

From Paraprofessional to Special Education Teacher: A Journey of Growth

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From Paraprofessional to Special Education Teacher: A Journey of Growth, Challenges, and Aspirations

After six years as a paraprofessional in special education, I stand at the threshold of a new chapter in my career. Growing up in a household that didn't always prioritize education, I developed a unique perspective that now informs my approach to special education. My personal experiences have made me particularly attuned to students struggling academically or socially. This narrative explores my journey toward becoming a high school special education teacher, highlighting the experiences that have shaped my professional identity, the challenges I've faced, and the core issues in teaching that drive my passion for inclusive education. Throughout this journey, I have said that not quitting is winning. I've learned that constancy is critical - not quitting in the face of challenges has been a vital lesson that has propelled me forward and one I hope to pass on to my students.

My path in special education has been marked by moments of discovery, growth, and adaptation. From my first experiences working with students with diverse needs to navigating the complexities of individualized education plans, each step has reinforced my passion for this field.

This narrative will show the defining moments that have shaped my professional aspirations, the obstacles I've overcome, and the core beliefs that guide my approach to inclusive education. By sharing my experiences and the lessons I've learned, I aim to show the unique demands and immense rewards of a career dedicated to supporting students with special needs.

Professional Overview

Exact title of your desired position: High School Special Education Teacher

Education required: A bachelor's degree in Special Education or a related field is typically the minimum requirement for high school special education teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022)

Certification(s) required: High school special education teachers must hold a state teaching license with a special education endorsement (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021).

Job Summary:

- Develop and implement Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) tailored to each student's needs.
- Adapt the general education curriculum for special needs students to ensure they have access to the same content as their peers.
- Collaborate with general education teachers and parents to create a supportive learning environment (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021).
- Assess student progress and maintain accurate records to track growth and adjust instruction.
- Manage classroom behavior and create a positive learning environment that promotes social-emotional development (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021).

Average hours per week: High school special education teachers typically work 40-50 hours per week, including time spent planning lessons, grading assignments, and attending meetings (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021).

Environment: Special education teachers work in a school setting, often in mainstream and self-contained classrooms (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021).

Stress level: High school special education teachers often experience a high-stress level due to the demands of managing student needs, collaborating with various stakeholders, and ensuring compliance with legal requirements

Prospective starting pay: The starting salary for high school special education teachers varies by location but typically ranges from \$45,000 to \$55,000 per year (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021).

Benefits: High school special education teachers often receive health insurance, retirement plans, and paid time off (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021).

Location: High school special education teachers are in demand in urban and suburban areas with larger school districts (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021).

Industry-related vocabulary

1. **IEP (Individualized Education Program):** A written document developed for each public-school child who needs special education. It is created through a team effort and reviewed at least once a year. (Parent Information Center)
2. **LRE (Least Restrictive Environment):** Federal law requires that students with disabilities receive their education, to the maximum extent appropriate, with nondisabled peers. (Parent Information Center)
3. **IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act)** is a federal law that ensures that services to children with disabilities are provided nationwide. It governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services. (Parent Information Center)

4. **Differentiated Instruction** is a teaching approach that tailors instruction to meet individual student needs, learning styles, and interests. (Parent Information Center)
5. **Assistive Technology** is any item, piece of equipment, software program, or product system used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of persons with disabilities. (Parent Information Center)
6. **Inclusion** is educating students with special needs in regular classes for all or nearly all day instead of in special education classes. (Parent Information Center)
7. **Accommodation:** A change in how a student is taught or tested without changing the standards a student is working toward. (Parent Information Center)
8. **Modification:** A change in what a student is expected to learn and demonstrate. Modifications change the core content standard. (Parent Information Center)
9. **Response to Intervention (RTI)** is a multi-tier approach to identifying and supporting students with learning and behavioral needs early. (Parent Information Center)
10. **Transition Planning** is the process of preparing students with disabilities to move from school to adult life. It includes postsecondary education, vocational training, integrated employment, continuing adult education, independent living, or community participation. (Parent Information Center)

Moments of Discovery

First Experience Working with a Student with Autism

My journey in special education began when I started working with Lynn, a sixth-grade student with autism. Initially, I felt intimidated by the process, unsure how to support his unique needs. However, as time passed, I loved the opportunity to provide individualized support and guidance. What struck me most was how much I was learning alongside Lynn - it felt like a mutual growth experience. We formed a bond that pushed us both to become better versions of ourselves.

One of my proudest moments came in seventh grade when Lynn had to give a presentation for class. It involved a PowerPoint presentation and a five-minute speech—a daunting task for many students, let alone one with autism. He invested enormous time and effort into the preparation leading up to the presentation. Despite his apparent nerves on the day, he courageously stood up and delivered his presentation to the entire class.

The reaction from his classmates, who had always socialized with him but perhaps underestimated his abilities, was one of shock and admiration. They were visibly impressed by his level of preparedness and the eloquence he spoke about his subject. But the most heartwarming moment came after he sat down. With relief and pride, Lynn turned to me and said, "I did it. I actually did it just as well as everyone else."

From that day forward, these small victories became the cornerstone of our work together. Over the six years, I had the privilege of working with Lynn until his graduation, there were indeed challenges. But those little moments of triumph, no matter how big or small, are the ones I will be eternally grateful for. Having a front-row seat to his success and growth was an invaluable experience that solidified my passion for special education.

Successfully Implementing a Behavior Intervention Plan

Working as a paraprofessional means being part of a team of educators dedicated to helping students reach their goals. A crucial part of this process is the implementation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and behavior plans. I vividly recall working with a student who struggled significantly with regulating their emotions. This difficulty often manifested in classroom outbursts, including throwing desks and calling out hurtful names to peers and staff.

Recognizing the severity of the situation, our team convened to develop a comprehensive plan to teach this student emotional regulation techniques. We decided to focus on meditation and deep breathing exercises as tools to help manage overwhelming emotions. We diligently practiced these techniques for weeks with the student, often feeling disheartened by the lack of visible progress.

However, our persistence eventually paid off. I remember one particular instance where I noticed the student on the verge of an outburst. Acting quickly, I dimmed the lights in the room, cleared the area of potential hazards, and began guiding the students through the meditation and breathing techniques we had been practicing. To our amazement and relief, it worked. The student was able to regain composure and avoid a full-blown outburst.

This moment was a powerful reminder that the fruits of our labor in teaching, especially in special education, aren't always immediately visible. It reinforced my belief that we can make a significant difference in our students' lives with patience, consistency, and the right strategies. This experience boosted my confidence in my ability to support students and reinforced my commitment to pursuing a career in special education.

Collaborating with a skilled special education teacher on curriculum adaptation

Working in a high school special education classroom often involves adapting regular education content to fit our students' diverse learning styles and needs. This became particularly evident when we encountered a student who struggled with traditional note-taking methods, especially in fast-paced science and math classes.

Many of these classes involved extensive notetaking with occasional hands-on learning experiences. This particular student would quickly become overwhelmed by the pace of the lectures and the amount of information they were expected to write down. Recognizing this challenge, we knew we needed to find a creative solution.

Collaborating closely with the classroom teacher, we implemented speech-to-text software and created interactive, pre-prepared notes. This adaptation allowed the student to participate in lectures without feeling overwhelmed by the pace of the overall class. They could focus on understanding the content rather than frantically trying to keep up with writing everything down.

This experience highlighted the importance of leveraging technology and thinking outside the box to ensure all students can access the curriculum effectively. It also underscored the value of collaboration between paraprofessionals and teachers in creating an inclusive learning environment. Seeing the student's increased engagement and understanding due to these accommodations was incredibly rewarding and further fueled my passion for finding innovative ways to support diverse learners.

Obstacles

Overcoming lack of formal education while working as a paraprofessional

One of the significant challenges in special education is the use of paraprofessionals and the need for comprehensive training. We are often brought in as a mandated resource, but the training we receive is minimal—usually consisting of videos and instruction to consult our collaborating teacher. This situation is further complicated by the fact that our collaborating teachers are often overwhelmed and may not adequately have the resources or time to guide a paraprofessional. Research supports this observation, as Brown and Stanton-Chapman (2014) found that "For survey questions related to the amount of training the paraprofessionals receive in their schools, the majority of responses revealed that they did not receive regular training (11, 58%) with an alarming number reporting that they have not received any training in the past year (10, 53%)." This lack of consistent and comprehensive training leaves many paraprofessionals underprepared.

After my first year in a classroom environment with minimal training, I recognized the need to take my professional development into my own hands. I began seeking free resources to better support students with autism, specifically because of the students I was working with. To my surprise and delight, I discovered a wealth of information available without formal education. As I accumulated these resources and put them into practice, I improved my performance and shared these tools with other professionals, helping to better equip them for their roles.

If more comprehensive, one-on-one training was provided to paraprofessionals, the turnover rate in this field would significantly decrease. Many individuals enter this profession with good hearts and the best intentions but often become frustrated and disillusioned without adequate guidance. By investing in proper training, we could retain more dedicated professionals and provide better support for our students. This investment in training is crucial, as the same study by Brown and Stanton-Chapman (2014) revealed that paraprofessionals feel less prepared

in critical areas such as leading lessons, providing academic support, and offering social support to students.

Anticipating challenges in managing increased workload and responsibilities

As I transition from paraprofessional to certified special education teacher, I anticipate challenges in effectively collaborating with general education teachers and parents. Special education teachers often serve as a bridge between the specialized needs of students with disabilities and the expectations of the general education curriculum. Navigating this complex dynamic requires strong communication skills, patience, and the ability to advocate for the student's best interests.

One potential obstacle I foresee is resistance from general education teachers, who may feel unprepared or overwhelmed by the prospect of accommodating students with disabilities in their classrooms. Some teachers might view these accommodations as a burden or disruption to their established teaching methods. To overcome this challenge, I must build positive, professional relationships with my colleagues and demonstrate the value of inclusive practices. This may involve providing resources, sharing successful strategies, and offering support to help general education teachers feel more confident in their ability to meet the needs of diverse learners.

Another challenge is navigating the varying expectations and concerns of parents. As a special education teacher, I will develop and implement Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) in collaboration with parents. However, parents may have different perspectives on what constitutes an appropriate education for their child. Some may push for more inclusive placements, while others might advocate for more specialized services. Balancing these

competing desires with the student's best interests and the school's resources will require skillful communication, empathy, and a commitment to finding mutually beneficial solutions.

To address these challenges, I plan to prioritize regular, open communication with general education teachers and parents. By establishing clear lines of dialogue and actively listening to their concerns, I hope to foster a spirit of collaboration and shared responsibility. I will also seek professional development opportunities to enhance my skills in facilitating difficult conversations, resolving conflicts, and achieving agreement among all affected.

Ultimately, while I anticipate facing obstacles in collaborating with general education teachers and parents, these challenges are opportunities for growth and learning. By approaching these relationships with respect, empathy, and a solutions-oriented mindset, I can effectively navigate the complexities of the special education landscape and ensure the best possible outcomes for my students.

Personal and Professional Identity

As someone who grew up in a household that wasn't always stable and didn't always prioritize education, I've found that my career in special education allows me to transform my past experiences into strengths. My background has given me a unique perspective, enabling me to quickly identify when a student is struggling, whether socially, emotionally, or academically. This intuition, born from my experiences, has become invaluable in my professional toolkit.

Growing up, I often felt like the odd one in my classroom. Now, as a special education teacher, I strive to create the environment I wish I had - one that Roald Dahl might have described this way: "Even if you're little, you can do a lot. You mustn't let a little thing like 'little' stop you" (Dahl, 1988, p. 81). I firmly believe in empowering each student helping them recognize their potential and capability to achieve their goals, whether big or small. This belief drives my daily interactions and interventions with students. Additionally, I place a strong emphasis on preparing students with disabilities for future job opportunities, a focus that is central to the classroom setting I work in.

My outgoing personality has proven to be an asset in this field. It allows me to quickly build rapport with students, colleagues, and parents. I enjoy creating a positive, energetic learning environment where students feel comfortable and motivated to engage. This natural desire to build connections has helped me foster a supportive classroom community where everyone feels valued and included.

My background, values, and personality traits have converged to make special education a career choice and a calling. Each day, I find fulfillment in using my unique experiences and qualities to impact my students' lives positively.

Problem of Practice

One of the most debated issues in special education is using inclusion versus self-contained classrooms for students with disabilities. This debate centers around finding the most effective and beneficial learning environment for students with complex needs. The discussion typically revolves around two main approaches, each with its beliefs, strategies, and implementation suggestions.

Side One of Problem: Beliefs, Approaches, and Suggestions

Proponents of full inclusion argue that all students, regardless of the severity of their disabilities, should be educated in regular classrooms alongside their typically developing peers. They believe this approach promotes social integration and prepares them for life in an inclusive society. Advocates emphasize the importance of meaningful social interactions and relationships between students with and without disabilities. They argue that inclusive classrooms provide students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum, potentially raising academic expectations and achievements.

This approach, they argue, better prepares students with disabilities for life after school in an integrated society. Additionally, typically developing peers can serve as behavioral and academic role models, and inclusion helps reduce the stigma associated with special education and disabilities. To support this model, proponents often suggest providing extensive professional development for general education teachers on differentiation and accommodation strategies, implementing co-teaching models with special education teachers in general education classrooms, and utilizing universal design for learning principles to make the curriculum accessible to all learners. The role of teachers in creating an inclusive classroom environment cannot be overstated. Hymel and Katz (2019) emphasize that teachers can shape classroom social dynamics: "As the designer of the classroom environment, teachers create, or deny, opportunities for students to interact socially and develop social awareness, and thus impact the interpersonal dynamic of the classroom" (Hymel & Katz, 2019, p. 246). Teachers can either foster or hinder the development of social awareness and inclusive relationships among students by designing the learning environment and the opportunities they provide for social interaction. I highlight the

importance of equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to create truly inclusive classrooms.

Side Two of Problem: Beliefs, Approaches, and Suggestions

Advocates for self-contained classrooms argue that students with severe disabilities often require specialized instruction and support that can be more effectively provided in a separate setting. They believe that self-contained classrooms allow for more one-on-one instruction tailored to each student's needs. Thompson and Wehmeyer (2020) note, "For some students, self-contained classrooms can offer benefits such as structure, routine, and a pace of learning directed by their individual needs. Self-contained programs may provide more opportunities for direct instruction, a reduced student-teacher ratio, and intensive intervention services required by some students with severe disabilities" (p. 182).

In these settings, teachers can focus on functional and life skills that may be more relevant for students with disabilities. Self-contained classrooms can also be better equipped to handle specific behavioral or medical needs and provide a calmer, less overwhelming environment for students struggling with sensory processing.

Specialized equipment and resources can be more readily available in a dedicated space. Supporters of this approach suggest ensuring high-quality, specially trained teachers and paraprofessionals in self-contained classrooms, implementing evidence-based practices specific to various disabilities, and creating opportunities for community-based instruction and vocational training. They argue that this focused environment can lead to more significant progress in essential skills for students with disabilities.

My Beliefs, Approaches, and Suggestions to the Problem

My personal belief lies somewhere in the middle of these two perspectives. Students should be provided opportunities in an integrated classroom setting whenever possible. Segregating our students in self-contained classrooms, while sometimes necessary, can limit their ability to socialize with same-age peers and access diverse learning experiences.

However, I also recognize that full inclusion isn't always the best solution for every student. Some students with disabilities may benefit from a more structured and specialized environment in a self-contained classroom for part of their day. The key is flexibility and individualization. It is essential to consider the complex interaction between social-emotional well-being and academic achievement when deciding on educational placements for students with disabilities. Hymel and Katz (2019) highlight the reciprocal relationship between students' social-emotional well-being and their academic performance. They argue that while a student's emotional state can impact their scholastic achievements, their academic success or failure can equally affect their social standing among peers. This reciprocal relationship underscores the need for an approach that addresses the social-emotional and academic needs of students with disabilities, whether in inclusive or self-contained settings.

I would advocate for a continuum of services where students can access inclusive and specialized settings based on their needs. This might involve partial inclusion, where students spend part of their day in a general education classroom and a more specialized setting. It could also involve gradually increasing inclusion time as students develop skills and confidence.

Ultimately, the goal should be to provide each student with the environment and support that best facilitates their learning and development. This requires ongoing assessment, joint working between general and special educators, and a willingness to adapt our approaches as

students' needs change. By maintaining this flexible, student-centered approach, we can work towards creating genuinely inclusive schools that serve all students effectively.

Reflections and Future Aspirations Conclusion

Throughout my journey as a paraprofessional in special education, I have gained invaluable insights and experiences that have shaped my professional identity and fueled my passion for supporting students with diverse needs. From my early days working one-on-one with a student with autism to my current role as a teacher's assistant, I have witnessed firsthand the power of individualized support, innovative accommodations, and collaborative problem-solving in unlocking each student's potential.

The challenges I have faced along the way, including the lack of comprehensive training for paraprofessionals and the increased workload that comes with taking on more responsibilities, have only strengthened my resolve to continue growing and learning in this field. I understand that personal and professional growth often requires stepping out of one's comfort zone and embracing new challenges head-on.

Reflecting on my experiences and looking toward the future, I am more committed than ever to pursuing a high school special education teacher career. I aim to create inclusive, supportive learning environments where every student feels valued, empowered, and equipped to succeed. This goal aligns with Shulman's (1986) observation that effective teachers are those who can convey their passion for their subject and their belief in the importance of education. He noted that these educators "are able to transmit their enthusiasm for the subject they teach, and their belief in the importance of learning" (p. 8). This insight resonates deeply with my approach to special education, as I strive to inspire and motivate my students through my enthusiasm and unwavering belief in their potential.

To achieve this, I plan to further my education by obtaining a master's degree in special education within the next five years. This advanced degree will give me the knowledge and skills to design and implement effective, research-based interventions for students with various disabilities.

Additionally, I aim to develop expertise in assistive technology specifically tailored to the needs of high school students with disabilities. In an increasingly digital world, proficiency in this area will be essential for ensuring my students have access to the tools and resources to participate in their education and fully prepare for post-secondary life.

As I embark on this next chapter of my professional journey, I will carry the lessons I have learned, the relationships I have built, and my unwavering belief in every student's potential. This aligns with Tomlinson's (2014) perspective on effective teaching: "A primary task of teaching is to create learning experiences that are so compelling that students can't help but engage with them and grow from them" (Tomlinson, 2014). This vision resonates deeply with my approach to special education as I strive to create engaging and meaningful learning experiences that inspire and motivate my students.

I aim to be a teacher that students describe as empathetic, inspiring, and dedicated. By combining my strengths, professional experiences, and future goals, I am confident in my ability to make a meaningful difference in the lives of the students I serve and contribute to the field of special education.

(Word Count: 4,240)

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