure maximum safety for students and staff. The bulk of this burden falls to the supervising classroom teacher. Maggin et al. (2009) suggested that if a teacher defines roles, trains, evaluates, and collaborates with paraprofessionals, then paraprofessionals can offer students better instructional and management services that line up with the classroom teacher's vision.

Teacher and paraprofessional collaboration. While findings on the type and extent of violence paraprofessionals experience is an integral issue in this purposed research, questioning them about their training and its effect on their ability to work with students is an equally important step toward a fuller understanding of paraprofessionals and how to integrate them into a collaborative school culture. As a part of the implementation of the research findings on paraprofessionals' victimization, evidence-based training and collaborative techniques must be implemented. Function Based Thinking exemplifies a system that a teacher and paraprofessional team could collaboratively construct and implement to reduce violence (Hershfeldt et al., 2010). Rather than punishing or, simply, reacting to erratic student behaviors, Hershfeldt et al. (2010) suggested creating and implementing a plan that replaces unfavorable behavior with an appropriate behavior. However, in order for this to be effective, teachers must communicate their vision and collaborate with all other school staff that interacts with the student. By casting a vision and bringing peripheral staff onboard, teachers create a web of support that will bolster appropriate behavior. As with any attempt to create positive behavioral supports and changes, significant and relevant on-going training and support must be given to all staff (Mooij, 2011; Rosenberg, 2012). This type of support and collaboration would be impossible without first collecting and interpreting the data on paraprofessional victimization and how they are trained to work with the students who perpetrate violence.

The compilation of research on staff victimization, training of paraprofessionals, and building collaborative, inclusive schools examined the plight of many school staff members and offered some suggestions for uncovering and alleviating violence in schools, respecting and adequately training staff, and creating a culture of ownership among staff. These findings offer good news for educators and paraprofessionals who have experienced violence. The reviewed

literature points to several areas where further research could help expand knowledge about these interrelated topics. A definite need exists for statistics on the victimization of all school staff, not just teachers (Espelage et al., 2013). In addition to these statistics, staff must make up a part of collaborative teams that help shape school environment (Mooij, 2011; Rosenberg, 2012). These researchers showed that violence is a problem with widespread consequences for all school staff, and that one of the best ways to alleviate this problem is through ongoing training and collaboration (Hershfeldt et al., 2010).

Chapter three of this paper will build upon the work and suggestions of these researchers. By basing a survey on the methodologies of Wilson et al. (2011) and Mooij (2011), the researcher was able to ask questions that revealed more information about paraprofessionals' rates of victimization and the amount of training they have received.

Chapter 3. Methodology

As explored in Chapter 2, many gaps currently exist in the research on paraprofessional victimization in schools. Paraprofessionals are often understudied and undertrained (Brenton, 2010; Giangreco et al., 2010). The research on violence against non-teaching school staff members is inadequate and incomplete (Espelage et al., 2013). These findings support this study's efforts in investigating High School A's paraprofessionals' perceptions of violence and training.

Design

This study used a primarily qualitative case study for its design methodology. By incorporating a questionnaire the researcher sought to obtain some quantitative data. The likert-type questions allowed for the development of some base line data about the violence paraprofessionals experience, something that is absent from current research and many record books (Espelage et al., 2013). Participants' perceptions and the researcher's analysis of these were by nature subjective. The subjectivity of data indicated that a qualitative focus best suited the study. A case study allowed the researcher to glean data directly from the participants by giving them room to explicitly discuss their perceptions of violence and training. Although violence and training could be partially quantified by analyzing accident reports, student suspensions, teacher logbooks or district files these records would not illustrate the full range of a paraprofessional's experience. The aim of this study was to investigate an on-going, contemporary event, something the participants experience on a day-to-day basis. It sought to understand how current paraprofessionals perceived violence and training and this required that they spoke for themselves through both surveys and dialogue (Yin, 2003). This methodology

also suited this study because it allowed the researcher to organize multiple experiences into common themes and gain a deeper understanding of the problem (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013).

Participants

The paraprofessional staff at High School A participated in this study. High School A is part of a Midwestern school district. This district has 13 schools, not including residential or alternative schools (two high schools, two middle schools, and nine elementary schools). This high school has 51 FTE licensed teachers, 989 students and 19 paraprofessionals. The paraprofessionals at High School A work in a variety of classrooms, but are most heavily concentrated in self-contained classrooms that deal specifically with one type of disability category Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), Developmentally Cognitively Disabled (DCD), Emotional/Behavioral Disorder (EBD) (see *Figure 3.1*). Education levels of the participants ranged from no college to paraprofessionals with master's degrees. Some paraprofessionals entered the field with no previous experience in education, some with previous experience as a paraprofessional, and some with teaching degrees/experience. These paraprofessionals were selected as a population of convenience, because the researcher worked at High School A. 18 out of 19 paraprofessionals in the school participated in the study.

Participant	Questionnaire	Interview	Category Served	
p. 1	Yes	Yes	ASD	
p. 2	Yes	No (V)	DCD	
p. 3	Yes	No	ASD	
p. 4	Yes	Yes	EBD	
p. 5	Yes	No (V)	DCD	
p. 6	Yes	No	DCD	
p. 7	Yes	Yes	EBD	
p. 8	Yes	No	DCD	
p. 9	Yes	No (V)	ASD	
p. 10	Yes	No	ASD	
p. 11	Yes	No (V)	ASD	
p. 12	Yes	No	ASD	
p. 13	Yes	Yes	DCD	
p. 14	Yes	No	DCD	
p. 15	Yes	Yes	DCD	
p. 16	Yes	Yes	ASD	
p. 17	Yes	No (V)	DCD	
p. 18	Yes	No	ASD	V= Volunteered

Figure 3.1. Participants.

Instrumentation

For obtaining desirable data, a questionnaire (see Appendix C) was distributed through High School A's mailbox system. The questionnaire worked well for this study because it was non-invasive, only required roughly 10 to 20 minutes of a participants' time, and was easily completed from any location at any time the participants' found convenient.

In order to successfully organize and gather data, the questions were broken down into sections. This allowed the researcher to more easily compartmentalize the data. The questionnaire was inspired in part on the work of several researchers who conducted similar research but did not publish their instruments (Mooij, 2011; Wilson et al., 2011). Through the use of multiple respondents (staff, teachers, pupils) with a questionnaire, Mooij (2011) found results reliable and internally valid. This study's use of two instruments helped to establish some

internal validity by collecting data and observing the situation from two different perspectives. This study used original questions on a questionnaire (see *Figure 3.2*) created by the researcher to pinpoint participants' perceptions. Questions about perceptions of violence made up one section; and questions about nonphysical, emotional perceptions and violence reporting followed. These questions were formatted in a 4-point Likert-type Scale response options (Mooij, 2011; Wilson et al., 2011). The third section asked participants to relay perceptions of training and its effect on their profession (Brenton, 2010).

I feel prepared to deal with violent situations throughout the school day.
I have witnessed another paraprofessional experience violence in school.
I have been the victim of physical violence by a student at school.
I have been the victim of nonphysical violence by a student at school.
I feel/have felt afraid of the students I work with at school.
I have received adequate training to properly serve students.
We have an adequate violence reporting system at school.
I know how to respond to a student's violent threat in school.
Training I have received is valuable to my everyday work.
I feel safe while working at school.

Figure 3.2. Questions from questionnaire.

The participants in the study were also asked if they wanted to take part in any further discussions about the topic. If they indicated that they would like to proceed, the researcher set up an interview time and asked the participant more in-depth and open-ended questions (see *Figure 3.3*).

Tell me about a time you have experienced student-perpetrated violence at school. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ At what location(s) in school did you experience violence? ○ What kind(s) of violence did you experience? ○ What else can you tell me about the situation?
Do you believe you have received adequate training for your current position?
Do you think you've ever escalated a situation? How?
Are you able to utilize the training you have received? Please elaborate.
What kinds of violence prevention training have you received?
What steps do you take to reduce violence at school?
What results have you seen after reporting violence?
What other training/information would help you feel more prepared?

Figure 3.3. Interview questions.

Procedure

Since the researcher is an insider (currently works as a paraprofessional) at the school where the sample population works, distributing questionnaires and confidentiality waivers to the population was more manageable than if contacting a wide swath of people in many different locations. After the initial proposal was designed, the study received approval from the IRB of the University of Wisconsin-Superior and the principal of High School A. Before any research was conducted, the invitation and overview form was distributed (see Appendix A) and the participant consent forms (see Appendix B) were disseminated, signed, and returned. Questionnaires were distributed in paper-pencil form. The questionnaire consisted of 10 likert-type questions that took 10-20 minutes to complete. As a result of high-interest in interviewing the researcher gathered a list of volunteers, separated them by disability category served, and randomly drew two names from each of the major disability categories served by paraprofessionals at High School A. The interview took no longer than 40 minutes in a 1:1 setting. The researcher used an I Phone and notebook to record the interviews for later data analysis. Once data was consolidated, analyzed, and interpreted the final chapter was written and the findings were made available to the participants, university and Principal.

Analysis

When analyzing the questionnaire responses, answers to questions pertaining to experiences of violence were compared with responses involving training, fear, and job preparedness. This was done to address the first research question. The researcher explored the second research question by comparing participants' perceptions of violence with the ways they believe training helps them cope with and act to reduce violence. The interviews added an extra vantage point that increased validity. It allowed participants to further clarify and elaborate answers to questionnaire questions. The analysis of these required the researcher to both objectively observe and record physical and verbal responses. After the recording process the researcher coded the data, categorized it, summarized it, and then drew subjective conclusions about the interviewees responses and their relationship to the data obtained from the questionnaires. The results of the questionnaire have been organized into graphic organizers to better present the results.

This data started to fill the void in the data that exists on paraprofessional victimization. The literature review indicated that not enough research has been done on paraprofessional victimization in schools. This survey will provide data and a research method that could be replicated on a larger scale to continue filling this gap in the research. This data will be shared with participants, University of Wisconsin-Superior, and High School A.

Chapter 4. Results

Two instruments were used to gather the data needed to answer this study's two research questions: What are paraprofessionals' perceptions of and reactions to student-to-paraprofessional violence? and How has training altered paraprofessionals' perceptions and reactions to student-to-paraprofessional violence? In order to unveil paraprofessionals' perceptions the study used a qualitative case study design that utilized interviews to gain the bulk of the data. A questionnaire was used as a secondary instrument to help increase the study's validity and provide a snapshot of the population's perceptions (see *Figure 4.1* and *Figure 4.2*). These two tools worked together to clarify some varied results. Some of the responses were almost evenly split on the questionnaire, but as the researcher interviewed a sample of the participants they revealed and explained some of the nuances that shaped their answers to the posed statements. By unearthing the general perceptions through the questionnaire the interview allowed for a fuller explanation of paraprofessionals' perceptions. Out of 19 questionnaires the researcher sent out, 18 were completed and returned. Out of those 18 participants 11 volunteered to participate in interviews. The researcher interviewed a total of six participants, two from each major disability category served by the bulk of Paraprofessionals at High School A.

Varied Experiences with Violence

The results of the questionnaire often showed varied experiences with violence (see *Figure 4.1*). Paraprofessionals overwhelmingly reported witnessing another paraprofessional experience violence in school (94%). A majority of paraprofessionals also reported that they have been the victims of student-perpetrated physical and non-physical violence in school.

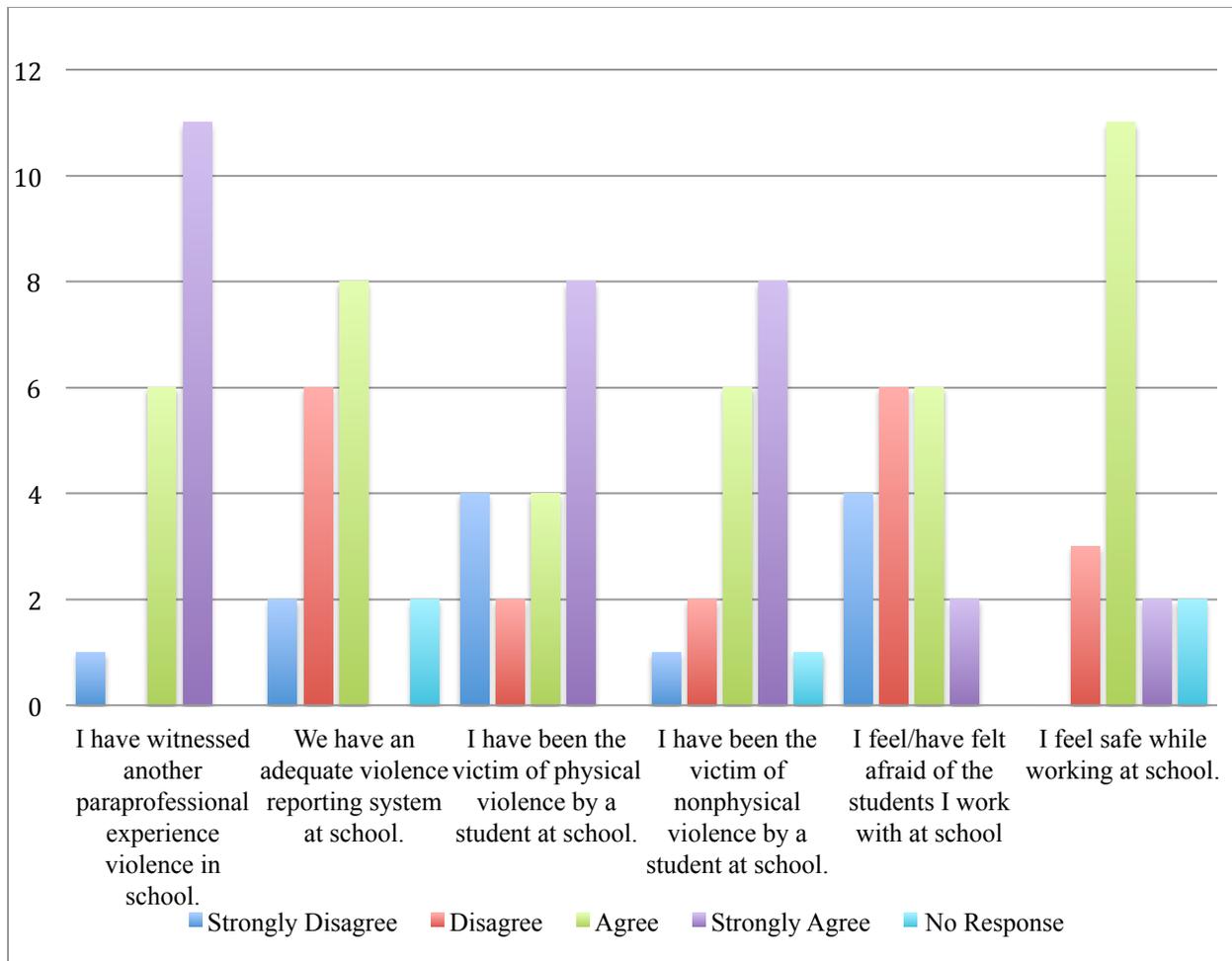


Figure 4.1. Paraprofessionals' perceptions of violence, by respondent.

Although these paraprofessionals serve students with very different needs in the umbrella categories of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Developmentally Cognitively Disabled (DCD), and Emotional Behavioral Disorders (EBD), their experiences possessed a thematic continuity. As the interviews were revisited and reviewed several main themes emerged. These themes arose from the questionnaire responses and the interview questions that paraprofessionals spent the most time talking about, and at times talking through. Experiences with violence, the violence reporting system, student consequences, interacting with students after a violent situation, and perceptions of training pervaded the conversations. These five main themes are the focus of this latter part of the paper.

Theme 1: Experiences with Violence

“he just took the chair and rammed it right into me”

Many of the paraprofessionals surveyed and all of the paraprofessionals interviewed reported experiencing violence in a variety of incarnations, 67% of paraprofessionals agreed (4) or strongly agreed (8) that they had been victims of physical violence, 91% of paraprofessionals reported observing another paraprofessional experience violence (6 agreed, 11 strongly agreed), and 78% agreed (6) or strongly agreed (8) that they had experienced nonphysical violence.

Interviewees reported everything from minor to major threats (“I’m gonna f*ckin’ kick your ass”) to sexual harassment (butts slapped, laser pointer circling private parts) to physical violence (punching, kicking, spitting, throwing of objects). These situations experienced by paraprofessionals varied in severity and scope. The paraprofessionals who work or worked in a self-contained EBD room reported experiencing the most threats, while paraprofessionals working with students with severe ASD reported the most frequent and significant student to staff violence. Many of these paraprofessionals reported experiencing some level of violence on a daily basis. The perceptions of violence, however, were varied. One paraprofessional spoke in frustration that, “We’re here to help these kids we shouldn’t have to put up with being hit.”

Theme 2: Violence Reporting System

The second theme that emerged through conversations and the questionnaire was varied experiences with the schools violence reporting system. Some paraprofessionals felt that the violence reporting system was well established and others felt that even when they reported something, nothing was being done about it. In response to the questionnaire statement, “We have an adequate violence reporting system at school” the results were almost evenly mixed (2 strongly disagreed, 6 disagreed, and 8 agreed). The paraprofessionals interviewed shared a

variety of stories where the outcomes of reporting violence looked very different. Several interviewees stated that the way many of the smaller incidents are reported is through a worker's compensation accident reporting system, another was through teacher logs, and another mentioned that often when faced with larger disciplinary issues they reported directly to administration and the police. One paraprofessional commented about attempts to try to improve the situations involving violence, "according to the district it's part of our job, we rely on accident reports to report these incidents". For many smaller violent incidents (biting, scratching, slapping, etc.) the only record-beyond teacher and/or paraprofessional logs- filed was an accident report that was turned into the nurse's office. One paraprofessional spoke with frustration of the violence reporting system, "I think it's garbage" another responded that even when they did report incidents "nobody followed through with anything."

One paraprofessional said, "We were told that, basically, being physically assaulted on the job is part of what we should expect as part of our jobs. We, most of the 'paras', don't feel that that should be part of their job. We are not there as policemen or probation officers." One of the biggest frustrations voiced by paraprofessionals was not the violence or the reporting of violence, but a perceived lack of student consequences.

Theme 3: Student Consequences

Naturally, the theme that arose after violence reporting was student consequences. The interviewees indicated that when there were large threats and paraprofessionals believed the student was capable of following through they worked with administration to write up police reports and administration took over the situation. For smaller incidents of physical or verbal violence some paraprofessionals expressed dissatisfaction with the ramifications for students. One participant explained the response from administration and the difference in consequences

this way: “They do an awful lot of triage now, the extremely important things have to be taken care of especially with the police department. It seems like the consequences have really diminished.”

Several participants expressed frustration that even if a student punched, kicked and/or spit in their face, the student rarely faced any serious punishment. One paraprofessional summed up the feeling by stating, “We would assume that when you’re physically assaulted that some action would be taken...it seems that not much is being done.” Depending on the student and the student’s disability, the consequence paraprofessionals most frequently observed was a half to one-day suspension for the student. This was in relation to students served under the category EBD, many of the higher need students with ASD and DCD received different consequences. One paraprofessional observed that these suspensions might have been causing more problems, “Students try to get kicked out because it’s like a day off.”

One sentiment that many paraprofessionals conveyed was an attitude of “this isn’t how it used to be or should be.” The general sentiment was that violence was getting worse in society and in the schools. As one paraprofessional stated, “the steady diet that students get of violence, violence is a way of solving all kinds of problems through the media, through the home situations, doesn’t make things easier, I think things are getting more and more difficult.”

Another issue that was addressed was the fact that lack of consequences was hurting not just paraprofessionals but students as well. One paraprofessional mused that, “If they [the student] have, like, 20 incident reports filed on them in the last couple months, maybe they shouldn’t be here, maybe it’s not working out for them. That’s not good to keep your staff under...I don’t see how anybody can be cool with self-mutilation...”

Paraprofessionals seemed to differentiate the violence of students who “know better” and violence that is a manifestation of a disability. For some of these higher need students in the ASD and DCD self-contained programs, paraprofessionals perceived that students received very little to no consequences for their actions. The sentiment across the board was that the violence, the lashing out the paraprofessionals experienced, were manifestations of the student’s disability.

Theme 4: Interacting With Students After Experiencing a Violent Situation

“I was playing catch with [the student] an hour after he spit in my face”

Violence is difficult to deal with, its function is sometimes difficult to understand, and it is often hard for someone to differentiate a manifestation of a disability and a personal vendetta when they are on the receiving end of a blow. By a slight majority 55% of paraprofessionals reported that they disagreed (6) or strongly disagreed (4) that they have felt afraid of the students they work with. One paraprofessional captured the nuance of working with students who exhibit extreme behaviors, “I feel they don’t really mean to, it’s part of their disability but they’re still striking out at us” The paraprofessionals interviewed all held the students’ needs at the forefront. At times they seemed to search for words to explain the chasm between acts of violence perpetrated against them and their care for the students they work with. This balance required snap decisions and in-depth reflection. When it came to making these quick decisions training and experience helped paraprofessionals diffuse and react to violence, 78 % of participants agreed (13) or strongly agreed (1) that “training I have received s valuable to my everyday work.”

One paraprofessional stated that after dealing with a violent situation, “I think you’re more careful, I think you’re more aware of the possibility something might blow up.”

Another paraprofessional said that after a violent incident, “I don’t treat them poorly... just give them a lot of space, more than I normally would... in the long run I don’t play favorites.” Rather than viewing a violent situation as a career changer paraprofessionals viewed it as a way to learn to better interact with and serve the most severe students. When musing about triggering student behaviors one paraprofessional stated, “you have to learn when to push, when to back off, provide options.” Even this mature response to violence doesn’t preclude paraprofessionals from feelings of frustration. Many of the paraprofessionals felt they could circumvent or better respond to violence if they were more prepared to deal with violent situations. When asked about things that would help them do their job better, some of the solutions paraprofessionals proposed fell within the realm of training, these are discussed further in the following section.

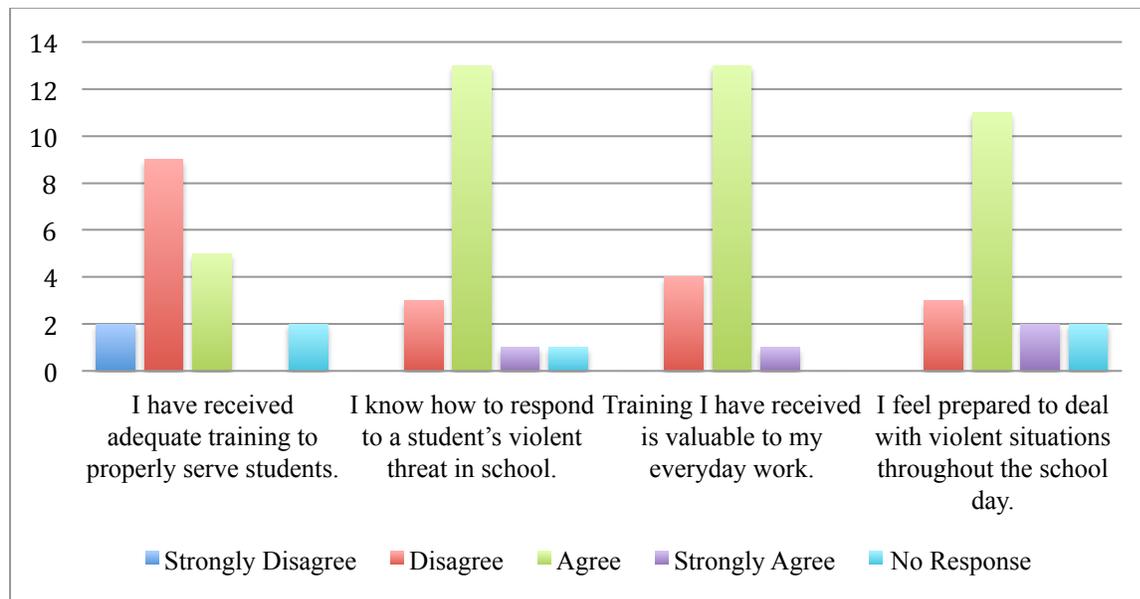


Figure 4.2. Paraprofessionals' perceptions of training, by respondent.

Theme 5: Perceptions of Training

Perceptions of training received. In order to better avoid or respond to violence all paraprofessionals at High School A receive Nonviolent Crisis Intervention training through Crisis Prevention Institute. In general, the paraprofessionals that responded to the questionnaire

responded favorably about training they have received (see *figure 4.2*). Although the majority of paraprofessionals agreed or strongly agreed that “training I have received is valuable to my everyday work,” the interviewees responded with mixed accounts. One participant said, “I ended up utilizing a lot of it, it does work”. Some other paraprofessionals disagreed, as one stated: “The training received doesn’t really prepare you for anything.” One paraprofessional who participated in extra training for a particular student enjoyed the specific, heartier training but relayed that, “the general training that most paraprofessionals get in the school system is rather inadequate.” Informal training was one area all of the interviewees discussed at some point in the interview. The paraprofessionals felt very comfortable working together and with their teachers to hash out solutions that help students. One paraprofessional put it this way, “Often a teacher will discuss with you, you know, what works best with a particular student and what their touch points are that you might want to avoid that set the student off.” In addition to teachers paraprofessionals also offered each other assistance and informal “training”. By working together to create a positive environment, paraprofessionals were able to teach, encourage, and help each other out. Even with formal and informal training in place, the paraprofessionals interviewed elaborated that they needed more, in-depth training to properly serve the students with whom they work.

Perceptions of training desired. All of the paraprofessionals who participated in interviews agreed that more training would be beneficial for their work with students with disabilities. In response to the questionnaire 61% of paraprofessionals surveyed believed they had not received adequate training to properly serve the students they work with, and many of the paraprofessionals interviewed also expressed a desire to receive more training. They specifically mentioned disability specific training and training with an emphasis on violence

prevention. They desired to better know how to work to support the needs of students. They felt that although they had received some training, they have not been trained well enough, and they and the students they work with would also benefit from their training.

These five themes written about above, encapsulated and encompassed both the questionnaire findings and the conversations from interviews. In the next section these results will be further analyzed and interpreted.

Chapter 5. Interpretation of Results

This study was conducted in order to investigate paraprofessionals' perceptions of violence and training in the school setting. Paraprofessionals are often undertrained and understudied, and while there is much information about teacher victimization in schools, there is a dearth of information on the victimization of other school staff (Espelage et al., 2013; Maggin et al., 2009). The best ways to include paraprofessionals in collaborative school initiatives has not been thoroughly investigated, and paraprofessionals often do not receive the support they need to work with students with disabilities (Brenton, 2010; Giangreco et al., 2010). This study was guided by two research questions: What are paraprofessionals' perceptions of and reactions to student to paraprofessional violence? and How has training altered paraprofessionals' perceptions and reactions to student to paraprofessional violence? These questions were posed with the intention of uncovering paraprofessionals perceptions and experiences with violence and training, which, according to the available research is an area that needs to be addressed and assessed. The participants in this study were a group of paraprofessionals from a Midwestern high school. Participants answered a likert-type questionnaire that measured perceptions of violence and training. In addition to the questionnaire, a randomly assigned sample of volunteers participated in more in-depth interviews. The previous chapter discussed five themes that emerged from the data collected with the paraprofessionals from High School A. These themes included paraprofessional experiences with violence, student consequences, the violence reporting system, paraprofessional-student relationships, and perceptions of training. In this section the results of the questionnaire and interviews will be further analyzed and interpreted, limitations will be discussed, and suggestions for further research will be given.

Discussion

The first research question, as stated above was answered in several ways. No blanket, cover-all experience with violence existed among the participants. Violence is not simply violence, and the ramifications of violence are as varied as the forms. Even when paraprofessionals recalled shared experiences, their attitudes, demeanor, and affect contributed to different manifestations of perception. Differences in perception also surfaced depending on the disability of the student.

Participants' experiences with violence related to Espelage et al. (2013) and Wilson, Douglas & Lyon (2011) research about violence against teachers and students. The results though taken from a small population showed that just as teachers and students have often been the victims of violence, paraprofessionals too have experienced and dealt with threats and actual violence.

The participants were often the victims of student-perpetrated violence (67 % experienced first hand physical violence; 67% experienced non-physical violence; and 94% reported witnessing another paraprofessional experience violence) but they often perceived violence differently depending on who was acting violently. These differences in perception often surfaced depending on the disability of the student. The two interviewees who have served students with EBD, expected their students to act more conscientiously and to receive larger consequences than those who served students with DCD and ASD expected.

Even with the violence that paraprofessionals experienced and their occasional frustrations with the violence reporting system, paraprofessionals conveyed a love for their jobs and the students they work with. These paraprofessionals truly seemed to want to help, but it was hard for them to completely ignore the problem of student-perpetrated violence. Some reported

feeling frustrated about the handling of violent situations. Because a significant amount of administrative time and energy goes into the extreme cases and non-disability related disciplinary issues, it's expected that the "lower level violence" (hitting, biting, slapping, spitting) from the students with ASD and DCD would get taken care of in the classroom with little to no outside acknowledgement or repercussions.

At times, though, it seemed the violence they dealt with left them with feelings of frustration, isolation, and helplessness. Although paraprofessionals experienced these feelings, they did not have time to hold grudges. Whether they were bit or spit on, part of a paraprofessional's job is to keep serving the student. Even when paraprofessionals expressed dissatisfaction with the consequences students faced and the results of violence reported, the overarching sentiment, especially for the students with ASD and DCD was that when students act violently it's not the students' fault; they didn't know how to direct their emotions, and their disability blocked their better judgment.

The results of the questionnaire and interviews also addressed the second research question. One reason that these paraprofessionals were able to balance frustrations with positivity and positive paraprofessional-student relationships seems to be a result of the training they have received. Paraprofessionals at High School A have been offered violence prevention training from their district, and 73% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that "Training I have received is valuable to my everyday work." Interviewee responses about training received were mixed, but the training received seemed to increase the paraprofessional's ability to deescalate and handle volatile situations, and to make some paraprofessionals feel more valued and invested as part of a team.

Paraprofessionals across the board desired even more training so they could better fulfill their roles with students. On the questionnaire 61% of paraprofessionals reported that they either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement: “I have received adequate training to properly serve students.” In addition, all paraprofessionals interviewed expressed that they would like to receive more in-depth training. This seems to indicate, whether they found the training they have received effective or not, that paraprofessionals would like more training to better support students. This finding corresponds with the existing research that paraprofessionals do not receive the training and support they need to successfully serve students with disabilities (Brenton, 2010; Giangreco et al., 2010). Several of the interviewees mentioned they would like to receive disability specific training that would be targeted to their specific environment and students demographics. Students with ASD have many different sensory, physical, emotional and social needs than students with EBD, and the paraprofessionals interviewed recognized these differences and the need for more in-depth training. Woven through the themes was an attitude of improvement and camaraderie. These paraprofessionals desired to better serve the students they work with and to operate better as a team with those around them.

Limitations

The data obtained from this research contains several limitations. The first limitation stems from the fact that the population was chosen because of convenience. Because the researcher previously knew the population and some of the various situations discussed, the researcher could have projected personal bias or opinion into the paper. Although using two instruments to measure paraprofessionals’ perceptions increased the validity of this study, the interviews were only conducted and analyzed by one interviewer and not looked at by other observers or third parties. A fourth limitation comes in the form of participants’ possible desire

to bolster their image or save face. When remembering and recounting events, paraprofessionals may have been tempted to elaborate or truncate their stories and experiences. The small population size is the final limitation of the study; because of the sample size and subjective nature of this study it is not generalizable to other schools or districts.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study found that the paraprofessionals at High School A had experienced violence and many paraprofessionals perceived a lack of training for the roles they were required to perform. Although the sample size limits the ability to generalize the findings of this study, this does not diminish the groundwork that this study has begun to lay. This type of research, fine-tuned and reproduced on a broader scale, could uncover much more about the training and subjection to violence of paraprofessionals. Future studies could investigate a larger population of paraprofessionals. In addition to perceptions, these studies could also quantitatively analyze data based on injury reports, student disciplinary referrals, nurse and teacher documentation, preservice training documents, and Continuing Education/training documentation. Further investigation into the roles of paraprofessionals could improve the educational experiences for students and the work environment for paraprofessionals and other school personnel.

Conclusion

Violence is a problem that affects paraprofessionals on a daily basis, and paraprofessionals are some of the most undertrained and understudied populations in schools (Brenton, 2010; Giangreco et al., 2010). In this study, paraprofessionals revealed their experiences with student–perpetrated violence and the effect training has had on their interactions with students. It also revealed that paraprofessionals desired more, in-depth training so they could better serve students with disabilities. This study, however, only uncovered the

perceptions of violence and training of a small population of paraprofessionals. Much more expansive qualitative and quantitative research needs to be done in the areas of student-perpetrated violence and its effect on paraprofessionals and the training of paraprofessionals.

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APPENDIX A. INVITATION AND OVERVIEW

I am Bryan Wentworth, a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Superior. I am doing research on paraprofessionals' perceptions of violence and training. I am going to give you information and invite you to be part of this research. You do not have to decide today whether or not you will participate in the research. Before you decide, you can talk to anyone you feel comfortable with about the research. If there is anything on this form that you do not understand please ask me to stop as we go through the information and I will take time to explain. If you have questions later, you can ask them of me.

Study Overview

The purpose of this research is to uncover paraprofessionals' perceptions of violence and training within the school setting. Although paraprofessionals are threatened with and victims of violence, violence against paraprofessionals has not been adequately studied.

This research will involve your participation in a questionnaire that will take an estimated 10-20 minutes, and, if you wish to continue, a personal interview that will take no more than 40 minutes. You are being invited to take part in this research because of your position at High School A, and I feel that your experience as a paraprofessional can contribute much to the understanding and knowledge of paraprofessional victimization and training. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. There is a slight possibility that you may experience a short-term emotional response when recalling times that students perpetrated violence against you. It is your choice whether to participate or not. You may change your mind later and stop participating even if you agreed earlier.

This Survey will use two instruments to gather paraprofessionals' perceptions of violence and training.

Questionnaire

You will fill out a questionnaire that will be physically distributed to you. If you do not wish to answer any of the questions included in the survey, you may skip them and move on to the next question. The information recorded is confidential, your name is not being included on the forms, and no one else except me will have access to your survey.

Interview

The interview will start with me, making sure that you are comfortable. I can also answer questions about the research that you might have. Then I will ask you questions about your perceptions of violence you have experienced and training you have received. You do not have to share any knowledge that you are not comfortable sharing. If you do not wish to answer any of the questions during the interview, you may say so and move on to the next question. The entire discussion will be digitally recorded, but no-one will be identified by name on the recording. The information recorded is confidential, and no one else except me will have access to the files.

Thank you for your consideration.

APPENDIX B. INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I volunteer to participate in the research project conducted by Bryan Wentworth, graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Superior. I understand that the research is designed to gather information about paraprofessionals' perceptions of violence and training. I will be one of approximately 20 people interviewed for this research.

1. My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time.
2. I understand I will not be compensated for my time in this study, and there are no known risks connected to participation in this study.
3. Participation involves answering an online questionnaire and a possible interview with the researcher. The questionnaire will take 10-20 minutes to complete, and the interview will last no more than 40 minutes. Notes will be written during the interview. A digital recording of the interview and subsequent dialogue will be made. If I don't want to be recorded, I will not be able to participate in the interview section of the study.
4. I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from the questionnaire or interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure.
5. I understand that confidentiality of all obtained information will be upheld
6. I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of The University of Wisconsin-Superior. For research problems or questions regarding subjects, the Institutional Review Board may be contacted through the university website.
7. I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
8. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

Your time is greatly appreciated!

My Signature

Date

My Printed Name

Signature of Researcher

For further information or concerns about this research, please contact:

Researcher:

Advisor:

UWS' Institutional
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APPENDIX C. QUESTIONNAIRE

The categories of violence used for this study include: *nonphysical violence*: name calling, intimidating, threatening, blackmailing, spreading false rumors, making inappropriate gestures and comments, *physical violence*: inappropriate touching, purposefully striking, pushing, kicking, tripping, pinching, fighting, or hitting, and *material violence*: destroying property, spray-painting or dirtying something, hiding something, and stealing (Mooij, 2011; Wilson, 2011).

Place an x in the box that most closely aligns with your response

	Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	I feel prepared to deal with violent situations throughout the school day.				
	I have witnessed another paraprofessional experience violence in school.				
	I have been the victim of physical violence by a student at school.				
	I have been the victim of nonphysical violence by a student at school.				
	I feel/have felt afraid of the students I work with at school				
	I have received adequate training to properly serve students.				
	We have an adequate violence reporting system at school.				
	I know how to respond to a student's violent threat in school.				
	Training I have received is valuable to my everyday work.				
	I feel safe while working at school.				
Are you interested in participating in a personal interview?	Please circle one: Yes / No If interested please indicate name on the back of the page				

APPENDIX D. PERSONAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- Tell me about a time you have experienced student-perpetrated violence at school.
 - At what location(s) in school did you experience violence?
 - What kind(s) of violence did you experience?
 - What else can you tell me about the situation?
- Do you believe you have received adequate training for your current position?
- Do you think you've ever escalated a situation? How?
- Are you able to utilize the training you have received? Please elaborate.
- What kinds of violence prevention training have you received?
- What steps do you take to reduce violence at school?
- What results have you seen after reporting violence?
- What other training/information would help you feel more prepared?