



IMPROVING THE DELIVERY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES: EXAMINING COMMUNICATION AMONG TEACHERS, PARA-EDUCATORS, AND AN EDUCATIONAL COOPERATIVE

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Abstract

Purpose of the study: The purpose of this study is to explore communication between participating school districts and the Cooperative with regard to the allocation of para-educators in general education classrooms.

Methodology: The study employed a comparative qualitative design. Since the goal of our research is to understand the communication channels and patterns between the Cooperative, general education teachers, and para-educators, we conducted focus group discussions with para-educators, the K-5 general education teachers who work in general education classrooms and the special education teachers.

Main Findings: The cooperative, special education teachers, general education teachers, and para-educators often operated in isolation of one another. Teachers and para-educators work together in the same classrooms but had a clear idea about who was providing the training and information needed to meet the needs of students in special education.

Applications of the study: Frequent communication and enhanced opportunities for planning and training would improve the efficiency and effectiveness of general and special education teachers along with para-educators.

Novelty: The study addressed ways to improve communication between participating school districts and the Cooperative with regard to the allocation of para-educators in general education classrooms. This would provide information about necessary training future para-educators need and expectations for engagement with students.

Keywords: *Special Education, Communication, Teachers, Para-educators, Educational Cooperative.*

INTRODUCTION

After World War II, parents raised concerns about the shortage of teachers qualified to meet the needs of students with disabilities. However, it was not until the 1970s that the awareness stimulated efforts to hire teacher aides to supplement general classroom instruction ([Brown, Farrington, & Knight, 1999](#); [Kaplan, 1977](#); [Billingsley, 2001](#); [Rude, Jackson, Correa, & Luckner, 2005](#)). The increasing demand for special education teachers prompted school stakeholders to look for effective and affordable alternatives to serve students with special needs. Numerous school districts found the solution in Paraeducators (also known as instructional assistants, teacher aides, and behavior support) to utilize as support in meeting challenges for students with special needs ([Giangreco, Edelman, & Broen, 2003](#)). The 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) describe the paraeducator as an employee who, appropriately trained, performs tasks assigned and supervised by the licensed practitioner ("[Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997](#)," [1997](#)).

Because of legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act ([ADA, 1990](#)), and No Child Left Behind ([\[NCLB\], 2002](#)), more students with special needs are learning in general education environments, thus requiring more instructional support. Foremost among these amendments was a requirement to develop Individualized Education Plans (IEP) focused on improving educational outcomes through the general curriculum, a 1997 initiative referred to as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Similar to teachers, para-educators fulfill various roles throughout the day: implementing teacher-planned instruction; supervising students; providing behavioral, communication, and social support; responding to individual student needs; providing personal care; and completing other assigned tasks ([Austin, 2014](#)).

[Finkel \(2014\)](#) estimated 830,000 para-educators were working in the United States at the time of his study, up from 500,000 in 1990. Rural and suburban schools have increased their reliance on the use of para-educators because the resources in these districts are usually more limited than those in large urban districts. Therefore, these circumstances make para-educators a viable approach for school districts attempting to enhance and provide support for special needs students ([Cegelka & Alvarado, 2000](#)). Even adding para-educators to rural or suburban districts can present challenges to human and fiscal resources. Many rural and suburban districts choose to join a cooperative, or co-op. In this system, districts pay a fee for services such as special education staffing, recruitment, training, and support services.



Joining a co-op allows rural and suburban districts to have access to more staffing options than they could afford on their own. However, using a cooperative can create difficulties for rural and suburban districts. Differences in school calendars, policies, priorities, and philosophies make it difficult for a co-op to align training; instructional support; recruitment, selection, and evaluation of support staff. Moreover, these differences can result in the formation of communication barriers between individual districts and a co-op that impede the functioning of processes and procedures. Since communication is fundamental to organizational health, a major task of a co-op is to understand and foster communication between the co-op and its organizational partners.

The purpose of this study is to explore communication between participating school districts and the Cooperative with regard to the allocation of para-educators in general education classrooms. We will solicit the perspectives of general education teachers and the para-educators working with them. Their perspectives will provide information about the assignment and supervision of para-educators; what communication channels exist and how they operate between the schools and the co-op; the training para-educators receive prior to entry into the classroom; the provision of continuing professional development; and expectations for engagement with students.

Research Questions

Given the purposes stated above, the following research questions will guide our investigation:

1. How do general education teachers and para-educators describe their roles and expectations in working with special education students?
2. How do general education teachers and para-educators communicate with each other about their roles and expectations?
3. How do general education teachers and para-educators describe the communication structure with the Cooperative?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature points out that many small districts nationwide, whether rural or suburban, have a difficult time attracting licensed teachers because they often offer a less competitive salary and benefits. Additionally, the geographic isolation of rural school districts may mean a lack of access to innovative materials or state of the art equipment to meet students' needs. Likewise, suburban schools find it difficult to serve students with special needs because suburban districts are growing faster than rural or urban districts. As student populations are increasing, the number of students needing additional academic support is increasing. As large as some suburban districts are, they are still unable to independently provide the required services for every low incidence disability within their attendance area. Consequently, rural and suburban districts typically have had two choices: struggling to meet the needs of students with low incidence disabilities or hiring para-educators to assist teachers working in inclusion classrooms. Hiring para-educators is a reasonably economical response for rural and suburban districts facing budgetary concerns and a limited supply of licensed special education teachers. When a teacher in an individual classroom has a caseload of varying disabilities, the ability of the teacher to effectively adapt instruction to the needs of each student is diminished ([Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000](#)).

The general classroom teacher is responsible for the supervision and support of the para-educator. However, the presence of a para-educator in the classroom sometimes does not achieve the sought after goal of having them at schools. A teacher in a classroom with a para-educator may show less direct attention to students in their classes with special needs ([Giangreco et al., 2003](#)). The relationship between the supervising teacher and para-educator has important implications for the quality of services provided to special education students. Thus, supervision is not merely an observation or shifting the teaching burden entirely to the para-educator. Supervision is a professional link that provides clear direction and feedback. Poor supervision may result in wasted instructional time and para-educators making decisions that are not based on good pedagogy or germane to the student's disability ([Guay, 2003](#)).

The increased hiring of para-educators to assist students with special needs raises ethical and legal questions ([Etscheidt, 2005](#)). [Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, and Doyle \(2001\)](#) posed a critical question about the nature of the training given to paraeducators in managing the high level of responsibility for special education students. Often, paraeducators are individuals with minimum qualifications and certifications even though they teach the most challenging students. While students in general education receive their instruction from licensed teachers, many of the students with special needs receive their education from paraeducators who have not received adequate preparation in pedagogy, content, and knowledge about the characteristics of specific disabilities. For example, many paraeducators receive limited training such as superficial oral instructions or reliance on handouts to explain how to work with students with disabilities ([Carroll, 2001](#)). Given the limited skills and financial compensation received by paraeducators, policymakers may be expecting paraeducators to offer a level of services they are not prepared to provide. Moreover, licensed special education teachers often receive inadequate training themselves and are ill-prepared to effectively supervise paraeducators ([Downing et al., 2000](#); [Giangreco et al., 2003](#); [Mueller, 2002](#); [Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl, 2001](#)).



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

School leaders seeking to improve educational results for children with disabilities encounter a host of complex issues. Addressing the needs of special education students in discrete silos bars educators from fully understanding needs and developing adequate solutions. Given the challenges of providing a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to children with disabilities, thinking in isolation is not sufficient. Key to overcoming organizational fragmentation and the compartmentalization of knowledge is fluid and regular communication that unifies the different components of the organization into a cohesive whole. ([Hedman & Gesch-Karamanlidis, 2015](#)). Educational leaders, teachers, and paraeducators have a greater opportunity to influence children in a positive and meaningful way when they develop their capacities to think and act together in ways that improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the services they deliver.

At a fundamental level, the development of collaborative thought and coordinated action requires dialogue. [Isaacs \(1993\)](#) defines dialogue as, “A discipline of collective thinking and inquiry, a process for transforming the quality of conversation and, in particular, the thinking that lies beneath it” (p. 25). However, in many settings, the dialogue needed to identify and examine issues surrounding the use of paraeducators in general education classrooms is either not occurring or occurring inconsistently. Dialogue is instrumental for keeping administrators and teachers sufficiently informed about problem areas in need of attention. Another purpose for dialogue is to focus attention on dysfunctional organizational arrangements that hinder the achievement of desired goals. If the communications between actors who are critical to healthy organizational functioning break down or become obstructed, organizations cannot significantly enhance their effectiveness. Time, budgetary constraints, and leadership hierarchies often prevent school administrators, special education coordinators, cooperating teachers, and paraeducators from having meaningful conversations about the services they provide. Assumptions and misconceptions about the delivery of special education services are more likely to occur when the conversation is insufficient or absent. Educators have an increased ability to coordinate activities, achieve goals, make informed decisions, solve problems, and institute change processes when open dialogue exists ([Rajhans, 2012](#)).

Dialogic Theory of Organizational Development and Special Education Services

Change is dynamic and ongoing within organizations that serve the needs of special education students. Changes in policy, personnel, student needs, and financial support are just a few of the challenges faced by special education providers. An environment of change fuels the need for educators to build trust and strengthen relationships in order to make sense of the multifaceted issues confronting them. “When the complexity of the issues leaders and organizations are facing is very high, the application of diagnostic protocols and pre-existing knowledge to identify and then implement change is unlikely to be successful” ([Marshak, 2015, p. 47](#)). However, a dialogical approach to organizational change recognizes the need for evolving conversations and interactions that foster inclusion and diversity and promote safe environments for people to think and work together in new ways ([Katz, 2015](#)). Contrary to a top-down approach toward communication, dialogical communication is multidimensional, holistic, and embraces a variety of interdependent perspectives ([Moroco, 2008](#)). Administrators seek feedback and input from teachers and paraeducators providing daily instruction to students. Dialogue is more than the communication of ideas; it is actively listening to the perspectives of others ([Floyd, 2010](#)).

For many organizations, problem-solving using dialogic methods requires a paradigm shift but incompatibilities between theory and practice in existing systems are difficult to close ([Floyd, 2010](#); [Wortham, 2011](#)). Established patterns of communication within schools may make it challenging for open dialogue between teachers, paraeducators, administrators, and special education support staff. Theories, narratives, and myths develop within organizations that influence the organizational culture, decision-making processes, and structures ([Grant & Marshak, 2011](#); [Marshak, 2013](#); [Marshak, 2015](#)). When operating independently, organizational members or groups “develop their own discourses about a particular issue through stories and narratives that define the way things are as they see and experience them” ([Marshak & Grant, 2008, p. S11](#)). These dominant and taken-for-granted discourses may impede communication and negatively influence the delivery of services. Therefore, to provide informed direction for the effective and efficient use of paraeducators, it is important for leaders to be aware of how the organization’s cultural stories connect to personal and interpersonal decisions and actions ([Hedman & Gesch-Karamanlidis, 2015](#)). Dialogic processes provide opportunities for educational leaders, classroom educators, and special education support personnel to understand cultural narratives, identify myths, and define theories-in-practice about the use of paraeducators.

Given the value of meaningful dialogue within organizations, we hope to collect information about communication patterns that exist between the co-op and participating schools. Organizations that understand and employ the principles of dialogic communication theory can expect healthier development and improved outcomes ([Bushe, 2013](#)).

METHODOLOGY

Founded in 1970, the Sedgwick County Area Educational Services Interlocal Cooperative #618, hereafter referred to as the Cooperative, became its own legal entity in 1981. This agency serves nine school districts with 50 different school buildings



and employs approximately 630 para-educators.

For this study, we examine the deployment of paraeducators in three elementary schools in three districts served by the Cooperative. The fourth school in another district declined to participate. Maize Central Elementary and Goddard Oak Street Elementary are in largely suburban districts; R.L. Wright Elementary is located in a small rural district. The Cooperative provides services and support for students with disabilities in their respective districts. We examine K-5 classrooms with an interrelated special education population. Paraeducators working in hearing impaired, visually impaired, gifted education, or programs that are not interrelated are excluded from the study.

Maize Central Elementary (MCE) is the largest of the five elementary schools in USD 266 with 951 students on their most recent state report card ([Kansas State Department of Education, 2013](#)). Maize is the most affluent of the districts in our study and contains the largest student enrollment served by the Cooperative.

With a population of 4,582, Goddard has the largest city population of any district in our study but the second largest student enrollment. The median income is slightly less than Maize at \$63,784 in 2013 ("[City-Data](#)," 2015). Approximately 70% of the student population at Oak Street does not qualify for a free or reduced lunch, as is representative of the Goddard school district. At Oak Street, 15% of students receive special education services ([Kansas State Department of Education, 2013](#)).

Of the two rural districts, Sedgwick is the smallest, least affluent, and the least racially diverse. There are 1,696 residents of Sedgwick, Kansas and the median income is \$53,025 ("[City-Data](#)," 2015). Almost 45% of R.L. Wright's students qualify for a free or reduced lunch, compared to the district average of 40%. The ratio of paraeducators to general education teachers who work with paraeducators in interrelated classrooms is close to 1:1. Maize Central has 25 paraeducators working with 20 teachers, and Oak Street has 13 paraeducators working with 13 teachers. Sedgwick's paraeducators slightly outnumber the teachers with six paraeducators and five teachers.

Table 1: Demographic Data of Participating Areas and Schools

| Category | Maize Central Elementary | Oak Street Elementary | R.L. Wright Elementary |
|---|--------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| City population | 3,823 | 4,582 | 1,696 |
| Median household income | 64,362 | 63,784 | 53,025 |
| Building enrollment | 951 | 392 | 355 |
| White | 83% | 82% | 88% |
| African American | 3% | <1% | 0% |
| Hispanic | 7% | 6% | 7% |
| Other racial groups | 6% | 5% | 5% |
| Eligible for free and reduced-price lunch | 16% | 30% | 45% |
| Students with disabilities | 11% | 15% | 15% |

Source: Kansas State Department of Education, 2013

Comparative Study Design

Qualitative research methods allow researchers to explore and gain insight into how participants perceive their world through in-depth data collection from multiple sources of information ([Creswell, 2007](#); [Merriam, 2009](#); [Silverman, 2013](#)). Fieldwork for qualitative studies is conducted in the natural setting, and the research team has the flexibility to modify the approach, the number of participants, or sites visited ([Creswell, 2017](#)). This flexibility allows us to include additional participants and adapt focus group questions as we learn more during the research process. Since the goal of our research is to understand the communication channels and patterns between the Cooperative, general education teachers, and, we conduct focus group discussions.

Participants

For this study, participants are paraeducators and the K-5 general education teachers who work in general education classrooms. Special education teachers are included when time and resources permit.

Focus Group Discussions

The nature of focused group discussions permits multiple participants to socially construct their perspectives from interactions and dialogue within the group ([Stake, 1995](#); [Krueger, 2009](#)). When selecting between interviews and focus groups it is essential to understand the benefits of each option and to choose the one that has the most reasonable chance of



answering the research questions (Kilbourn, 2006). These groups also provide researchers a chance to study participants in a more natural and relaxed atmosphere compared to the formality of single-subject interviews that may occur in a private setting (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). Once one member breaks the ice on a controversial topic, others will usually follow (Kitzinger, 1994). We employ open-ended protocols of 8-10 questions each with teachers and paraeducators that facilitate and elicit participants' perspectives. The teachers and paraeducators participate in separate focus groups (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Data Analysis

After completing data collection, we transcribe recorded group discussions. To make sense of data collected from focus group discussions, data analysis methodologies such as coding and the development of themes are used (Maxwell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After transcription, we code the data and group it into thematic categories. This allows us to discern patterns in the data and identify recurring and contrasting ideas and experiences. Themes are analyzed and interpreted for meaning so as to avoid redundancy (Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2012; Merriam, 2015).

FINDINGS

Institutional Structure and Culture

The strength of the building's structure and culture determines how administrators, teachers, and paraeducators allocate resources, approach problems, and define roles while meeting the needs of special education students.

Distribution of resources: Among all focus group participants, it was clear that the special education teacher was responsible for scheduling paraeducators within the building. One general education teacher remarked, "I would say I know our special education teachers do a good job of trying to match our paras with a teacher or with an age level... They do a very good job that way." While respondents agreed that the special education teacher was responsible for arranging the schedule, they also explained that scheduling was inconsistent and did not effectively meet the needs of all students and expectations of the staff.

In multiple focus group conversations, participants pointed out that when a paraeducator was absent, personnel would be moved from their typical duties to cover areas of highest need. This causes general education teachers to adjust their lesson plans at the last minute. As one set of teachers explained, "When they [paraeducators] are sick, they always take them and put them in younger grades... but that's when I look at my lesson plans, and go, 'Now, what do I do?'"

The amount of input given by teachers and paraeducators about scheduling assignments varied by building. In one paraeducator focus group, they indicated assignments were determined according to their strengths, "I'm way better in math than I am in language arts so she's given me more math classes." Several participants mentioned that when the principal or other building staff took an active role in screening and selecting paraeducator candidates, they were able to arrange for more compatible assignments. "This is the second year that our building has had more say in who is hired. I've noticed over the last two years this is a great benefit." She observed, "The people coming in have been a better fit because the building administrator and special education teachers have gotten a better say."

Chain of command and problem-solving: Participants felt strongly that the special education teacher or the building administrator was their first level of intervention and support. However, everyone knew they could contact the Cooperative independently if they wanted to. A paraeducator mused, "I guess if you have an issue with your supervising teacher, you could bypass her and call the co-op." One needed to be sensitive though, to hierarchical protocols. "You would go to the [supervisor] because it's like the chain of command. But you don't want to go above her before you talk to her."

Participants desired more contact or communication with the Cooperative when there is a problem. Several paraeducators expressed satisfaction with how questions were handled in their buildings. In situations where additional expertise was needed, a supervisor in the building might call the Cooperative and request resources such as a behavior specialist to observe a child if needed.

Time: The one circumstance all participants agreed on was related to the importance and scarcity of time with their paraeducators. One teacher complained, "I don't know how it would be possible, but just having a few minutes to communicate with the para about the week or the day, but there's just no time!" Several teachers felt the relationships and communication with their paraeducators would be more effective if they were able to arrange a dedicated time outside the classroom. Paraeducator work schedules seemed to be the biggest factor limiting planning time. The teachers felt that non-instructional days were an ideal opportunity to plan with paraeducators.

Role definition: Teachers and paraeducators recognized and appreciated that the function of having a paraeducator was to help students academically and behaviorally. One paraeducator described her role as, "Helping them make sure they understand what material they've been given. And helping them stay on track, make sure that they're getting their



assignments in.” When teachers described the role of paraeducators in their classrooms, they viewed their tasks as similar to what teachers do for students.

Teachers did not agree on who had responsibility for communicating work expectations to their paraeducators. Due to lack of time for adequate communication of roles and expectations, one paraeducator worried, “We want to make the teachers happy. But when we’re in the classroom, we are constantly questioning, ‘How much does this teacher want me to do?’ I need to be communicated with.”

Supportive building culture: Participants gave examples of admiration and appreciation for the leadership in their respective buildings and cited examples of how strong leadership contributed to their overall contentment with their working relationships. They described administrators as, “very visible and engaged, open, friendly, and supportive.” Paraeducators called the teachers they worked with “wonderful and phenomenal people.” Teachers, in turn, expressed their appreciation for their paraeducators by saying “They are 100% vital. Without them, we cannot do our jobs.”

Training, Knowledge, and Skills

Training at the beginning of the year: Many paraeducators reported receiving limited training upon being hired to work with students with disabilities. As one paraeducator mentioned, “I think it was like overall of six hours.” One paraeducator reported that during her training day, she filled out paperwork, and watched videos and slideshows. Others found the training insufficient stating but questioned what more the Cooperative could provide in only a single day. Participants remembered the experience feeling like an “orientation” that focused on technical issues such as workplace safety, how to fill out a timesheet, and employment benefits.

Ongoing training: Paraeducators received limited in-service training during the academic year, which left them feeling unprepared to perform their duties as effectively as possible. The Cooperative offered ongoing online training for paraeducators that they were expected to do independently.

Duties and responsibilities of paraeducators: Even though their assignment is to assist students with IEPs, paraeducators described themselves as “helpers of all” because they found themselves working with all students. Paraeducators expressed their happiness to work with kids, but not their parents. They seemed to work well when teachers had the responsibility of grading besides dealing with parents. A paraeducator voiced her relief to focus only on children but not to be worried “about grading things for them. I’m just...there to help them learn.”

Teacher’s opinions about training: Teachers noticed a shortage of training for paraeducators and how that affected students’ learning. Some teachers mentioned they had a feeling “it is kind of our job to let them (paraeducators) know what you expect of them to do.” For some, paraeducators were like substitutes who did not receive enough preparation to do their duties. Some paraeducators seemed to have an unclear idea about their responsibilities unless they received direct instructions from teachers. For some paraeducators, their responsibility was to sit back in class and listen to the teacher as if they were one of the students without helping teachers unless asked to assist certain students.

When paraeducators worked with students, teachers felt their presence in the classroom could be problematic. One teacher expressed her dissatisfaction with a paraeducator’s performance that “would rather give the answers to students than show them how to do it.”

Teachers provide paraeducators with some instruction

Documentation: Paraeducators and teachers faced some issues with documentation. Documentation included reading students’ files, documenting behaviors every class period, and taking notes. Some paraeducators reported doing a lot of documentation, some of which were repetitive and cumbersome. One paraeducator noted that she documented, “every 15 minutes.” Other paraeducators agreed that documentation required a significant amount of time and attention.

Relationships and Trust

Paraeducators and the Cooperative: In both large and small schools, paraeducators employed by the Cooperative reported experiencing relationship and communication challenges with the Cooperative. Various paraeducators described their connection with the Cooperative as “weak, not completely positive, impersonal, uncomfortable, frustrating, demeaning, and nonexistent.” However, the paraeducators that participated in the study desire improved relationships and communication. Several paraeducators stated that they avoid direct communication with the Cooperative and only correspond through email. During the focus group discussions, two key reasons repeatedly surfaced that explained the preference of emails to phone or face-to-face conversations: fear of a disparaging response and the need to create a paper trail. Participants shared feeling treated unprofessionally and that Cooperative coordinators do not know them. Additionally, the paraeducators cited the misplacement of documentation and records, poor organization of the Cooperative, and multi-step reporting systems as negatively influencing pay, requests for time off, and recording of training hours.



Teachers and the Cooperative: The teacher focus groups included primarily general education teachers; however, a group of special education teachers also participated. General education teachers are district employees and reported that they have little to no communication with the Cooperative. The district teachers from the larger schools felt that the district should run its own special education services to eliminate the added layer of administrative bureaucracy. The special education teachers are employees of the Cooperative and offered a different perspective. These teachers reported that they do have regular contact with the Cooperative. The general education teachers surmised that the special education teachers shared their concerns about a lack of communication with the Cooperative. However, the data collected from the special education teachers do not support the general education teacher's hypothesis. Since participants only included a small number of special education teachers, additional interviews are necessary to determine if special education teachers are experiencing challenges to communication with the Cooperative.

Paraeducators and special education teachers: The relationships between the paraeducators and the special education teachers varied among the three schools. The data indicated that the quality of communication and level of trust was dependent upon the persons involved. Terms used by paraeducators to describe their relationships with special education teachers included: "supportive, phenomenal, very good at prepping us, and concerned with confidentiality." However, other paraeducators used phrases such as "intimidating and not receptive to change" when describing their relationships with supervising special education teachers. These paraeducators stated they would like to privately voice their concerns to a third party such as the Cooperative, but do not feel they have an opportunity to do so.

Paraeducators and general education teachers: Several groups of paraeducators and general education teachers clearly identified that lack of time for collaboration is a barrier to building relationship, trust, and healthy communication. The teachers and paraeducators that talked about time barriers also voiced the most concerns about their working relationships in the classroom. Other problems general education teachers described related to paraeducators changing the dynamics of the learning environment citing excessive noise levels created by simultaneous adult conversations among multiple support staff, distractions such as cell phone use, and the ongoing training and coaching of paraeducators.

General education teachers and special education teachers: The data collected indicated there were strained relationships between general education teachers and special education teachers. The most frequent reasons given for the relationship challenges faced by both general and special education teachers were a lack of opportunity for training and planning coupled with a heavy workload. Teachers also talked about the need for time to build rapport.

The general education teachers frequently made comments that indicated low trust levels toward the special education teachers. Some general education teachers reported that the special education teachers "throw them under the bus" in front of administration and parents. Special education teachers also spoke about concerns related to communication and trust. After a focus group discussion, a special education teacher asked privately, "Can I tell you one thing that has been a breakdown?" The special education teachers also expressed concern that general education teachers do not always want a paraeducator in their classrooms. The special education teachers were aware that general education teachers are frustrated about the management of special education services.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Increasing Time for Collaboration

According to the theory of dialogic communication, the development of collaborative thought and coordinated action requires dialogue. However, throughout the focus group discussions, participants universally expressed concern that the lack of time for collaborating was a barrier to effectively providing for student needs (Floyd, 2010; Wortham, 2011). Teachers and paraeducators stressed the importance of having time to actively listen to one another to understand more fully each other's varying perspectives. They suggested that this type of open communication leads to improved teamwork, increased productivity, and better student outcomes (Bushe, 2013).

In all focus groups, teachers and paraeducators reported that it is challenging to consistently find opportunities to identify, examine, and address issues related to the use of paraeducators in general education classrooms. These issues include building cohesive teams, clarifying role expectations, and increasing professional competencies through formal and informal training. The primary reason cited by participants for the lack of time allocated for collaboration was budgetary constraints; however, paraeducators and teachers clearly stated that additional time is imperative for opening and developing communication pathways that lead to improved services for students.

Building Cohesive Team Structures

The data collected from the focus groups discussions revealed a fragmented special education team. According to participant feedback, the cooperative, special education teachers, general education teachers, and paraprofessionals often operated in isolation of one another (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000). As stated in the previous section, a possible reason for the



disjointment of the team members is a lack of time for communication and collaboration. However, without a cohesive approach, it is unlikely that students will receive the high quality of services these educators desire to provide. The difficulty in providing optimal services for special education students can exacerbate feelings of job dissatisfaction and lead to negative discourses (Hedman & Gesch-Karamanlidis, 2015). Negative cultural narratives further impede communication and erode trust among team members. Several focus group members described relationships with certain colleagues that did not feel inclusive or safe for sharing concerns or ideas. Paraeducators experienced a stronger sense of belonging to the building, not the Cooperative, a significant issue if the Cooperative decides to address the communication concerns described in the study. In some instances, this led to an unwillingness to pursue dialogue and reinforced barriers to open communication. Whereas a cohesive team is more likely to have an increased ability to coordinate activities, achieve goals, make informed decisions, solve problems, and institute change, teams such as those in the study will struggle to do so without deliberative efforts to overcome dialogic barriers and improve patterns of communication (Katz, 2015).

Clarifying Role Ambiguity

Even though teachers and paraeducators work together in the same classrooms, neither had a clear idea about who was providing the training and information needed to meet the needs of students in special education. Role ambiguity manifested itself in different ways (Rajhans, 2012). For instance, general education teachers assumed that paraeducators had more knowledge about IEP contents and implementation than they did. At the same time, the paraeducators assumed that general education teachers were more informed about meeting the needs of special education students than they were. Moreover, in these situations, neither teachers nor paraeducators appeared to communicate about how to resolve this impasse. Some teachers assumed that because a paraeducator was in the room, appropriate special education was happening. However, this was not always the case. For example, a few paraeducators described occasions when they sat in the back of the room, hesitant to engage with students or help the teacher. They believed they had to wait for the teacher or students to solicit help. If neither the teacher nor the paraeducator has reviewed the IEP or collaborates to fulfill the goals stipulated in the IEP, then it weakens the effective implementation of special education.

Paraeducators reported feeling overwhelmed and confused documenting student behaviors because they did not receive adequate training to perform these duties. In particular, because paraeducators did not understand the IEP or the disability they were confused about the purpose and usage of the documentation. Seeking help from other peers was a useful strategy considering the lack of other options, but it was not necessarily their preferred approach. Without additional guidance from teachers and the Cooperative, the paraeducators' understandings will continue to remain vague, leading to the perpetuation of myths and misunderstandings. Paraeducators assumed that their primary role was to help students with special needs understand the curriculum; however, teacher beliefs about the role of paraeducators exceeded the training the paraeducators received (Carroll, 2001). Moreover, teachers assumed that paraeducators were aware of their duties and what was expected of them. Additionally, teachers did not know what instruction paraeducators had received from the Cooperative or special education teachers or what the IEP documents said about their specific duties. Thus, clarifying dialogue is necessary to identify and examine issues surrounding the roles of different actors in general education classrooms.

Developing Professional Learning Opportunities

The training paraeducators received, either at the beginning or throughout the academic year, were insufficient to prepare them to fulfill their responsibilities. Orientation training, presented via slideshows and videos, tended to concentrate on topics such as timekeeping and workplace safety. Paraeducators understood the necessity of these tasks but yearned for more substantive knowledge that is of direct use in the classroom. They also reported that Infinitel training topics, which they self-selected during the academic year, were unengaging and inadequate for classroom application. As a result, some teachers felt that paraeducators needed direct instruction. Other teachers were uncertain who was responsible for training the paraeducators (Downing et al., 2000; Giangreco et al., 2003; Mueller, 2002; Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl, 2001). Consequently, teachers guided paraeducators in an inconsistent manner. The downside of this classroom dynamic was that some teachers believed that paraeducators contributed to the poor academic performance of students.

CONCLUSION

General and special education teachers along with paraeducators are convinced that improved and more frequent communication combined with enhanced opportunities for planning and training will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their practice. Furthermore, paraeducators and teachers expressed a desire for paraeducators to be included in building-level professional development. The benefits for students and staff might warrant the additional expense. Paraeducators want to be part of the school team; however, under current arrangements, they do not have a strong sense of belonging to the school's professional community. The ramifications of this isolation cannot be overstated. Through clear communication pathways, teachers and paraeducators can enjoy greater collaborative opportunities to support children and improve the quality of the services they deliver.



LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

One limitation of this study is the number of paraeducators and special education teachers who accepted to take part in focused group discussions due to the nature of qualitative studies. Thus it was hard to generalize the finding of the study. Including more participants would enrich the information about communication pathways between different parties. Future research could include more participants from different states and educational districts.

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AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

Dr. Eric Freeman was the principal investigator, Bilal Obeidat, Pam Martin, and Jennifer Sinclair were co-investigators.

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