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INCENTIVES TO IMPACT THE LONGEVITY OF URBAN SPECIAL EDUCATION PARAPROFESSIONALS

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INCENTIVES TO IMPACT THE LONGEVITY OF URBAN SPECIAL
EDUCATION PARAPROFESSIONALS

By

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

Educational Doctorate in Educational Administration

Major: Educational Administration

Under the Supervision of Professor Marilyn L. Grady

Lincoln, Nebraska

April 2020

INCENTIVES TO IMPACT THE LONGEVITY OF
URBAN PARAPROFESSIONALS

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University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2020

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Special education paraprofessional educators play an essential role in support of special education students from an academic and safety standpoint in public-school systems.

During several years, a Midwest, urban school district, awarded a tuition reimbursement incentive to 31 paraprofessionals through an application process coordinated by District Human Resource Office. In the Fall of 2019, after three years, 16 paraprofessionals remained in the program. The experiences of the paraprofessionals during the three years are presented through the findings of this study.

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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The paraprofessional role is essential to the success of special education students in their individual education plans, for student safety, social, behavioral, emotional well-being, and student learning. Constant continual vacancies in the paraprofessional role may require interviewing, hiring, and training processes to maintain adequate staffing levels. The hiring process demands time of the district and school administrators. Low paraprofessional retention rates suggest a critical need for the development of new retention approaches for special education paraprofessional educators.

The incentive tuition reimbursement program at one school district in a Midwest urban school district is described for the study. Twelve paraprofessionals received a tuition reimbursement for up to 15 college credits. The questions that guided the study focused on the subjects' experiences with the tuition reimbursement opportunity.

My interest in this topic is based on my professional work in the school district. The consistent turnover of paraprofessionals led to my interest in the topic of retention. An article by Reist indicated that pay increase is not sufficient to reduce paraprofessional turnover. The paraprofessionals union states, "Of the 815 paraprofessionals at a Midwest school district last year, more than half had been there two years or less. Moreover, 23 to 28 percent—had been there less than a year" (Reist, 2016b, para. 9).

Research evidence about the difficulties in retention of employees is evident (Tillery, Werts, Roark, & Harris, 2003). Funding impacts not only teachers but also the paraprofessionals in the school districts. Blalock (1991) described paraprofessionals as

essential to provision of services for special education students. In Kansas, statewide budget cuts led to challenges that included a reduction of paraprofessional hours. “Worst of all, two years ago the district was forced to cut paraeducators’ hours by five hours per week, leaving students without their help at the beginning and the end of the day” (Litvinov, 2015, para. 7).

Paraprofessionals, hourly and mostly part-time employees, may lack job security. The pay range is low and there is a lack of incentives. Ghere and York-Barr (2007) discussed how strategies on wages, job matching, support, and team culture could improve retention.

In this study, paraprofessionals responded to the issues of longevity, and retention rates. Districts throughout the United States choose different paraprofessional incentives. Frith and Mims, in *Burnout Among Special Education Paraprofessionals* (1985), reported the lack of career advancement. Only two states, Kansas and Louisiana, have formally accepted the career concept for special education paraprofessionals (Frith & Mims, 1985). “As a result, incentives for professional development are often minimal” (Frith & Mims, 1985, p. 225). Poor salaries were noted; “This problem itself may not be as serious as it initially appears, particularly as it relates to burnout. This is especially true if career ladder concepts are in effect” (Frith & Mims, 1985, p. 226).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine an incentive tuition reimbursement program at one Midwest school district. Paraprofessionals, who received the tuition reimbursement, were the participants in the study. These individuals were interviewed.

Research Questions

Two research questions were:

1. What have been the experiences of paraprofessionals who received the incentives?
2. How has the tuition reimbursement prepared the paraprofessionals to be career ready?

The single case study of a Midwest urban school district incentive program is a study of the program. The embedded unit of analysis are the individual paraprofessionals who received the tuition reimbursement incentive (Yin, 2014).

The study fills a gap in the literature related to the subject of special education paraprofessionals. Limited research about incentives for paraprofessionals and their retention exists (Reist, 2016a; Tillery et al., 2003). An example of one district's incentive is a small district of 2,700 students in Sequim, Washington that provides paraprofessionals with a maximum of 35 hours per employment year for district-approved training and coursework (Sequim School District, n.d.).

In response to the problem of retention, one district has provided an incentive of a college tuition reimbursement program. The program's purpose is to provide additional incentives to the paraprofessional package, as well as a small increase in pay.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

This literature review provides the context for a qualitative study of an incentive program implemented by an urban school district to recruit and retain highly qualified paraprofessionals and develop paraprofessionals career path. The literature review provides research related to paraprofessionals, as an employee group, perceptions of their roles, the need for their role in special education, responsibilities, concerns, incentives, and the need for school districts to retain highly qualified paraprofessionals in addition to building capacity for growth in their careers. The study focused on an urban school district, the use of incentives to improve paraprofessional retention rates and the paraprofessional's experiences in receiving the incentive.

The following sources for this literature review were: (a) electronic databases-ERIC through the University of Nebraska-Lincoln library systems, and (b) Google Scholar. The terms used for the searches were: paraeducator, teacher aide, special education para, special education assistant, retention of paras, roles of paras, paraprofessionals, inclusion of paraprofessionals in the classroom, and paraprofessional career ladders and incentives for paras.

Paraprofessionals

Paraprofessionals serve an important role in a PreK-12 setting in special and general education. It is important to understand the role they serve; and, why the role is essential to supporting students in education. Paraprofessionals serve students with significant academic, emotional, and behavioral needs. Blalock (1991) commented, "The

largest numbers of paraprofessionals are employed in special education and related programs, serving students with the greatest needs” (p. 201). Blalock (1991) provided an introduction to a paraprofessional:

Paraprofessionals are the primary service providers in a range of settings: preschool programs, school programs that range from mainstream to self-contained and from regular to special education, community-based and work-study instruction, postsecondary education programs, numerous adult service programs, and rural, suburban, and urban sites. (pp. 200-201)

She continued, “Effective use of paraprofessionals in special education and related programs has yielded many benefits” (p. 201). Other factors studied were collaboration with team members, lack of job descriptions, different expectations of job duties, use of paraprofessionals as substitutes for teachers, limited plan time with classroom teachers and paraprofessionals, and paraprofessionals not feeling valued in the workplace (Blalock, 1991, pp. 201-202). Paraprofessionals work in a range of settings assisting students with various disabilities and ages (Blalock, 1991). In those settings, there is evidence in the research that individuals in these roles do not feel valued. According to Blalock (1991), Special Education programs and services in the United States are due to Public Law 94-112 and to society’s emerging awareness of people with disabilities is not always matched because they do not work with the students’ and their needs. The need for paraprofessionals has expanded and so has the need to extend service delivery (Blalock, 1991, p. 200).

Paras not feeling valued or valuable was also evident in Giangreco, Edelman, and Broer’s (2001) article, “Respect, Appreciation, and Acknowledgment of Paraprofessionals Who Support Students with Disabilities.” The authors acknowledged

that there is not significant research behind what paras feel they need to have to be appreciated and accepted in their role. Giangreco et al. (2001) note research has been around topics such as “compensation, role clarification, training opportunities, supervision, and support” (p. 486).

A study was conducted in the state of Vermont, and the schools selected were based on being part of the same education system, for their history of inclusion, and “paraprofessionals support students with and without disabilities” (Giangreco et al., 2001, p. 487). In this mixed methods study, data were collected from 103 individuals who included 38 paraprofessionals. Participants in the study were both interviewed and observed. A topical interview guide was used with topics gathered from current professional literature about paraprofessionals (Giangreco et al., 2001). In the interview guide, the following was the basis for the interviews. The interviews addressed the following paraprofessional topics:

(a) acknowledging their work, (b) training, (c) hiring and assigning, (d) interactions with students and teachers, (e) roles and responsibilities, (f) supervision and (g) impact of paraprofessional support. A total of 51 hours of observation was conducted during 22 school visits, and seventy school personnel were directly observed. (Giangreco et al., 2001, p. 488)

Giangreco et al. (2001) found that “there were six themes present; (a) non-monetary signs and symbols of appreciation, (b) compensation, (c), being entrusted with important responsibilities, (d) non-instructional responsibilities, (e) wanting to be listened to, and (f) orientation and support” (p. 488). Symbols of appreciation could be a simple note of appreciation or a thank you in the hallway. The research showed that the paraprofessionals wanted this feedback with the teacher with

whom they worked the most—such as special education teacher—and not necessarily school administrators (Giangreco et al., 2001). This research examined what worked for paras who remained in their roles and the importance of retention of paraprofessionals to fill in the following missing gap in literature.

Retaining paraprofessionals who are satisfied with their work (a) allows in-service training resources to be used more effectively; (b) creates opportunities for teachers, special educators, and paraprofessionals to develop constructive working relationships; (c) allows school administrators to make strategic staffing decisions; and (d) provides continuity for students with disabilities and their families. (Giangreco et al., 2001, pp. 486-487)

The research focused on the implication of three items.

First, all team members share the same understanding and match what the roles are of the paraprofessional. Second, there is a match on the agreed roles and skills, and they have the skills and training to match — last, compensation. If paras are matched and trained, their compensation should align. (Giangreco et al., 2001, pp. 495-496)

The challenges reported were: implementation into practice, time for paraprofessionals to meet with classroom teachers to plan, agreed aspects matching of roles with student needs, and the time commitment to training (Giangreco et al., 2001). It will take a great deal of effort to plan and demand consistency across all special education teams in a school. Meeting these demands is very challenging from a professional standpoint. There are only so many hours to meet outside the classroom day, and funds are not available for the necessary training (Giangreco et al., 2001).

Giangreco et al. (2001) found in their literature review that Passaro, Pickett, Latham, and Hongbo (1994) reported paraprofessional shortages were attributed to the lack of respect, identified roles, low wages, lack of administrative support, and “limited opportunities for advancement” (Giangreco et al., 2001, p. 486). The study highlighted

the “importance of considering various aspects of respect, appreciation, and acknowledgment of paraprofessionals as important factors to attracting and retaining them.” (Giangreco et al., 2001, p. 486). Giangreco et al. (2001) reported “these data also suggest that respect and acknowledgment extends beyond a “pat on the back,” words or encouragement, or other symbolic gestures of appreciation” (p.486).

Giangreco and colleagues (2001) noted that paraprofessionals would not have the training or training as a teacher to; therefore, they will not be paid at the same rate. Also, Giangreco noted that if paraprofessionals want to be retained, they should be paid accordingly. Giangreco et al. (2001) stated that:

They deserve respect, appreciation, and acknowledgment in tangible ways such as appropriate role clarification, training, support, compensation, and opportunities for input in schools. It is in our collective best interest, particularly the interests of students, parents, and teachers, to ensure that paraprofessionals are not allowed to be or become the Rodney Dangerfield of public education. (Giangreco et al., 2001, p. 496)

Paraprofessionals are the service providers for students with special and general education needs in the schools. In their review of research, Giangreco, Suter, and Doyle (2010) noted that “Federal data indicate that as of 2005, approximately 390,000 special education teacher aids (the term used in federal reporting) worked in the field of special education” (p.41).

Giangreco and colleagues (2010) completed a review of research from 2000-2007 with 32 significant findings in nine topical categories. Active collaboration with paraprofessionals is a growing area of concern because of the special education needs in every classroom. Giangreco et al. (2010) stated: “recent studies reiterated findings from

earlier research, suggesting that it remains challenging for some schools to hire and retain a sufficient number of paraprofessionals with desired qualifications” (p. 44).

The findings from the research of Giangreco and colleagues (2010) were the following:

(a) hiring and retention of paraprofessionals, (b) training, (c) roles and responsibilities, (d) respect and acknowledgment, (e) interactions of paraprofessionals with students and staff, (f) supervision, (g) students’ perspectives on professional supports, (h) school change, and (i) alternatives to the use of paraprofessionals (Giangreco et al., 2010, p.41).

Fisher and Pleasants’ (2011) statewide survey study explored roles and concerns of paraeducators. They explore descriptive information regarding job situations of special education paraprofessionals across one state to determine the perceptions of roles along with current issues in the literature (Fisher & Pleasants, 2011, p. 288). “The survey was conducted in districts across one midwestern state” (Fisher & Pleasants, 2011, p. 289). It was targeted to spend time studying general education settings and actual para assignments such as one-on-one para assignments and group assignments. The survey addressed paraprofessional roles. Do the paraprofessional views of their roles change if they spend time in their general education settings? The survey had a 43% para response rate that included five key concern areas: “(1) lack of appreciation by others, (2) turnover of paraeducators, (3) insufficient expertise for roles required, (4) GE teacher less likely to interact with student who has IEP when paraeducator present, (5) paraeducator viewed as primary instructor for students with IEP rather than GE teacher. The highest rate of concern was the “lack of appreciation by others” (Fisher & Pleasants, 2011, p. 292).

Urban Paraeducator Goes to College, a study conducted by Wall, Davis, Winkler Crowley, and White (2005), was a statewide survey of the roles, and concerns of paraeducators. Paraeducators were accepted into a cohort called the ParaMet program. The program was put in place to comply with the paraeducator training required by IDEA of 1997 and NCLB of 2001. There were 70 applicants for 40 openings in the first two cohorts. According to Wall et al. (2005), "...the ParaMet admissions committee considered the applicants' scores on a standardized reading assessment, grade point averages (GPA), recommendations, interview results, and writing samples looking for indicators of solid work habits, high motivation, and academic potential" (p. 184). For the mixed method study, 39 participants indicated: this program was key reason to a potential answer to challenge of preparing and recruiting teachers for schools with the most need (Wall et al., 2005, p. 184).

The findings indicated that paraprofessionals needed more training in special education (Wall et al., 2005, p. 184). "The paraeducators identified their lack of formal training as their greatest challenge. A close second was their lack of preparation for handling the behavioral or emotional issues of their students... Others described their goals in professional terms, such as becoming certified teachers or special education teachers" (Wall et al., 2005, p.186). One of the recommendations based on the study was to "encourage the system to use salary increases and career advancement to recognize paraeducators who completed the ParaMet program" (Wall et al., 2005, p.189).

Paraprofessionals and Their Roles in Schools

The study completed by Suter and Giangreco in 2008 explored key indicators of special education service delivery based in 19 Vermont schools with 92 special educators and 36 administrators. The quantitative study design, included data collected from September 2006 to April 2007 from a purposeful sample. Special educators reported on their work with more than 100 students who were receiving support from one-to-one paraprofessionals in a general education classroom. The research questions focused on the following:

- (a) What are the caseloads of special educators, and how do they report using their time?
- (b) How many professionals do the special educators supervise, and how do the special educators report that these paraprofessionals use their time?
- (c) What are the characteristics of students with disabilities receiving one-to-one supports in general education, what are the reasons for such support, and who is instructing them?
- and (d) What are the perceptions of school administrators regarding the data collection and debriefing process used in the study as a means of reflecting on a special education service delivery. (Suter & Giangreco, 2008, p.83)

The findings indicated that special educators have fair to high caseloads; there are more paraprofessionals than special educators, more than half of paraprofessionals are assigned to one-on-one students (Suter & Giangreco, 2008, p.86-87). Paraprofessionals are assigned to students with disabilities. This raises concerns about free, appropriate public education, and suggests effective service delivery by paraprofessionals to be studied (Suter & Giangreco, 2008, p.92).

Giangreco, Broer, and Suter's study (2011), *Guidelines for Selecting Alternative to Overreliance on Professionals: Field-Testing in Inclusion-Oriented Schools*, "was a five-year multisite mixed-methods evaluation study chronicles the field-testing of the

planning process Guidelines for Selecting Alternatives to Overreliance on Paraprofessionals in 26 schools (Grades K-12) in six states” (Giangreco et al., 2011, p.22).

Evaluation of the utilization and outcomes of the guidelines process was based on data from 472 participants. The study researched the following questions:

1. Why did schools decide to utilize the GSA planning process? 2. How did schools rate themselves on 20 GSA self-assessment items? 3. What were the schools’ highest priorities, and what actions were taken? 4. How did the study participants rate the GSA planning process? 5. What impact did the GSA planning process have in the participating schools on service delivery, faculty, and students. (Giangreco et al., 2011, p. 24)

The findings highlighted the following:

(a) schools with widely varying characteristics successfully utilized the GSA process to assist in developing alternatives to the overreliance or inappropriate utilization of paraprofessionals, (b) individuals using the GSA process rated it favorably, and (c) implementation of GSA actions plans contributed to a variety of positive outcomes. (Giangreco et al., 2011, p.25)

The study was conducted because the use of paraprofessionals was increasing in schools. The study findings provided useful information on how schools can utilize paraprofessionals more effectively, with more than seven types of data collected in each of the schools such as demographics and the special education service delivery. The GSA process was found to be a useful tool in helping with the use of paraprofessionals (Giangreco et al., 2011).

Paraprofessionals Retention

Research on retention rates included:

Blalock (1991) reported that in 1984, 45% of the special education paraeducators surveyed had less than one year of experience, only 12% had more than two years

of experience, and no paraeducators had more than eight years of classroom experience. (Tillery et al., 2003 p. 119)

In this study, “interviews were conducted with 21 paraeducators. There were 12 who had left the position for another position or role in the district or left the district in the last two years (leavers) and nine who were employed and paid as paraeducators (stayers)” (Tillery et al., 2003, p. 119). Participants were from two school districts in the state of North Carolina. The sample was secured through the para organization for one district and personnel office from the other district (Tillery et al., 2003, p. 121). Telephone interviews tape recorded. There were 17 questions in the telephone questionnaire, that included demographics and questions such as: “Why did you take this job?” (Tillery et al., 2003, p. 121).

Data coding was completed, and themes were identified. The results indicated that paraeducators took the job for the love of children, working conditions, and flexibility in their schedule to work for their own families. Compensation and benefits were a concern for those who stayed (Tillery et al., 2003). Some paraeducators found new jobs: “Other participants reported they left the job because of working conditions including constant program changes, stress, and being required to drive a school bus” (Tillery et al., 2003, p. 123). The researchers noted: “Most paraeducators commented that their overriding reason they stayed was the love of the children” (Tillery et al., 2003, p. 124).

Ghere and York-Barr’s (2007) study focused on the issues of paraprofessional turnover and retention. There is limited data on the rate of turnover, because most districts do not keep track of that data. The districts continually complete the cycle of recruiting, interviewing, hiring, and training. As Ghere and York-Barr (2007) stated, “We

can no longer afford to ignore the hidden costs of paraprofessional turnover for programs, staff, and students” (p. 31).

The costs associated with an employee leaving an employer are significant. Costs related to hiring, interviewing, and training are high—not to mention the time invested in the process. Other “costs” associated include the impact on the workforce as they upload the work while the vacancy is filled. There is also a lost opportunity cost when people who are already part of the organization use this time to fill the position, resulting in lost time to complete other duties or work within the organization (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007, p.22). Solutions to help support the position during the transition or hiring period include hiring substitutes on a trial basis to help decide possible “future paraprofessionals.”

Ghere and York-Barr (2007) conducted a multisite case study of three mid-sized school districts. There were 53 participants in the study. “The study focused on the recruiting, screening, interviewing, district orientation, orientation checklist, district SE orientation, and job-embedded development” (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007, Table 3, p. 26). All districts were calculated with the estimated time for each new paraprofessional hire.

The retention of paraprofessionals is an essential and critical issue facing public school districts. Ghere and York-Barr’s (2007) study explored “on the issues of paraprofessional turnover and retention. Given the size of the paraprofessional workforce and the central role that these employees often play in education programs, the ramifications of turnover on students and entire programs are potentially enormous” (p. 21). Although urban administrators, human resource administrators, and district leaders try to find staff for the paraprofessional who stays more than 1 to 2 years, there is

limited data on the rate of turnover because most districts do not keep track of those data. Ghere and York-Barr (2007) research findings showed that “low wages and poor benefits were the primary reason for paraprofessional turnover” (p.28). Additional reasons for turnover were due to life events that occur normally, changing positions within the district, the stress of the role, and conflicts that occurred in the team. Future research may reveal that higher pay or incentives could change paraprofessionals view—but research has not been done on incentives given to employees and their impact on “wanting to stay” (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007, pp. 28-29).

The researchers looked not only at turnover but also the fulfillment of paraprofessionals. Ghere and York-Barr (2007) summarized how raising the salary is not necessarily the best thing. Future research may reveal that higher pay or incentives could change paraprofessionals view.

Roles and responsibilities are a recurring theme in the research on paraprofessionals (Fisher & Pleasants, 2011). The authors noted that there is an increase of paraprofessionals, how they are prepared for this role and invited to be part of education teams is essential. Research to understand what support is offered to paraprofessionals is scarce. Paras frequently work with the neediest students, with little to no training to support their roles. The low pay and retention rates are a recurring topic in research (Fisher & Pleasants, 2011). Fisher and Pleasants’ study included a survey that focused on paraprofessionals roles and responsibilities, issues in the literature relative to their work, and communication and cooperation from the administration, such as

attending individual education plan meetings (2011). The survey was conducted with 1,867 paraeducators across several school districts in one Midwestern state.

In an article in the “Lincoln Journal Star” from April 23, 2016, it was noted that the school district in Lincoln, NE had not escaped the difficulty of filling para positions. To help aid the retention rate, the district increased paraprofessional pay to help increase retention. Twenty-eight percent (28%) of the paraprofessional staff have been employed for less than a year. This incentive pay was considered and approved by the board to help retain and hire paraprofessionals in this urban school district (Lincoln Public Schools, 2016).

Summary

In summary, the literature affirms the value of paraprofessionals and the importance of their roles in school settings. The research indicates that paraprofessionals want to learn and/or continue up the career ladder. However, incentive programs for paraprofessionals have not been studied to understand their impact on retention and career growth. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to examine the experiences of a group of paraprofessionals who participated in a tuition reimbursement program offered by a school district.

CHAPTER 3 – METHODS

Rationale for Single-Case Study

Description and Rationale for Methodology Purpose

Literature has addressed the topics of paraprofessionals. Their desire for; an increase in pay, feeling part of the special education team, learning more of special education, role clarifications, orientation experiences, training, assignments, and supervisions were prominent in the literatures. The literature suggests that paraprofessionals are not sufficiently prepared for their work. A small number of studies documented positive outcomes from paraprofessional supports. These included being trained, not feeling like they were usurping the role of teachers, given feedback as well as strong support from administration and being entrusted with responsibilities.

The focus of this study was on an urban school district paraprofessionals' perception of their experiences and the impact on their role based on the district newly implemented tuition reimbursement incentive program. The single-case study design included interviews with incentive recipients in a public city/school district where they were employed. Denzin and Lincoln stated that research with participants in "their natural settings" is a hallmark of qualitative design (in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15).

Paraprofessionals from the urban school district who received the incentive were the source of reflected experiences of the paraprofessionals. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described characteristics of qualitative research, including having a goal of understanding, flexible and emergent design, and small sample size with richly descriptive findings (p. 20). This research focused on the experiences of

paraprofessionals, who accepted the tuition reimbursement incentive. Single case study approach was used for the study. I interviewed paraprofessionals to obtain their insights.

Reflexivity Statement-Positionality

The topic of increasing retention of paraprofessionals is of interest because of the direct impact it has on student learning. It is important to determine why paraprofessionals are short-term employees.

My experiences in education, working with paraprofessionals, sparked my interest in paraprofessional retention. The difficulties in retention of paraprofessionals and paraprofessional dissatisfaction with their roles is a significant issue. Districts are beginning to address the challenges of paraprofessional retention and to offer various approaches to address the problem. The intent of the study was to provide information about the tuition reimbursement incentive program; and to provide suggestions for improvement of the program.

The intent of the single case study was to explore the real-life paraprofessional experiences of the individual who received incentives beyond their salary (Stake, 1995). The aspects of the single case study included: the paraprofessionals participated in the study off site from their public-school special education off site from their work sites. The paraprofessionals were interviewed in a neutral location. The interviews were conducted face-to-face. I was able to observe how they behaved and acted during the interviews.

Studying paraprofessionals and focusing on the essence behind their life experiences as recipients of the tuition reimbursement incentive was an emphasis of the

study. Studying the benefits, the paraprofessionals earned in their paraprofessional role provided insight into their position. This study design was emergent. The qualitative design allowed changes or shifts during the data collection. Reflexivity was possible during the research due to my background and role at the district office. The roles I have held provided perspective during the study (Creswell, 2014).

My positionality as a supervisor of paraprofessionals had an impact on the conduct of the research and the analysis of the findings (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2018; Maxwell, 2013; Scotland, 2012). The role of a special education paraprofessional in the classroom is to assist students in their learning and with my understanding of the importance of paraprofessional retention has shaped by my experiences and background in education as well as from the lessons my Mom shared with me as a special education paraprofessional for more than 30 years. During the last 14 years, I worked with more than 60 special education paraeducators while serving in various teaching and leadership positions in different buildings within the same school district. As an individual education teacher, I often supervised 7 to 30 special education paraprofessionals each year. As an elementary level school administrator, I supervised 7-12 paraprofessionals each year who worked with individual education teachers. In 2019, I supervised 30 special education paraprofessionals in a secondary education setting. In these positions and roles, I observed the high turnover of special education paraprofessionals in this urban school district.

My story began when my Mom worked as a paraprofessional in my seventh-grade school. She loved her job as a paraprofessional and was passionate about the students she

worked with daily. Because the pay was low, she always had a second job to help pay the household bills. My Mom worked hard and loved her job. She still speaks fondly of her time as a paraprofessional. She is now retired.

Throughout the years, while I was teaching and becoming an administrator, it seemed that it became more challenging to retain paraprofessionals. I had not encountered, many paraprofessionals who have had longevity in the position of paraprofessional similar to the experiences of my Mom. Year-to-year, I interviewed multiple individual paraprofessional positions at the beginning of the school year. I also interviewed individuals throughout the year to fill paraprofessional positions. This experience was very different from childhood memories of my Mother's experience as a paraprofessional.

I started to question what had changed; and, why it appeared that the retention of special education paraprofessionals was low in the school district. I became interested in studying longtime special education paraprofessionals' retention in their positions. Based on my background and experience, I sought to discover methods and strategies to assure that public schools are working to retain special education paraprofessionals.

As a school administrator, I find that the time it takes to read, create interview questions, interview, and train special education paraprofessionals, while valuable and necessary, is time-consuming for all staff members. The time spent hiring, rehiring, and retraining paraprofessionals might be used on other administrative tasks that could solve the retention issues associated with paraprofessionals.

To disclose my possible biases, I provide the following information. As a teacher, I have a passion for paraprofessionals. Because I knew the paraprofessionals within the school district I studied, this may have had impact on the number of interviews I was able to conduct.

Because of my memories of my Mom's experiences, those memories may have been a bias in my study. To reduce potential study bias, I limited the study participants to special education paraprofessionals I did not know and whom I had not worked with as their supervisor.

Research Design

The research design was a single case study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The embedded unit of analysis for the research was paraprofessionals who received a college tuition incentive through the Midwest urban school district where they were employed. The focus of the study was an analysis of the incentive program and the paraprofessionals' responses to the incentive program. To understand the program, two data gathering methods were used. Paraprofessionals who received the tuition reimbursement were interviewed. Documents and information provided by the Midwest school district tracked the history of recipients of the retention incentive were reviewed.

Participants

The participants were individuals who received the incentive for tuition who are still in school earning their teaching certificate, and participants who may have received the reimbursement while in school but now served in the role of a teacher. Additional

participants may have resigned their paraprofessional roles or left their positions in the urban school district.

Unique sampling was used to identify paraprofessionals who received the incentive of tuition reimbursement. These individuals shared the unique tuition incentive receipt and paraprofessional attributes, “A unique sample is based on unique, atypical, perhaps rare attributes or occurrence of the phenomenon of interest” (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016, p. 97). This group of participants was unique. No other paraprofessionals in the district were included in the study.

The participants were paraprofessionals from a Midwest school district that served more than 41,000 students in grades Pre-K through age 21. I selected the Midwest school district because the district offered paraprofessionals a college tuition reimbursement incentive. The incentive was introduced to paraprofessionals in the Spring of 2017 and has continued during 2019-2020. Paraprofessionals completed an application process for consideration for the incentive. A committee selected the recipients of the incentive. Pseudonyms were used for interviewees. Years of service in the Midwest school district were not disclosed. I informed the participants that pseudonyms would be used at all times and any identifying information would not be shared (Merriam & Tisdell, 2006, p. 127).

Data Collection

For the single case study, I conducted one semi-structured interview (interview questions in the index) and included a mix of less structured questions to provide for flexibility as suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2016).

Individual Data

The interviews were one-on-one with each individual paraprofessional who agreed to participate in the study. The questions were designed to gather insights into the paraprofessionals' experiences based on receipt of the tuition reimbursement incentive. Identification of the value of the incentive to the recipients were the focus of the interviews. The opinions of the recipients related to their retention in the school district were a focus of the interviews as well. I conducted the interviews in a familiar environment, such as a comfortable and private area of a public location. The face-to-face interviews lasted between 15-30 minutes. As the researcher, I engaged in interpretative research that involved, sustained an intensive experience with paraprofessionals who received the incentive during the 2017- 2019 school years (Creswell, 2014, p. 187). The data from the 15-30-minute interviews provided information about the tuition reimbursement incentive program.

Documents

The documents are essential and important to data collection for this single-case study (Yin, 2014). Table 1 indicates specific documents that were helpful. The applications for the program for paraprofessionals were reviewed to gain information about the interviewees' educational background, longevity of employment, degree intention, and experiences in applying for the incentive program. The Midwest school district summary provided details of the program.

Table 1

Data

Data Item	Description
Interviews	Twelve semi-structured, one-on-one interviews (in appendix).
Sample	Unique sample (participants currently or have participated in the tuition reimbursement incentive)
Document Observations	Documentation on paraprofessionals' application and demographics provided and documented by district.

Data Analysis Methods

Data analysis was completed in steps. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommended a verbatim transcription of interviews since it “provides the best database for analysis” (p. 131). I read the field notes from the interviews and the transcriptions completed by the transcriptionist. I color highlighted the transcripts and made notes. The data analysis relied on plausibility, intuitive, and critical reflections. I aggregated the data into small themes (Creswell, 2014). I noted patterns in the interview data. The data were clustered to provide themes from the study “by grouping and conceptualizing objects that have similar patterns or characteristics” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p. 279). Coding and sorting provide units of meaning, capturing the commonalities of the experiences.

Reliability in Data Collection-Data Collection Strategy

To ensure reliability, the data collection strategy included comprehensive field notes, documents provided by the Midwest school district, and interview transcripts. I reviewed the transcripts I received from the transcriptionist for accuracy and consistency

(Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). Coding maintained its meaning, by comparing data consistently with categories. I clarified and documented bias in the field notes such as information shared with me during the face-to-face interviews and made notes to keep information confidential in the summary of findings (Creswell, 2014).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations for the research study were: to gain approval to interview from the urban school district office. Following approval, a permission letter to participate in the study was presented to secure a signature indicating informed consent. The interviews were conducted in a secure private location. An informed consent form was created. The participants were invited to sign the form granting permission for me to conduct the interview (see Appendix A).

The interviews were conducted in a secure, private reserved location. All data collected was kept confidential and will be destroyed per protocol described in the interview protocol section after final defense of the dissertation.

Interview Protocol

Data collection involved establishing a protocol for documenting and recording information from interviews and documents researched (Creswell 2014). In preparing to collect data for a case study, Creswell (2014) recommended the use of a protocol for recording information. The following interview protocol was used for the study (see Table 2).

Table 2

Interview Protocol

Protocol	Researcher Action
Location: Place/time	This was recorded on the audio recording. Room reserved before interview took place. Emails document location and time of interview. Phone calls will be made to invite if an email response is not returned. Up to three calls will be made for recruitment or reminders.
Permission for Research	IRB approval.
Questions—Semi-Structured	The semi-structured questions are prepared and written out on a Word document for the study.
Space between questions	Time is provided to give time to write, and write documentation on observations
Thank you	A verbal Thank you is given to the interviewee
Documentation log	A log was created in a notebook/folder for the researcher to write and document
Devices/prepped	A device was prepped and the researcher practiced use for audio recording of the interview.

Note. Adapted from Creswell (2014)

Summary

In summary, this chapter provided the positionality of the researcher, the description of the rationale, and the research questions that guided the study. The rationale for choosing a single case study was explained and how the paraprofessionals would serve as the embedded unit of study. The participant sampling method, data collection and analysis were described, how the study was approached and completed, and how potential ethical issues would be addressed.

CHAPTER 4 – FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter contains the results of the qualitative single case study conducted to answer the research questions:

1. What have been the experiences of paraprofessionals who received the incentives?
2. How has the tuition reimbursement prepared the paraprofessionals to be career ready?

This chapter includes analysis consistent with a qualitative single case study. The chapter includes the information collected from the application process of the tuition reimbursement incentive program for paraprofessionals in the Midwest school district. Additionally, the documentation of the tuition reimbursement program is provided. Tables in this chapter, summaries and categorize the data from interviews with paraprofessionals. The tuition reimbursement incentive program referenced in the study were based on the years, 2017, 2018, and 2019.

The Program

The application process for the tuition reimbursement program required the completion of an online application. Each applicant provided information about their current employment. An essay on future goals, professional references, and the *Gallup Organization TeacherInsight* assessment were required. The applicant's plans for future coursework and their years of service were documented. The individual's employment was in good standing at the time of the application with no concerns from the supervisors.

Conditions for participation required service of more than one year. Active appraisal feedback from supervisors was required. Applicants had to intend to pursue working toward a teaching certificate in order to be eligible tuition reimbursement program.

Sample

In Fall 2019, 119 paraprofessionals applied for the tuition reimbursement program. Thirty-one (31) were awarded the tuition reimbursement incentive. Table 3 illustrates the number of applicants and the number of awards for each academic year.

Table 3

Applications Received and Awarded

Year	Applications	Awarded
2017-2018	58	13
2018-2019	34	9
2019-2020	27	9
Totals	119	31

The school district provided contact information for the 31 individuals who received the incentives. Seven (7) of the paraprofessionals who received the incentive were no longer employed by the school district. Thus, no contact information was available for these individuals.

The remaining 24 participants were invited to participate in the study. Three (3) emails and follow-up calls to the participants. Twelve (12) individuals participated in this study. Participants were current or past recipients of the tuition reimbursement incentive. In Fall 2019, 11 participants remained employed at the Urban Midwest school district.

One participant left the district during the study. Table 4 provides a list of the 12 participants, their roles and status.

Table 4

Status of Incentive

Para	Current Role	Status of Receiving the Incentive:
Para 1/Patricia	Paraprofessional	Yes
Para 2/Kathleen	Teacher	No, graduated with teaching endorsement.
Para 3/Tina	Other Classified Role	No, not in a paraprofessional role
Para 4/Sara	Paraprofessional	Yes.
Para 5/ Julie	Paraprofessional	Yes
Para 6/ Sammy	Paraprofessional	Yes
Para 7/ Debbie	Paraprofessional	Yes
Para 8/Clara	Teacher	No, graduated with teaching endorsement
Para 9/Sylvia	Other Classified Role	No, not in a paraprofessional role. Left school district.
Para 10/Nicole	Teacher	Yes, still working on teaching endorsement
Para 11/Max	Paraprofessional	Yes
Para 12/Mary	Teacher	Yes, still working on teaching endorsement.

Data Collection

Twelve (12) participants in the tuition reimbursement incentive were interviewed. These individuals were the source for this research single case study. After each interview, a transcriptionist transcribed the interviews. I coded the transcripts for themes and patterns. The documentation provided by the school district included additional information about the program.

As of Fall 2019, of the 12 interviewed, 4 participants no longer received benefits of the tuition reimbursement program because of the following reasons: (a) completed their teacher endorsement program, (b) no longer worked for the school district, or (c) accepted another assignment in the district.

Table 5 shows the summary of the incentive program outcomes. The findings indicate there was a 50% retention rate in the program. Table 5 indicates that there was a 9.1% teacher assignment success rate through the program. The number of applicants awarded and accepted have decreased since the first year in the program.

Data and Analysis –Open Coding

There were several findings based on research questions. The purpose of this case study was to describe the experiences of paraprofessionals who received the incentive for tuition reimbursement. The intent was to document the paraprofessionals' experiences in the school district. Twelve (12) interviews were transcribed. The responses were coded. Transcripts were color-coded based on those themes. Yellow for career ladder growth, pink was coded for communication. Orange for the application process, green for costs associated with education, blue for cadre/mentor, purple for college plans, and pink dots for encouragement. The coding resulted in 6 themes. Table 6 provides a summary of the themes. Pseudonyms were used for participants in the research study. Table 6 represents each paraprofessional and the themes from coding.

Table 5

Incentive Program Outcomes

Year	Awarded	In Program	Accepted Teaching Assign. w/ provisional certificate ¹	Accepted Teaching Assign. ²	Withdrew	Reason for Withdrawal
2017-18	13	2	1	2	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 completed the program • 2 elected to withdraw • 2 resigned • 1 accepted an office position • 1 change of status • 1 accepted a tech assignment
2018-19	9	5	1	0	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 left education • 1 accepted teaching assignment • 2 resigned
2019-20	9	9	-	-	-	TBD
TOTAL ³	31	16 (51.6%)	2 (9.1%)	2 (9.1%)	11 (50.0%)	

Notes. Data compiled from documents and information provided to researcher from district.

¹ Individuals accepting teaching assignment w/provisional certificates remain eligible for incentive.

² Teachers accepting teaching assignments w/out provisional certificates are no longer eligible for incentive.

³ Totals for accepted teaching assignments with and w/out provisional certificates and withdrawals do not include 2019-20 awardees since the academic year has not been completed.

Table 6

Data Analysis/Coding

Para	Current Role	Themes present from coding:
Para 1/Patricia	Paraprofessional	Career ladder growth. Communication, application process, costs associated with the education, college program choice.
Para 2/Kathleen	Teacher	Career ladder growth. Communication, application process, costs associated with the education, mentorship/support, college program choice.
Para 3/Tina	Other Classified Role	Career ladder of growth, Communication, application process, costs associated with the education, mentorship/support, college Program choice
Para 4/Sara	Paraprofessional	Career ladder growth, Communication, application process, costs associated with education, mentorship/support.
Para 5/ Julie	Paraprofessional	Career ladder growth, communication, application process, costs associated with education, mentorship support
Para 6/ Sammy	Paraprofessional	Application process, costs associated with education, mentorship/support, college program choice
Para 7/ Debbie	Paraprofessional	Communication, application process, costs associated with education, mentorship/support, college program choice
Para 8/Clara	Teacher	Costs associated with education, mentorship/support
Para 9/Sylvia	Other Classified Role	Career ladder growth. Communication, application process, costs associated with the education,
Para 10/Nicole	Teacher	Career ladder growth. Communication, application process, costs associated with the education, mentorship/support
Para 11/Max	Paraprofessional	Career ladder growth. Communication, application process, costs associated with the education, mentorship/support, college program choice.
Para 12/Mary	Teacher	Career ladder growth. Communication, application process, costs associated with the education, mentorship/support.

Coding Results

The coding results provide information to help summarize the themes that answer the research questions:

1. What will the retention of paraprofessionals be who receives incentives such as tuition reimbursement?
2. What is the likelihood the paraprofessionals will remain in the Urban school district after completion of college?
3. How has the tuition reimbursement incentive prepared them to be teacher career ready?

The intent was to document the paraprofessionals' experiences at a Midwest urban school district. Pseudonyms were used for participants. Six themes emerged from the coding:

1. Participants wanted to be teachers and see themselves as career ladderers within the Midwest school district. Participants wanted to stay in the district and wanted to be hired as teachers. Participants were dedicated to the program, the schools they worked in, and their current school administrators.
2. Participants would like improved communication with the district regarding the incentive tuition reimbursement program. Participants feel they earn it; but, they don't hear much follow up from the school district.
3. The participants had a favorable view of the application process; although they thought it was a lot of information to request.

4. Participants want a better understanding of possible local college programs that will fit their work schedule as a paraprofessional. They would like this information before applying, so that they have a firm idea of how to student teach.
5. Participants would like to have a mentorship/support on their path from the program while receiving the tuition reimbursement incentive. They want to have a mentor or be part of some mentorship while being part of the program.
6. Participants were pleased with the amount they received for tuition reimbursement from the Midwest school district. The participants indicated managing to pay for college while waiting for compensation was challenging. “They could always use more”; but again, grateful for the amount they received.

Career Laddering

Career laddering is a term to describe what participants in the incentive tuition reimbursement program see themselves work towards in earning their teaching certificate. Several participants captured the idea of career laddering. One shared what they want to do as a professional.

I wanna be a school counselor. I wanna teach for a couple of years before, just so I have some experience in the classroom and what the students go through, in order for me to be able to be a counselor and be like okay. I’ve been through that, I’ve seen it. (Patricia)

Another participant in the study who is currently a teacher now, still sees her potential for growth in the role. She was pleased to be teaching and was thrilled to have

a role in the school district. “Right now, I just am wanting to stay in my role as a teacher and just grow in that” (Kathleen).

A past participant of the tuition reimbursement who is now in another role hopes for career ladder growth and wants to stay in the district.

By May, I’ll have my provisional in Special Ed, Secondary. U . . . and then I hope to slow down and get my Master’s and just finish that and be a case manager while my youngest is at West Compass High School. And then I would really like to work for the district, and just work for the dual diagnosis, or unique cases. (Tina)

Another recipient of the tuition reimbursement also shared plans for career ladder growth; but, is unsure what grade level. She wants to teach. “an early childhood educator, I don’t know, not sure ideally, if would be in preschool or, kindergarten and first. Anywhere under grade 3” (Sara). “A paraprofessional applicant knew what she wanted to do for her education. I would like to be a school counselor. I’m not sure yet at what level. I’m hoping to get a certified in K-12” (Julie).

Communication

Communication was the term that was common among the participants. For instance, participants would like improved communication with the district regarding several aspects of the incentive tuition reimbursement program. Some communication was apparent during the application process; but after being chosen for the tuition reimbursement incentive, participants articulated the need for improved communication. All participants interviewed mentioned communication could be improved.

A participant in the program expressed how she did not receive a response when requesting information and had a question.

I did ask Kim, or I emailed her, because I haven't been at College, but I am still at local community college. I emailed Lisa or Betty, and asked if just doing one class counts not as a full-time student. Would Midwest school district pay for that, or if I just have to do it out of a pocket. Which is fine. And I never got an email. (Patricia)

Parts of the process were unclear to the paraprofessionals; specifically, how to turn in the request for reimbursement.

I don't know if I'm going to get a reimbursement. Because, if I pay with a student loan first, I don't have \$1,500 just sitting in my pocket at home. I need to know if I am going to recoup that money through the para reimbursement program. Does that make sense? (Debbie)

Another interviewed conducted with another participant had some similar comment. When asking the participant, what could the school district do for the paraprofessionals who receive the incentive to make them more successful in their professional roles? "I think reaching out giving feedback would be helpful. I feel like I had to reach out several times and it takes a while for a response. And that can be frustrating" (Sara).

A paraprofessional found out about being accepted into the program from the researcher. A paraprofessional did not receive the letter from the school district. The paraprofessional was pleased she had been accepted into the program. She would have liked to receive the information from the Midwest school district.

Application Process for Paraprofessional Incentive

Participants found the application process for the incentive to be favorable; but it required time to gather all the information the Midwest school district requested in the application. Research participants were asked to find older information, such as transcripts and records. As part of the paperwork, they were asked for references and

were required to complete assessments provided online by Human Resources.

Participants in the program found out about the program in several ways that included, email, job postings, through word of mouth, or encouragement from an administrator.

One applicant found the process to be easy. The individual found the essay or writing piece easy to complete. There were just a few things that the paraprofessionals felt were daunting. “And the only thing that was kind of demanding was asking my supervisor for a recommendation” (Patricia).

Another paraprofessional (Kathleen) felt the process was easy. “It was pretty easy. A few application questions were why you would like to do it. After completing the application, it was pretty easy to show I had made progress and that I was taking these classes” (Kathleen).

Another applicant felt applying for the program was just like applying for a job at the district.

You go online, and fill an application. The hardest part was finding my old records from 1992. The hardest part was digging up some of those old transcripts that showed that yes, I have a degree; I’m just a non-traditional student trying to go back to school. (Tina)

Another paraprofessional, who applied for the program, stated it was straightforward. “I had to give them a transcript of my bachelor’s degree. I think another thing I had to do was give them a list of potential classes I would need to finish my program” (Julie).

Paraprofessionals were informed about the tuition reimbursement incentive, through other paraprofessionals who were talking about it. They recalled the first time heard of it was from “snooping” around on the job listings. “So I viewed the tuition

reimbursement post, and I asked at my school if any had participated, which I think now there's 2 of us" (Max).

A paraprofessional recalled the application as lengthy and pretty intensive. But she could not remember all the steps of applying for the tuition reimbursement incentive. Some paraprofessionals thought it was an intensive and lengthy process.

So, I don't remember the exact steps anymore, because it's been a couple of years. I do remember thinking that it was pretty intensive. I think had to submit transcripts. I know that there was a lengthy application. I know I had to write a couple of short mini papers or something about why I wanted to participate and why I would be good candidate, and what I plan to do. (Sylvia)

A paraprofessional did feel the process of applying for the incentive was challenging. The paraprofessionals' had to share their future program of study when applying for the incentive. "I really have to know all the courses that I am going to take. That was challenging. Now, I understand the reasoning behind it" (Debbie).

Overall the process as mentioned, was favorable, just more of the application process that included the information on colleges was most challenging.

Paraprofessionals Attendance at College

The paraprofessionals were challenged in strategizing how to maintain paraprofessional roles while attending college. A specific concern was how to arrange student teaching. Another concern, would community college be eligible for the tuition reimbursement incentive? "Would the Midwest school district pay for it or would the participant have to pay out of pocket?" (Patricia).

One participant wanted to participate in the incentive program to prepare to be a case manager. However, the local university wanted to place her on the track to be a

principal. She had no interest in being a principal because she was a single parent with five children at home. Instead, she enrolled in another state college to prepare for being a case manager; however, the school district was unable to fund her because she had changed positions. Another participant was interested in the incentive program. However, the challenges in the teaching preparation program are in conflict with public school daily schedules. If the college courses during the day are Monday-Friday it is impossible for them to attend the classes and to keep their job. The incentive is alluring but the feasibility is absent. There may be other colleges in the evening or on-line however the local college has their classes during the day; it is a barrier to using this incentive.

Another paraprofessional shared his ups and downs with the process of trying to find the right college to finish his teaching credentials. He made several attempts to find the right place to finish a teaching certificate. There was a local college that offered online courses that would fit with the paraprofessionals' schedule.

Another paraprofessional spoke about the process of trying to make plans of possibilities of what schools she could go to; and, how the decision needed to be known to apply for the application and incentive. She did not know what school she wanted to go to. She was unfamiliar of the choices she could attend.

Mentorship and Support

Participants in the incentive tuition reimbursement program needed mentorship and support to be successful. One participant said she would have liked to receive feedback on her performance while she was in the program.

Another response based on the same question; What could the school district do for the paraprofessional who receive the incentive to make them more successful in their professional role? Another participant said she would have like to have a mentor. The paraprofessionals interviewed for this incentive program wanted to have some awareness for other resources such as trainings. “They would love to know more about how the district does things. I would love to know more of the district’s policies and procedures” (Julie).

Another paraprofessional said it would have helped to have questions answered. It comes back to having someone who can mentor that you can call. Debbie said that it would it would be helpful to have somebody answer all those little questions. She did not know who that would be.

Another paraprofessional interviewed also mentioned that mentorship of some sort would be very helpful. Another paraprofessional mentioned that it might be helpful if the paraprofessionals’ were partnered with a teacher or someone in the district who is overseeing the program to get feedback about on how they are doing.

Costs of Education

Costs of education was a topic mentioned by the participants. Each Paraprofessional mentioned the cost of education. One paraprofessional was new and was not sure on how much her tuition would cost, so she did not know. Another paraprofessional mentioned that it depended on how much tuition reimbursement they would receive. Other paraprofessionals were able to share a specific amount of money

they received for a reimbursement. Another paraprofessional said they appreciate the support that they are receiving. It made them feel valuable.

Paraprofessionals were often unsure about the costs associated with college attendance. Many of the participants indicated that if at least half of the tuition was paid it would be a great benefit. Julie indicated that having half the tuition reimbursement would be nice. The paraprofessionals' were looking ways to get their degrees with less student loans. Each of the paraprofessionals' talked about the cost burden of their families on college attendance. One participant said having the incentive will make it easier for her to finish her degree. It allows her to have less burden. When she received the incentive, she said it was a big relief. It made the paraprofessional feel the district was invested in her, and she was willing to work harder. The paraprofessionals' were appreciative in receiving the tuition reimbursement incentive. The paraprofessionals' described the costs associated with attending college and mentioned the costs such as fees and books and were pleased the tuition reimbursement covered some of those costs. Three of the paraprofessionals mentioned the length of time it took to receive the reimbursement from the school district. Another paraprofessional noted that they will have less debt because of the tuition reimbursement incentive.

Additional Findings

The following topics were introduced by the study participants:

1. The process for turning in forms for reimbursement from taking the courses should be clarified.

2. The amount of tuition reimbursement the applicant will receive each quarter should be specified.
3. Paraprofessionals were pleased to be in the program. They felt they were being recognized for their roles. One participant mentioned it was a “feather in her hat.”
4. Participants in the incentive program were good students in HS and were even better students in college.
5. Participants knew their long-term goals. They all wanted to be teachers and earn their degrees.

CHAPTER 5 – IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of the study was to examine an incentive tuition reimbursement program at one Midwest school district. Paraprofessionals, who received the tuition reimbursement, were the participants in the study. These individuals were interviewed.

Research Questions

The findings from this research may be helpful to school districts who want to address their paraprofessional and teacher shortages. The information will be helpful to Universities and colleges who seek to assist non-traditional students in achieving teacher certification.

Limitations of the Study

There were a few limitations of the study throughout the research, which is essential to note. One imitation was in the recruitment of paraprofessionals limited access to computers and emails. Telephone calls were more productive in the recruitment process. An additional limitation was the unique sample size. There were fewer individuals who met the study criteria than originally anticipated.

Mentorship/Cadre Connection

After carefully coding and looking for themes, the idea of creating a Cadre and mentorship emerged. A cadre will be beneficial to the group of paraprofessionals who have received the tuition reimbursement incentive through the Midwest school district. Creating a cadre with the recipients might help them gain input on training and feedback on how to better the role of the paraprofessional. It could also create opportunities for them to learn about the district and prepare them for their teaching roles. A cadre such as

this, led by administrators and teachers, every other month or one time per quarter during the school year, could help increase retention and interest in the incentive program. This would also provide additional and further training to the paraprofessionals who are already receiving the incentive.

Each session, the paraprofessionals who received the incentive tuition reimbursement could have supports and mentorship from different departments within a public school. Topics focused on being a first-time teacher, hearing from first-time teachers, and teachers in the program itself would be helpful. Creating this Cadre/mentorship group would allow them to be with like members who they could lean into for support and mentorship. Another idea is to establish mentorships. The paraprofessionals who were already teachers would make great mentors for those that are new to the program and are not yet teachers.

Communication

Following are some recommendations for improved communication with the paraprofessionals. First, during the recruiting process, paraprofessionals had limited access to technology. The paraprofessionals often had difficulty accessing email because they didn't have computers. Based on this research, providing a Chromebook, or an iPad to the paraprofessionals to begin to prepare them for the technology piece of teaching in a public school in 2020 would be beneficial.

The lines of communication that pertain to the work of paraprofessionals need to be clarified. These lines of communication may vary from paraprofessional to supervisor, paraprofessional to school, paraprofessional to district. A flow chart of the

communication needs to be prepared to help the paraprofessionals understand how to obtain information. A session prior to the paraprofessionals applying would be beneficial to future applicants. This would allow them to understand the application process, steps to complete the process, and how the incentive program would work.

Future Research

The three years study of the incentive program provided valuable information. Future research about the program will add to that information because there will be a new set of individuals who will have received the new incentive.

This will provide additional information about retention and career laddering. Additional future research examining whether the paraprofessionals feel part of a team. Also, examining the professional development provided to the paraprofessionals would be useful for future research.

Participants that were interviewed were dedicated and wanted to stay in the urban school district long term. The participants in the study indicated that they appreciated the mentorship they received and would value additional mentorship from experienced teachers in the district.

The findings from the research will be necessary for practice when providing an incentive such as the tuition reimbursement incentive the Midwest school district implemented for paraprofessionals. This program, through this research, will allow achieving the findings and provide some possible solutions and recommendations in making the practice of a tuition reimbursement incentive program implemented with success. The research and suggestions will help other school districts who want to work

on the retention and career ladder building of paraprofessionals, and this research will serve as a guide.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Informed Consent

Appendix A: Informed Consent

IRB #: 19604

Title: Incentives to Impact the Longevity of Urban Professionals

Authorized Study Personnel:

Tonya Jolley, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Primary Investigator

Dr Marilyn Grady, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Secondary Investigator

Researcher Contact Information:

Phone: 402-202-1151

Email: tonyajolley3@gmail.com

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The box below highlights key information about this research for you to consider when making a decision whether or not to participate. Please carefully consider this information and the more detailed information provided below the box. Please ask questions about any of the information you do not understand before you decide whether to participate.

Key Information to Consider
Volunteer Consent: You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There will be no penalty or loss to benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation.
Purpose: The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the incentive tuition reimbursement program at one school district.
Duration: It is expected that the participation will last 30-40 minutes.
Procedures and Activities: You will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview. For this study, your name and all identifying information will be not be revealed in the report. The use of pseudonyms will be used for your confidentiality. I will share with you any new information that may affect your willingness to continue participation in this research. You will be provided a copy of this consent form.
Location: The coffee shop where the interviews will take place is at the following: Rock 'n' Joe Coffee-5025 Lindberg Street, Lincoln, Nebraska 68516. A private room will be reserved.

Invitation

You are invited to take part in this research study. The information in this form is meant to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

Who is conducting this research?

The researcher, Tonya L. Jolley, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, is asking consent to this research.

Why are you being asked to be in this research study?

You are being asked to be in this study because you are a participant in the school district's paraprofessional tuition reimbursement program.

What is the reason for doing this research study?

This qualitative research will examine the incentive tuition reimbursement program at one school district. You are being asked to participate because you have been admitted to the program. About 20 people will take part in this research.

What will be done during this research study?

Your participation will include one interview and will not take longer than 40 minutes. You will be tape-recorded for this study with the data secured at all times.

How will my data be used?

Information collected for this research will be used to examine paraprofessionals perceptions as participant in the school district's paraprofessional tuition reimbursement program. This data may be used to share with the school district, journal articles and conference presentations.

What are the possible risks of being in this research study?

There are no known risks to you from being in this research study.

What are the possible benefits to you?

You are not expected to get any benefit from being in this study.

What are the possible benefits to other people?

The future advancement in knowledge about incentives for paraprofessionals.

What will this research study cost you?

There is no cost to you to be in this research study.

Will you be compensated for being in this research study?

There will be no compensation for your participation in this study.

What should you do if you have a problem during this research study?

Your welfare is the major concern of every member of the research team. If you have a problem as a direct result of being in this study, you should immediately contact one of the people listed at the beginning of this consent form.

If you have a problem or experience harm as a direct result of being in this study, you should immediately contact one of the people listed at the beginning of this consent form.

If needed, seek immediate emergency care for this problem. Please note, it is the policy of UNL not to pay for any required care. Agreeing to this does not mean you have given up any of your legal rights.

How will information about you be protected?

Reasonable steps will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your study data. The data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the investigator's office and will

only be seen by the research team during the study and for 1 year after the study is complete.

The only persons who will have access to your research records are the study personnel, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and any other person, agency, or sponsor as required by law. The information from this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported as group or summarized data and your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

What are your rights as a research subject?

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study.

For study related questions, please contact the investigator(s) listed at the beginning of this form. For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB):

Phone: 1(402)472-6965

Email: irb@unl.edu

What will happen if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start?

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study (“withdraw”) at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason.

Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

Documentation of informed consent

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to be in this research study. Signing this form means that (1) you have read and understood this consent form, (2) you have had the consent form explained to you, (3) you have had your questions answered and (4) you have decided to be in the research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Participant Feedback Survey

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln wants to know about your research experience. This 14-question, multiple-choice survey is anonymous. This survey should be completed after your participation in this research. Please complete this optional online survey at: <http://bit.ly/UNLresearchfeedback>.

Participant Name:

(Name of Participant: Please print)

Participant Signature:

Signature of Research Participant

Date

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol Form: Incentives to Impact the Longevity of Urban Professionals

Date: _____
 Time: _____
 Location: _____
 Interviewer: _____
 Interviewee: _____
 Consent Form Signed? _____

Notes to Interviewee:

Thank you for your participation. I believe your input will be valuable to this research and in helping grow our professional practice. Confidentiality of responses is guaranteed.

Approximate lengths of interview will be 20-30 minutes with 15 questions.

Purpose of research

The purpose of this study is to examine the incentive tuition reimbursement program at one school district. The embedded unto for the study is paraprofessionals who received the tuition reimbursement and learn if this is impacting their longevity in the district.

Questions that guide the study will examine the tuition reimbursement incentive and impact of professional longevity in the district. The results of this study could be impactful to districts who implement incentives for paraprofessionals.

Questions:

1. What is your education level?
2. What is your current role?
3. How long have you worked for the school district?
4. In what year did you receive the incentive?
5. How were you informed about the tuition reimbursement incentive program?
6. Were you encouraged to apply for the incentive tuition reimbursement?
7. Describe the process of applying for the tuition reimbursement program?
8. What do you think is a reasonable amount for the tuition reimbursement?

9. What are your long-term goals as a professional?
10. What could the school district do for the paraprofessionals who received the incentive to make them more successful in their professional roles?
11. How academically successful were you in HS? How academically successful are you in college?
12. How does the incentive you received help you as a professional in the district?
13. Had you planned to go to college before you received the tuition reimbursement incentive?
14. How has the incentive accelerated your career?
15. How will this incentive for paraprofessionals help keep us build the district?

Closure: Thank you for your time. Again, confidentiality of your responses is guaranteed.

Tonya Jolley

Appendix C

Email Template

Appendix C: Email Template

IRB #: 19604

Title: Incentives to Impact the Longevity of Urban Professionals

Authorized Study Personnel:

Tonya Jolley, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Primary Investigator

Dr Marilyn Grady, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Secondary Investigator

Researcher Contact Information:

Phone: 402-202-1151

Email: tonyajolley3@gmail.com

Dear Participant,

My name is Tonya Jolley. I am a doctoral student in the Education Administration department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study for my dissertation work about the incentive tuition reimbursement program you received through your school district. You are eligible for this study because you are currently or have been a participant in this program.

Participation in this study will take no longer than 30 minutes and will be a one-on-one interview. Participation will take place in a local coffee shop in a reserved space. I obtained your contact information from the list of participants who are part or have been part of the tuition reimbursement incentive program.

I would like to audio record your interview. I will use the information to understand your experiences as a paraprofessional who received the tuition reimbursement incentive. Your responses to this interview will be kept confidential. The data will be stored in a secure place and destroyed once the research is complete.

I am also a coordinator at Lincoln Public Schools for our transition program. I ask that if we work together, you decline to be interviewed. Remember, participation in the

study is voluntary, and will not impact or damage any relationships if choose to not participate.

There are no risks associated with this research. You can choose to participate in the study or not participate in the study. If you are willing to participate in this study, please reply to this email so that we can set a day and time for the interview.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Tonya Jolley
Tonyajolley3@gmail.com
(402) 202-1151

Dr. Marilyn Grady
mgrady1@unl.edu
(402)472-0974

Appendix D

Email Template Reminder

Appendix D: Email Template Reminder

IRB #: 19604

Title: Incentives to Impact the Longevity of Urban Professionals

Authorized Study Personnel:

Tonya Jolley, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Primary Investigator

Dr Marilyn Grady, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Secondary Investigator

Researcher Contact Information:

Phone: 402-202-1151

Email: tonyajolley3@gmail.com

Dear Participant,

This email serves as a reminder of a recent invite you received over email in the last few weeks. My name is Tonya Jolley. I am a doctoral student in the Education Administration department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study about the incentive tuition reimbursement program you received through your school district. You are eligible for this study because you are currently a participant in this program. Participation in this study will take no longer than 30 minutes and will be a one-on-one interview. Participation will take place in a local coffee shop in a reserved space. I obtained your contact information from the list of participants who are part of the tuition reimbursement incentive program.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be contacted to schedule and provided the location and time for the interview. I would like to audio record your interview. I will use the information to understand your experiences as a paraprofessional who received the tuition reimbursement incentive. Your responses to this interview will be kept confidential. The data will be stored in a secure place and destroyed once the research is complete.

Remember, participation in the study is voluntary. There are no risks associated with this research. You can choose to participate in the study or not participate in the study. If you are willing to participate in the study or have any questions about the study, please email or contact me via the information listed below.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Tonya Jolley
tonyajolley3@gmail.com
(402) 202-1151

Dr. Marilyn Grady
mgrady1@unl.edu
(402)472-097

Appendix E

Transcriptionist Confidentiality Statement

Appendix E: Transcriptionist Confidentiality Statement***Blank Transcriptionist Confidentiality Statement:***

I, _____ (Name of transcriptionist) agree to hold all information contained on audio recorded tapes/ and in interviews received from _____, (Name of PI) primary investigator for _____, (Name of the project) in confidence with regard to the individual and institutions involved in the research study. I understand that to violate this agreement would constitute a serious and unethical infringement on the informant's right to privacy.

I also certify that I have completed the CITI Limited Research Worker training in Human Research Protections.

Signature of Transcriptionist

Date

Signature of Principle Investigator

Date

