

Summer 7-24-2017

# An Action Research Study of Barriers to Paraprofessional/Teaching Assistant Licensure in New York Community Colleges

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### Recommended Citation

Johnson, Tonya L., "An Action Research Study of Barriers to Paraprofessional/Teaching Assistant Licensure in New York Community Colleges" (2017). *CUNY Academic Works*.  
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### **Abstract**

The majority of New York State teachers remain disproportionately White, while their student populations grow increasingly diverse, and New York has experienced a dramatic increase in the number of diverse students, often referred to as students of color, including a large number of immigrant groups, in nearly all regions of the state. Recently published research has underscored that in order for multilingual, multiethnic, and multiracial teacher candidates to successfully enter the teaching profession, teacher preparation programs may need to alter some of their practices. In particular, the bulk of the research highlighted a need to expand recruiting for more diverse teaching candidates. While acknowledging the importance of this research calling for a more diverse teaching force, the current work examines 5 years of educational outcomes for teacher candidates at an urban community college. By examining the survey data, this action research study highlighted one New York community college's continued social inequities and barriers that hindered postgraduation paraprofessional licensure and employment.

**Keywords:** diverse students, diverse educational support force, paraprofessional educator preparation, pedagogy, social inequities

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### **Introduction**

The need for well-prepared and certified teaching assistants and paraprofessionals is critical, as the population of infants, preschoolers, children, and youth with disabilities continues to grow and be taught inclusively in early childhood, childhood, and secondary education settings. According to the Center for Independence of the Disabled, New York (2011), the city contains 51,524 children ages 5–17 with disabilities. Persons living with disabilities account for 11.1% of New York City's (NYC) population. The Bronx has the highest percentage (13.7%) of persons living with disabilities. Compared with the other boroughs, the Bronx also has the highest percentage (5.9%) of children ages 5–17 living with disabilities. These disabilities include but are not limited to autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbances, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, learning disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment (including blindness).

In the Bronx alone, 1,706 job vacancies are waiting to be filled by paraprofessionals/teaching assistants (Center for Independence of the Disabled, New York, 2011). District 9 contains 8,096 children living with disabilities, and District 10 has 8,319—the highest among the four districts served over the long term. Districts 11 and 12 carry 6,940 and 4,965 cases, respectively. Among this population of children, the most common disability is learning disability, with speech and language impairment (6,415) ranked second in terms of numbers among the different types of disabilities listed for the four districts. Autism is the third

most common type of disability; the combined total for Districts 9, 10, 11, and 12 is 2,745 (Center for Independence of the Disabled, New York, 2011).

Due to the existing shortage of trained professionals, many of the paraprofessional vacancies will be filled with individuals who do not have the required qualification and training to effectively accomplish the supporting tasks in the classroom. Until recently, paraprofessionals worked one on one with a single student for the entire school year. Within the past few years, NYC began to require paraprofessionals to assist in small-group instructional support, providing language support for bilingual students, collecting data, and documenting student behavior for instructional purposes. (United Federation of Teachers, 2017).

The purpose of this action research study was to explore teacher assistant/paraprofessional candidate outcomes for one large urban community college in New York City (NYCC). The NYCC is located in one of the largest cities in the Northeast and has an enrollment of more than 12,000 students. For this study, participants were teacher candidates who entered the associate of arts (AA) and associate of applied science (AAS) degree tracks in education between fall 2012 and fall 2016. Student outcomes over this 5-year period were examined for 923 students; 302 chose the AAS track that prepares students for careers as teaching assistants and paraprofessionals, provided they do not plan on becoming teacher candidates. The AAS program is typically for students who want to attend college and begin to work immediately; these students may or may not attend a 4-year college. The AA degree is usually sought by students who are planning to attend 4-year colleges.

In the current study, the term *paraprofessional/teacher assistant* is used to describe candidates who meet the requirements of both the NYC and NYS for preprofessional/teaching assistant licensure. A preprofessional teaching assistant certification was recently added as an

advanced certificate for teaching assistants who have held a teaching certificate for more than 5 years. The certificate allows holders to provide direct instruction to students under a licensed teacher. The license is renewable, provided the assistants are enrolled in a teacher preparation program and have completed at least 30 semester hours of a teacher approved program.

Preparing assistant teachers to become teachers is ultimately the goal of NYS and NYC to address the looming teacher shortage. New York State Education Department (NYSED) requirement whereby the certification credentials are Levels I–III, with Level III as the license prior to obtaining a preprofessional license. The newly implemented preprofessional credential through the NYCDOE certification allows candidates the opportunity to work directly under a credentialed teacher and provide direct instruction to students, unlike teaching assistants/paraprofessionals who work under a licensed educator. The candidate holding this license is required to enroll in a teacher education program. Each of the teaching assistant levels requires three workshops: Identification and Reporting of Child Abuse, School Violence Prevention, and Dignity for All Students Act. In addition to the workshops, the levels of licensure require assistant teachers/paraprofessionals to sit for a licensure examination, the Assessment of Teaching Assistant Skills (ATAS). As noted by Clukey (2016) and Saunders (2017), the purpose of community colleges is to create the foundation and pathway for teacher education programs. Community colleges are the best option for students who do not have the necessary grade point average or SAT and ACT scores to get into 4-year colleges.

Community colleges also play an important role in the teacher training of minority teaching candidates (Lehner & Johnson, 2016). Rich (2015) underscored the high national attrition rate of teachers of color in public schools; while minority students in public schools have increasingly become the majority, the number of teachers of color has not substantially

changed. Further, Rich stated that more than 80% of the teachers across the country are White; in New York State, 85% of the students are racial/ethnic minorities and 65% of the teachers are White. Unfortunately, test scores are not the only barriers faced by minority teacher candidates; the importance of representation of teachers as reflective of the demographics of the student body continues, and Klein (2016) argued that at least one Black teacher made a difference in minorities graduating high school and college.

Kamenetz (2017) stated that one Black teacher will make the difference; with this, more students will at least graduate from high school and take college entrance exams. Kamenetz further stated that having at least one Black teacher in the third, fourth, and fifth grade reduced the likelihood of Black boys dropping out of high school to 39%, and those that had at least one Black teacher increased expectations for college. As Sewell (1992) noted, culture is often enacted in recursive relationship between structures and agency; these structures, as Sewell observed, are not fully vested with hegemonic power as Gidden (as cited in Sewell, 1992) maintained. Rather, Sewell detailed the complicated ways in which hegemony is reproduced within the school system overall. Therefore, teacher candidates of color do not have the same access to resources as their White counterparts (Johnson, 2016, 2017). Finally, Gloria, Castellanos, and Herrera (2016) continued this work and highlighted that college settings need to develop cultural congruity with students of color to reduce these inequities.

### **Method**

This action research study employed a preintervention survey to assess participant paraprofessional knowledge to offer a baseline of participant awareness for workshop facilitators. The intervention workshops were delivered in spring 2016, and a postintervention 5-point Likert-type survey (5 = *very satisfied*; 1 = *very dissatisfied*) followed to measure

improvement of participant knowledge for paraprofessional preparation and licensure (New York Teaching Assistant Levels I, II, and III). Survey data from a final sample of 148 New York community college students were exported to Microsoft Excel for analysis. Results showed marked improvement in participant awareness following the intervention workshops.

### Results

A total of 148 AAS/AA participants completed the postintervention survey (a 100% return rate), and 89 AAS participants participated in the intervention workshops. The majority of participants reported gender as female (90.5%), reflecting the disproportionately small number of females in the AAS degree population (see Figure 1) and the population of paraprofessional/teacher assistants working in the school system. According to the United Federation of Teachers chapter leader for paraprofessionals, New York City currently has 24,000 paraprofessionals, up from 19,024 in the past 2 years and 90% are female (UFT, 2017).

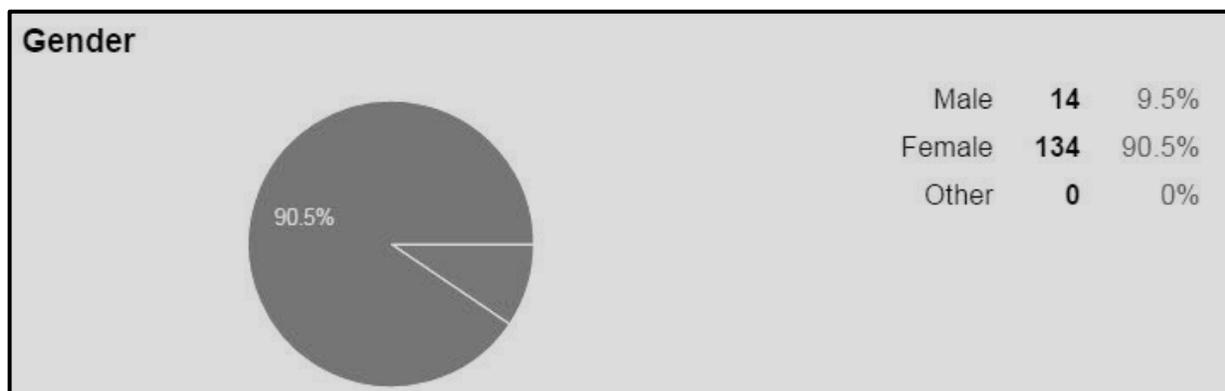


Figure 1. Participant gender.

The preintervention survey indicated student unawareness, lack of knowledge, and resources as barriers to licensure as a paraprofessional/teacher assistant following completion of the AAS degree (see Figure 2). The survey results also reflected 87.3% of student participants were not yet paraprofessionals; however, the majority (95.5%) responded yes to “are you interested in becoming a paraprofessional.”

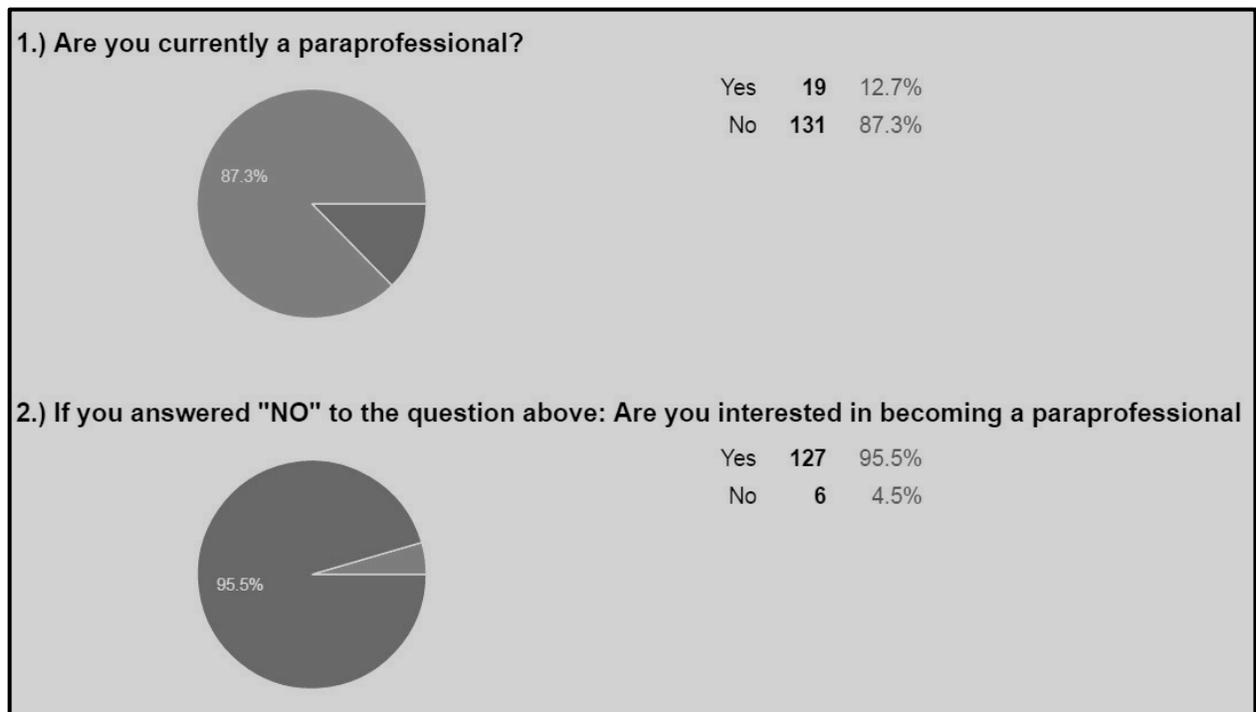


Figure 2. Paraprofessional status and interest.

New York State requires each of the workshops in Figure 3 to be completed prior to certification. The number of students in the AAS program represents 59.3% of the students who completed workshops. As stated earlier, the AAS degree program is for students who prefer to work immediately after attending college for 2 years; the majority expressed interest in a paraprofessional career. A greater percentage of students (40%) had completed the Child Abuse Identification workshop than the other two. This was likely due to its availability online and at no cost. The other two workshops are not available online and require a fee.

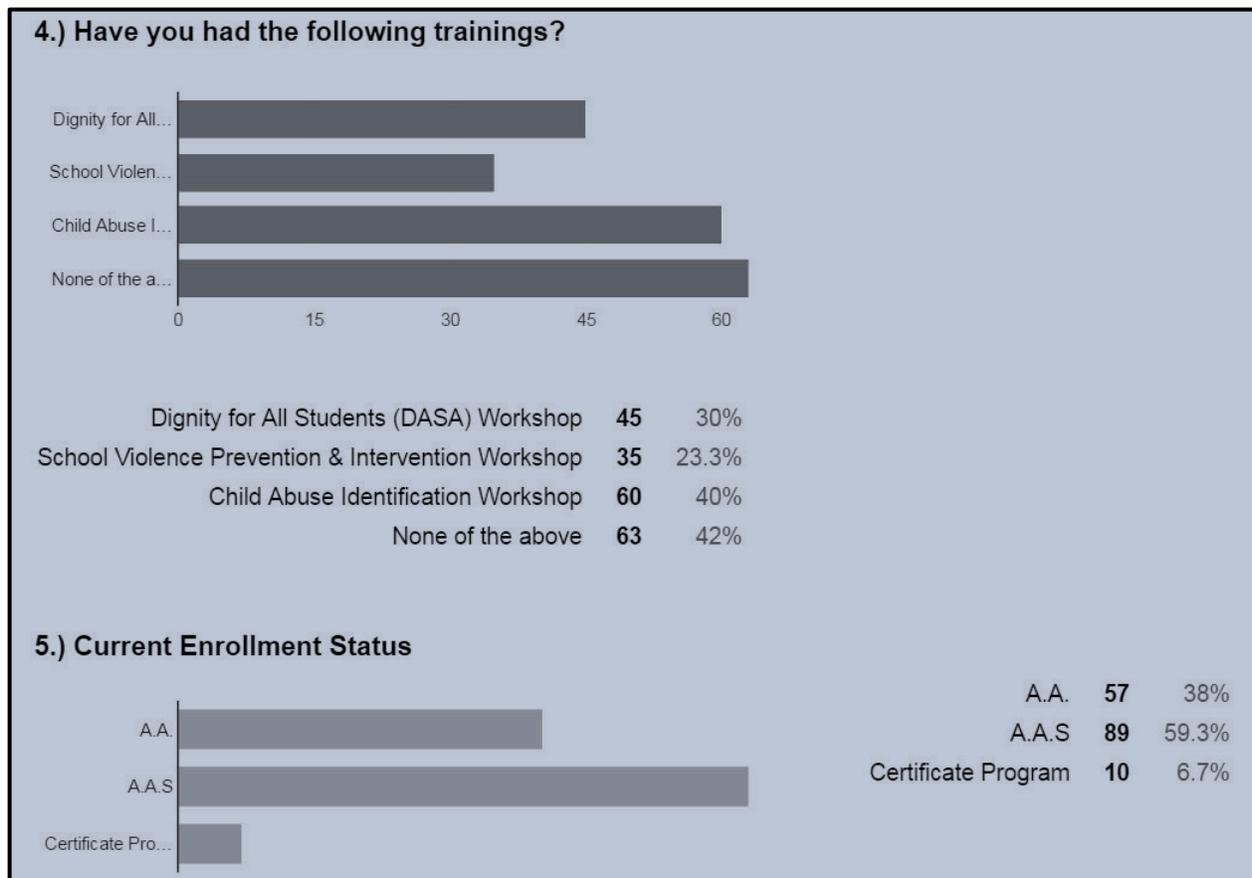


Figure 3. Workshop training requirements.

The workshops were completed over 7 weeks (3 hr per week), providing a total of 21 hr of test preparation. Figure 4 illustrates the sample of participants who completed the survey with an interest in attending the workshops (decreased from 95.5% to less than 50% who actually committed and attended). The ATAS workshop was offered to prepare the students to pass the required ATAS exam; a majority (70.6%) concluded that they were significantly prepared, while the others felt somewhat prepared, and 79.4% reported they would strongly recommend the workshop. Participants commented that they would recommend the workshop based on the amount of information they received, review of mathematical strategies, and the opportunity to delve into preparation for an exam where they had no prior knowledge.

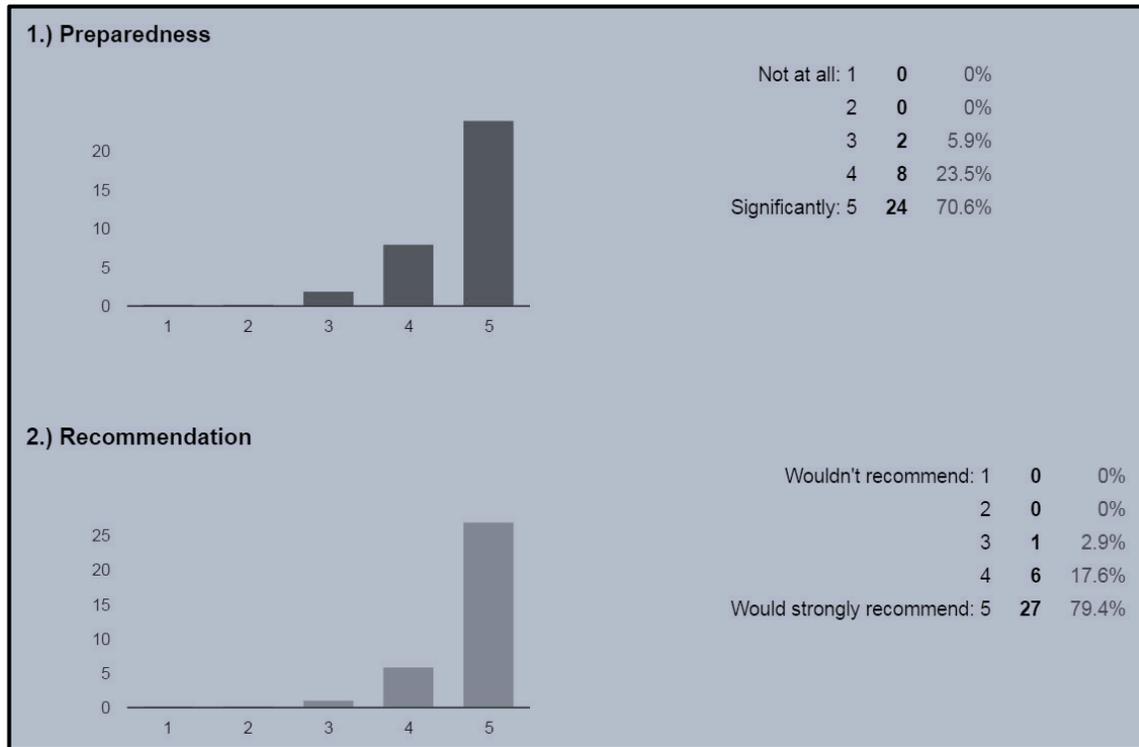


Figure 4. Participant evaluation of workshop.

### Discussion and Conclusions

A cultural responsive framework informed this research and supported the need for future research (Gloria et al., 2016; Kamenetz, 2017). The AA/AAS students' response to the survey justifies continued research interest in providing these students with a series of workshops to prepare them for assistant teacher/paraprofessional licensure. This offering not only gives these students an opportunity to fill the state deficit in licensed paraprofessional/teaching assistants in NYC but also could ultimately expand their desire to continue higher education toward a teacher education career, which also continues at a deficit in NYS.

As shown by the findings, 95.5% of the participants were interested in seeking a paraprofessional career path; yet, the majority reported they were not currently in a career role as a paraprofessional (87.3%). One consistent barrier to this career pathway is students' lack of full

access to the information and resources needed to (a) pass the paraprofessional licensure, and (b) seek employment within a district. This action research study served as a foundational study to support future research into efforts needed to improve community college students' career access as paraprofessionals to meet the shortages within the state and industry. Continued research should also consider analysis of student ATAS pass rates and track student success in attainment of a paraprofessional position.

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