

Special Education Teachers' Experiences Supporting and Supervising Paraeducators: Implications for Special and General Education Settings

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been an increase in paraeducator supports, in large part because students with low incidence disabilities are being included more frequently in general education settings. As a result, special education teachers have been given additional supervisory responsibilities related to directing the work of paraeducators in special and general education settings. Many teachers, however, feel unprepared for this supervisory role. Therefore, to gain a better understanding of current practices in paraeducator supervision, the authors interviewed 13 special education teachers who were nominated by district special education administrators as exemplary supervisors of paraeducators. From the interviews, three themes emerged: creating effective teams, ensuring appropriate training and evaluation, and recommendations for the field. Practices for paraeducators working with students with low incidence disabilities in general education settings are noted in the first two themes. Implications for policy, practice, teacher preparation, and future research are also discussed.

Keywords

paraeducator, supervision, teacher training, disabilities

Providing a successful educational experience for students with low incidence disabilities (e.g., autism, intellectual disability) requires a team of education professionals (Alquarini & Gut, 2012). For many students with low incidence disabilities, a paraeducator will serve as a key team member (Mirenda, 2014). Because of the paraeducator's central role supporting students with low incidence disabilities, federal law requires that paraeducators receive appropriate training and supervision by a certified professional (U.S. Department of Education, 2005), such as a special education teacher. Despite this federal mandate, however, research has consistently noted that paraeducators lack proper training, supervision, and clarity in roles (Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001; Giangreco, Suter, &

Doyle, 2010). In addition, paraeducators report insufficient preparation prior to entering the classroom, and reliance on the supervising teacher for instruction and support (Riggs & Mueller, 2001). Furthermore, despite the important role of teachers in supporting paraeducators, many teachers report inadequate preparation for their supervisory role, especially in pre-service and in-service training programs (Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl, 2001).

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As students with low incidence disabilities have increasingly been included in general education settings, the number of paraeducators have also increased (Alquarini & Gut, 2012; Riggs, 2004). Unfortunately, paraeducators supporting children with disabilities in general education settings often lack adequate support and supervision as they spend much of the day out of view of the supervising special education teacher (Alquarini & Gut, 2012). Although they are in the proximity of general education teachers, general education teachers often lack the training and expertise required to support both the student with a disability and the paraeducator in the general education setting (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2001). In addition, special education teachers report limitations to supervision indicating that only 7% of their time in the school day is devoted to paraeducators they supervise (Giangreco & Broer, 2005). These supervision challenges can result in isolation and uncertainty regarding performance for paraeducators in general education settings (Marks, Schrader, & Levine, 1999). Given these circumstances, traditional managerial models of supervision, in which a teacher observes the paraeducator and provides feedback (Wallace et al., 2001), may be problematic in general education settings where the supervising special education teacher may not be readily available. However collaborative models of supervision, often used in other areas of education (Nolan & Hoover, 2011), where teachers work together and encourage paraeducators to engage in independent reflection and goal setting may be more appropriate supervision models for paraeducators serving students with disabilities in general education settings (Drecktrah, 2000; Riggs, 2004). In addition, collaborative teaming approaches suggest inclusion is most successful when team roles are clearly defined (Chopra, Sandoval-Lucero, & French, 2011) and teams communicate, plan, and participate in learning opportunities together (Pickett, 1999).

Despite the existing research in the area of paraeducator supports, at present, there is limited research about supervision supports for

paraeducators. A review of existing research conducted by Giangreco and colleagues (2010) found only three studies (Drecktrah, 2000; Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Wallace et al., 2001) from 2000 to 2007 focused on supervision of paraeducators. Since that time, Chopra and colleagues (2011) conducted a study where they found that paraeducators were only effective when the supervising teacher clearly defined their roles and provided them with appropriate direction and guidance. Although these studies provide some knowledge about the lack of preparation for teachers supervising paraeducators (Drecktrah, 2000), as well as potentially important knowledge and skills for teachers supervising paraeducators (Chopra et al., 2011; Wallace et al., 2001), we still lack knowledge about the actual experiences of teachers who are seen as successful supervisors of paraeducators, especially paraeducators who serve students in general education settings. Therefore, we sought to explore supportive methods that can be utilized to ensure appropriate supervision of paraeducators. In addition, recognizing that paraeducators provide different types of supports based on the grade level and needs of the student, in this study, we decided to first focus on elementary settings (i.e., K-6 grade) for children with low incidence disabilities where paraeducator supports are most common, often overused, and potentially inappropriate. Specifically, we examined the supervision practices of 13 teachers who were nominated as *outstanding supervisors of paraeducators* with the goal of identifying the key components to supervisory practice for paraeducators supporting students with low incidence disabilities in elementary special and general education settings.

Method

Recruitment

Teachers were recruited for participation in this study using the following methods. First, school districts in Pennsylvania (a state with a history of advocacy for community and school

inclusion; see *P.A.R.C. vs. Pennsylvania*, 1972) were randomly selected (i.e., 15%, or 80 of the 528 districts in the state), and district special education administrators were contacted via email and invited to nominate teachers for participation. In recruitment emails, special education administrators were invited to nominate elementary-level special education teachers (see Howell & Gengel, 2005) whom they viewed as outstanding supervisors of paraeducators supporting students with low incidence disabilities (e.g., autism, multiple disabilities, intellectual disability) who received services in the general education settings at least part of the day. Nominated special education teachers were then contacted via email and invited to participate in the study. Teachers who agreed to participate in the study were asked to complete a three-item screening questionnaire to ensure they were currently working as a special education teacher and supervising paraeducators supporting elementary age students with low incidence disabilities who were included in a general education setting at least part of the day.

From the 85 districts randomly selected, 24 district supervisors responded. All district supervisors who did not respond to the initial email received a follow-up email. Twelve district supervisors responded with one or more nominations for the study, resulting in a total of 20 teacher nominations. Ten district supervisors indicated that they did not have nominations at this time (e.g., no teachers met the inclusion criteria, or teachers were too busy to participate), and two responded initially with questions about the study but never provided nominations even after follow-up emails were sent responding to their questions. Of the 20 nominated teachers, 13 were interviewed, one did not meet the inclusion criteria, five did not respond to the request to be interviewed (despite multiple email contacts), and one email was returned as undeliverable.

Following an analysis of the initial nominations, additional recruitment efforts were made to target urban, high-poverty districts, which were not represented in the original nominations although requests were made to

districts with these demographics. Unfortunately, despite multiple efforts to recruit from districts meeting urban, high-poverty demographics, no additional nominations were made by administrators (i.e., administrators did not respond, $n = 3$; administrators had no one appropriate to nominate, $n = 2$). Therefore, recruitment of participants was stopped when saturation of the data was reached (e.g., no new or relevant information was noted in interviews; Creswell, 2007). Table 1 provides information on the district demographics of randomly selected districts.

Procedures

An institutional review board approved procedures for this study prior to the start of the study. All approved protocol was followed throughout the study to protect participants.

Interview protocol. All interviews were conducted via telephone using semi-structured interview techniques (Smith, 1996) and were digitally recorded for later transcription. The same interview protocol was used for all interviews and included a list of primary questions with potential follow-up topics if the teacher did not address the topic within the primary question. Interview questions addressed demographics (i.e., six questions), as well as topics related to supervision practices with paraeducators (i.e., six questions addressing topics such as training, feedback, and evaluation), supports for paraeducator supervision (i.e., two questions), and recommendations regarding supervision of paraeducators (i.e., one question). The first author conducted all interviews. Questions were open-ended and sought to gain information about the supervision experiences of the teacher with his or her paraeducator(s).

At the beginning of each interview, teachers were thanked for completing and returning the screening questionnaire, the format of the interview was explained (i.e., approximate length, audio recording), and the interviewer informed teachers that they could choose to skip any question or end the interview at any time. The interviewer then confirmed that the

Table 1. Demographic Information for Districts.

	Number of districts recruited	Number of teachers nominated	Number of teachers interviewed
District type			
Rural	25	4	3
Town	11	4	2
Suburban	38	11	8
Urban	6	1	0
Poverty range ^a			
Low (0%-10%)	22	9	6
Average (11%-20%)	39	10	7
High (above 21%)	19	1	0
Total number	80	20	13

^aPoverty range listed is for the district collectively as reported for by the New America Foundation (<http://febp.newamerica.net>).

teacher was still willing to be interviewed before proceeding. Next, screening questions were reviewed for accuracy, and the researcher proceeded with demographic questions and remaining interview questions.

Data analyses. Data analyses were based on procedures outlined by Berg (2007). First, each interview was transcribed resulting in approximately nine to 27 typed pages per interview. Then, using investigator triangulation (Denzin, 1989), two researchers (first and second authors) independently read interview transcripts and identified themes in the interviews. Next, the researchers met to compile an inclusive list of themes and coded transcripts using agreed-on themes. During this time, representative quotes were also selected from teachers to illustrate the themes. Finally, a matrix was created to organize data, identify interaction of themes, and compare data with existing research.

Member check. After the data were coded and organized, a brief summary of the themes from the interviews was sent to each teacher to further establish credibility of the findings

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Two of the teachers contacted during the member check could not be located to provide the summary, as they were no longer working in the districts where they were originally contacted for the interview. The other teachers who were contacted did not request changes or additions to the information provided in the summary. One teacher expressed appreciation to the researchers for the information that was provided.

Results

Teachers in this study came from a variety of districts and educational settings, and supported a diverse group of students. Table 2 provides details about districts, classrooms, students served, teaching experience for teachers, teacher education and certification, teacher experience supervising paraeducators, and paraeducator experience/education level.

Three main themes emerged from the teacher interviews in the study: creating effective teams, ensuring appropriate training and evaluation, and recommendations for the field. Teachers discussed practices for paraeducators serving students in general education settings within the first two themes.

Creating Effective Teams

Team roles. During the interviews, teachers noted the importance of sharing responsibilities and working as a team to ensure success. Teacher M stated, "having that team thinking is just key." Teachers identified four essential team members for students with low incidence disabilities.

Special education teachers. Special education teachers noted primary responsibility for the day-to-day supervision of paraeducators. This included training and providing feedback to paraeducators. Teachers also emphasized their role in making team relationships successful (e.g., setting up team meetings, communicating with team members). All teachers highlighted classroom roles such as accountability and supporting student learning (e.g., collecting student data, scheduling, planning).

Table 2. Demographics of Participating Teachers, Districts, and Classrooms.

Teacher	District type/poverty level	Class type ^a	General education participation	Student disability categories	Caseload	Years of teaching experience	Certification/ education	Years of supervision experience	Number of paraeducators supervised (current/typical/max)	Paraeducator experience ^{b/} education
A	Town average	Life skills	1.5 hours daily Lunch, recess, specials ^c	A, ID, SLI, OHI, MD	6	7	K-12 SE Master's SE	7	2/2/3	3-7 years HS
B	Rural average	Life skills K-6	Breakfast, lunch, recess, homeroom, specials, science studies	A, ID, SLI, OHI	9	5	SE, EE, ECE	5	2/2/2	3-6 years HS
C	Suburban average	Autism support 5-6	One student full inclusion Other students: lunch, recess, specials	A	5	6	SE, EE Master's educational development/ strategies	6	3/3/3	5+ years Certified teacher, Bachelor's, HS
D	Suburban low	Itinerant K-6	Full inclusion with pull out supports as needed	A, ID	26 (3 with A)	11	K-12 SE, Middle-level English	11	3/3/7 ^d	Usually none Associate's, HS
E	Town average	Learning/emotional support K-2	Lunch, recess, specials	A	3 with A ^e	5	SE, EE	5	6/6/8	5-7 years HS
F	Suburban low	Autism support	Lunch, recess, specials	A, ID	7	7	K-12 SE, EE, Music; Middle Math, Science, English	7	4/4/5	8-9 years Bachelor's, HS, Military
G	Rural average	Multi-disability K-1	Breakfast, lunch, recess, homeroom, specials	A, ID, OI	4 (1 ED)	16	SE, EE, ECE Master's SE	16	2/2/7	4-5 years Unknown

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Teacher	District type/poverty level	Class type ^a	General education participation	Student disability categories	Caseload	Years of teaching experience	Certification/ education	Years of supervision experience	Number of paraeducators supervised (current/typical/max)	Paraeducator experience ^{b/} education
H	Rural average	Life skills K-5	Lunch, recess, homeroom, specials, science, social studies	A, ID, MD	6	5	SE, EE Master's reading	5	2/2/2	5-7 years HS
I	Suburban low	Learning support K-2	Lunch, morning work, recess, specials, social studies, science	A, ID, OI	9	30	SE, EE Master's SE	15-20	4/-/-	1-10 years Certified Teacher, Bachelor's, HS
J	Suburban Low	Learning support K-3	Lunch, recess, specials, 40 min language arts, math	A, ID, OI	5	33	Birth-21 SE Bachelor's/ Master's SE	15	5/5/6	1-10 years Certified Teacher, Associate's, HS
K	Suburban average	Life skills 2-6	Lunch, homeroom, recess, specials	A, ID, VI, TBI	7	29	K-12 SE Master's SE	29	4/4/4	1-12+ years Certified Teacher, Bachelor's, HS, CNA
L	Suburban low	Learning support	Full inclusion with pull out supports for math/reading/ language arts	A, OI	6	9	K-6 SE	7	5/5/8	1-20 years Certified Teacher, Bachelor's
M	Suburban low	Learning support 6	Homeroom, lunch, recess, specials, science	^c	21 (1 LID)	11	K-12 SE, EE Master's reading	5-6	1/1/1	3 years Bachelor's

Note. A = autism; ID = intellectual disability; SLI = speech language impairment; OHI = other health impairment; MD = multiple disability; SE = special education; EE = elementary education; ECE = early childhood education; HS = high school diploma; OI = orthopedic impairment; ED = emotional disability; VI = visual impairment; TBI = traumatic brain injury; LID = low incidence disability; CNA = certified nursing assistant.
^aAs reported by the teacher.

^bRanges are provided for the total years of experience across all current paraeducators in the classroom.

^cSpecials include classes such as gym, art, music, library, computers, guidance, special activities in the general education classroom, and so on.

^dTeacher only indicated paraeducators who support students with low incidence disabilities.

^eTeacher only listed students on caseload with a low incidence disability.

^fTeacher did not discuss disability category since she was only referring to one student during the interview.

Teachers emphasized their role in scheduling and planning and noted the stress of trying to coordinate so many activities and individuals. Teacher J stated she made “daily schedules for the student as well as the paraeducator so that he or she knows exactly what they are supposed to be doing during the day,” while Teacher L mentioned that she provided paraeducators with a schedule “so they know what they are doing. Otherwise they are constantly asking me ‘what do we do next?’”

Paraeducators. Teachers listed a variety of roles for paraeducators. Paraeducators were expected to incorporate training and feedback provided by teachers and administrators. With regard to classroom responsibilities, teachers expected paraeducators to provide appropriate support to students by documenting student services, providing instructional support, managing behavior, and communicating with team members. Teacher K indicated the importance of documenting student services: “Documentation is very important when you are dealing with education... We have OT, PT, Speech...nurses...anytime there is any kind of contact, I need to make sure it is logged. I need to make sure I know.” Teachers noted that some paraeducators were assigned additional roles in the school (e.g., recess duty, bus duty), which often conflicted with their roles with special education students. Teachers also expected paraeducators to be professional, maintain confidentiality, and demonstrate appropriate interpersonal skills.

General education teachers. Teachers discussed the roles of general education teachers, especially in relation to supporting students and paraeducators in general education settings. General education teachers were expected to provide classroom schedules and information about classroom curriculum so accommodations and modifications could be provided for children with special needs. In addition, teachers noted that general education teachers were often consulted to obtain feedback about the performance of paraeducators in general education settings. Teacher A stated, “I can’t really say [what is

happening in the general education setting] unless I get feedback from the general education teacher.”

Administrators. Administrators discussed by teachers included principals, special education directors, and other district specialists (e.g., school psychologist, autism specialist). Teachers reported that administrators were vital to supporting paraeducators in the schools. Administrators supported teachers in their supervisory roles with paraeducators (e.g., checking in with teachers, helping with conflict resolution), conducted evaluations for paraeducators, and supported paraeducator training (e.g., planning, conducting, or approving paraeducator training). Most teachers felt well-supported by administration in their work with paraeducators. Teacher J stated, “I get wonderful support from my principal and my special education supervisor.” This, however, was not a universal experience. Nine teachers expressed at least some frustration with the level of support provided by their administrators. Teacher I noted, “I really don’t remember getting any instruction from supervisors . . . they pretty much leave it up to us what to do with the paraeducators,” while Teacher C shared, “If I tell my administrator what I need from them they most definitely will do what I need. It might take some time, but it gets done.”

Team relationships. Teachers indicated many positive experiences when working with paraeducators. According to teachers, positive team relationships were best achieved through teamwork, mutual respect, and good communication.

Teamwork. Teachers indicated methods to ensure teamwork occurred with paraeducators. First, they indicated the importance of making paraeducators feel a part of the team. Teacher C stated, “Make [paraeducators] feel part of the team because I think sometimes that they are forgotten and they get a little bit offended by that.” Teachers also noted that teamwork is best achieved when the team works together to solve problems

and make decisions. Teacher G indicated, “[We] brainstorm our ideas as a team about what works and what doesn’t work.” Teachers also indicated that teamwork was more easily achieved when the paraeducator and teacher were familiar with each other.

Mutual respect. Several key factors led to a respectful environment according to the teachers interviewed. First, they stressed the importance of treating the paraeducator as an equal. Teacher A mentioned, “I would never ask [paraeducators] to do anything that I wouldn’t do myself.” Other teachers emphasized the importance of showing appreciation. Teacher H stated, “I’ve tried to let [my paraeducators] know how much I appreciate them . . . we all enjoy hearing when we are doing a good job.” Teacher K indicated that paraeducators who feel respected are more motivated: “Show them that you respect them . . . treat them the way you want to be treated, they will want to know what they can do differently.”

Communication. Teachers emphasized the importance of good communication with paraeducators and other education professionals, especially in the general education setting. Teacher E noted, “I keep in close contact with the regular education teachers and I go into every classroom that my child is in at least once or twice a day.” Teachers often had set meetings with education teams and paraeducators, but the frequency of the meetings varied (e.g., weekly, before school begins, daily at some point during the day). Teachers communicated with paraeducators verbally or in written forms (e.g., written notes, text messages, email), and indicated communication was easier with familiar paraeducators. Teacher B commented, “We do a lot of email exchange . . . it’s a good way to kind of keep us both on the same page and have it in writing so that we can refer back to it.”

Teachers also provided tips for improving communication with paraeducators. They suggested meeting regularly as a team to discuss and share ideas, using and posting schedules, providing written instructions, and reviewing

expectations. Teachers communicated with paraeducators about a variety of topics including changes that needed to be made in the classroom, student needs, curriculum, planning and scheduling, sharing ideas, and expressing appreciation. The most frequently mentioned challenge for communication was the lack of time teachers had to communicate with paraeducators. Teacher F expressed, “I wish I had more time to sit down with them.”

Relationship challenges. Although the teachers experienced many successes in team relationships, the relationships between teachers and other team members were not always smooth. Nine teachers identified the challenge of establishing a professional relationship with paraeducators, especially when there was an age difference. Teacher E indicated, “Being younger than them makes it harder . . . I feel like my first year I really struggled with that.” Teachers also mentioned that some paraeducators lacked work ethic and professionalism. Teacher J noted of some paraeducators, “It’s not necessarily that they’re not doing well with their child, it’s that they just don’t have a high work ethic.” Other paraeducators did not understand the needs of students with low incidence disabilities, which sometimes increased challenging behaviors from students, contributed to the provision of inappropriate supports for the student, or required additional supervision from the teacher to the paraeducator.

Teachers also discussed relationship challenges with team members, such as personality clashes between paraeducators and students, and/or paraeducators and teachers. Teacher H summed her experience: “Often times it is more difficult to manage adults in my room than it is [to manage] students.” When conflicts arose with paraeducators, teachers indicated that they first tried to resolve any issues with paraeducators, but sometimes sought advice from an administrator. Teacher D stated, “I did as much as I could and eventually we had to kind of step in with the principal.” Teacher G expressed appreciation for administrative support when resolving conflicts: “You have to have someone else

look at the situation too. I think it is always important to have someone else's opinion." When trying to resolve challenges with paraeducators, teachers often documented issues. If issues could not be resolved through these methods, a meeting was generally held with the paraeducator, teacher, and/or administrator. Meetings often resulted in written instructions, follow-up from administrators, or placement changes for the paraeducators.

Ensuring Appropriate Training and Evaluation

Teacher preparation to work with paraeducators. When teachers were asked about their preparation to work with paraeducators, most indicated that they were provided little or no training regarding paraeducator supervision. Teacher D said, "I feel that I had a great college education, but very little talk about managing or working with paraeducators. Very, very little." Other teachers stated previous job experiences provided some background for supervision of paraeducators (e.g., work as a paraeducator, previous positions with supervisory roles). Informal training in supervision skills was often noted by teachers including trial and error on the job, personal life experiences (e.g., general people skills, raising a child with a disability), or guidance from mentor teachers, administrators, and significant others.

Paraeducator training. Teachers indicated that training provided to paraeducators included both formal (i.e., group training that met district and state requirements) and informal training (i.e., training specific to classroom duties). Formal training was selected and provided by the district, intermediate unit, or state educational agencies. Training content for formal training included data collection, Medicaid paperwork, CPR/first aid, autism, academic topics, and inclusion. The special education teacher most frequently conducted informal training, although teachers noted that occasionally, behavior specialists, school psychologists, speech language pathologists, technology specialists, autism

support consultants, or experienced paraeducators were asked to conduct informal training depending on the content. Teacher M noted the responsibility of training paraeducators: "It is your job to provide information to them and get them what they need to know." Training usually occurred at the beginning of the year with ongoing small sessions, as needed, later in the year (e.g., before school, after school, during lunch). Three teachers, however, noted challenges training paraeducators who were hired mid-year. Training format included discussion of skills, coaching by the teacher, and modeling of skills by the special education teacher. Content for informal training included social, academic, behavioral, life, and self-help skills. In addition, informal training included content about schedules, student-specific information (e.g., Individualized Education Program [IEP] goals, category-specific information), inclusion, and paraeducator expectations. When providing training to paraeducators, teachers emphasized the importance of providing written information to all paraeducators and additional support to inexperienced paraeducators. Teacher H indicated, "Someone new, I might do more modeling and it might take more time to establish all the things that we have talked about."

Paraeducator evaluation. Teachers discussed the formal evaluation process for paraeducators as well as feedback provided to paraeducators as part of training and supervision.

Feedback. Teachers conducted informal observations of paraeducators and provided feedback. Observation was done both in the special education and general education settings. Teachers tried to observe paraeducators frequently, measuring paraeducator progress. Many indicated more frequent observations with new paraeducators, or observing more frequently at the beginning of the school year. Feedback given to paraeducators occurred either immediately (i.e., when the issue was easy to address, urgent, or the teacher was available) or was delayed (i.e., when students

were not present, the feedback was sensitive in nature, correction could wait, or it was the end of the day/downtime). Feedback to paraeducators came in three forms: corrective (paraeducator needed to make a change), supplemental (paraeducator needed additional information), or reinforcement (paraeducator encouragement). Teacher K suggested, "Don't just tell them what they do wrong . . . tell them what they do right." Teachers noted challenges, at times, with paraeducators who had difficulty accepting feedback. Teacher F discussed a paraeducator who cried when receiving feedback: "She would start crying . . . I was always afraid that if I gave her feedback, she was going to cry." Teachers also expressed the difficulty of conducting observations in general education settings due to lack of time, scheduling challenges, and responsibilities with other students. Teachers indicated that they often sought additional support from school staff to gather information about paraeducator performance in general education settings.

Formal evaluation. Administrators, most often principals, but also district special education supervisors and school psychologists conducted formal evaluations. Evaluations typically occurred once per year at the end of the year, although Teacher L noted evaluations were now conducted in the middle of the year so paraeducators could implement suggestions provided during the evaluation. Most evaluations included a combination of observation with written feedback and/or a meeting. Teachers were often asked by administrators to provide feedback about the paraeducator for the evaluation. Some teachers, however, were concerned with how evaluations were conducted or with inconsistencies with the evaluation process. Teacher F stated, "In our district, I think evaluation is mostly whether they show up for work."

Recommendations for the Field

During the interviews, teachers provided many recommendations for improved supervision of paraeducators. Most notably, teachers

emphasized training recommendations for teachers and paraeducators and advice they have for future teachers.

Training for teachers. Teachers made several recommendations for changes to pre-service and in-service preparation to better prepare teachers to supervise paraeducators. Several teachers noted the importance of training to learn the leadership and management roles needed when working with paraeducators. Teacher D suggested managerial training: "I would really put in managerial training, almost the training you would get in business courses on how to appropriately manage people. I think it should be a mandatory part of special education." Teacher J suggested content for pre-service teacher preparation: "I would certainly want to have conversations about how to resolve conflict, how to manage your classroom when you have more than just yourself, how to work with different personalities." Teacher B recommended hands-on experience: "I think it's really important to see paraeducators in action – helping a student in an inclusive setting, helping a student in a special education classroom. I think that's the best way to really see what works." Teacher H indicated that improved mentoring might also be useful. She expressed her willingness to "offer support and try to serve as a mentor and offer things that [she] has done to try and build the [paraeducator] relationship."

Training for paraeducators. Teachers noted several concerns with current training practices for paraeducators. Eight teachers expressed concern with the lack of training for paraeducators. Teacher K stated, "They only have 20 hours a year . . . and it concerns me a lot, because when you have the low incidence population there are so many different areas that could be covered." Although most teachers recognized paraeducators were provided with limited training, some teachers found creative solutions. For example, Teacher F attended trainings and shared the information with her paraeducators because they were not given the opportunity to attend the training firsthand. Teacher K used organization tools

to keep track of the training she provided to paraeducators, such as a packet of information for paraeducators with a checklist of all the topics she wanted to cover during training. Teachers also noted a lack of funding for training, and the additional supports some paraeducators need as they gain skills. Teacher B stated, "Truthfully, we don't have a lot of training for teachers or paraprofessionals because of budget; honestly, it's not even an option."

Advice for future teachers. The teachers each shared advice for future teacher supervisors of paraeducators. Three teachers discussed the importance of understanding the paraeducator's role. Teacher E clarified appropriate and inappropriate roles: Paraeducators "can't be giving [primary] instruction, but they can give supplemental instruction based on something you did . . . and you shouldn't be using them to get your coffee or something. You should utilize them for the child." Seven teachers additionally emphasized the importance of making expectations and roles clear to paraeducators (e.g., how to interact with students, professionalism, confidentiality, behavior management procedures). Four teachers emphasized that teachers should create classroom environments where paraeducators feel part of the team and are treated as partners (e.g., have meetings together, be open to suggestions, have open communication). Twelve teachers emphasized the importance of creating an environment of respect and understanding in the classroom. Teacher H provided the following advice:

You're going to have a variety of personalities in your classroom, and sometimes you're not going to mesh and sometimes you will. Eventually you will need to find solid ground because these are the people that are going to be spending 180 days with you in the classroom. You either have to make it work or you're going to drive yourself crazy.

Teacher L and F suggested that spending time working in classrooms with paraeducators before teachers have their own classroom would be beneficial to understanding the

supervisory role better (e.g., work as a substitute paraeducator, student teach in a classroom with paraeducators).

Discussion

Paraeducators play a critical role in supporting educational experiences for students with low incidence disabilities (Mirenda, 2014). The teachers in this study described their experiences supporting and supervising paraeducators who work with students with low incidence disabilities. Teachers described both positive experiences and areas of concern in the field. Many of the experiences they described align with existing recommendations in the research.

Positive Experiences

The majority of teachers reported positive relationships with administrators, who, in turn provided support for teachers responsible for the supervision of paraeducators. Although some challenges were reported with administrators, (e.g., evaluation procedures), most teachers noted support from administrators during conflict resolution. It is encouraging to hear of these successes from teachers because researchers have suggested administrative support for supervision of paraeducators is essential to appropriate paraeducator supports (French, 2003). Also echoing the literature (French, 1998), teachers detailed success providing support to paraeducators through training, utilizing schedules, and lesson planning.

Areas of Concern

Although teachers noted many positive experiences, several areas of concern were also highlighted including challenges with communication, providing and receiving adequate training (both pre-service and in-service), and conducting quality evaluations for paraeducators. Previous studies have provided similar findings emphasizing the importance of effective communication among educational teams supporting children in general education settings (Downing et al., 2000), and the challenge

of providing paraeducators with adequate training (Downing et al., 2000; Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2002; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). Teachers also indicated that more time is needed to meet with and train paraeducators. Educational agencies must work with teacher supervisors to ensure proper training of paraeducators. Finally, from teacher reports in this study and as also noted by Riggs and Mueller (2001), it is clear that evaluation procedures need to be clarified. Educational agencies should detail the evaluation procedures to both teachers and paraeducators (Hilton & Gerlach, 1997), and teachers should be involved in the evaluation process (French, 2003).

Recommendations for Supervisory Practice

Another finding from this study was the clear indication that the supervision of paraeducators is being directed and owned in large measure by those charged with responsibility for providing supervision. There was little indication that paraeducators themselves were expected to play any sort of collaborative role identifying strengths and weaknesses or directing their own growth and development. Contemporary models of supervision are often based on the premise that supervision produces the most powerful long-term results when it is as collaborative as possible and allows the supervisee to take on increasing ownership for growth and development over time (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2009; Nolan & Hoover, 2011). If this does not occur, the supervisee remains dependent on the feedback of others to identify goals for improvement. A system where teachers and administrators direct paraeducator growth may be especially problematic in a general education setting where paraeducators receive limited time and feedback from their supervisors. Therefore, training in the supervision of paraeducators should include theories, models, and practices that are aimed at engaging paraeducators in developing the capability of co-directing their own growth in specific

domains. Because we expect students who receive special education services to develop an understanding over time of their strengths and weaknesses and become self-advocates, it seems appropriate to provide the professionals who support them the same opportunity and challenge. Current paraeducator supervision practices, also noted in this study, include supervision by a special education teacher regardless of the placement of the child. In a time of increasing inclusive practices, however, it is important to explore the expanding role general education teachers will and should have in supervising paraeducators.

Limitations

The results of this study should be interpreted with care, as the study included a relatively small sample of single interviews of special education teachers supporting students at the elementary level, with some limitations to diversity in the districts (i.e., no teachers working in high poverty or urban schools). In addition, this study included nominations from district supervisors of special education teachers who were seen as *outstanding supervisors of paraeducators*. As such, the experiences of the teachers in this study might not be reflective of the experiences of other teachers supervising paraeducators (e.g., novice teachers or supervisors of paraeducators, general education teachers working with paraeducators).

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

There are still unanswered questions and changes that must be made in the area of paraeducator supervision. Paraeducator utilization is at an all time high, yet paraeducators are often used inappropriately, and may receive inappropriate training and supervision. From this study and previous research in paraeducator supervision, it appears that current practice focuses primarily on management of paraeducators, rather than an approach that addresses utilization of

paraeducators from many angles (e.g., changes to district policies, administrative practices, and teacher preparation, collaboration with paraeducators to determine needs). Supervision of paraeducators is just one aspect of quality supports for students with low incidence disabilities, and lack of attention to other areas will continue to result in inappropriate paraeducator supports (Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2003). States, educational agencies, and teacher preparation programs should work together to implement policies that promote appropriate practices. Based on this study and previous research, changes to policy and practice should include (a) improvement of pre-service preparation to teachers for supervisory responsibilities including practicum experiences and coursework covering topics such as teamwork, effective communication, navigating team challenges, roles and responsibilities of paraeducators and teachers, and supervision practices with paraeducators including collaborative methods of supervision; (b) clarification of roles for administrators, teachers, and paraeducators within school settings especially role for administrators and teachers related to the supervision, training, and evaluation of paraeducators (e.g., written roles and responsibilities for paraeducators and teachers, in-service training to teachers and administrators in their supervisory roles with paraeducators, mentoring for supervisory responsibilities); (c) systematic, thorough training provided to paraeducators (e.g., pre-service training provided before duties begin, improved formal systems of training for paraeducators, increased training, support to teachers for day-to-day training needs of paraeducators, creation and use of training recording systems to ensure training has occurred); and (d) development of evaluation procedures for paraeducators that are transparent and clearly outline paraeducator expectations and evaluation methods for administrators, teachers, and paraeducators.

Finally, there are gaps in the literature that warrant further investigation. Future research

might address (a) the impact of pre-service and in-service training to teachers for supervisory roles with paraeducators, (b) the effectiveness of collaborative models of paraeducator supervision and evaluation, (c) the impact of quality supervision and training of paraeducators on the performance of students, (d) the impact of comprehensive evaluation procedures for paraeducators, and (e) the impact of additional meeting time for teachers and paraeducators to communicate and provide training.

Summary

With the current emphasis on inclusive practices for children with low incidence disabilities and use of paraeducators to help facilitate inclusive programming, the importance of quality supervision of paraeducators will continue to become more urgent. The experiences shared by teachers in this study provide additional information needed to improve educational outcomes for all children. As a field, we can move forward and provide appropriate educational programming for all children by continuing to influence policy, practice, and pre-service preparation, and conduct additional research in the area of paraeducator supports.

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