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To cite this article: Daniel Östlund, Thomas Barow, Kajsa Dahlberg & Anette Johansson (2021) In between special needs teachers and students: paraprofessionals work in self-contained classrooms for students with intellectual disabilities in Sweden, *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 36:2, 168-182, DOI: [10.1080/08856257.2021.1901370](https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2021.1901370)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2021.1901370>



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Published online: 20 Apr 2021.



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ARTICLE



In between special needs teachers and students: paraprofessionals work in self-contained classrooms for students with intellectual disabilities in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Based on street-level bureaucracy, this study investigates the paraprofessional role and assignments in self-contained classrooms for students with intellectual disabilities in Sweden. The research design contains a mixed method approach using a digital questionnaire for paraprofessionals (N = 60) and semi-structured interviews with four special teachers and five paraprofessionals. The results demonstrate that paraprofessionals cooperate with special needs teachers and have a supportive role working with students throughout the day. A lack of support for paraprofessionals' professional development and few opportunities for them to co-plan, co-teach and co-assess with special needs teachers is said to hinder this advancement. The complexity of being both an educator in the classroom and a caregiver taking the responsibility for students' wellbeing, peer-to-peer relations and care orientated work tasks are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Care taking; paraprofessionals; self-contained classrooms; special needs teachers; students with intellectual disabilities

Introduction

In international educational research, the role of paraprofessionals has been debated for some time. However, in education for students with an intellectual disability (ID) in Sweden, the practice of paraprofessionals has not received much attention, even though questions have been raised about their function, training, and professional development. In this article, we explore questions tied to paraprofessionals' roles and assignments with the purpose to investigate their cooperation with special needs teachers (SNT), their specific assignments in self-contained classrooms for students with ID, and the support given for their further education.

For students with ID in Sweden, different educational pathways exist from being fully included in general education settings to belonging to a special school with its own campus. This school setting, often in the form of self-contained classrooms, is a compulsory school for students with an intellectual disability and an upper secondary school for students with an intellectual disability, offering students adapted curricula. In Sweden, about 88% of students with ID in compulsory school are in such self-contained classrooms with high staff density. The other 12% attend general education classrooms (Swedish

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National Agency for Education 2018). For students with ID, an adapted curriculum exists and is orientated towards general education. Paraprofessionals are generally employed by the school – and in some cases by an assistance service company – as a special educational effort and are expected to work with a student in need of special support. In a study by Lindqvist et al. (2011, p.) a majority (82.3%) stated that they had ‘nine years of compulsory school or upper secondary school as their highest education’ (p. 147). The other 17.7% had a university education. Regarding SNTs for students with ID, Klang et al. (2019) found that teachers working in a mainstream setting had higher expectations on students’ academic performance, but lower focus on students’ social participation. Anderson and Östlund (2019) demonstrate that SNTs work primarily with teaching and, to a lesser extent, with supervision and school development. The study pinpoints the importance of collaboration with paraprofessionals and co-planning. Therefore, this paper addresses a neglected occupational group and aims to provide knowledge on the working conditions of paraprofessionals in self-contained classrooms for students with ID.

Issues concerning paraprofessionals working with students with ID

Up until the 1990s, and similar to other school systems (Thompson et al. 2018), education for students with ID in Sweden was embedded in social welfare, often promoting care rather than education. For many years, this tradition gained criticism (National Agency for Education 2001; Swedish National Audit Office 2019). Due to curriculum reforms (Swedish National Agency for Education 2011, National Agency for Education 2001), education for students with ID gained clearer focus on academic achievement, not least with an increased focus on both formative and summative assessment. For paraprofessionals, this resulted in the need to work more extensively on students’ academic performance and not just the tasks related to care and wellbeing (Anderson and Östlund 2017).

Parallel to curriculum implementation, the formal qualification demands for teachers working within curricula for students with ID increased, but without corresponding requirements for these paraprofessionals. In current education policy, there are no national guidelines on the work of paraprofessionals. At the same time, studies on education for students with ID in Sweden (Östlund 2015; Anderson & Östlund 2017; Anderson and Östlund 2019) report that it is common for SNTs and paraprofessionals to work in teams with joint responsibility for the students’ academic progress, social development and wellbeing.

Paraprofessionals working in teams

International research (Symes and Humphreys 2011; Biggs, Gibson and Carter 2016; Cipriano et al. 2016) shows that collaboration between teachers and paraprofessionals is crucial to special educational needs students’ success in school. Previous studies have also shown that caregivers and professionals have a central role in supporting students with ID in their capability to address social relationships (Mason et al. 2013). Mitchell (2008) describes collaboration as a process that allows staff groups with different occupations to combine their resources to solve problems that occur in teaching practice. Teaching students in need of support often requires collaboration and coordination between staff members. Martin and Alborz (2014) find that information between teachers

and paraprofessionals is often exchanged in recess or other spontaneous occasions – an obstacle for deeper cooperation. According to Saufley Brown and Stanton Chapman (2017), this depends on a paraprofessional showing an interest in increasing their opportunity to participate. There is a risk that hierarchical structures in the work team damage the collaborative climate unless paraprofessionals' participation and influence is encouraged (Balshaw 2010). Adaptations of learning activities are often made spontaneous, so it is sometimes difficult to formally determine or evaluate the contribution of paraprofessionals (Haycock and Smith 2011). However, it has been noted that paraprofessionals carry out instructions and make educational decisions – tasks that should be carried out by teachers (Broer, Doyle, and Giangreco 2005; Brock and Carter 2013; Sharma and Salend 2016; Giangreco 2021).

In all Nordic countries, paraprofessionals have been an important role working closely with students, especially for those with different types of disabilities (Hemmingsson, Borell, and Gustavsson 2003; Takala 2007; Egilson and Traustadottir 2009; Hedegaard-Sørensen and Langager 2012). This research (Takala 2007; Hedegaard-Sørensen and Langager 2012; Anderson and Östlund 2019), shows that collaboration between paraprofessionals and teachers is emphasised as a basic prerequisite for teaching to work effectively in the schools. Finnish research (Takala 2007) shows that work teams consisting of teachers and paraprofessionals have very limited opportunities for educational and didactic discussions and supervision, indicating shortcomings in the cooperation between SNTs and paraprofessionals. Östlund (2015) demonstrates that the provision of one-on-one instruction for students with ID is common for paraprofessionals. In another Swedish study, Anderson and Östlund (2017) show that schools that consciously work with school development can progress, such as favouring the paraprofessionals in their role and practice. Hedegaard-Sørensen and Langager (2012) highlight that close collaboration between SNTs and paraprofessionals increases an awareness of SNTs regarding their responsibility towards students and paraprofessionals. It was also clear that the paraprofessionals felt more appreciated, valued and more confident in their role, their assignment and their abilities when they had equal and non-hierarchic collaboration with SNTs. Anderson and Östlund (2019) demonstrate that SNTs express that paraprofessionals' contribution to the learning process of students with ID is seen as valuable, even though there is limited time for co-planning and co-assessing. Paraprofessionals' responsibility for providing educational support to students with ID is pervasive.

In summary, research on paraprofessionals shows that they work in teams with SNTs. They take responsibility for similar tasks in teaching as SNTs and make decisions on pedagogical instruction. Moreover, their education is often regarded as insufficient. Since research on paraprofessionals' work and assignments in Sweden is rare, it is our ambition to critically discuss in this area of research. Based on a paraprofessional perspective, we raise questions concerning their occupational role and collaboration with SNTs, in self-contained classrooms for students with ID. Therefore, our research addresses three research questions:

- (1) What are the conditions for paraprofessionals' cooperation with SNTs?
- (2) What are paraprofessionals' specific assignments?
- (3) What support do paraprofessionals receive for their occupational development?

Our research is relevant as it exemplifies basic questions about conditions for paraprofessionals in self-contained settings. From a larger perspective, this article sets the foundations for an open discussion on the tensions and dilemmas that arise in collaboration between special needs teachers (e.g. Broer, Doyle, and Giangreco 2005). Thus, our study supports a discussion about the current situation of the paraprofessional occupation in relation to students with ID in self-contained settings and, at the same time, contributes knowledge to an area that is seldom explored in a Scandinavian context.

Theoretical framework

The theory taken for this study is from Michael Lipsky (2010), which describes how street-level bureaucrats, who are in direct contact with their clients, carry out or implement measures that are legislated by the legislature and through decisions made in the public sector. There are core components of the description of what constitutes a street-level bureaucrat working within an organisation. These individuals work with clients and have great freedom of action in relation to the client. However, there are unclear goals that street-level bureaucrats are working towards. Freedom of action is necessary for them to be able to do the work because it is considered so complex that it is not possible to formulate ready-made manuals. To shed light on the paraprofessional role and to interpret their views when dealing with assignments, professional development and cooperation with SNTs in self-contained classrooms, street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky 2010) has been a theoretical inspiration. In their daily work, paraprofessionals are guided by overall education policies, however, there are no specific guidelines or instructions to guide them. Street-level bureaucrats generally have limited control over the outcome of their work and cannot choose individual clients (Lipsky 2010). This means that they are bound to the overall structures in education for students with ID, including the curriculum and their working conditions. However, there is no clear policy governing their work and paraprofessionals have great discretion in relation to these students. In previous research (Broer, Doyle, and Giangreco 2005; Brock and Carter 2013), the role and assignments of paraprofessionals appear to be complex, with low demands on education and high demands on performance of work because these professionals often work closely with students who have the most complex needs. This theoretical view aims to clarify how paraprofessionals experience cooperation with SNTs, their assignments in self-contained classrooms, and what support paraprofessionals receive for their occupational development.

Method

To investigate paraprofessional experiences, a mixed methods approach (Creswell 2014) based on a questionnaire and qualitative interviews has been chosen. We collected both descriptive quantitative data and qualitative data, which has helped to provide a deeper understanding of paraprofessional cooperation, assignments and support. The use of mixed methods is taken to capture paraprofessional statements in a nuanced way. All participants were informed about the research study's ethics policy applied in this project (Swedish Research Council 2002), which was based on confidentiality and participants taking part voluntarily.

First, we conducted a digital questionnaire with open and closed responses in two municipalities. 60 paraprofessionals (N = 60) working in four schools for students with ID participated with a response rate at ~67%. All four schools were located in two municipalities with 50,000–100,000 inhabitants. The municipalities were selected by a convenience sample method. All schools were sharing campus with general education students and the teaching for students with ID were organised in self-contained classrooms. Due to the sample size and the sample method, we only used descriptive statistics when presenting the numerical data and qualitative data of the questionnaire. The paraprofessionals have experience from 0–2 years (N = 13), 3–10 years (N = 32), 11–20 years (N = 12), and 21 years and more (N = 3). Quotes from the questionnaire are identified as para 1 to para 60.

Second, we received permission from one municipality, based on convenience selection method to conduct interviews with paraprofessionals (N = 5; identified as PARA a to PARA e) and SNTs (N = 4; identified with the abbreviation SNT a to SNT d). We used a purposive sampling strategy to find participants, and searched for SNTs and paraprofessionals working in teams with experience of working with education students with ID. In the final sample, we prioritised participants working in joint teams rather than having extensive experience, which resulted in one of the interviewed paraprofessionals having only three months' experience being included in the sample. Within the group of interviewees, four female paraprofessionals, one male paraprofessional and all four SNTs were females. Working with qualitative data is a common procedure for researchers to identify, analyse and interpret themes (Bryman 2016). The analysis of the interviews can be divided into four stages. 1) All interviews were transcribed verbatim; 2) the transcript was initially read in order to identify an overview; 3) a thematisation was carried out in light of the study's research questions; and 4) the final analysis was carried out and quotes were selected that related to the research questions, theory and previous research studies. Due to the study design, limitations exist in generalising the results.

Results

The analysis of the survey and the interviews was guided by the research questions and yielded three themes. We summarise them as *Conditions for cooperation between paraprofessionals and SNTs; Being an educator and a care-giver; Lack of support for professional development.*

Conditions for cooperation between paraprofessionals and SNTs

Paraprofessionals working with students with ID are included in working teams alongside SNTs. From both interview and questionnaire data there are different responsibilities in the work team and the prerequisites for working together vary. All informants share the view that lack of time places limits on how cooperation works and state this is an organisational issue. The interviewed SNTs and paraprofessionals describe that they set aside 15 to 30 minutes a week for meetings. This time is the only scheduled time for meetings every week.

We have a short meeting every Monday morning, but that time is very much spent on what is going to happen and not so much on assessment. (PARA b)

Time allocated for educational discussions focused on learning and assessment is often consumed by other more urgent practical tasks. The lack of joint planning time is confirmed in the survey responses, but with the difference that they have more time at their disposal: up to one hour (73%) and in some cases up to two or three hours (27%). The survey also states that the time for co-planning and co-assessment disappears because of practical problems that needs to be solved. Despite the shortage of time, paraprofessionals often receive information about what the teaching should contain at the same time as the students. Time is also a prerequisite to keeping informed about SNTs' written plans and students' IEP and is something that does not fit within the working hours. The interviewed paraprofessionals also keep themselves updated on student documentation outside their working hours. Even though there is a lack of time for joint planning, the survey shows that many paraprofessionals report they are familiar with the content in the weekly education plan.(Figure 1)

The interviewed SNTs and paraprofessionals describe a constant exchange of information during the school day. Often these are ad hoc, unplanned reconciliations in connection with the beginning or end of a lesson. It is primarily an oral exchange of information, but there are examples of paraprofessionals mentioning that they write down reflections on students' learning and provide these to the SNT after a lesson. Some participants describe the importance of these brief reconciliations about students' learning process directly when the lesson ends, otherwise the information will be forgotten.

It is also expressed that the staff share their thoughts with each other while the students are having a lesson, as some situations occur when the students have independent work and have the opportunity to catch these moments.

You complement each other in good cooperation. I can contribute what I see and then my colleague comes up with their opinions. You have to listen and trust each other and together you can create a clearer picture of the student. (SNT b)

The interviewees point towards the importance of giving opportunity for dialogues within the team to utilise all knowledge about the students' learning and they believe that their knowledge is well used if they strive to do a good job together. They suppose that responsibility rests on the SNT to lead the cooperation, but also invite the paraprofessional to participate in the educational work and in the formative assessment.

It is what interests you have as paraprofessional, but also how the SNT invites me and what I want with my work. It's a bit of both I think. (PARA c)

In the interviews the importance of the SNT's overall role in the work team is identified together with the formal mandate to assess, and do not indicate that the conversations held in the work team affect teaching to any significant degree. Another participant argues that there is a clear difference in the roles, but that the role of paraprofessional is underestimated. The SNTs do not see everything the paraprofessional does. The interviewees also point out that the role of a paraprofessional is to follow the student throughout the school day, but that they may also take over a SNT's assignments, such as being a substitute due to SNTs absence.

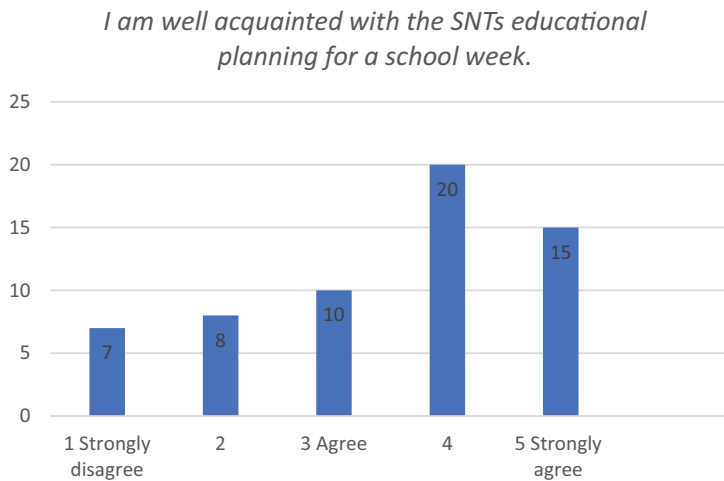


Figure 1. Paraprofessionals self-reported knowledge about SNTs' educational planning for a school week (N = 60).

Yes, but I have the role of being everywhere. Then we will be substitutes when the SNT is absent. Then you have both your own role and the SNT's role. (PARA b)

It also appears that some participants experience a large difference between the two occupational categories in terms of status. Some paraprofessionals describe a hierarchy within this cooperation:

Many of us in the team where everyone is equally worthy of whatever title they have. In the class I am now, it is *not* like that. (PARA e)

Furthermore, some paraprofessionals claim to be divided into a 'first' and a 'second' team and that it is the SNT who has the main responsibility – being the 'first' team – and sets the agenda. The paraprofessionals feel as though they are not valued in the same way because they lack a title and education.

I can sometimes feel that when you have an education that I have, you look at things sometimes in a different way. Paraprofessionals may not always have the overall picture. (SNT b)

In the survey responses, on being familiar with the content in the curriculum shows variation among paraprofessionals. It is stated in the interviews that the SNT has the main responsibility for planning, making the teaching work and completing assessments. The paraprofessional has a supportive and important role, working closely with the student all day. It seems contradictory that a lack of time for planning is highlighted as an issue at the same time as many paraprofessionals believe they are familiar with their SNT's weekly planning schedule. Information about students' learning objectives and what kind of learning activity to perform is given ad hoc to the paraprofessional, often whilst the students are informed. Even though there are difficulties in organising joint time for SNTs and paraprofessionals, it is stated as a strength that the work team representatives have different roles, can focus on different parts and can then take advantage of this. In the interviews some participants explained that the different occupational roles complement

each other with their different knowledge, which contributes to a holistic view of the student.

Being an educator and a caregiver

Both the interviews and the survey data point to the complexity of the paraprofessionals' occupation, role and assignments. In relation to students, they have a responsibility for educational activities and pedagogical decision making. They also have the main responsibility for a student's wellbeing, peer-to-peer relations and being accountable for more care orientated work tasks. The paraprofessional's work consists mainly of working closely with a student throughout the day: in the classroom, in recess and in the cafeteria – thus supporting the student in a variation of situations. Being a significant adult for the student and working with them each day means the paraprofessional's pedagogical decision making becomes important. Some of the paraprofessionals express that besides their direct work with students they also have other specific responsibilities to procure subs, make the schedules for the staff, order materials, and teach single subjects (such as music or arts). Although they always work closely with the students, they are expected to support them in their learning, and many have direct responsibility for teaching a subject. The survey results show that paraprofessionals' self-reported knowledge of content in the curricula varies.(Figure 2)

Most participants see the team's joint work as a resource that benefits all of the students. The collegial work is seen as a strength in relation to the student and that paraprofessionals and SNTs see different aspects of the students' learning and development. Participants also mention that students work and behave in different ways depending on which member of staff is closest to the learning situation. One benefit highlighted by the interviews is that the paraprofessionals follow the students throughout the school day. The paraprofessionals describe that they have responsibilities for their students in

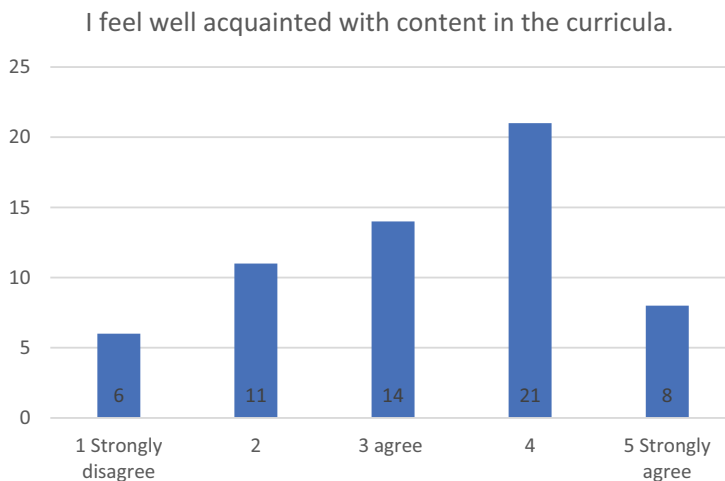


Figure 2. Paraprofessionals self-reported knowledge about content in the curriculum (N = 60).

other situations than in the classroom. That circumstance gives them a holistic picture of a student's learning during all activities in the school, not just the formalised ones.

Yes, but it is very important that you see the whole of the student, that is, their entire development everywhere and you listen to each other because we have different knowledge and we look at the student in different ways and in different situations. (PARA c)

There are statements that differ from the others and these indicate that the time for learning is not always seen throughout the school day. Content learned in a formalised lesson is sometimes seen as more important than learned in other situations and some paraprofessionals state that they contribute with a holistic understanding of the students' learning:

There are different SNTs [. . .] some just see the learning in the classroom and do not think that this time between leisure time is also a learning to be assessed. We can see that the knowledge is in other places than in the classroom. For example, the math: you can see traces of it when the student works in the wood craft lesson. (PARA b)

This statement points to the importance of recognising a student's knowledge in a subject in different contexts. Paraprofessionals follow students in all subjects with different teachers and have the potential to observe them learning and how knowledge is used in different situations. Both SNTs and paraprofessionals are needed in the team to ensure a student is guaranteed a valid and reliable formative assessment.

If you think about the formative assessment, this an ongoing assessment in everyday life all the time. When you are several staff members you see different things, you see different pieces, you contribute with different parts. If I was the one who assessed everything myself, [. . .] then it is just my eyes and my thoughts. If there are more people, you see more angles, I think. (SNT d)

This quotation highlights the importance of members in the team around the students' contributions in the formative assessment. In addition to tasks that are directly related to teaching, paraprofessionals have a variety of other tasks directly related to students' disabilities and their need for care. In the survey, the paraprofessionals provide examples of tasks they perform every day:

Nasogastric intubation, toilet/diaper change, providing medication, transfers between different aids/wheelchairs, assisting students to get dressed. (para 1)

Supports social interaction in recess, supports students' dressing, for example, in PE; ensures that students wash properly and dress in clean clothes, reminds students to wash hands after a visit to the toilet, support in school lunch cafeteria. (para 39)

The quotations pin down the variety and complexity of the paraprofessionals' work and where they are expected to be able to support students academically, but also support them in issues such as their social interactions in recess, hygiene and medical conditions. The results show that the paraprofessionals' role is an important contribution to a holistic view of the students' learning. On the other hand, there is a large variation in their knowledge on what content the students are supposed to learn. As a group, paraprofessionals also take on the main responsibility for activities outside of formal teaching. They are in recess with the students, provide medicine, help with toilet activities (such as changing diapers), mediate conflicts between students and help with nasogastric

intubation. The assignment may also include coordinating student journeys with the school bus and arranging subs when someone is absent, and in some cases making schedules for the paraprofessionals. Both the interviews and the survey provide instructions on the complexity and the various tasks that are part of paraprofessionals' work.

Lack of supervision for professional development

The data indicate a lack of support for paraprofessionals' professional development and few opportunities for them to be supervised by SNTs. Only 10% (N = 6) of survey respondents report they have access to supervision continuously.

One of the paraprofessionals clarified:

Our SENCO meets with me and another paraprofessional once every 14 days to help us design our support around our students. We discuss different arrangements and give each other feedback. The SENCO makes observations during lessons to see how we work. (Para 42)

Since SNTs are the ones expected to lead the work and have overall responsibility for planning, conducting teaching, assessment, and documentation, they need to guide and supervise the paraprofessionals. The lack of common time is an obstacle to being able to supervise and the supervision often becomes superficial when SNTs only provide feedback in connection with the teaching when the student is present. The lack of time is a dilemma for the SNTs who are unable to practice their skills in supervising; this requires supervision to be a continuous element in the team's preparation and evaluation. The interviewees believe it is important to have a respectful attitude in all forms of supervision, describing examples of both external and internal supervision. Engaging an external supervisor was mainly related to dealing with students' behavioural problems, while internal supervision was in the form of guidance from SNTs to paraprofessionals within the same team. One of the SNTs emphasised that external supervision at the start of the semester could be helpful because they were then completely new colleagues who formed a new team and needed support. In the interviews, paraprofessionals expressed what skills a supervisor should have:

A supervisor must be responsive and have both education and experience. It is good to have experience in mentoring someone, but you do not become a good supervisor overnight. Almost everyone needs guidance to be able to develop the work. (PARA e)

Participants believe that a good supervisor should have experience and a respectful attitude. SNTs do not consider themselves qualified interlocutors, nor are they considered qualified interlocutors by the paraprofessionals. SNTs must guide paraprofessionals on issues related to content in the curriculum and learning objectives, questions on assessment and student development. It became clear that newly hired paraprofessionals need guidance, and this is seen as a shared responsibility between the SNTs and more experienced paraprofessionals.

The paraprofessionals need an adjustment period to get into the way they work. They are thrown in and have no idea what they should be able to work with. It is everyone's responsibility when any new colleague starts with us. (PARA d)

Discussion

Our results revealed a large variety in paraprofessionals' experiences. It is remarkable to note that the time paraprofessionals report they spend with students and the responsibilities they have. Our results confirm the results in international research (Broer, Doyle, and Giangreco 2005; Symes and Humphrey 2011; Brock and Carter 2013; Martin and Alborz 2014; Saufley Brown and Stanton Chapman 2017), as both the interviews and the survey report a variation between no time at all up to three hours for cooperation around planning, assessments and supervision. Due to the complexity of teaching and assessing students progress, the variation in time for cooperation in the team is problematic. The assessment of students' progress is something that affects the entire team, not only the SNTs. The results demonstrate two stakes. First, there is not enough time for SNTs and paraprofessionals to prepare and evaluate their joint efforts for students' learning. Second, paraprofessionals have limited access to and limited time for supervision from SNTs or external supervision. Therefore, students with ID are expected to receive instruction and formative assessment from a varied and diverse group of paraprofessionals.

Anderson and Östlund (2017) reached a similar conclusion where ambiguity exists in the roles of different occupations. The results lead to similar conclusions where boundaries between the various occupational categories have faded, as paraprofessionals have an increasingly informal responsibility for pedagogical decisions, including direct instruction and formative assessment. For cooperation to work, good guidance is required for paraprofessionals, but also commitment and motivation in the group of paraprofessionals. It also turns out that there are partial opportunities for dialogue and educational conversations among the staff. However, time limitations for teachers and paraprofessionals become a barrier for cooperation and for student learning outcomes.

From the theoretical perspective of street-level bureaucracy, Lipsky (2010) has developed four main parts of the description over what constitutes a street-level bureaucrat in an organisation: 1) they work with people; 2) have great freedom of action; 3) unclear goals that the street-level bureaucrats are working towards; and 4) they often have too few resources at their disposal. In our results, it becomes clear that paraprofessionals are trapped between organisational conditions, unclear expectations and expanding discretion in meeting students. Lipsky (2010) believes that street-level bureaucrats are expected to be able to make balances and assessments based on each unique situation they encounter. Based on participants' accounts, our research suggests that they also feel a great influence over direct meetings with students. When there are no predetermined courses of action, formal rules or supervision guiding them, teaching is conducted on the basis of street-level bureaucratic subjective interpretation of a situation. This may explain that reviews of education for students with ID by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2010) indicate that the teaching places low demands on students and becomes more caring oriented than knowledge oriented (Swedish National Audit Office 2019). Another explanation is that the paraprofessionals lack of formalised pedagogical education and the lack of professional development for this occupational group.

Both SNTs and paraprofessionals point towards tensions in overall cooperation; from the paraprofessionals' point of view, they are sometimes feeling like being seen as the 'second team' compared to SNTs. On the other hand, they are also valued as competent enough to be a sub for the SNT. The SNTs point to the problem of paraprofessionals often

lacking a formal education, but in contrast they also highlight the importance of good cooperation and that paraprofessionals contribute with knowledge and student experiences. In a working cooperation, balance in the relationship is important as well as the staff working together to enable students to make use of transferability in knowledge acquisition. For students to succeed in school, persistent work teams are required, with the students' learning objectives in focus and that they strive for a holistic approach. For the cooperation to be favourable, common goals, functioning communication and planning time are central. Our results demonstrate this, and it emerges that respect is an important building block in relationship building among staff. This confirms Saufley Brown and Stanton Chapman (2017) study, which shows that hierarchical structures can damage teamwork unless paraprofessionals' participation and influence is encouraged. However, this is a matter of the paraprofessionals showing an interest in increasing the opportunity to participate. There is a risk that hierarchical structures will build up in the work team and damage the teamwork unless paraprofessionals' participation and influence are encouraged. The paraprofessionals have a multifaceted assignment where they work with knowledge-oriented tasks, but also social, medical and nursing tasks. This places great demand on them. All of these areas are important for a student's wellbeing and growth as a future citizen. The work with medical, social and nursing tasks are a prerequisite for the teaching environment to function properly.

It will need further research to replicate our results. However, some tendencies become visible. Due to the sampling strategy used, the results can only be applied to other groups with great caution. The samples is very limited in size, but the results from the questionnaire and the interviews are compatible and complement each other. The observed tendencies are valuable and could inspire future research.

Conclusion

Paraprofessionals are the occupational group who spend the most time with students during the school day and therefore become especially important for students' social and academic development. In the light of the street-level bureaucracy approach (Lipsky 2010), paraprofessionals work is between the organisation, SNT and student with the task of accommodating all parties. Paraprofessionals have the discretion to make their own pedagogical decisions in relation to the student, but with very limited support and resources. Paraprofessionals' time for co-planning with SNTs varies, leaving the paraprofessional to make decisions about teaching and assessment on their own with few possibilities for supervision. The paraprofessionals' perceived ambivalence can be a reaction to the fact that there are several contradictory values that they are expected to support. Due to conflicting values, Lipsky (2010) argues that the role of street-level bureaucracy is complex and difficult. The results lead to similar a conclusion, as Broer, Doyle, and Giangreco (2005) point to paraprofessionals being responsible for direct instructions and pedagogical decisions. The conflicting values place high demands on street-level bureaucrats' level of competence and responsibility. We conclude that paraprofessionals role is complex due to leeway and the demands on pedagogical decision making with a lack of policy and regulations steer their work. The importance of joint time for supervision, co-planning, and co-assessment (to reduce barriers developing) cannot be stressed enough. In view of the requirement since 2011 that teachers of students with

ID must have a special needs teacher's degree and supplementary education at an advanced level, questions are raised about paraprofessional education. As paraprofessionals have a comprehensive responsibility for both teaching and social development, the issue of their education needs to be addressed by policy makers as well as government and local officials. It is also the case that students with ID should be entitled to an education with highly skilled SNTs and paraprofessionals. Our results indicate that there are organisational barriers preventing paraprofessionals from developing within their profession. The lack of time for co-planning and co-assessment and non-supervision also becomes an obstacle to further development. Although the dilemmas described are related to the school's organisation, the issue is larger and needs to be addressed by both school authorities and policymakers. There is reason to believe, that, it is students with ID who will not make progress from a qualitatively worse teaching environment unless paraprofessionals are paid attention and receive support. Requirements for statutory planning time and supervision are two initiatives that would raise awareness of pedagogical decisions within the professional group. An increased focus on the group through training requirements, professional development programs and formalised education would probably contribute to the professionalisation and help that the group requires for joint time with SNTs for co-planning and co-assessment.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflicts of interest are reported by the authors.

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