

Date of first submission	2026-06-11
Date of acceptance of article for publication after review	2026-07-25
Date of publication/publication	2026-07-25

The Role of Paraprofessionals in Supporting English Language Acquisition in Secondary Education

Datsko Khrystyna

Multilingual Teacher Assistant, Maine Township High School District 207, Maine West High School, US

Bachelor's Degree in Philology (Translation), Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, Ukraine
<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7235-9117>

Abstract. *Paraprofessionals have become one of the most consequential yet under-theorized resources in secondary schools enrolling growing numbers of English learners. This paper examines the role paraprofessionals play in supporting English language acquisition at the secondary level, arguing that their instructional value depends less on their presence in a classroom than on how their work is structured, trained, and coordinated with the classroom teacher of record. Drawing on recent research on paraprofessional training, ESL instructional design, and teacher collaboration, the paper synthesizes evidence that paraprofessional support functions best not as a fixed accommodation but as a calibrated, evolving relationship between a paraprofessional and an ESL or content teacher. The paper introduces an original model, the Paraprofessional-Teacher Collaborative Continuum, which describes three progressive stages of collaboration, moving from high-support co-teaching toward data-calibrated fading of paraprofessional involvement as a student's proficiency develops. The model is intended to be scalable across secondary schools serving substantial immigrant populations. Implications are discussed for training pipelines, collaborative planning structures, and the broader connection between paraprofessional practice and educational equity, since consistent, well-coordinated language support during secondary school shapes students' subsequent access to college and career opportunity.*

Keywords: paraprofessionals, English language acquisition, secondary education, teacher collaboration, ESL support, educational equity, immigrant students.

Introduction

As secondary schools across the United States enroll increasing numbers of immigrant and English-learner students, paraprofessionals, also called teacher assistants or paraeducators, have become a routine part of how language support is delivered [8; 21]. Their role, however, is frequently defined more by staffing convenience than by instructional design, a gap that matters given how directly structured language support shapes multilingual students' academic trajectories, including access to advanced coursework and postsecondary opportunity [12; 6]. Achievement research consistently shows structural gaps tied to immigrant and language-minority status [2; 13], and unlike gaps rooted in isolated individual factors, these gaps respond to how schools organize support, including who delivers it and how well that delivery is coordinated with the teacher of record [8].

Paraprofessionals sit at an unusual intersection in this system. On one hand, a growing body of evidence shows that trained paraprofessionals can meaningfully raise literacy and language

outcomes [1; 15]. On the other hand, the same literature repeatedly cautions that paraprofessional effectiveness is conditional: it depends heavily on training quality, defined scope of practice, and ongoing supervision, rather than being an automatic function of adding another adult to the room [3; 4; 11]. Much of the strongest evidence on paraprofessional training, however, comes out of special education rather than ESL-specific contexts [22; 23; 24; 25], leaving an open question about how these lessons should translate to secondary language acquisition specifically.

This paper argues that the central lever for paraprofessional effectiveness in secondary ESL contexts is not training in isolation, but the structure of collaboration between the paraprofessional and the ESL or content teacher of record. Drawing on the training, instructional, and collaboration literatures, the paper proposes the Paraprofessional-Teacher Collaborative Continuum, an original three-stage model describing how paraprofessional involvement should evolve as students progress, moving from intensive co-delivery toward a more autonomous, teacher-led model as language proficiency develops. The remainder of the paper reviews the relevant literature, describes the analytic approach used to build the model, presents the synthesized findings, and discusses implications for practice, scalability, and future research.

Literature Review

2.1 Immigrant and Language-Minority Achievement Gaps

Research on immigrant and language-minority achievement provides the backdrop against which paraprofessional support should be understood. Borgen [2] found that immigrant students' academic disadvantage is frequently obscured when researchers rely on average outcomes rather than differential effects across subgroups, a finding with direct implications for how individual schools read their own data. Sprong and Skopek [21] traced achievement gaps by migration background to the earliest years of formal schooling, suggesting that by the time students reach secondary school, gaps have typically compounded over years of prior schooling. Finch, Hernández Finch, and Avery [8] showed that both national policy context and school-level factors shape immigrant student performance, reinforcing that structural, school-based decisions are a major driver of outcomes. Holzman, Sánchez Salazar, Chukhray, and Guo [12] documented how English learners are disproportionately excluded from college-level coursework in high school, with consequences that extend into postsecondary opportunity. Curran, Pacheco, Boza, Harris-Walls, Tan, and Deig [6] add that achievement trends for multilingual learners vary considerably across subgroups, and Johnson [13] similarly found meaningful variation in growth trajectories among English learners, underscoring that any support model needs to account for heterogeneity rather than treat English learners as a single group.

2.2 Evidence for Paraprofessional Effectiveness

A direct evidence base supports the claim that paraprofessionals can meaningfully affect student outcomes. Aurora and Farkas [1] found that paraprofessional instructional assistants measurably raised reading performance among Latina/o first graders in a low-income district. Martin, Lemons, and Haddad [15] reviewed paraeducator-implemented literacy interventions and found measurable skill gains when interventions were clearly specified and consistently delivered. Trausch, Brock, and Anderson [22] examined paraeducators facilitating peer support arrangements and found that, with appropriate facilitation, paraprofessionals can extend the reach of instruction well beyond what a single teacher could deliver alone. Together, this body of work establishes that paraprofessional support is not a merely symbolic resource; it produces measurable instructional effects when the underlying conditions are right.

2.3 Conditions and Cautions: Training Quality

A second, closely related body of work qualifies this optimism. Brock and Anderson [4] and Borosh, Newson, Mason, Richards, and Collins Crosley [3] reviewed the paraprofessional training

literature and reached a similar conclusion: effectiveness tracks training quality and structure rather than mere staffing presence. Walker and colleagues, across three related studies, extended this point: pre-service training practices shape how well paraeducators deliver systematic instruction [23], ongoing training is needed to support behavioral as well as academic needs [24], and structured, supervised interventions consistently outperform informal arrangements [25]. Giangreco [11] offers perhaps the most important caution, describing how schools can fall into treating paraprofessional assignment as a default response to any student need regardless of fit, a pattern he compares to reaching for the one tool available regardless of the job at hand. This caution matters directly for secondary ESL contexts, where paraprofessional assignment can become a substitute for structured language instruction rather than a genuine extension of it.

2.4 Teacher and Paraprofessional Collaboration

A third strand of evidence addresses collaboration directly, though mostly among certified teachers rather than paraprofessionals specifically. Ghezali [10] examined collaboration between content teachers and language specialists and found it frequently aspirational, constrained by scheduling and unclear expectations rather than genuinely built into the school day. Fones [9] reached a similar conclusion studying professional learning communities for English learner teachers, finding real but limited value due to turnover and unclear roles. Li, Hu, and Pan [14] reviewed the broader literature on school support systems and found that support structures for language learners tend to be additive rather than coordinated by design. These findings, centered on teacher-to-teacher collaboration, describe the same structural weaknesses likely to limit paraprofessional-teacher coordination, since both depend on the same scarce resources of time, role clarity, and institutional priority.

2.5 Instructional and Assessment Context for Calibrating Support

A final strand of literature describes the instructional and assessment tools that should guide how paraprofessional support is calibrated over time. Choi, Kim, Wright, and Morita-Mullaney [5] showed that structured, language-conscious instructional design measurably improves classroom quality in bilingual settings. Miller, Daugherty, Martorell, and Gerber [16] used a randomized controlled trial to show that corequisite English instruction, pairing developmental support directly with credit-bearing coursework, outperformed standalone remediation, a model with clear implications for how paraprofessional time might be allocated. Mokher, Park-Gaghan, and Hu [17] cautioned that reforms designed for the general student population do not automatically transfer to language-minority students, and Reyes and Norman [18] argued for keeping instructional design connected to students' cultural and linguistic resources. On the assessment side, de Valenzuela, Pacheco, and Shenoy [7] documented persistent challenges in language proficiency assessment, Rivera and McKeithan [19] emphasized tracking language and content growth together, Shelton, Hogan, Chow, and Wexler [20] found that professional development is most effective when tied directly to assessment data, and Wolf and Lopez [26] demonstrated that technology-based formative reading assessments can supplement large-scale instruments with more immediate, usable information.

Methodology

This paper does not report new empirical data collection. It applies a structured thematic synthesis to the twenty-six peer-reviewed sources in the reference list, coding each against three domains relevant to paraprofessional practice in secondary ESL settings: evidence on paraprofessional training and effectiveness, evidence on teacher-paraprofessional collaboration structures, and evidence on ESL instructional design and assessment that could inform how paraprofessional involvement is calibrated. Each source was read in full and classified by the type

of evidence offered, experimental, quasi-experimental, systematic review, or theoretical, and by whether it addressed staffing, collaboration, instruction, or assessment.

Three patterns recurred consistently enough across independent sources to be treated as coherent findings rather than isolated results: the conditional, training-dependent nature of paraprofessional effectiveness [1; 3; 4; 11; 15], the underdeveloped state of structured collaboration between paraprofessionals and teachers [9; 10; 14], and the potential for assessment data to guide how paraprofessional involvement should change over time [7; 19; 26]. These three patterns form the conceptual basis for the Paraprofessional-Teacher Collaborative Continuum developed below.

The approach has a clear limitation: because it synthesizes existing research rather than collecting new data, the model proposed here should be read as a conceptual, practitioner-facing tool rather than an empirically validated intervention. Its purpose is to give schools a structured way to organize an already well-evidenced set of practices, and to generate specific propositions, for example about how quickly paraprofessional involvement should fade relative to documented proficiency gains, that future empirical work can test directly.

Results

Three patterns emerge from the synthesis above, and together they underpin the Paraprofessional-Teacher Collaborative Continuum proposed in this paper.

First, paraprofessional effectiveness is real but conditional. Where training is structured and ongoing, measurable gains in literacy and language outcomes follow [1; 15; 22]. Where training is informal or a one-time event, the literature is considerably more cautious, warning that paraprofessional assignment can substitute for, rather than extend, properly resourced instruction [3; 4; 11]. This conditionality means that paraprofessional deployment cannot be treated as a fixed accommodation; it needs to be actively structured and periodically reviewed.

Second, collaboration between paraprofessionals and the teacher of record is the least developed part of the system, even though it is the mechanism that should translate training into classroom practice. Evidence on teacher-to-teacher collaboration [9; 10; 14] shows the same structural weaknesses likely to affect paraprofessional-teacher pairs: limited scheduled time, unclear roles, and turnover that resets whatever informal collaboration has developed.

Third, assessment and instructional data exist to guide paraprofessional deployment but are rarely used for that purpose. Progress-monitoring tools [19], formative technology-based assessment [26], and professional development tied to assessment data [20] all point toward the same conclusion: student data can and should determine how much paraprofessional support a student needs at a given point, rather than support levels being set once and left unchanged.

Table 1 maps these patterns onto the three stages of the Collaborative Continuum, and Table 2 summarizes the specific training and collaboration practices that the literature associates with each stage. Read together, the tables support this paper's central claim: paraprofessional support functions as an evolving relationship calibrated to student growth, not as a static classroom fixture.

Table 1

The Paraprofessional-Teacher Collaborative Continuum (PTCC): Stage Structure

Stage	Description	Paraprofessional Role	Supporting Evidence
Stage 1	High-Support Co-Teaching	Direct, side-by-side language scaffolding under close teacher supervision; role is tightly	[1; 4; 15]

Stage	Description	Paraprofessional Role	Supporting Evidence
		scripted	
Stage 2	Structured Collaborative Planning	Paraprofessional co-plans with the ESL/content teacher; role includes some independent small-group instruction	[3; 9; 10; 22]
Stage 3	Data-Calibrated Fading Support	Paraprofessional involvement is reduced in step with documented proficiency gains; teacher assumes primary role	[7; 19; 26]

Table 2

Training and Collaboration Practices Supporting the Continuum

Practice	Description	Evidence Base
Structured pre-service training	Explicit, teacher-delivered training in language scaffolding techniques before independent work begins	[3; 4; 23]
Scheduled co-planning time	Protected, recurring time for paraprofessional and teacher to align on goals and roles	[9; 10]
Ongoing supervision and feedback	Regular teacher observation and coaching of paraprofessional practice, not one-time onboarding	[11; 24; 25]
Shared assessment data	Paraprofessional and teacher jointly review proficiency and progress-monitoring data to recalibrate support	[7; 19; 20; 26]

Discussion

The Paraprofessional-Teacher Collaborative Continuum proposed here reframes paraprofessional support as a relationship that changes shape over time rather than a fixed staffing decision made once at the start of a school year. This responds directly to a gap in the literature: training research explains what makes paraprofessionals effective [3; 4; 11], and collaboration research explains why coordination between adults in a school so often falls short [9; 10; 14], but very little work connects these two literatures into a single, practical model for secondary ESL settings. That connection is this paper's central contribution.

Stage one, high-support co-teaching, is appropriate for students with emerging proficiency and draws directly on evidence that structured, closely supervised paraprofessional involvement produces measurable literacy gains [1; 4; 15] (See Figure 1). At this stage, the paraprofessional's role is intentionally scripted and closely tied to teacher direction, consistent with the caution that untrained, loosely defined paraprofessional roles are where the literature's concerns concentrate [3; 11].

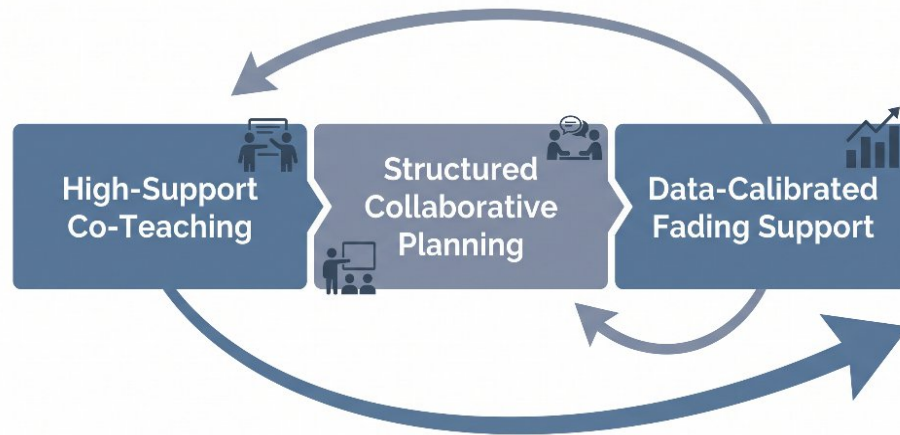


Figure 1. The Paraprofessional-Teacher Collaborative Continuum (PTCC)

Stage two, structured collaborative planning, moves the paraprofessional toward supervised independent small-group work, contingent on scheduled, protected co-planning time with the teacher of record. This stage draws on the collaboration literature, which consistently finds that where such time exists and roles are clearly defined, collaboration functions well, and where it does not, collaboration remains aspirational regardless of good intentions [9; 10]. Trausch, Brock, and Anderson's work on paraeducator-facilitated peer support [22] is instructive here, showing that paraprofessionals can extend instructional reach considerably once a structured protocol, rather than informal improvisation, governs their role.

Stage three, data-calibrated fading support, is this model's most distinctive feature. Rather than treating paraprofessional involvement as constant until a student exits ESL services altogether, this stage ties the intensity of support directly to proficiency and progress-monitoring data [7; 19; 26], gradually shifting primary instructional responsibility back to the teacher of record as data indicate readiness. This design responds to Shelton and colleagues' finding that professional development, and by extension staffing decisions, are most effective when explicitly tied to assessment data rather than treated as generic or indefinite [20].

This model has direct implications for scalability across secondary schools serving substantial immigrant populations (See Figure 2). Because the continuum specifies concrete, observable stages rather than a single undifferentiated paraprofessional role, it gives school and district leaders a common structure to adopt even where local context, funding, and staffing levels vary considerably. The training practices summarized in Table 2 do not require specialized ESL certification for paraprofessionals themselves; they require a teacher of record willing and equipped to structure training, protect collaboration time, and share assessment data, conditions that are within the control of a building or district even when broader systemic reforms are not.

The equity implications are direct as well. Because paraprofessional support is often concentrated in schools with the highest concentrations of immigrant and language-minority students [8; 21], how well that support is structured has an outsized effect on which students gain timely access to advanced coursework and, eventually, postsecondary opportunity [12]. Left unstructured, paraprofessional assignment risks becoming what Giangreco describes as a default response applied regardless of fit, a pattern that can quietly limit rather than expand access to

rigorous instruction [11]. Structured through the continuum proposed here, the same staffing resource becomes an active, evolving part of a student's path toward academic integration.

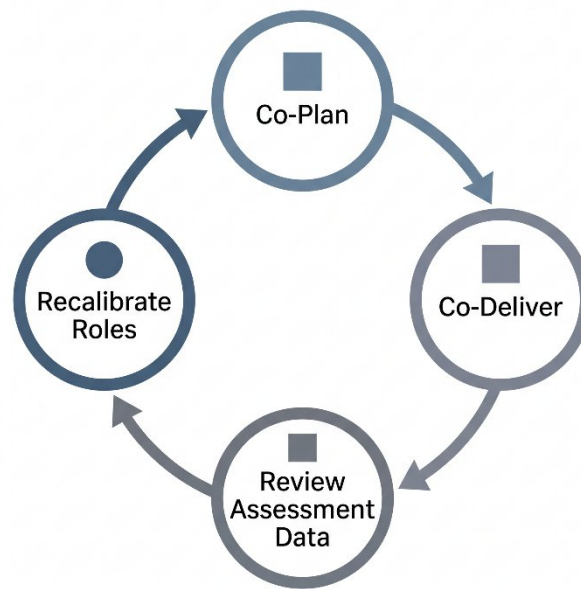


Figure 2. The ESL Teacher-Paraprofessional Collaboration Cycle

Future research should test the continuum's central proposition directly: that paraprofessional involvement calibrated to assessment data produces better outcomes, and more efficient use of staffing resources, than either a fixed high-support model or an under-resourced, undifferentiated one. A natural design would compare secondary schools that formally structure paraprofessional roles around the three stages described here against schools using conventional assignment, tracking WIDA ACCESS growth, coursework access, and GPA over multiple years, following the methodological direction of corequisite research [16] and progress-monitoring scholarship [19].

Conclusions

Paraprofessionals are already doing consequential work in secondary schools serving growing numbers of English learners, but the research reviewed here suggests that their impact is being left partly to chance. Training matters, collaboration matters, and assessment data exists to guide deployment decisions, yet these three elements are rarely brought together into a single coherent structure. The Paraprofessional-Teacher Collaborative Continuum proposed in this paper offers one way to do so: a three-stage model that moves paraprofessional involvement from closely supervised co-teaching toward data-calibrated independence, built around practices already supported by the evidence base rather than around any new, untested intervention.

This model does not remove the real constraints schools face, including limited planning time, uneven training pipelines, and assessment systems that are not always used as active decision-making tools. What it offers is a shared structure that schools with very different resources can adapt, and a set of testable propositions for future research. Given how closely secondary language support is tied to later access to college and career opportunity, treating

paraprofessional practice as a structured, evolving collaboration rather than an unexamined staffing default should be understood as a meaningful, achievable step toward educational equity.

References

1. Aurora, M., & Farkas, G. (2023). Paraprofessional instructional assistants raise the reading performance of Latina/o first graders in a low-income district. *Remedial and Special Education*, 44(6), 458–470. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325221134919>
2. Borgen, S. T. (2023). Masked by the mean: Immigrants in school and differential effects on student achievements. *European Sociological Review*, 39(3), 333–351. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcac035>
3. Borosh, A. M., Newson, A., Mason, R. A., Richards, C. D., & Collins Crosley, H. (2023). Special education teacher-delivered training for paraeducators: A systematic and quality review. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 46(4), 350–370. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08884064231160575>
4. Brock, M. E., & Anderson, E. J. (2021). Training paraprofessionals who work with students with intellectual and developmental disabilities: What does the research say? *Psychology in the Schools*, 58(4), 702–722. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22386>
5. Choi, W., Kim, W. H., Wright, W., & Morita-Mullaney, T. (2022). Improving English language arts instruction in Indiana dual language bilingual education classrooms. *Language and Education*, 36(6), 566–584. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2022.2032731>
6. Curran, F. C., Pacheco, M. B., Boza, L., Harris-Walls, K., Tan, T., & Deig, A. (2024). Multilingual learners and elementary science achievement: Exploring trends and heterogeneity across subgroups. *AERA Open*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584241303498>
7. de Valenzuela, J. S., Pacheco, R., & Shenoy, S. (2022). Current practices and challenges in language proficiency assessment for English learners with complex support needs. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 47(1), 3–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15407969221075848>
8. Finch, H., Hernández Finch, M. E., & Avery, B. (2021). The impact of national and school contextual factors on the academic performance of immigrant students. *Frontiers in Education*, 6, Article 793790. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.793790>
9. Fones, A. (2024). Understanding the work of professional learning communities for English language learner teachers: Possibilities and limitations from two urban high schools. *Journal of Education*, 204(3), 587–608. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220574231225446>
10. Ghezali, A. (2021). Collaboration between ESP and content teachers: Challenges and advantages. *International Journal of English Language and Translation Studies*, 9(1), 16–24. ISSN: 2308-5460
11. Giangreco, M. F. (2021). Maslow's hammer: Teacher assistant research and inclusive practices at a crossroads. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 36(2), 278–293. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2021.1901377>
12. Holzman, B., Sánchez Salazar, E., Chukhray, I., & Guo, W. (2025). Sorted and tracked: English learners, college-level course-taking in high school, and postsecondary opportunity. *American Educational Research Journal*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737251392299>
13. Johnson, A. (2023). Achievement and growth for English learners. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 45(3), 391–413. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048211049419>

14. Li, J., Hu, Z., & Pan, L. (2022). Analysis of school support: Systematic literature review of core Chinese- and English-language journals published in 2000–2021. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, Article 933695. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.933695>
15. Martin, G., Lemons, C. J., & Haddad, Y. E. (2025). The effects of paraeducator-implemented interventions on student literacy skill acquisition: A review. *Remedial and Special Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325241234080>
16. Miller, T., Daugherty, L., Martorell, P., & Gerber, R. (2022). Assessing the effect of corequisite English instruction using a randomized controlled trial. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 15(1), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2021.1932000>
17. Mokher, C. G., Park-Gaghan, T. J., & Hu, S. (2023). Does developmental education reform help or hinder the success of language minority students? An exploration by language minority, ESOL, and foreign-born status. *Education Finance and Policy*, 18(3), 467–497. https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp_a_00364
18. Reyes, A. J., & Norman, T. A. (2021). Resource pedagogies and the evolution of culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining education. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1698>
19. Rivera, M. O., & McKeithan, G. K. (2022). Progress monitoring of language acquisition and academic content for English learners. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 37(3), 245–253. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ldrp.12290>
20. Shelton, A., Hogan, E., Chow, J., & Wexler, J. (2023). A synthesis of professional development targeting literacy instruction and intervention for English learners. *Review of Educational Research*, 93(6), 861–902. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543221087718>
21. Sprong, S., & Skopek, J. (2022). Academic achievement gaps by migration background at school starting age in Ireland. *European Societies*, 24(5), 580–604. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2022.2084558>
22. Trausch, K. J., Brock, M. E., & Anderson, E. J. (2022). Efficacy of paraeducators facilitating peer support arrangements for elementary students with multiple disabilities. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 47(2), 89–103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325211063607>
23. Walker, V. L., Kurth, J., Carpenter, M. E., Tapp, M. C., Clausen, A., & Lockman Turner, E. (2021). Paraeducator-delivered interventions for students with extensive support needs in inclusive school settings: A systematic review. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 46(4), 214–231. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15407969211055127>
24. Walker, V. L., Douglas, K., Wilkerson, K., & colleagues. (2022). Special education teachers' perspectives of effective pre-service training practices in systematic instruction for students with extensive support needs. *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities*, 70(4), 582–593. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20473869.2022.211036>
25. Walker, V. L., Douglas, S. N., Reilly, A. M., Tapp, M. C., & Sobeck, E. E. (2025). Paraeducator training to support students' behavioral needs: Administrator, teacher, and paraeducator perspectives. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098300725133598>
26. Wolf, M. K., & Lopez, A. A. (2022). Developing a technology-based classroom assessment of academic reading skills for English language learners and teachers: Validity evidence for formative use. *Languages*, 7(2), Article 71. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages7020071>