Para Educator and Classified Staff Study: Hacker Middle School

Cierra Hunter Donlee Webb

Boise State University
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Cierra H.D. Webb
Boise State University

Author Note
The author and researcher of this study is a recent graduate of Boise State University, fall class of 2023. The study was conducted over a 7-week period that consisted of active interviews, communication, a survey for employees and establishment in the Mountain Home School District 193 and conducted at the middle school, Hacker Middle School. The author at the time that this is published is an active employee and para educator of two years. Any questions, reference or use of this study can be obtained from Boise State University or requested from the author.

Department of Interdisciplinary Professional Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Boise State University

Email: cierrawebb1@gmail.com
208-570-5579
Abstract

The following research and data collection was conducted over the course of 7 weeks during the capstone period of the authors final course for their Interdisciplinary Professional Studies degree. The following content is the interviews, data collection, and experiences of the author on their journey of this project. It establishes the wants and needs of the staff at a local middle school in Mountain Home Idaho. The author’s goal was to establish a foundational path for improvement and communication when it pertains to the classified and para educator staff at the local middle school and how this establishment could be implemented and open opportunities for change in the education career path. They plan to continue their efforts after graduation and with more studies and information to the growing knowledge of how schools and districts are dealing with both the positive and negative concerns amongst their staff as the world of education changes.
Introduction

I have worked in the Mountain Home School district for 6 years in various positions ranging from coaching, subbing, and now being a para educator for the last two years. In the first year as a para educator I was met with little to no resources on how to do my job and the basics that were outlined were that of the recess, breakfast, and lunch duties that I was to attend and help deal with the chaos of students at those indicated times. When it came to my actual job title of TEAM para educator, there was quite literally nothing explained to me. I did some basic shadowing with the other para in the room with me that year and was able to ask questions to her and the teacher, but my fellow para that was supposed to be training me on how to do the job had also stated that the year before she wasn’t trained or taught fully how to do her job and that basically we had to wing it. While I received a perfect end of the year report from my admin, I didn’t feel as though I had truly earned it as I didn’t know what I did right and what I did wrong. Winging it got me through my first year, but I could not tell you fully what my job is.

The district that year had organized some paid trainings and conversations at the office that were required to be attended of the para staff, but in all honesty, I and many other coworkers didn’t find much that we learned from the trainings and most of the time spent in them was used for paras to complain about the issues with students and the lack of support they were feeling. While being able to vent and express is freeing in its own way, you would also think that the district would have refined these trainings when we gave the feedback and taken the complaints to heart to help improve the conditions of which their staff were working in. However, this year there have been no established trainings and the lack of support and para staff has dropped to an all time low for the district. The short staffing has led to my boss and teacher in my room to be working at four different schools and has not been in ours more than four days this year.
In many ways I take this as a compliment that I am doing my job well and therefore she isn’t worried about me, but not having that support has been taxing and vexing in many ways. The lack of training this year has also been a sore spot for not only myself but other paras as the general and special education teacher trainings have happened bi-weekly. I thought to myself as the project was approaching that if I was feeling this frustration and vexation that there was a problem and one that was probably felt by my coworkers.

I decided that since this was a problem that I was seeing in my neck of the woods that this was a problem that I could begin to solve in my last stretch here at Boise State. The establishment was the first thing that I needed to do. Meaning that I needed to define the problem from the bottom up. I began to talk to my co-para educators about what they were seeing as the issue to their frustrations and what they would like to see changed this year or in the coming years if they chose to stay on staff; many were and are still debating leaving education all together. Their frustrations were the same as mine as I conducted my impromptu interviews; lack of training, support, pay, utilization, and the feeling of being a vital part of the school system.

From there I established what the administration, Principals of my school, were seeing from us as staff and where we could improve. While they didn’t have much to say, the two that were the same were promptness and taking initiative; fair, and at least a place to start. I wasn’t sure how to go about this when bringing up trainings and established a connection with the Education Association Mountain Home Chapter Union President, Lisa Mills on how to go about this and from there I found a mentor and a like minded person who was vying to establish the same trainings and support that I was. From there we began discussing our discussion and research points and set up a survey for staff in my school to take and we ended the project with
trying to establish a meeting with the superintendent to discuss the findings and how we can move forward. While we had immense success with the survey in our focus group at Hacker Middle School, we have yet to hear back from the superintendent, but while that was the end goal and has yet to be reached, phase one is complete and something that hasn’t been done in over 10 years. The beginning of closing the gap has begun and will only continue to move forward.

**Elements Coming Together**

*Innovative Approach*

The perspectives that I had to combine was that of administration wanting a staff that was functioning better as a collective unit and establishing the issues of the classified and para educator staff that was leading the high turnover that we have been seeing in the last two years. This was done through interviews, both group and individual to finely define what each stakeholder was wanting out of the research portion. I wanted the administration to understand what they were accomplishing and accomplishing well versus the backlash and frustrations that their staff were actively noticing and not feeling comfortable enough to voice and if that was even something that they as the leaders of the school could fix. I am fortunate enough to have both coworkers and administrators that are willing and able to be collaborative, so this was easily done.

It didn’t come down to just, “If we establish and support then/or we will or will not lose staff”, it was about realizing that there is and was a lack of communication and a fear of conflict on both sides, maybe even a lack of caring enough to do something, that needed to be established and brought to light by someone before we could even begin to start establishing the things that would be needed to fix this problem on a district level let alone in an individual school. The
innovative approach to the beginning stages of my project were much more complex in many ways. Getting people to open up and feel safe and comfortable enough to talk about what they wanted and what the issues were that they were seeing being presented on all sides. It wasn’t until this was established that I could even begin to think about how to gain support and begin a survey to collect my data.

*Emotional Intelligence*

I knew what I saw as an individual and the problems that I wanted fixed, but I needed to separate myself from the situation in order to really listen and understand the value of what my coworkers and administrators had to say on the topic at hand. In order to begin the approach I had to make sure that I was in check emotionally and that I was not steering those that I was interviewing in one direction or another, a direction that aligned with my thinking. I had to be receptive to where I was also a part of the problem and what I needed to fix and adjust internally before I could be a blank and unbiased partisan in this project. This led me to being able to not only gain trust easier, but allowed me to be able to fully note and understand what was valuable to the survey and what training could be established in order to bring unity, utilization and understanding amongst all stakeholders. Each brought value and a new perspective to the table and ultimately, and I don’t think they realize it quite yet, but were the ones who were paving the path of my project and paving the way for their own solutions. They just needed someone to listen.

*Creative Thinking and Innovative Solution*

Part of the creative thinking process was establishing an interactive training and survey that wasn’t going to be simply talking about and at the para educators in the district or those that were in our testing group at Hacker. We, Lisa and I, during this first part of the project that I
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aimed to accomplish, wanted to make sure that those who were at Hacker felt like they had a voice in what was going into the trainings as they at the end of the day decide the standard and ways that they are willing and comfortable working in. Through the survey and conversations that I was creating and having, I was making sure that they felt like they were making the decisions and part of being a leader or wanting to lead change is taking a step back and letting your team decide what is going to be in the final project. I also had to have these conversations and stage the survey that I sent out to complete phase one in a way that didn’t have my administrators and the superintendent thinking that the para educator and classified staff at Hacker was staging a coup. It had to promote the positives that were already happening in the school and establish a sense of acknowledgement from the staff in the testing survey.

As the processes of getting the results was coming to a close and presentation of the finding is the next step, I made sure that the surveys and conversation topics were approved by Lisa and that I had the full backing of an organization, the Union, that knew how to establish these types of trainings that the staff was asking for as we moved forward and they themselves had the training to teach them. Not many have the luck that I did with the full backing of a Union in what they are trying to achieve and not one that was already becoming certified to provide the training, representation, and support that was going to be needed going forward.

The survey was sent out to 14 classified and para educator staff and they were able to stay anonymous which promoted more of the faculty to be open and honest in their opinions. This also offered a form of protection for the staff if the school district or administration opted to illegally retaliate; 8 out of the 14 opted to participate. The goal of the project wasn’t just getting the staff the resources and needs fulfilled, but to establish that they were safe to say how they felt without the fear of retaliation and that is something that we accomplished.
The results were measured on a scale of Strongly Agree to Strongly disagree in 25 out of the 27 questions with the last two being open ended responses from the participants. This closes out our phase one with a positive outcome and results.

**Results**

The impact was measured in a series of 27 questions that allowed the staff to rate how they were feeling on a scale from the problems that we had talked about in a select few and about the way they felt as a whole in the school when it came to interactions with the administrators and other teachers, certified staff, in the building. It promoted direct involvement in future endeavors that Lisa and I are aiming to establish in phase two of the project as we go into the spring semester. The impact that was measured was in how honest the staff was in their results and in how they established what was needed in the school. Did they keep their answers mild and simple or did they state how they really felt. I found that the staff that I was working with was receptive to voicing their opinions strongly, sometimes even in anger and frustration in the survey, but that showed that the safe environment that I wished to provide was and that was an accomplishment.

The benefits that these individuals that took the survey got were that they were getting a taste of what coming together to solve the problems felt like and in many ways it brought us together more as a staff which is something that admin was heavily asking for. Not only that, but the administration can use these results as a way to improve in the following semester or coming years. After this survey was sent out and I had a discussion with my administration on the results my boss over the fall break began to take action and we have two trainings coming our way on suicide prevention in our students and the other on communication in special education, something that many of us are overwhelmed with excitement with. All we have wanted to do
was be included in the training and make our school a better place for ourselves and our students
and because we opened up the table to conversation, we are seeing our need being fulfilled.

Impact with the superintendent will be measured after graduation, but the hope is that it is
met with the same positive response that Hacker has already shown. There is a want for
betterment and change on all levels of staff but no one to take it on and take the reins of the
operation; that is where Lisa and I have stepped in. So far in our tester group we are seeing
happier and more bonded classified and para staff and better relationships building from this
group with administrators. The lines of communication are finally open and from there it can
only go up and get better.

Conclusions

The results of the survey are what we anticipated in the conversations; that there were
disgruntled employees that we upset at the lack of communication, training, support, and pay and
while we can change some of these easily, it also gave us as insight for pay negotiations on the
union end on why para educator and classified employees are leaving the district in a small
glance. While this may not represent the voices of a whole group, it is a large enough pool that
can be used in the defense of said employees. There were, in the personal response, as we
expected people who were calling for administration discipline from a district level that went as
far as firing the staff, but there were also employees that were making suggestions about library
funding, and what other areas in the district that they reported to that were lacking. These were
areas that we hadn’t even considered in the original plan and something that Lisa and I can
include as we move forward into phase two.

The ones that surprised me the most were the amount of the staff that felt supported the
most by other para educator staff. Where I thought there might be some lack of communication,
seeing that the balance in this area of staff and the bond already being strong gave a sense of relief and excitement to move forward into phase two. It also allows us to use Hacker as the standard of what a school should be functioning as when it comes to the connection amongst the staff. While they didn’t always feel supported as a whole by the other teachers, they did however feel like they had a friendly bond that allowed them to do their job successfully which is another thing that Lisa and I can delve into moving into training. The last one that I found surprising was that all para and classified educators felt that they could be in their job was that they could be doing more. A common complaint that I did find is that teachers, paras mainly, were sitting in their classrooms not being able to do their job from the lack of utilization, but I didn’t realize that those who were classified were feeling the same frustration when it came to wanting to do more and this is an area that can and will benefit administrators and the district when it comes to outlining job duties and trainings. There is more that we could be doing.

The main thing coming to the final end of this project that I would be doing differently is establishing a more urgent and aggressive approach when it comes to administration and the superintendent on the vitality and meaning that their participation and vocalization is when it comes to these types of discussion, no matter how busy they may be. There should be time allotted or time made to help their staff feel as though they are wanted, needed, and supported. I think that if I had pushed for this more and expressed this in a better manner that I could have gotten more information on their expectations and gotten in with the superintendent quicker than what I am. That was the sole disappointment and failure when it came to this project. That I will not be able to publish and state the opinion of the person who is running a district on the matters at hand, however, their words with be gotten and known, just in a longer stretch of time.
In the end I find that this project was a success in meeting the expectations and goals that I and Lisa had set out to accomplish. The lines of communication amongst the “lower” staff and administration are now open and positive allowing change to be able to happen on equal terms. Para educators and classified staff in the tester group at Hacker feel as though their voices are being heard, valued, and now taken seriously and finally there is action and accountability being taken on all sides in order to ensure that their needs are being met. While the pay gap and issues will be something that will have to be addressed and tackled in a different manner and by the union, there is hope in both of us going into the future negotiations that we will be able to support the staff in the district in that manner as well. Here is too good luck and good team work as I move forward into phase two!
References


Appendix
My job as a para educator is currently fulfilling
8 responses

- 37.5% Strongly Agree
- 12.5% Agree
- 12.5% Neutral
- 37.5% Disagree

I feel utilized by my colleagues-other para educators
8 responses

- 37.5% Strongly Agree
- 12.5% Agree
- 37.5% Neutral
- 50% Disagree

Strongly Disagree
I feel utilized by my colleagues-certified teachers
8 responses

I feel utilized by admin
8 responses
I feel that I know what my job entails/requires of me
8 responses

- Strongly Agree: 50%
- Agree: 25%
- Neutral: 25%

I could tell you my exact job description; both title of job and all the duties I perform
8 responses

- Strongly Agree: 62.5%
- Agree: 37.5%
I feel that my job is interactive with both faculty and staff
8 responses

I feel that I am supported by admin and certified teachers
8 responses
The emotional climate that is present in my school is one that I am comfortable with.
8 responses

I have a person I can ask questions about my job
8 responses
I am given the resources and tools to accomplish my job successfully
8 responses

I am able to have a good relationship with faculty and students
8 responses
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My pay matches my needs in my community
8 responses

My pay matches the requirements for my job
8 responses
My day is filled with job duties
8 responses

My job is predictable
8 responses
I feel like a needed part of the team in my job
8 responses

I have had or will be receiving adequate training for my job
8 responses
My work support system mainly comes from people with like titled jobs
8 responses

I feel well represented by my school district
8 responses
I think that I could easily train someone on how to do my job-full details
8 responses

I feel important in my job
8 responses
I feel safe to ask questions to my admin and they will have an accurate or well-rounded response.  
8 responses

I feel that when I have to discipline a student that I am backed up by other teachers. 
8 responses
I feel that there is more to my job that I could be doing

8 responses

What are some things that you would like to see changed? 8 responses

- Firing the vice principal
- Teacher's using para's as a resources both in and outside their classrooms. I think that more training should be given for what should be done in groups.
- Pay raise for the Paras, because we don't get paid enough for what we do on a daily basis.
- It would be nice if everyone was on the same page as far as rules on the playground.
- Im Okay
- better pay
- Better pay, more training, more meetings/communication between admin and para staff
- I would like to see better communication between paras, teachers, and admin both in the building and the district office.

What are some things that could be added; resources, training, funding, better relationships etc., that would benefit you in your job? 7 responses

- Communication, admin communication.
- Training for how teachers want groups to be run. The schools always need more funding.
- More training/resources, more Para meetings, staff team buildings included with the Paras.
- training, funding (there is no district budget for the library) and wages
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resources
training, reading material resources in regards to psychology/behaviors, funding for paras to be paid on PD days

The Title One person in the district office could make more of an effort to communicate, observe, and collect data before making changes to Title One.