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<https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.7274>

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ABSTRACT

An abstract of the dissertation of Regina Moreno for the Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership: Special and Counselor Education presented November 6, 2009.

Title: Paraprofessionals Who Work with Elementary Grade Students with Significant Disabilities in Inclusive Settings

The use of paraprofessional services is an established and crucial aspect in the pursuit of a free and appropriate public education for students with disabilities (Etscheidt, 2005). Paraprofessionals are often the primary providers of instruction for students with severe disabilities yet are the least trained instructional personnel in schools (Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2001; Giangreco, Smith, & Pinckney, 2006). Identified competencies and necessary training content for paraprofessionals who serve students with severe disabilities are nearly absent in the professional literature.

This study extended the current literature regarding paraprofessionals who serve students with disabilities in public schools by focusing specifically on those paraprofessionals who serve students with severe disabilities in inclusive general education elementary school settings and support the need for these

paraprofessionals to be adequately trained for their specialized instructional duties. This multiple-case study offers a cross-case analysis of three Oregon school districts related to paraprofessionals who serve elementary students with severe disabilities in included settings. Through one-to-one interviews, focus groups and document review, the daily responsibilities, orientation, ongoing training practices and the training needs of these paraprofessionals are explored.

**PARAPROFESSIONALS WHO WORK WITH ELEMENTARY GRADE
STUDENTS WITH SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES IN
INCLUSIVE SETTINGS**

by

REGINA MORENO

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF EDUCATION
in
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP:
SPECIAL AND COUNSELOR EDUCATION**

Portland State University
2009

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

The abstract and dissertation of Regina Moreno for the Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership: Special and Counselor Education were presented November 6, 2009, and accepted by the dissertation committee and the doctoral program.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special recognition and sincere appreciation is extended to my mentor, colleague and dissertation advisor, Dr. Ruth Falco. Recognition is given my dissertation committee members: Dr. Ruth Falco (Chair), Dr. Ann Fullerton, Dr. Christine Chaille, Dr. Paula Stanovich, and Dr. Pauline Jivanjee. Their scholarship, time, expertise, and guidance in the development and completion of this research is appreciated and respectfully acknowledged. An additional acknowledgement is extended to Dr. Leslie Munson and Dr. Eileen Brennan who also shared their guidance in the development of this research.

Recognition is given to the special education administrators, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals who participated in this study and who offered their time and valuable perspectives. Acknowledgment is offered to Pati Sluys, Nicole Vollrath and Darika Monroe for their editing assistance.

I extend my most sincere appreciation to my husband, Duane Vollrath, for his unwavering support, patience, and belief in my ability to complete the dissertation. I offer a special recognition to my nieces and nephews who need to believe that anything is possible and it is never too late to pursue a life's dream. I offer my sincere appreciation to my family, friends, and colleagues for their interest and support.

I acknowledge the many students with disabilities, their families and the paraprofessionals serving these students that I have had the honor to meet over my 32-year career. Finally, a special thank you to AriBen, Alden, Nethaniel, Laura, and Jase.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	i
LIST OF TABLES.....	vii
Chapter	
I INTRODUCTION	1
Background of the Problem	1
Definition of Terms	2
Problem Statement.....	4
Purpose of the Study	7
Research Questions.....	8
Delineation of Limitations for Generalization of Results.....	9
II LITERATURE REVIEW.....	11
Overview of the Literature	11
Issues Related to Paraprofessionals	
Characteristics of Students with Significant Disabilities	
Paraprofessionals Who Work with Students with	
Significant Disabilities	
Training Needs of Paraprofessionals Who Work with	
Students with Significant Disabilities	
The Effects of Close Proximity between Paraprofessionals	
and Students with Significant Disabilities	
Summary	50
III RESEARCH METHODS.....	54
The Qualitative Paradigm	54

Research Design	55
Setting	56
Participants	58
Role of the Researcher	62
Data Collection Procedure	64
Interviews	
Document Collection	
Data Analysis	71
Organization and Preparation of the Data for Analysis	
Coding the Information	
Document Review	
Summary	81
IV RESULTS	82
Theme One	83
Varying Types of Student Disability	
Instructing Across Multiple Conditions and Settings	
Lack of Defined Paraprofessional Job Responsibilities	
Theme Two	90
Students with Significant Disabilities have Unique	
Learning Needs	
Specialized Strategies and Approaches	
Functional Curriculum Content Areas	
Additional Considerations Related to Curriculum and	
Instruction	
Theme Three	98
Orientation Opportunities for Paraprofessionals Are Absent	
District Level In-Service Training has Minimal Relevance	

for Paraprofessionals Who Serve Students with
Significant Disabilities
On-the-Job Training Practices for Paraprofessionals are
Sporadic
Paraprofessional Attitudes Create Barriers to Training

Theme Four 109

Theme Five..... 110

Theme Six 113

Special Education Teachers Are Not Prepared for Their
Supervisory Role

Theme Seven 116

Summary 121

V DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH 123

Framing the Issues 123

Summary of Findings..... 124

Implications for Practice 129

Paraprofessionals Job Description, Orientation and
Responsibilities
A Shared Concern that Students with Significant
Disabilities Are Not Receiving a Good Education
Unique Learning and Instructional Needs of Students
with Significant Disabilities
Ongoing Training and Training Content Needs of
Paraprofessionals

Special Education Teachers Are Underprepared to
Supervise Paraprofessionals
Paraprofessionals Feel Job Dissatisfaction

Limitations	143
Generalization and Alternative Explanation of Results.....	145
Strengths of the Study and Potential Contribution to the Field.....	147
Future Research	148
Conclusion.....	153
REFERENCES	156
APPENDICES	
A PARTICIPANT LETTERS	171
B INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS.....	185
C INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS....	188
D GUIDE FOR PARAPROFESSIONALS.....	191
E DOCUMENT REVIEW GUIDE	194
F ANECDOTAL OBSERVATION PROTOCOL	196
G DATA MATRICES	198
H MEMBER CHECK LIST OF THEMES AND TOPICS.....	209

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1 Recommended Paraprofessional Competencies	18
2 Recommended Paraprofessional Core Competencies	19
3 Demographic Summary of School Districts.....	57
4 Demographics of Licensed Participants	61
5 Demographic Summary of Paraprofessionals	62
6 Data Collection Timeline	64
7 Data Collected	65
8 Document Type Collected	70
9 Data Analysis Process	75
10 Example of Partial Matrix Within-case Analysis.....	76
11 Example of Partial Matrix Cross-case Analysis.....	77
12 Major Themes.....	83

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

Paraprofessionals play a crucial role in the education of students with disabilities. The 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) required state education agencies to establish standards for paraprofessionals, including roles and responsibilities, recommended practices, and training requirements (Pickett & Gerlach, 2003; Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl, 2001). These amendments allowed appropriately trained and supervised paraprofessionals to assist in the provision of special education services to students with disabilities (Downing, Ryndak & Clark, 2000; French, 1999b; Pickett, 2003; Riggs & Mueller, 2001).

The majority of paraprofessionals work at the elementary school level (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2006). It is estimated that 75% of paraprofessionals work with students with significant disabilities (Blalock, 1991; Pickett, Likens, & Wallace, 2002; U.S. Department of Education [USDE], National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000). There is no uniform list of responsibilities or training practices for paraprofessionals. However, there is a general consensus in the professional literature that if paraprofessionals were adequately trained to use specific instructional procedures and if directly supervised they can impact positively the learning of students with significant disabilities (Westling & Fox, 2009). The roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals have changed as students

with significant disabilities are increasingly being educated in general education classrooms. The learning needs of these students are complex and require specialized instruction throughout the entire school day (Brown, Farrington, Knight, Ross, & Ziegler, 1999). Experts in the field have expressed concern about the quality of education that students with significant disabilities receive given that the majority of these students' time is spent with untrained and minimally supervised paraprofessional personnel (Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 1999).

In a review of published sources between 1991 and 2000, Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, and Doyle (2001) found that paraprofessionals had a wide array of responsibilities for which they were not sufficiently trained. Paraprofessionals often independently planned student programs. On-the-job advice to paraprofessionals was often provided by fellow minimally trained paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals commonly executed daily instructional practices with limited guidance from supervising licensed personnel (French, 1998, 2001; Riggs & Mueller, 2001).

Definition of Terms

A variety of words and definitions are used in the literature to describe paraprofessionals, students with significant disabilities and inclusive educational settings. These terms are defined below, as used in this study.

- Paraprofessionals: Frequently the term paraprofessional is used to describe non-licensed school district personnel who assist teachers in educational

programs (Chopra & French, 2004; Ghore & York-Barr, 2003; Jones & Bender, 1993). For the purpose of this study the term paraprofessional was defined as school employees who assist with the delivery of instructional and other direct services as assigned and who work under the supervision of teachers or other professional personnel who have ultimate responsibility for the design and implementation of instructional plans and the assessment of the instructional impact on student progress and other education outcomes (Pickett, 1994; Pickett et al., 2002).

- Significant disabilities: Individuals with significant disabilities are a heterogeneous group in which the disability condition results in the individual's need for extraordinary or significant supports to "participate in education, community living and employment settings" (Thompson & Wehmeyer, 2008, p. 20). Fifteen percent (8.7 million) of the nearly 58 million students, ages 6-21, who are eligible for school-age special education services are students with significant disabilities (USDE, Office of Special Education Programs, 2003). Mental retardation, autism, and multiple disabilities are commonly described as significant disabilities manifested before the age of 22 (Lohrmann-O'Rourke & Browder, 1998; Thompson & Wehmeyer, 2008; USDE, Office of Special Education Programs, 2003; Westling & Fox, 2009). For the purpose of this study,

significant disability refers to the special education categories of mental retardation, autism, and multiple disabilities.

- **Inclusive Educational Settings:** Ghere and York-Barr (2003) defined inclusive settings as situations in which students with significant disabilities receive special education services designed to meet their individual needs primarily within the general education age-appropriate classroom.

Education in inclusive settings facilitates membership, participation and high expectations of learning for all students, regardless of the severity of disability (Ghere, York-Barr, & Sommerness, 2002). This is accomplished through the utilization of individualized instructional strategies and supports. Inclusive education is achieved when students, regardless of degree or type of disability, experience equity of membership and quality of education within the school community (Westling & Fox, 2009).

Problem Statement

A recurring theme in the professional literature is related to the training needs of paraprofessionals who serve students with disabilities (French, 2001; Gerlach & Hilton, 1997; Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001).

Paraprofessionals often have little to no experience in special education and do not receive initial preparation for their instructional duties once hired (Riggs & Mueller, 2001). Much of the research regarding paraprofessional practices reflects a broad view of paraprofessionals who work with students with disabilities, and

includes those paraprofessionals employed under Title I in public schools. The idea that the daily experiences of these paraprofessionals adequately define what paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities, is an over simplification of the issues related to the daily instruction of these students.

While a few studies do include data on the practices of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities, these studies are limited in scope. Young and Simpson (1997) and Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, and MacFarland (1997) report on paraprofessional behaviors such as proximity to students with disabilities in general education classrooms. These qualitative researchers found that at times paraprofessional proximity is necessary, but it can also be excessive and disruptive to relationships between the classroom teacher and the student with significant disabilities. Excessive paraprofessional proximity to students with disabilities has also been found to interfere with same-age typical peer interactions (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997). Though studies such as these bring valuable information to the research literature, they do not describe the curriculum content addressed by paraprofessionals while in various proximities to students with significant disabilities or the instructional strategies they use.

Broer, Doyle, and Giangreco (2005) interviewed 16 individuals with significant disabilities on their relationships with paraprofessionals.

Paraprofessionals were considered to be the most important, and sometimes exclusive, aspect of the educational experience (p. 420). Paraprofessionals were

described as a mother figure, a friend, a protector from bullying, and the primary teacher. Broer et al. (2005) share concerns related to these findings. The first concern the authors expressed was students with significant disabilities being perceived as needing a mother at school could interfere with the development of social relationships with peers. Secondly, the need to protect anyone from bullying is a school-wide concern and should be addressed as such. The third concern indicated that paraprofessionals as primary deliverers of instruction promote student isolation, social stigmatization, and promotes inequity of educational opportunities (Broer et al., 2005; Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 1999; Giangreco & Doyle, 2002).

A descriptive, quantitative study by Giangreco and Broer (2005) explored how paraprofessionals spend their time. Their findings suggested paraprofessionals were engaged in several instruction-related tasks. This study revealed that paraprofessionals who were assigned to students with significant disabilities spent a greater amount of time on self-directed tasks than those paraprofessionals who worked with students with milder disabilities (Giangreco & Broer, 2005, p. 14). Self-directed tasks were defined as instructional tasks not planned by supervising teachers. This study also revealed that paraprofessionals, who were assigned students with significant disabilities, spent less time on instructional tasks (e.g., academic instruction guided by a supervising teacher) than those paraprofessionals who worked with students with mild disabilities. Additionally, tasks related to

functional life skills such as adaptive, personal care skills, and providing behavioral supports, were not described as instructional tasks. However, instruction inaccurate in functional life skills continues to be a crucial instructional curriculum focus for students with significant disabilities (Browder, 2001; Browder & Spooner, 2006; Snell & Brown, 2006; Westling & Fox, 2009). Each of these studies reveals a concern that continues to exist for students with significant disabilities.

Paraprofessionals are the most unprepared, under-trained, and inadequately supervised school personnel (Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001, Giangreco, Smith, & Pinckney, 2006). Paraprofessionals working with students with disabilities in included settings receive less than 2% of a supervising teacher's time related to training and guidance (Giangreco & Broer, 2005). Students with significant disabilities are primarily educated by paraprofessionals (Giangreco & Doyle, 2002). While these paraprofessionals are the least trained instructional personnel, they are likely to be the personnel who spend the greatest amount of time instructing students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; French, 1999a; Giangreco, Edleman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001; Giangreco, Smith, & Pinckney, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

A clearer understanding of the practices and training needs of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities is needed. The

studies above set the framework for this cross case study. This study examined the perceptions of special education personnel on the practices and training needs of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities in inclusive elementary school settings across three public school districts in Oregon. Through an initial examination of special education administrators, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals' perspectives, this study sought to confirm and disconfirm related issues in the literature regarding the practices and training needs of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities in inclusive elementary settings. In addition, the study was intended to address gaps in the literature related to the practices and training needs of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities.

This study was designed with the assumption that paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities require unique training to fulfill their important role in the education of a student with significant disabilities. The questions for this study sought a better understanding of the daily instructional responsibilities, training opportunities and training needs of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities in inclusive elementary school settings.

Research Questions

The foci of this study were the daily instructional responsibilities and other activities of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities in elementary inclusive school settings. In addition, the study explored

paraprofessionals' training experiences and ongoing support and training needs.

The research questions were:

1. What are the daily instructional responsibilities of paraprofessionals serving students with significant disabilities in inclusive school settings?
2. What orientation and initial preparation opportunities do paraprofessionals receive prior to working with students with significant disabilities?
3. What ongoing training opportunities related to the instruction of students with significant disabilities are provided to paraprofessionals?
4. What are the training needs of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities?

Limitations for Generalization of Results

It is important to remind the reader that this study was intended to be an initial exploration of the perceived specific practices and training needs of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings. The study was conducted using a small sample of participants from three school districts. The intention of this study was to deeply explore the roles and training experiences of a few paraprofessionals who work with elementary grade students with significant disabilities within these school districts. Generalization of the practices and training needs of paraprofessionals, who serve students with significant disabilities to other districts that follow an inclusive model in the

education of students with significant disabilities beyond the represented sample, is beyond the scope of this study. The sampling of this study may not be representative of other school districts. The researcher for this study had past connections with each school district. The researcher had past professional connections with members from one focus group of paraprofessionals, one special education teacher, and all three administrators. Due to these past connections, the findings of this study may have been influenced. For example, paraprofessionals and special education teacher participants may have felt somewhat reserved in fully discussing their perception of the issues because I knew the administrators from the districts. The administrators may also have experienced some discomfort in fully disclosing the various types or limitations of support for their instructional personnel who serve students with significant disabilities in their districts.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of the Literature

The literature related to paraprofessionals working in special education programs has grown considerably during the last decade (Ghere & York-Barr, 2003), especially as it relates to paraprofessional roles, responsibilities, training and support. However, gaps in the literature continue to exist related to working conditions, assignment of paraprofessional responsibilities, and the training and supervision of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities (Ghere & York-Barr, 2003; Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001).

This literature review included data-based and non-data based sources, primarily published between 1990 and early 2009. Initial sources were identified based on a scholarly review of the literature completed by Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, and Doyle (2001). They summarized and analyzed a set of 43 sources from the professional literature related to the utilization of paraprofessionals from 1991 to 2000 (p. 47). Themes that emerged from the reviews by Giangreco, Broer, and Edelman (2003) and from Ghere and York-Barr's (2003) multiple-site case study of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities in inclusive programs were drawn upon to build a framework of important issues addressed in this study.

Special education journals, a small number of widely accepted texts, and online Internet sources supported by highly reputable professional organizations (e.g., Association for Persons with Significant Handicaps, Council for Exceptional Children, National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals, and Office Special Education Programs) were included. Search of the education databases and full text sources such as ERIC on-line, Education Full Text, Academic Search Complete and Dissertation and Master's Thesis identified the majority of literature used in this review. Topic searches focused on information related to the work of paraprofessionals with school-age students with disabilities in American public schools. This chapter offers a comprehensive, but non-exhaustive, overview of the professional literature related to responsibilities, practices, and training issues relevant to paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities. This literature was summarized to frame the context and purpose of this study.

First, literature providing a general overview of issues related to paraprofessionals who work with students with both mild and significant disabilities eligible for special education services in public schools is reviewed. This section examines the definition of paraprofessionals, their roles, their responsibilities and daily practices. Additionally this section includes competencies for paraprofessionals, in general, as recommended by respected professional organizations related to individuals with disabilities. Literature regarding job retention, job satisfaction, and the supervision of paraprofessionals is reviewed

also. Secondly, literature presenting a description of the characteristics and learning needs of students with significant disabilities is reviewed. Section three discusses the literature addressing paraprofessional responsibilities, their practices and experiences related to the education of students with significant disabilities. Section four presents the literature that discussed the preparation, training and supervision of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities. Literature providing recommended content for training these paraprofessionals also is included in this section. The final section discusses literature addressing the effects of paraprofessional proximity on student learning.

Issues Related to Paraprofessionals

Who are paraprofessionals? More than 1.3 million paraprofessionals were estimated to work with students with disabilities in American public schools at the end of 2002 (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2006). Special education experts and professional organizations have described the roles of paraprofessionals. According to Giangreco, Broer, and Edelman (1999), paraprofessionals work under the direct supervision of teachers, or other licensed personnel, who have the responsibility for identifying the learning needs of students with disabilities who are eligible for special education services. The main role of all paraprofessionals is instructional (Pickett, 2002; USDE, Office of Special Education Programs, 2003). French (1999b) wrote “the primary reason paraprofessionals are employed in special education is to increase the instructional quality...for student with disabilities...”

(p. 67). The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (1999) asserted that the intent and use of paraprofessionals is to supplement and not substitute for the work of certified educational service providers relative to the education of student with disabilities.

The average paraprofessional is a 40-year-old female who works in an elementary or secondary public school (Pickett, 1994). Paraprofessionals tend to live in the neighborhood or near the school they serve and have racial, cultural, and linguistic characteristics similar to the student population of the school (French, 2001). They are usually paid on an hourly basis and often work part-time (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2001; USDE, 1997). Some paraprofessionals have taken some college courses or have college degrees. The paraprofessional career usually lasts about 6 to 8 years in special education and some work in the field for more than 10 (Riggs & Mueller, 2001).

Paraprofessional responsibilities and practices. Over the last 20 years the role of the paraprofessional evolved to be primarily instructional in nature with a high level of responsibility in supporting individual or small group learning, assisting with data collection and implementing all aspects of individual education plans for students with disabilities (Carroll, 2001; Ghery & York-Barr, 2003; Pickett, 2002). These personnel assist licensed teachers with implementing instructional programs for students with disabilities across various educational contexts and environments (Doyle, 2002; French & Pickett, 1997).

A 2001 study conducted by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) on personnel needs in special education found the average paraprofessional worked in five different classes per week and served 16 to 23 students (SPeNSE, 2001, p. 1). They may provide daily special education instructional services for as many as 15 students with varying disabilities (French & Chopra, 1999; SPeNSE, 2001).

Ashbaker and Morgan (2001) reported that paraprofessionals work with several supervising teachers, had several roles and sometimes worked in different schools during the school day (p. 63). Paraprofessionals are assigned numerous duties with high levels of responsibility. Wallace, Stahl, and Johnson (2003) reported that paraprofessionals spent 75% to 100% of their day performing instructional duties. Paraprofessionals spent 85% to 90% of their time on educational activities, academic instruction, one-on-one instruction, small group instruction, data collection, and implementation of behavior management programs (USDE, 2003; SPeNSE, 2001). They monitor student behavior, adapt or modify curriculum and provide personal care assistance for students with a wide range of disabilities across educational contexts and various environments. The various instructional environments in which paraprofessionals work may include inclusive general education classrooms, special education self-contained classrooms, resource rooms, transition services in the community and early childhood settings (Boyer & Mainzer, 2003).

Paraprofessionals perform a broad set of responsibilities, the appropriateness of these responsibilities, particularly in inclusive education programs where paraprofessionals do not work alongside the special education teachers, that are not clearly defined (French, 1999b; Ghere & York-Barr, 2003). In inclusive settings, such as general education classrooms, paraprofessionals who work with students with disabilities often make instantaneous, instructional decisions that affect student programs (Minondo, Meyer, & Xin, 2001; Werts, Wolery, Snyder, & Caldwell, 1996).

Recommended competencies for all paraprofessionals. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC; 1997), the National Education Association (NEA; 1994), the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Related Services (NRCPS; 1995), and the IDEA Partnerships Paraprofessional Initiative (2001) identified several competencies for paraprofessionals working in special education programs. Competencies included knowledge: (a) about characteristics of disabilities; (b) ethical practices, professionalism and confidentiality; and (c) effective behavior management skills. Table 1 provides a comprehensive list these general competencies. Competencies related to the principles of learning and teaching, use of specialized materials, accommodations, data collection and student observation strategies were also identified.

Paraprofessional retention and job satisfaction. Experts suggested that it is difficult to retain paraprofessionals in the special education field due to low job

satisfaction (Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2001; Wadsworth & Knight, 1996).

In their opinion-based article, Ashbaker and Morgan (2001) explained that poorly defined job descriptions, lack of preparation and training, absence of teacher supervisory support, a general lack of respect, non-recognition regarding paraprofessional contributions, and low-pay are directly associated with paraprofessional feelings of job-related frustration and are considered to be contributing factors to low job satisfaction.

An task force from the Oregon State Department of Education identified that eight core competencies are relevant to paraprofessional practices: Child development, assessment, family issues, service delivery, program management, service coordination, research and professionals development. Surveys conducted by Killoran et al. (2001) found that paraprofessionals did not feel knowledgeable and were not sufficiently prepared in these eight competency areas. Please refer to Table 2 for a more comprehensive description of these core competencies. These paraprofessionals did not perceive themselves to be at a mastery-level ability on any of the 41 skills related to the eight competencies. Examples of these skills are: how to conduct observations, communicate and collaborate effectively, embedding instructional goals, use adaptive equipment and participate in self-evaluation practices. These paraprofessionals reported that they were not able to independently and successfully apply the skills at an exemplary level.

Table 1

Recommended Paraprofessional Competencies

Recommended Paraprofessional Competencies	CEC	NEA	IPPI	NRCP
1. Philosophical, historical, legal foundations of special education (all ages) and inclusion	✓		✓	✓
2. Characteristics of learners with disabilities	✓	✓	✓	✓
3. Purposes of assessment and evaluation	✓			
4. Instructional content and practice	✓			
5. How to support the teaching/learning environment	✓			
6. Social communication interaction skills of learners with disabilities	✓			
7. Communication and collaborative partnerships	✓		✓	✓
8. Professionalism/ethics and confidentiality	✓	✓	✓	✓
9. Recognition of school policies		✓		
10. Understanding of team member roles and responsibilities, including paraprofessional		✓		✓
11. Using effective discipline, classroom management strategies and positive behavioral support	✓	✓	✓	✓
12. Observing, documenting and reporting student performance		✓	✓	✓
13. The use of specialized materials, accommodations, assistive technologies and computer		✓	✓	✓
14. The use of specialized techniques		✓		
15. Principles of learning & teaching strategies		✓	✓	✓
16. Health and school safety		✓	✓	
17. Transition-related information and job coaching			✓	✓
18. Child development			✓	✓
19. Development of independence and mobility			✓	
20. Task analysis			✓	
21. Functional life skills development			✓	

They reported an ability to satisfactorily demonstrate 17% of skills the survey with guidance. The paraprofessionals reported an awareness of the remaining skills, but were in need of training (Killoran et al., 2001, p. 73).

Paraprofessionals reported they were unfamiliar with the functions of assessments, observation techniques, program implementation, strategies, eligibility regulations, and how to implement adaptation and modification. Paraprofessionals indicated their highest training needs were related to daily service delivery and teaching. The paraprofessionals ranked their need for training in the eight core competency areas as higher priorities than did teachers, specialists, and administrators did for paraprofessionals (Killoran et al., 2001, p. 70).

Table 2

Recommended Paraprofessional Core Competencies

Core Competency Area	Demonstrate Knowledge
Child development	Typical development and disability awareness
Assessment	Function of assessment and how to do observations
Family issues	Respect for diversity, effective communication, and assist embedding child goals
Service delivery	Best practices, teach to the program, use adaptive equipment, evaluate student progress
Program management	Knowledge of program goals, keep a safe environment, process for staff evaluation
Service coordination	Demonstrate collaborative teaming and problem solving
Research	Current literature in relationship to practice and effectiveness
Professional development	Self-evaluation, participate in continuing educational opportunities and adheres to codes of ethics

(Killoran et al., 2001)

Paraprofessional retention and job satisfaction. Experts suggested that it is difficult to retain paraprofessionals in the special education field due to low job satisfaction (Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2001; Wadsworth & Knight, 1996). In their opinion-based article, Ashbaker and Morgan (2001) explained that poorly defined job descriptions, lack of preparation and training, absence of teacher supervisory support, a general lack of respect, non-recognition regarding their contributions, and low-pay are directly associated with paraprofessional feelings of job-related frustration and are considered to be contributing factors to low job satisfaction. Young-Tillery, Gessler-Werts, Roark, and Harris (2003) interviewed 12 paraprofessionals who left their jobs after 2 years of employment with school districts in North Carolina and found that these paraprofessionals left due to low pay, lack of respect, lack of training and preparation and inappropriate assignment of responsibilities.

Ghere and York-Barr's (2003) conducted a qualitative study in three school districts. Two schools reported a 38% to 50% paraprofessional turnover rate due to poor wages, high job demand, and poor working conditions that led to high stress. Giangreco, Edelman, and Broer (2001) conducted semi-structured interviews and observations in order to explore the perspectives of 103 personnel, including special education teachers, general education teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators regarding paraprofessionals' recognition and job satisfaction. The data suggested that paraprofessionals and administrators differed in their opinions

related to paraprofessional job satisfaction. Administrators perceived, overall, that paraprofessionals felt supported. However, paraprofessionals reported job dissatisfaction concerning wages, compensation, and recognition. Administrators reported being aware of pay scale limitations, but felt that the benefit package provided by the district was a symbol of recognition and appreciation of paraprofessionals. The paraprofessionals perceived role clarification, effective ongoing support and adequate supervision, being respected, feelings of being acknowledged, and appreciated as factors considered to positively influence their feelings of job satisfaction.

Giangreco, Edelman, and Boer (2001) suggested that retaining paraprofessionals is a key factor in quality supports for students with disabilities. Other professional literature also states that it is essential that paraprofessionals be appropriately recognized for their contribution in the education of students with disabilities through supervision and guidance aligned with their responsibilities (Heller, 1997; Hilton & Gerlach, 1997; Morgan & Ashbaker, 1997; National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1999; L. S. Simpson, 2004).

Research reported that paraprofessionals feel they have little support and recognition from teachers and administrators (Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2001; Hilton & Gerlach, 1997). Goessling (1998) examined paraprofessional perspectives using purposive sampling of 10 paraprofessionals working in inclusive settings in the state of Maine. Through extensive interviews, paraprofessionals reported that

they felt like “invisible elves of the school...getting all the things done that need to be done with no one noticing or acknowledging their efforts or needs...” (Goessling, 1998, p. 9). The majority of paraprofessionals reported never having been formally evaluated, and those who had been evaluated were evaluated by someone with little to no knowledge of what they did on a daily basis and who had not “...seen [them] work with students in the classroom” (Goessling, 1998, p. 10). Riggs and Mueller (2001) found that 47% of paraprofessionals were not provided with written job descriptions and for those that were the descriptions were outdated, meaningless, and did not reflect their “current job description” (p. 58). According to Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, and Doyle (2001), paraprofessionals, especially those with paraprofessional duties in inclusive classrooms, were often left to “fend for themselves without support or supervision” (p. 58). Morgan and Ashbaker (2001) found many paraprofessionals who reported working in isolation away from their supervisory teacher received little to no feedback or guidance associated with their instructional duties (p. 231).

Supervision practices of special education teacher. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act of 2004, all paraprofessionals instructing students with disabilities are required to be under the direct supervision of certified personnel. As described by the Rhode Island State Department of Education (2002), the instructional team leader, usually the special education teacher, provides overall direction and coordination of the special education instructional

team including supervisory responsibilities. The professional literature indicated that roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals require direct supervisory follow-up and constructive feedback in a timely, professional manner to assure quality of performance that might be directly related to student outcomes (French, 2000; Heller, 1997; Hilton & Gerlach, 1997; Morgan & Ashbaker, 2001). Teachers are responsible for effective utilization of paraprofessionals. These responsibilities include practices related to orienting and scheduling paraprofessionals for their assigned roles and assuring paraprofessionals are adequately prepared for their immediate instructional responsibilities (French, 1998; Pickett & Gerlach, 2003). Ghere and York-Barr (2003) found that the special education teacher had four simultaneous intertwined roles related to the supervision of paraprofessionals. These roles included (a) developing student programs, (b) coordinating program implementation, (c) providing instruction, and (d) preparing and supervising paraprofessionals.

Special education teachers have extensive and complicated responsibilities related to the preparation, support and supervision of paraprofessionals. However, as Ghere and York-Barr (2003) pointed out these teachers have little to no preparation for these responsibilities. When they enter the field, many special education teachers do not know that they will be responsible for supervising, monitoring, or training other adults (French, 1998). Many experts observe that special education and general education teachers are unprepared and untrained for

their leadership role related to the supervision of paraprofessionals (Blalock, 1991; Carroll, 2001; Drecktrah, 2000; French & Pickett, 1997; Hilton & Gerlach, 1997; Katsiyannis, Hodge, & Lanford, 2000; Lindeman & Beegle, 1988; Salzberg & Morgan, 1995; Vasa, Steckelberg, & Ulrich-Ronning, 1982; Wadsworth & Knight, 1996; Wallace et al., 2001).

Special education teachers often do not receive preparation during their licensure program for their leadership responsibilities related to the supervision of paraprofessionals nor do they receive district-level professional development preparation to support their leadership role related to paraprofessionals (Ghere & York Barr, 2003; Lindeman & Beegle, 1988; Salzberg & Morgan, 1995). Drecktrah (2000) surveyed 212 special educators with paraprofessional supervisory responsibilities regarding their opinions about information that should be included in teacher preparation course work related to paraprofessional supervision. Respondents reported that information on how to teach paraprofessionals about behavior management, how to convey necessary information about students with disabilities to paraprofessionals and how to collaborate with paraprofessionals should be included in special education teacher-preparation curriculum.

Teachers who have not had preparation for paraprofessional supervision do not feel comfortable with this role (Morgan & Ashbaker, 1997). French (1998) interviewed 18 teams of special education teachers and paraprofessionals to identify practices related to paraprofessional supervision. Nearly all the teachers

who were interviewed indicated they were not comfortable with supervising paraprofessionals. Teachers reported that there was no time to meet formally with paraprofessionals. Additionally, they felt unsatisfied with the effectiveness of their communication with paraprofessionals.

In another study, French (2001) conducted a survey of special education teachers' practices related to the supervision of paraprofessionals. Fewer than 19% of the special education teachers reported that they created written plans for paraprofessionals. These plans mostly included individual education plan (IEP) information, specifications on how to document student performance and the purpose of lessons. Thirty percent of the 240 special education teachers surveyed reported that they provided no information to paraprofessionals upon assigning responsibilities. French found that while 13% of the special education teachers reported that they met almost daily with paraprofessionals, 25% of special education teachers never met with paraprofessionals. Nearly 50% of the teachers indicated that paraprofessional-teacher meetings occurred weekly; and over 33% of the teachers met at least five times a year with paraprofessionals.

French (1999a) indicated that it is important for teachers and other supervisory personnel to keep in mind that most paraprofessionals to whom they are assigning instructional tasks have had little to no preparation for these tasks. Paraprofessional confidence levels in the delivery of instructional support to students with special education needs increased 20% when meeting time with

teachers increased from less than 1 hour to 2-4 hours or more a month (SPeNSE, 2001). French (2001) found that teachers who did not spend time related to paraprofessional planning and training were likely to feel dissatisfied with paraprofessional performance. In a mixed-method study, Riggs and Mueller (2001) surveyed 758 paraprofessionals and interviewed 23 paraprofessionals who worked with students with disabilities in elementary school settings. The findings suggested that paraprofessionals believed that if teachers clearly stated their expectations regarding rules and student programming objectives, paraprofessionals would likely increase their effectiveness with students. These paraprofessionals indicated a desire to be supervised.

Characteristics of Students with Significant Disabilities

Educating students with significant disabilities. In 1976 Brown, Nietupski, and Hamre-Nietupski published a landmark article that continues to influence the current practices for teaching students with significant disabilities. This landmark article supported the position that significant disabilities should be educated in neighborhood schools with typical same-age peers (p. 3). The authors suggested homogeneous-ability grouping of students with significant disabilities should be avoided (p. 5) and skills should be taught in natural occurring environments (p. 6). This article introduced the idea that the education for students with significant disabilities should be based on the “criterion of ultimate functioning” (p. 14). This criterion indicated that students with significant disabilities should be provided

consistent opportunities to participate as fully as possible in integrated environments in order to build skills within functional and meaningful environments (p. 9). Finally, Brown et al. indicated that teaching procedures for these students should be in one-to-one and small groups and in multiple instructional settings and conditions with an emphasis on function skills curriculum with relevant and functional instructional materials (p. 14).

Nearly three decades later, a functional curriculum approach is still considered relevant to the education of students with significant disabilities (Ford, Blanchette, & Brown, 2006). In addition to the functional curriculum, an emphasis related to the general education academic core curriculum and the expectation for students with significant disabilities to participate in district-wide and statewide assessment opportunities are currently considered best educational practices for students with significant disabilities (p. 12). The following section discusses the two main curricula focuses currently associated with the education of students with significant disabilities.

Highly specialized functional curricula. Several highly regarded organizations such as the Council for Exceptional Children, the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium, and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards offer extensive and explicit descriptions of the specialized curricula associated with the instruction of students with significant disabilities (Ford et al., 2006). In combination with the general education

curriculum typically addressed in inclusive settings, the instruction of functional daily life skills to maximize engagement with school and community opportunities are also considered to be priority curriculum areas for students with significant disabilities (Dalrymple & Ruble, 1992; MacDuff, Krantz, & McClannahan, 1993; Westling & Fox, 2009). The fundamental goal for students with significant disabilities is "...the development of functional life skills that maximize engagement in appropriate self-care, work and leisure activities" (MacDuff et al., 1993, p. 89).

Functional skills are typically described as those skills that are carefully selected to teach students with significant disabilities, in addition to the general education curriculum (Browder, 2001; Browder & Spooner, 2006; Downing et al., 2000; Gaylord-Ross, 1987; Lang & Fox, 2003; Snell & Brown, 2006; Westling & Fox 2009). Functional skills often include instruction in expressive and receptive communication skills, specialized technology, fine or gross motor skills and social skills. Functional daily living skills such as personal care, hygiene, toileting, feeding, dressing, preparing meals, cleaning, using the phone and doing laundry are common curriculum areas addressed in the education of students with significant disabilities (Carroll, 2001; Orelove & Sobsey, 1987; Snell, 1993; Snell & Browder, 1986; Westling & Fox, 2009). Additional common areas include vocational skills, community skills, recreation/leisure skills, mobility skills, and self-regulation skills.

Functional academics are skills meant to “serve the individual in his or her current and future life...” (Westling & Fox, 2009, p. 442). Curriculum areas of functional academics include basic early reading, writing and math skills that are considered to be requisite skills to the common general education curriculum (Shelden & Hutchins, 2008). Skills such as telling time to the hour, reading menu items, following a written or pictured schedule, printing one’s name and counting money to pay for an item are just a few examples (Ghere et al., 2002; Westling & Fox, 2009). The use of augmentative communication, assistive technology devices and positive behavioral supports are also common instructional priorities for students with significant disabilities (Carroll, 2001; Koegal & Koegal, 1995; Parsons & Reid, 1999; R. L. Simpson, de-Boer-Ott, & Smith-Myles, 2003; Young & Simpson, 1997).

Instruction within the general education core curriculum. Addressing the grade appropriate curriculum in the instruction of students with significant disabilities is clearly outlined in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 and recent amendments (Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act of 2004). These legislative acts underscore an expectation that the education of students with significant disabilities should provide access to the general education curriculum including language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies (Browder & Spooner, 2006; Ford et al., 2006). With this recent responsibility, special education teachers and general

education teachers alike need knowledge of extensive collaboration practices, the implementation of universal design for learning, and modification and adaptation of the grade appropriate general curriculum commensurate with the abilities of students with significant disabilities in meaningful contexts (Ford et al., 2006).

Paraprofessionals Who Work with Students with Significant Disabilities

Paraprofessionals are essential personnel in the education of students with disabilities (Ghere et al., 2002). According to Giangreco and Doyle (2002), students with significant disabilities, who commonly have the most specialized and complex learning needs, are primarily educated by paraprofessionals. Generally paraprofessionals are assigned to assist one student at a time. French (1998) surveyed and interviewed 18 teacher-paraprofessionals teams. In this study, participants reported that the paraprofessionals were assigned one-to-one instructional responsibilities with students with significant disabilities for at least 5.5 hours during the school day. Ninety-five percent of these paraprofessionals were also responsible for small group instruction (French, 1998, p. 362). It is also common for paraprofessionals to be assigned several one-to-one student assignments per day, resulting in complications with scheduling preparation of paraprofessionals for their multiple duties (Freschi, 1999; Ghere et al., 2002; Giangreco, Cichoski, Backus, Edelman, Broer, Cichoski, & Spinney, 1999; Werts, Zigmond, & Leeper, 2001).

Highly specialized roles and responsibilities. Westling and Fox (2009)

have asserted that there is not a specific list of responsibilities for paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings. However, according to these authors, paraprofessionals often are expected to perform instructional duties similar to teachers. The instructional roles and responsibilities performed by paraprofessionals are numerous and complex (Giangreco & Doyle, 2002). In addition to the general description of responsibilities that are commonly described in the literature as described earlier, paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities are responsible for additional complex daily instructional activities.

According to Ghere and York-Barr (2003) these responsibilities are unique from other paraprofessionals whose responsibilities and practices are related to students with high incidence disabilities (e.g., specific learning disabilities, attention deficit disorders, other mild to moderate disabilities). Downing et al. (2000, p. 178) used qualitative methods in a study of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings. They found that these paraprofessionals performed a variety of instructional tasks that included personal care skills and individual instruction. Riggs and Mueller (2001, p. 55) offered a glimpse into the broad categories of instructional tasks performed by paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities. They found that these paraprofessionals performed various one-on-one and small group instruction

of academic and functional life-skills tasks for students with significant disabilities for more than 75% of their workday across general education and special education settings. Furthermore, these paraprofessionals were often expected to provide ongoing feedback about student need and priorities to general education teachers, special education teachers, and related service personnel (Carroll, 2001; French, 1999a; Warger, 2002).

Marks, Schrader, and Levine (1999) interviewed 20 paraprofessionals who served students with significant disabilities in general education classrooms. These paraprofessionals felt they were considered to be experts about the students with significant disabilities by school personnel. The paraprofessionals reported that they were responsible for preventing the student from being a bother to the teacher. They also reported that they had the exclusive responsibility of making instructional and curriculum decisions for the student (p. 322).

Highly specific practices are often required of paraprofessionals who provide educational supports for students with significant disabilities in addition to the core areas of the general education curriculum (Ghere & York-Barr, 2003; Westling & Fox, 2009). Issues related to highly specialized functional curriculum, instructional strategies, specialized systems of support, unique collaborative practices related to general education classroom and students with significant disabilities are discussed below.

Use of highly specialized instructional strategies. To address their learning needs effectively, students with significant disabilities require specialized instructional strategies. Students with significant disabilities commonly require highly repetitive individualized practice, physical guidance, and a high degree of environmental structure (Browder, 2001; Orelove & Sobsey, 1987; Parsons & Reid, 1999; Parsons, Reid, & Green, 1996; Quill, 1995; Snell, 1993; Snell & Browder, 1986; Snell & Brown, 2006; Westling & Fox, 2009). Teaching technology related to the education of students with significant disabilities includes applied behavioral teaching strategies (e.g., task analysis, discrete trial training, pivotal response training, incidental teaching, use of a prompting hierarchy, reinforcement strategies, use of error correction strategies) (Carroll, 2001; Freschi, 1999; Koegal & Koegal, 1995; Parsons & Reid, 1999; Parson, Reid, & Green, 1993; Quill, 1995; Schopler, Mesibov, & Kuncie, 1998; R. L. Simpson et al., 2003; Westling & Fox, 2009; Young & Simpson, 1997). Embedded instruction (i.e., teaching during opportune times within natural occurring classroom events and routines) is also considered to be an effective teaching strategy (Munk & VanLaarhoven, 2008; Westling & Fox, 2009, p. 445).

Use of highly specialized supports. Paraprofessionals require adequate knowledge and skills to collect objective student performance data across multiple contexts and learning environments, modify significantly general education curriculum and adapt the environment according to individual student need

(Westling & Fox, 2009). The ability to manage students' behavioral crisis plans, the use of adaptive and assistive technologies, the ability to perform specialized positioning of students, and the use of specialized equipment are also imperative skills for paraprofessionals (French, 1999a; Mehaffey & Rea, 2003). The implementation of student health and safety protocols and the provision for training and support for typical peers are also important in paraprofessional practices when working with students with significant disabilities (Blalock, 1991; Doyle, 1997; Fletcher-Cambell, 1992; Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Pickett & French, 1997).

Downing et al. (2000) used semi-structured interviews with 116 paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities. These paraprofessionals reported that they provided positive behavioral supports and monitored students across all relevant environments including community and vocational settings, implemented adaptations and modifications of curriculum, used assistive technology devices, provided direct instruction in social-communication, self-regulation and personal care skills, and facilitated interactions between students with significant disabilities and their typical peers (pp. 174-175).

Unique collaborative practices. In addition, paraprofessionals are responsible for demonstrating effective teaming and collaboration skills. These skills include performing clerical duties, developing individualized materials, making significant modifications and adaptation of the general education curriculum, and directly

reporting to general education teachers, special education teachers and related service personnel (Blalock, 1991; Boomer, 1994; Carroll, 2001; Doyle, 1997; Fletcher-Cambell, 1992; French, 1999a; Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2001; Goessling, 1998; Mehaffey & Rea, 2003; Pickett & French, 1997; Warger, 2002; Westling & Fox, 2009).

One priority focus of paraprofessional responsibility in inclusive settings as described by Ghere and York-Barr (2003) was to promote student independence in academic and functional skills across multiple settings for students with a wide array of learning needs. Social engagement was also paramount in the inclusion of students with significant disabilities (Minondo et al., 2001; Shukla, Kennedy, & Cushing, 1999; Westling & Fox, 2009). For students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings, continual and major modifications of the general education curriculum were frequently necessary. Modifications in presentation, response modes and materials were common (Wehmeyer & Agran, 2006). These modifications also included curriculum augmentation (e.g., additional instruction, specialized strategies, curriculum alterations) to provide additional and specialized content and curriculum foci that were not usually addressed in the general education curriculum.

This section presented examples of highly specialized knowledge and skills required of paraprofessionals in relation to the education of students with significant disabilities. These highly specialized areas of knowledge and skills

create unique training needs for paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities.

Paraprofessionals as a principle source for student success. Many paraprofessionals believe they are solely responsible for the day-to-day educational decisions for students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings according to Marks et al. (1999). These researchers interviewed 20 paraprofessionals who worked with students with significant disabilities in general education classrooms. They found that these paraprofessionals believed that waiting for teachers and other licensed personnel to make curricula and teaching decisions was not feasible. The paraprofessionals shared that it was not reasonable to wait for a teacher to design instruction for the students they worked with because teachers did not know the student or just did not have the time (p. 319). These paraprofessionals were often autonomous when making curricular and instructional decisions. Downing et al. (2000) interviewed 16 paraprofessionals to gain information on how paraprofessionals perceived their daily responsibilities. These paraprofessionals reported that they made independent decisions regarding most student programs and experienced uncertainty about whether their decisions adequately matched the educational needs of the students for whom they were responsible (Downing et al., 2000, p. 179).

Marks et al. (1999) reported that paraprofessionals working in inclusive classrooms perceived themselves to be the principal source for student success and

felt primarily responsible for including students with significant disabilities in general education classes and ensuring that general education teachers would not be “burdened by the inclusion of students [with significant disabilities]” (p. 317).

Paraprofessionals assumed the primary responsibility for academic and behavioral needs of students in inclusive settings and felt that ongoing daily contact and decision-making responsibilities about students’ education made them the “...hub... the expert...and liaison of their student” (p. 318).

Wadsworth and Knight (1996) reported that paraprofessionals lacked a sense of belonging in inclusive settings. They felt isolated, believed that they carried sole responsibility for student success, lacked supervisory support and needed to largely rely on parent input. These factors were associated with low job satisfaction. Minondo et al. (2001) found that paraprofessionals felt they were the primary communicators with families. In focus groups, Chopra, Sandoval-Lucero, Aargon Bernal, Berg De Balderas, and Carroll (2004, pp. 219-231) found that paraprofessionals felt that parents wanted a relationship with them outside of the school arena, regardless of the districts’ concerns regarding the breach of student confidentiality. Furthermore, paraprofessionals believed parents felt more comfortable communicating with them because teachers were too busy, under-informed of student needs, and not accessible.

Training Needs of Paraprofessionals Who Work with Students with Significant Disabilities

The need for a well-trained staff with knowledge of the strategies and techniques associated with best practices for students with significant disabilities and with the ability to integrate those instructional practices effectively is paramount in the education of these students (Downing et al., 2000). Several experts have pointed out that most preparation and training for paraprofessionals is fragmented, arbitrary, not competency-based and rarely geared to specific paraprofessional responsibilities (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2001; French, 1999b; Gerlach & Hilton, 1997; Lasater, Johnson, & Fitzgerald, 2000; Likins, 2003; Pickett, 1996).

Orientation opportunities. Seventy to 90% of paraprofessionals have no training for the job upon employment (Katsiyannis et al., 2000). Paraprofessional pre-service training, such as orientation is rarely offered and when available, the overall training of paraprofessionals working with students with significant disabilities and autism “continues to be insufficient” (Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001, p. 54). Yet, with little to no preparation or on-the-job training, paraprofessionals are expected to provide the necessary supports and instruction to students with significant disabilities in a wide range of curriculum areas (Carrol, 2001; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). Riggs and Mueller (2001) found that nearly half of paraprofessionals in their study were not given a written job description and only 17% of nearly 800 paraprofessionals working in general education classrooms reported that they had training before working with students. These

paraprofessionals expressed gratitude for this informal introduction to the special education arena. However all respondents felt that they were still in need of more in-depth and systematic training (Riggs & Mueller, 2001, p. 60).

Experts indicate the first step to paraprofessional training begins with orientation (Boomer, 1980; Carroll, 2001; Mueller, 2002), with important aspects such as a program philosophy, clarification of roles and responsibilities, performance expectations, and policies to be included in the orientation process. Carroll (2001) described paraprofessional orientation as a process that sets the tone of the job related responsibilities:

When a paraeducator begins working, provide a packet of practical information...all paraeducators should be familiar with the individualized education program (IEP) goals and objectives. Written information about safety concerns, medical concerns, communication styles, or behavior plans for each student. (p. 60)

The NEA (1994) recommended that orientation for all paraprofessionals include roles and responsibilities, district overview of policies and procedures, educational jargon, confidentiality, safety and emergency procedures, employment or contract information, observing and working alongside a mentor in the same position (job shadowing), and an introduction to general classroom curriculum, classroom rules and procedures, and the school-wide behavior management plan (p. 17).

In-service and district level training opportunities. Generally in-service training occurs after paraprofessionals begin their work responsibilities and is conducted during non-regularly scheduled times without students present (Blalock,

1991; Lang & Fox, 2003; Pickett, 2002). In-service training sessions that enhance paraprofessional knowledge and skills and the provision of structured on-the-job coaching across relevant teaching conditions are considered essential elements of paraprofessionals preparation (Chopra & French, 2009). However, according to Blalock (1991), special education teachers and general education teachers often mistakenly believe that paraprofessionals are adequately skilled and knowledgeable about what and how to teach students with significant disabilities.

There has long been recognition of the significant need for in-service training relevant to effective teaching methodology for paraprofessionals who assist in the education of students with significant disabilities (Parsons & Reid, 1999; Parsons et al., 1993). However, current district level in-service training opportunities are often not meaningful and rarely address the specific needs of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities (Ghere & York-Barr, 2003). Paraprofessional in-service training opportunities typically do not recognize the specific differences related to the education of children with significant disabilities in comparison to working with students with high incidence disabilities (Ghere & York-Barr, 2003; Pickett & Gerlach, 2003; L. S. Simpson, 2004). Riggs and Mueller (2001, p. 59) reported that as few as 8-12% of paraprofessionals who worked with students with significant disabilities received formal training through in-service workshops and that 70% of the paraprofessionals who did have the opportunity to receive formal paraprofessional in-service training

felt the experience was irrelevant to their specific training needs. In a qualitative study, Downing et al. (2000) asked 19 paraprofessionals to describe their training experiences after having been employed. These paraprofessionals reported that they felt training was critical. Their annual in-service opportunities varied greatly and in-service content most frequently consisted of principles of behavior, information on inclusion, and adapting the core academic curriculum. The paraprofessionals also reported the need to have training in areas specific to students with significant disabilities. They indicated that they required training to effectively interact with these students and adequately follow the students' education plans. The majority also reported that they received no training upon being hired and learned what to do on their own (Downing, 2000, p. 178).

Paraprofessional on-the-job training. Experts suggested that paraprofessionals need to have access to ongoing learning opportunities, (e.g., workshops, courses, internet study) in addition to on-the-job experiences that promote their skill development in areas relevant to the education of students with significant disabilities (Blalock, 1991; French, 1998; French & Pickett, 1997; Freschi, 1999; Ghore et al., 2002; Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Jones & Bender, 1993; Morgan, Ashbaker, & Forbush, 2000; Parsons & Reid, 1999; Passaro, Pickett, Latham, & Hong Bo, 1994; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997; Riggs, 2001; Steckelberg & Vasa, 1998; USDE, 1997; Young, Simpson, Smith-Myles, & Kramps, 1996).

In a mixed-method study, Riggs and Mueller (2001) found that 25% of paraprofessionals reported that they received no supervision on daily tasks and felt unsupported and underprepared for their instructional duties (p. 61). On-the-job training opportunities for paraprofessionals who served students with significant disabilities, when offered, largely consisted of brief contacts between the teacher and paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals reported most of the on-the-job training consisted of seeking advice from other paraprofessionals (Riggs & Mueller, 2001, p. 60).

On-the-job training for paraprofessionals is often the responsibility of the supervising teacher (Carroll, 2001). Giangreco, Edelman, and Broer (2001) suggested teachers need to offer ongoing coaching, modeling and feedback while preparing paraprofessionals for their assigned responsibilities. French (1998) emphasized that it is necessary to assure that paraprofessionals are able to perform duties assigned under the close guidance of a teacher before expecting the paraprofessional to independently carry on with the expected duties. Downing et al. (2000) suggested weekly or monthly training meetings are effective ways to meet the ongoing professional development of paraprofessionals so that they can appropriately meet the educational needs of students. Regular feedback, both written or verbal, are recommended on-the-job training practices (Westling & Fox, 2009). Recommended practices for paraprofessional staff development include a pre-assessment of paraprofessional training needs, established objectives, plans of

action, identified activities and needed resources, relevant materials and methods of competency evaluation (Blalock, 1991; Carrol, 2001; Freschi, 1999; Hilton & Gerlach, 1997; Lasater et al., 2000; NRCP, 1991). The following is a brief overview of recommended training curriculum for paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities.

Recommended training curriculum. According to Giangreco and Doyle (2002), general competencies need to be recognized as a minimum standard for preparation of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities. These paraprofessionals must also be specifically prepared for their unique responsibilities related to students with significant disabilities (Broer et al., 2005).

Lasater et al. (2000) indicated that paraprofessional training models should be designed to ensure a comprehensive plan be responsive to the immediate training needs of paraprofessionals at the school district level. Paraprofessional training efforts that promote well-trained staff who can effectively integrate recommended strategies and techniques associated with the instruction of students with significant disabilities cannot be underestimated and must include a process that incorporates criteria for basic entry-level skills, a specific relevant pre-service orientation, ongoing in-service training, on-the-job coaching, and frequent and constructive feedback (Downing et al., 2000). For instructional personnel to acquire the necessary skills related to the education of students with disabilities, training

efforts must incorporate meaningful instruction along with opportunities to practice these skills while receiving coaching and feedback (Schreurmann, Webber, Boutot, & Goodwin, 2003).

In addition to the competencies previously identified in Table 1, paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities need a working knowledge of the general education curriculum and the impact of significant disabilities on students' learning within general education settings. These paraprofessionals also need to understand the impact of paraprofessional proximity on student learning (Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2003; Jenson, Parsons, & Reid, 1997; Mehaffey & Rea, 2003). A review of the literature revealed three paraprofessional training programs that identified specific competencies for paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities. These training programs are described below.

Ghere et al. (2002) recommended that paraprofessionals be able to demonstrate knowledge in four competency areas directly related to paraprofessional instructional practices in inclusive settings. First, paraprofessionals are taught the meaning of inclusive education and the role of the paraprofessional in inclusive environments. Secondly, the curriculum explores what to teach. Next, this program offers information on how to instruct students with significant disabilities. Finally, the curriculum provides information on how to use adaptations, understand behavior as communication and how to interact with

students. This curriculum recommends a site-based job-embedded, coach-and-feedback approach in addition to a lecture series. This curriculum is “not designed as an orientation...instead the focus is on increasing the knowledge and skills for providing direct instructional and social supports for students” (p. 9). Currently, there is no data indicating the effectiveness of this paraprofessional training on student learning outcomes.

Fox (2001) recommended curriculum for 12 hours of instruction and a 10-hour practicum training for paraprofessionals who support students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings. Four broad knowledge areas are included. First, principles and assumptions related to characteristics of significant disabilities, disability characteristics that affect student learning and the inclusion of students with significant disabilities are considered. The second component focuses on various ways that students with significant disabilities communicate and strategies to promote opportunities for communication. Thirdly, issues related to health, safety and positioning with the use of specialized equipment and devices are examined. The fourth and final focus area outlines personal care issues such as dressing, hygiene, toileting, and feeding. This curriculum has been recently added to the Paraeducator Training Project curriculum developed by the University of Vermont (ChickoskiKelly, E., Bakus, L., Giangreco, M.F., & Sherman-Tucker, P., 2002). Currently, there is no data indicating the effectiveness of this paraprofessional training on student learning outcomes.

Parsons et al. (1993) developed a Teaching-Skills Training Program (TSTP) model to address the preparation of personnel responsible for teaching individuals with significant disabilities. The TSTP training model consisted of classroom-based instruction, on-the-job monitoring, feedback and follow-up supervision for direct-support personnel such as paraprofessionals working with students with significant disabilities. The TSTP training format focused on training personnel on four basic teaching strategies. These include task analysis, least-to-most assistive prompting, reinforcement and error correction. These teaching strategies are commonly associated with best practices when teaching individuals with significant disabilities (Downing, 2000; Parsons et al., 1993; Simpson, 2004). Currently there is no data indicating the effectiveness of this training on paraprofessionals' on-the-job performance or the impact on learning outcomes for students with significant disabilities.

Other expert opinions. Experts propose that paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities need knowledge of how these students learn, a working knowledge of specialized curriculum in addition to the general education curriculum and specific training in basic instructional concepts and in procedures that promote learning and independence of students with significant disabilities (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Simpson et al., 2003; Young & Simpson, 1997). Suggested training content includes providing information on positive behavioral supports, promoting peer interaction, enhancing

social and communication skills, managing groups, using technological devices, using specialized techniques (e.g., positioning and feeding/diets), creating environmental modifications and managing emergency or crisis situations (Carroll, 2001; CEC, 1997; Passaro et al., 1994; Wadsworth & Knight, 1996; Young & Simpson, 1997).

Paraprofessionals need to promote independent-living skills, offer sensory-related support, and adjust, modify and structure the environment specific to individual student needs across settings and contexts when working with students with significant disabilities (L. S. Simpson, 2004, p. 139). Several studies of paraprofessional training needs identified specific strategies associated with the education and support of students with significant disabilities. Mehaffey and Rea (2003, p. 2) surveyed 438 paraprofessionals. Participants were assigned duties in inclusive settings at the elementary ($n = 122$), middle ($n = 93$), and high-school ($n = 113$) levels. Participants reported training needs in the areas of student behavior management, disability characteristics, instructional strategies and legal requirements relevant to their jobs. In the Downing et al. (2000, p. 177) study, paraprofessionals discussed the need to know how to effectively interact with students and to follow the student's IEP for effective instruction. Riggs (2001) reported that paraprofessionals needed training on the use of technology such as computers, training on specific disabilities, student health and safety issues,

behavior management, and how to accommodate students' learning needs, in the inclusive settings.

Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, and Doyle (2001) reviewed single-subject studies relevant to the training of paraprofessionals. These studies highlighted training in specific intervention techniques (e.g., instructional delivery, use of prompting strategies, chaining and fading, error correction, student reinforcement). Paraprofessionals who worked with students with significant disabilities also required knowledge related to the impact of constant close adult proximity on students with disabilities (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Marks et al., 1999).

The Effects of Close Proximity between Paraprofessionals and Students with Significant Disabilities

The issue of paraprofessional proximity to students with disabilities provides a specific example of the impact that a lack of paraprofessional training can have on outcomes for students. There are times when close proximity between an adult and student are necessary for safety and educational purposes. However, paraprofessionals often assume the need to remain in close proximity to students with significant disabilities for these students to behave appropriately and to keep them from interfering with the activities of the general education teachers, as well as to prevent interference with other students' learning (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Ginagreco & Doyle, 2002; Marks et al., 1999).

Several researchers have investigated the effects of paraprofessional proximity on learning for students with disabilities.

For example, Giangreco, Broer, and Edelman (2001), Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, and MacFarland (1997), Marks et al. (1999), and Young and Simpson (1997) established that constant, close paraprofessional proximity (i.e., two or fewer feet from the student) interferes with classroom teacher ownership and negatively impacts peer and teacher engagement with the student with disabilities. Students with significant disabilities tend to pay greater attention to the paraprofessional, who is close, rather than to the classroom teacher (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997, p. 13). Negative effects such as the over-reliance on the paraprofessional, limited opportunities for relationship-building with the general education teacher and peers, and isolation and stigmatization of the student with significant disabilities are associated with excessive close proximity of paraprofessionals (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Giangreco & Doyle, 2002; Marks et al., 1999; Young et al., 1997).

Young and Simpson (1997) studied the impact of paraprofessionals' proximity on elementary-age students with autism. Students' self-stimulatory behaviors and inappropriate vocalizations occurred most frequently when paraprofessionals were in close proximity of the students. Overall, teachers appeared more inclined to interact with students whenever paraprofessionals were

more than 2 feet away, and one-on-one, peer-related activities seemed to promote greater on-task behaviors than did paraprofessionals' proximity.

Causton-Theoharis and Malmgren (2005) found when four paraprofessionals were trained to promote peer interactions between students with significant disabilities and typical peers in inclusive settings, the quality and rate of their social facilitation behaviors significantly increased. This outcome was maintained over time, thus positively impacting the social opportunities for students with significant disabilities.

Summary

The professional literature supports the need for skilled paraprofessional personnel in the education of students with disabilities. The utilization of paraprofessionals may be a necessary practice in the education of students with significant disabilities (Riggs, 2001). However, as acknowledged by Riggs (2001), "neither research nor common sense provides support for assigning the least trained personnel to provide primary instructional support for students with the most significant learning challenges" (p. 79).

Some competencies have been identified for paraprofessionals in general. However, the professional literature does not adequately identify specific competencies of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities. The literature related to the roles and responsibilities, preparation and training experiences, and training needs of paraprofessionals who work with students with

significant disabilities is scant. The literature suggests the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities often include instructional practices that are considered to the responsibilities of licensed teachers. Paraprofessionals are faced with the responsibility to make educational decisions and are often the primary instructors for students with significant disabilities (Westling & Fox, 2009). There is a current need to identify the practices of paraprofessionals serving students with significant disabilities in inclusive elementary school settings.

Experts suggest that paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities need to have access to ongoing learning opportunities, (e.g., workshops, courses, Internet study) in addition to on-the-job experiences that promote their skill development in areas relevant to the education of students with significant disabilities. These paraprofessionals need to be taught the meaning of inclusive education and the role of the paraprofessional in inclusive environments. These paraprofessionals require a working knowledge of the general education curriculum, characteristics of significant disabilities and the impact of significant disabilities on students' learning within general education settings, managing groups of students, promoting peer interactions, and training on how to adapt the core academic curriculum and create environmental modifications. Information on how to provide effective specialized instructional strategies and techniques relevant to the specific learning needs of the students they serve is crucial in the training of

these paraprofessionals. Examples of these strategies include: task analysis, least-to-most assistive prompting, reinforcement and error correction.

Training content for paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities needs to include principles of behavior, use of positive behavior supports, behavior as communication, how to effectively interact with students, and managing emergency or crisis situations. These paraprofessionals need information on various ways that students with significant disabilities communicate and the needed strategies to promote appropriate and effective communication and social skills for these students.

Paraprofessionals who work with these students need training on the importance of the IEP and the impact of adult proximity on student learning. Training curriculum related to health, safety and positioning with the use of specialized equipment are important components in the training of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities.

Specific training in functional curriculum areas to include personal care issues such as dressing, hygiene, toileting, and feeding are also identified as necessary features in training curriculum for paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities. Minimal supervision from certified personnel, lack of relevant preparation and training opportunities, absence of relevant job descriptions, the misunderstood role of the paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings, “pose serious questions about the

soundness and effectiveness” (p. 75) of education for students with significant disabilities. Further research is needed to explore these concerns in greater depth. In addition to identifying the roles and responsibilities of these paraprofessionals, it is necessary to understand the current orientation, training and training needs of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities. This understanding could lead to more accurate job descriptions and relevant competencies. This study was designed to address these areas of need. The research questions explored in this study were:

1. What are the responsibilities of paraprofessionals serving students with significant disabilities in inclusive elementary school settings?
2. What orientation and initial preparation for working with students with significant disabilities do paraprofessionals receive when hired?
3. What ongoing training opportunities are provided to paraprofessionals related to the instruction of students with significant disabilities?
4. What are the training needs of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities?

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODS

This chapter describes the design and the methodological procedures used in this study. The purpose of this study was to gain an initial understanding of the practices and training needs of paraprofessionals as told in the voices of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities, the special education teachers who oversee their work, and the special education administrators who support these personnel.

The Qualitative Paradigm

Qualitative methods are often effective in establishing information needed to embark on additional research regarding a topic (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Cresswell, 1994). A benefit of a qualitative approach is the identification of variables central to the occurrence of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994). While qualitative studies focus on ordinary events in close proximity to the specific situation, qualitative data can offer a thick description of what the participants experience and perceive (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 7). Data collection efforts can be flexible to best serve the participants and the focus of the study.

A cross-case analysis (Cresswell, 1994) was selected to describe the perceptions of paraprofessionals, special education teachers and special education administrators regarding the instructional practices and training needs of paraprofessionals with daily instructional responsibilities for students with

significant disabilities in inclusive elementary school settings. Through the application of an interpretive and constructivist framework, this study addresses trustworthiness and credibility using a cross-case analysis (Guba, 1990).

Research Design

Case studies were used to compile comprehensive, systematic and in-depth information related to participant subgroups across school districts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A cross case analysis of sub-group across the three school districts (Patton, 2002) evaluated the relative perceptions of participants by looking for patterns and themes in the data that were common across the three school districts.

Analysis was based upon data derived from:

- One-on-one 45minute interviews with administrators responsible for assuring opportunities for the training for paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities;
- One-on-one 45minute interviews of special education teachers responsible for the supervision, management and preparation of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities;
- Focus group interviews with paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities; and
- Review of documentation of each school district's training opportunities provided to paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities and related documents such as job descriptions.

This study examined the perceptions of three subgroups closely related to the daily practices and training needs of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities, including administrators, special education teachers and the paraprofessionals themselves. Previous research identified broad descriptions of practices and training needs of all paraprofessionals, regardless of the type of disability of the student. The purpose of this study was to extend knowledge and provide an initial understanding of the specific needs of those paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities in public elementary schools.

Setting

Three Oregon school districts that followed an inclusive model of services for students with significant disabilities were selected for this study. Each school district (LEA) had a history of providing educational services to students with significant disabilities in general education classrooms and other settings for at least 12 months. The years of inclusive practices across the districts ranged from 1 to 25. Selecting districts that represent a range of years of inclusive practices was important in this study. The districts involved in this study were selected to gain a comprehensive understanding of subgroup across settings. The districts were selected to gain a deep understanding of the participants' perceptions across a range of districts and not for the purpose of being representative across all schools.

Each LEA assigned paraprofessionals to serve elementary grade students with significant disabilities in general education classrooms and other inclusive

settings. Each LEA assigned special education teachers responsibilities for the implementation of individual education programs for students with significant disabilities in general education classrooms and other inclusive settings. The teachers were responsible for the on-site management and training of paraprofessionals who worked directly with elementary grade students in inclusive settings. The special education administrators from the three districts expressed interest in a study of the practices and training needs of the paraprofessionals who served students with significant disabilities in general education settings, within their district. Table 3 provides demographic information to describe the three districts.

Table 3

Demographic Information of School Districts

	LEA 1	LEA 2	LEA 3
Total number of schools	3	6	15
Number of elementary schools	1	4	10
Estimated student population	2,000	3,500	13,000
Estimated number of K-5 student with significant disabilities	10	15-20	75-110
Number of Paraprofessionals serving all students	18	33	75-93
Number of paraprofessionals serving students with significant disabilities	10	15	60
Number of years inclusive practice for students with significant disabilities	1	3	25

Participants

Volunteer participants represented three roles within the three different Oregon school districts that followed an inclusive education model for students with significant disabilities. One special education administrator and one special education teacher from each district were selected for interviews. Paraprofessionals who served students with significant disabilities from each district were recruited. Documents regarding preparation and training of paraprofessionals were solicited from each district.

After approval of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board and the dissertation committee, special education administrators of three school districts were invited to participate in the study. Administrators were asked to allow the researcher to contact special education teachers and paraprofessionals who served students with significant disabilities. Administrators were also asked to share any documentation related to the districts' paraprofessional preparation and training activities during the past school year. Invitations for participation and requests for informed consent were disseminated to potential special educators and paraprofessional participants after the administrators' permission was received. Letters of explanation were also disseminated to building principals to inform them of the study and that paraprofessionals and special education teachers were invited to participate in the study. Additionally, building principals were invited to contact

the researcher to discuss any concerns or questions related to the study. All letters of information were distributed directly to building principals in the same manner.

The special education administrators were asked to participate in a one-on-one, 45-minute interview. Special education teachers, who had responsibilities for services to elementary-aged students with significant disabilities and the paraprofessionals who served these students were also invited to participate in a one-to-one, 45-minute interview. Paraprofessionals who worked with elementary students with significant disabilities were invited to participate in a 90-minute focus group. Invitations were distributed to paraprofessionals in both LEA 1 and LEA 3. In total, invitations were distributed to 11 elementary schools.

The district administrator from LEA 2 preferred that invitations to paraprofessionals were distributed from the district office. An initial distribution of invitations by the district office was sent to an elementary school principal who distributed them to seven paraprofessionals in June 2007. One paraprofessional responded to the invitation by September 2007. However, the district appointed a new special education administrator in the fall. A follow-up request to redistribute invitations to paraprofessionals was made. A meeting with the new administrator was conducted to provide an overview of the study and to request a second distribution to paraprofessionals. A third distribution to paraprofessionals was requested in January 2008. In February of 2008 the undistributed invitations from

Fall 2007 and January 2008 were returned to the researcher from the district office without distribution.

Table 4 provides demographic data to describe the administrators and teacher participants who volunteered to participate in the study. The special education administrators and special education teachers had held their positions from 1 to 12 years. These respondents had been working with paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities for 3 to 10 years. The special education teachers had an average caseload ranging from 5-29 students with significant disabilities and had responsibilities for overseeing 5-20 paraprofessionals who serve these students.

Table 4

Demographics of Licensed Participants

	LEA 1	LEA 2	LEA 3
<i>Title: Special Education Administrator: Director of Student Services</i>			
Years in current position	1	3	11
Years as SPED teacher	6	10	7
Years working with students with significant disabilities	6	10	12
Years responsible for supervision/training of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities	6	10	7
<i>Title: Special Education Teacher: Learning Specialist</i>			
Years in current position	3	6	7
Years as a SPED teacher	3	8	10
Years working with students with significant disabilities	3	8	10
Years supervision and training paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities	3	8	10
Number of students with significant disabilities on caseload	5	29	23
Number of supervised paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities	5	15	20

Two focus groups of paraprofessionals from two school districts LEA 1 and LEA 3 were conducted. Each focus group had four participants. All but one participant was female. The average age of the paraprofessionals was 48, and ranged from 38 to 62 years. All paraprofessionals had a high school degree, while approximately 62% of the paraprofessionals had at least 2 years of college. A focus group for LEA 2 did not occur. Demographic information for the focus group participants appears in Table 5.

Table 5

Demographic Summary of Paraprofessionals

Paraprofessionals LEA 1	P1-1	P1-2	P1-3	P1-4
Age	55	38	44	51
Gender	F	F	F	F
Degree	High School	High School	High School	BA
Years as Paraprofessional	20	2	6	3
Years as a Paraprofessional in current LEA	20	1	6	3
Years Working with Students with Significant Disabilities	20	2	4	3
Years Working in a General Education Setting	1	2	4	3
Paraprofessionals LEA 3	P3-1	P3-2	P3-3	P3-4
Age	62	48	48	48
Gender	M	F	F	F
Degree	BS	BS	2 yrs college	BA
Years as Paraprofessional	9	6	14	10
Years as a Paraprofessional in current LEA	8	6	14	10
Years Working with Students with Significant Disabilities	8	6	14	10
Years Working a General Education Setting	8	6	14	10
Paraprofessionals LEA 2	NA	NA	NA	NA

The paraprofessionals represented five schools across the two districts, worked with students with significant disabilities between 2 and 20 years and worked in inclusive schools from 1-14 years. All paraprofessionals reported that they taught three to five students with significant disabilities, ranging from kindergarten to fifth grade in general education settings. They also provided one-to-one and small group instruction across multiple contexts.

Role of the Researcher

My extensive experience and knowledge related to paraprofessional training contributed to the credibility of the study (Patton, 2002). Personnel in the school districts were familiar with my work. I was highly regarded as a provider of training and support for paraprofessionals for nearly 15 years. I worked in special education serving students with significant disabilities, including autism, for more than 30 years. I once shared many characteristics similar to those of the focus group participants. I was a paraprofessional for twelve years who provided instruction for students with significant disabilities in elementary school settings. I worked as a special education teacher responsible for the education of students with significant disabilities including the management, training and support of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities for nearly 10 years. I continue to work in the field related to the education of students with significant disabilities. This knowledge and experience also enabled me to better understand the participants' responses and behaviors. It is this very inside understanding of the

situation that is "...a powerful central concept for understanding the purpose of the study" (Patton, 2002, p. 51).

While I offered significant experience and knowledge to the study, my role as the researcher was to be an objective receiver of information. Participants, with exception of the paraprofessionals from LEA 1 and the special education teachers from LEA 1 and LEA 2 knew me from previous professional activities. Participants who knew me stated that they were confident I would maintain the utmost professional research practices: Safeguards included assuring participant confidentiality, the utilization of objective and open-ended interviews, systematic data analysis procedures, triangulation of the data sources, member checks, peer review and following all required elements of the research process as outlined by the Portland State University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board and my dissertation committee. However, even with these safeguards, there is a possibility that some participants may have been influenced by my familiarity. Because of my prior experience and familiarity with a few participants it was important to use procedures that addressed concerns regarding bias, as discussed in the method section. There was also a potential for the findings to be unintentionally influenced by my previous experiences related to the issues. Within the qualitative paradigm, the researcher's creditability and ability to accurately understand the emerging issues, is "related to the researcher's experience and background" (Patton, 2002, p. 52).

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection began in the spring of 2007. The data were collected based on the convenience of the participants. Personnel changes within the districts and summer break contributed to delays in data collection. A second set of invitations was sent to LEA 1 and LEA 2 in mid-September 2007. All of the special education administrators consented to participate immediately. Two of 10 special education teachers from the districts responded within 2 weeks of the invitation. Due to the busy time of year, respondents opted to be interviewed after school ended in June. Table 6 provides a summary of the data collection timeline while Table 7 provides a summary of the data collected for each district.

Table 6

Data Collection Timeline

June 2007	Initial invitation to participate disseminated to participants LEA 1, LEA 2 and LEA 3 Administrators interviewed LEA 1 and LEA 3 SPED teachers interviewed
July 2007	LEA 1 paraprofessional focus group
September October 2007	Follow-up invitation for LEA 2 teacher Follow-up invitation for LEA 2 and LEA 3 Paraprofessionals
November 2007	LEA 2 teacher interviewed
December, 2007	LEA 3 paraprofessional focus group
January, 2008	Follow-up invitation LEA 2 Paraprofessional: no response
February, 2008	All interview documents transcribed All LEA documents collected Initial data analysis started LEA 2 Paraprofessional Invitations returned by administrators office
April, 2008	Member checks completed

Table 7

Data Collected

	LEA 1	LEA 2	LEA 3
Special education administrator	Interviewed	Interviewed	Interviewed
Special education teacher	Interviewed	Interviewed	Interviewed
Paraprofessionals	Focus group held	Focus group <i>not</i> held	Focus group held
Documents provided	None	Yes	Yes

Interviews

Interviews with one special education administrator and special teacher for each of the three school districts were conducted. Initial data were collected through face-to-face, open-ended interviews. Each interview was approximately 45 minutes in length. Each interview was conducted within the participating school district, with the exception of the interview of one special education teacher. This teacher elected to have the interview occur in her home. Each interview participant was given a copy of *Lets Team Up: A Checklist for Paraeducators, Teachers and Principals* (Gerlach, 2006).

Participants were assured that confidentiality and ethical practices, from both the researcher and fellow participants, would be adhered to without question. Participants were asked to sign an informed consent statement at the beginning of the interview they could request discontinuation of the taping at any time during the interview and they were free to end the interview session at any time. In addition,

the participants were assured that their participation would not have any effect on their relationship with Portland State University. They were also assured that through the data analysis process the information would be coded in such a way that confidentiality would be maintained.

Interview Questioning Technique. During interviews of special education administrators and teachers the use of a semi-structured open-ended questionnaire addressed the research questions (see Appendices B and C). Two essential techniques of questioning were used (Brotherson, 1994). A pause strategy was used to stimulate interaction. Open-ended probe questions were provided to avoid influencing responses.

The interview questionnaire content explored the administrators' and teachers' perspectives on paraprofessionals' daily responsibilities, paraprofessionals practices related to the instruction of students with significant disabilities, training provided to these paraprofessionals once hired, future training needs of these paraprofessionals and training models considered to be effective. The participants appeared to be relaxed and offered the full duration of the interview without interruption. One member check per subgroup was conducted to assure consistency of information and to validate the accuracy of the information reported. Each interview participant was provided with an incentive copy of *Lets Team Up: A Checklist for Paraeducators, Teachers and Principals* (Gerlach, 2006).

Focus Groups

Two focus groups of four paraprofessional members each were conducted for LEA 1 and LEA 3. Focus groups with paraprofessionals who worked with K-5 elementary students with significant disabilities inclusive schools lasted approximately 90 minutes each. Each focus group was conducted within each of the participating school districts. Participants were assured that confidentiality and ethical practices, from both the researcher and fellow participants, would be adhered to without question. Ground rules for each focus group were explained at the beginning of the focus group to encourage interaction among participants. These included (a) one person speaking at a time, (b) no right or wrong viewpoints and (c) the expectation of keeping the group discussion respectful between members were explained at the beginning of the focus group to encourage interaction among participants (Brotherson, 1994). Participants were asked to sign an informed consent statement at the beginning of the focus group. They were reminded that the sessions would be audio-taped, they could request discontinuation of the taping at any time during the interview and they were free to end the interview session at any time. In addition, the participants were assured that their participation would not have any effect on their relationship with Portland State University. They were also assured that through the data analysis process the information would be coded in such a way that confidentiality would be maintained.

Each interview and focus group participant was given a copy of *Lets Team Up: A Checklist for Paraeducators, Teachers and Principals* (Gerlach, 2006). The paraprofessional focus group participants were also provided with a 30-minute PowerPoint presentation on the impact of paraprofessionals proximity on students with significant disabilities and a \$20 gift certificate from a local store of their choice.

Focus Group Questioning Technique. Focus group procedures were followed as recommended by experts in qualitative inquiry (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Patton, 2002). Each focus group was audio-taped. A systematic method to organize the flow of questioning within the focus group session was used to promote an in-depth conversation among the participants. Using Kruger and Casey's (2000) model of questioning, the focus group question guide included: (a) an opening question to help the participants feel comfortable; (b) introductory questions to help the participants "...get connected..." with the topic (p. 44); (c) transition questions that moved the conversation into key questions; (d) four key questions that reflected the research questions; and (e) ending questions to promote reflection, clarify final points of view and assure that critical aspects were not overlooked (see Appendix D).

The pause strategy of questioning was embedded in each question within each phase of the focus group interview and open-ended probe questions were used to stimulate interaction and avoid influence on paraprofessionals (Brotherson,

1994). Interview field notes by an assisting moderator were taken during the first focus group (Greenbaum, 1997). As the group discussed broad topics related to paraprofessional training, careful recording of the evolving changes in the interview questions were noted.

Immediately after the focus group, the researcher and the assisting moderator reviewed notes to confirm that the notes were accurate. These notes were also reviewed to assure goodness of fit with the research questions. This process provided flexibility to capture participants' perceptions (Brotherson, 1994; Cresswell, 1998; Patton, 2002, p. 131). These reviews indicated no need to adjust the questionnaire and no need for a co-moderator in the second focus group. Great care was taken to maintain consistency of questions across groups while allowing meaningful revisions in the protocol to further explore emerging themes (Brotherson, 1994). At this time, the first member check of the study was conducted. A paraprofessional volunteered to participate in a member check with the moderator at the end of the meeting time. The paraprofessional was asked to look over the moderator's notes and offer any confirming or disconfirming information regarding the content of the field notes. The paraprofessional agreed that the information was accurate, to the best of her recollection.

Document Collection

A review of documents related to training opportunities for paraprofessionals who served students with significant disabilities was also

considered important for this study. Special education administrators were asked to supply any documentation related to the planning of paraprofessional staff development and training opportunities for the current school year. Review of documentation often offers information that interviews do not reveal (Patton, 2002, p. 293). Administrators were given guidelines for the type of documents that were considered to be useful for this study. An example of the document selection protocol can be found in Appendix E. Administrators for two districts gathered hard copies of information regarding district-level training opportunities which paraprofessionals were either required to attend or welcomed to attend. Please refer to Table 8 for a summary of the types of documents collected. One packet of information was hand-delivered, while another district administrator mailed documents related to paraprofessional training.

Table 8

Document Type Collected

LEA 1	LEA 2	LEA 3
District Web-site Job descriptions (Out dated)	Agendas (NA) Plan for trainings Meeting Notes NA Curriculum Notes From teacher	District Web-site Job-descriptions (Broad and dated) Archived notes 10 years old

The district administrator from LEA 1 reported that the district did not have documents related to paraprofessional training did provide paraprofessional job descriptions but indicated that these were considered to be obsolete. One special

education teacher also provided documents used when training the paraprofessionals she supervised.

Data Analysis

Miles and Huberman (1994) described an analysis process to validate and interpret qualitative data. The process included data reduction, data display and theme identification. This process was applied in this study.

Organization and Preparation of Data for Analysis

Data were organized and securely stored to prepare for data analysis. At the close of each interview or focus group session, each labeled audiotape cassette was placed in a single envelope. Each envelope was labeled with an identifying code name, dated and sealed. Only the researcher knew the identity or district of each participant. Once all interviews were completed per district, the tapes were hand-delivered for transcription to a Portland State University graduate student. Prior to giving the audiotape data to the transcriber, a full explanation of requirements for confidentiality was provided. The transcriber verbally agreed to maintain this commitment. All interview data were transcribed verbatim. Once the data were transcribed, the transcriber was instructed to return the audiotape to the corresponding envelope along with either a completed hard copy of the transcription or a CD version of the document. Additionally, the transcriber was required to send an electronic copy of each document as an email attachment to the researcher. Once this was done, the transcriber was directed to delete their copy of the transcript. All

data were kept in a password-protected file on the researcher's computer or locked in a file cabinet that was not accessible to the public.

Second Member Check

Upon receipt of the individual transcripts the researcher checked the readability and accuracy of the transcripts. Individual member checks were conducted with a member from each representing sub-group. The purpose of this member check was to assure for the authenticity of the data and to confirm the accuracy (Patton, 2002) of the individual interview transcript and the focus group transcript that each member participated in. This member check was conducted prior to any analysis of the data.

The researcher contacted a randomly selected member of each group (i.e., an administrator, teacher and paraprofessional) to review the accuracy of the interview content. The member check sessions was conducted at the convenience of the participant. The administrator opted for a phone review. She concluded the transcripts were accurate. In face-to-face meetings, a special education teacher confirmed the accuracy of an interview transcript and a paraprofessional confirmed the accuracy of a focus group transcript.

Coding the Information

Detailed reviews of verbatim transcripts of all interviews, along with a review of documents from each district, were conducted. Comprehensive qualitative analysis began with a coding process. Coding is the process of

organizing the data into broad topics (Cresswell, 1998; Rossman & Rallis, 1998). It involves segmenting the data into meaningful units, sorting these segments into categories and labeling those categories with a term based on the actual language of the participants (Creswell, 1998). A constant comparative approach to data analysis was used to code the data. This process is an inductive approach in which categories of information are identified and defined through an ongoing process of constantly comparing one unit of information with another (Patton, 2002). If the successive units of information are similar, they are added to an existing category. In the event that the successive units of information are unique, another category is then generated. As the researcher becomes increasingly familiar with the data, through multiple reviews of the data, the response categories are further defined and previous categories may change to reflect increasing understanding and clarity. Once units of data have been categorized, each category is labeled and receives a code.

Each transcript was read individually twice prior to the initial the coding phase. Transcripts of the interviews were then transported into a qualitative data analysis software program (Hyper RESEARCH 2.8). On the third read, each transcript was open-coded (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) line-by-line. Initially, four broad categories emerged: (a) responsibilities and daily practices of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities, (b) their experiences with licensed personnel, (c) the instruction of elementary-age students

with significant disabilities and (d) aspects of preparation and training for these paraprofessionals. Thirty-three codes emerged from the interview content. These four categories were closely aligned with the research questions. Once initial codes were identified, a fourth reading was attempted to further itemize the data. This was difficult because the constraints of the Hyper RESEARCH 2.8 electronic format did not allow me to further itemize the content of the interview transcripts. At this point, for the purposes of “ease of use” (Patton, 2002, p. 443), and my need to be able to further itemize the data and move the data around more freely than the computer program allowed, I went back to hand-coding the original transcripts.

A constant comparative approach was used to examine participant perspectives across subgroups across districts. Transcripts were analyzed for recurring code identification using a line-by-line reexamination of the text. A case-by-case categorical aggregation of the data (Stake, 1995) was completed using a cut, paste and hand-sort method for each identified code, resulting in distinct themes. A combined total of 456 single units of meaning were labeled with identifier codes assigned according to district and participant role to preserve the origin of the sources. These data were sorted into 26 themes related to the initial four broad categories, previously identified. Category reduction strategies, such as sub-coding for larger categories and clustering categories into larger themes, were employed to further filter the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). With this, the 26 categories were further collapsed into a list of seven themes addressing the general

concepts of the research questions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The original 456 units of meaning were reviewed again and resorted into the seven themes to preserve original data codes and specific statements of the participants. The units of meaning were then sub-coded and collapsed into 95 subtopics in support of the overarching seven themes. The researcher and dissertation advisor, who is an expert in the field of special education with research experience, conducted an additional review to confirm accuracy of the themes. Please see Table 9 for a review of the steps of this analysis process and appendix H for a final list of themes and sub-themes.

Table 9

Steps of the Analysis Process

Step	Process
1.	Four Research Questions drawn from the literature
2.	Statements from transcripts transcribed verbatim
3.	Segments of statements from transcripts identified 456 units of meaning
4.	Units of meaning were grouped for similar meaning using constant comparison analysis
5.	26 themes emerged and all original coded units of meaning were sorted into the identified themes
6.	Through further sorting the 26 themes were collapsed into 7 larger themes
7.	Units of meaning were further sorted and collapsed into 95 sub-themes organized under the 7 themes

Matrices were used to organize, conceptualize and draw conclusions from the data (Patton, 2002). Two types of matrices were utilized to organize the transcribed data. One type of matrix was used to compare the three respondent groups within each of the three school districts. The second type of matrix used to

compare the three respondent groups across all school districts. These matrices helped illustrate the commonalties and differences of perceptions related to the seven themes among administrators, special education teachers and paraprofessionals. For each matrix, the seven themes were listed on the left side of the matrix. For the within-case analysis, the role of each participant from school district was identified across the top of the matrix. Table 10 offers an example of within case analysis matrix for theme one.

Table 10

Example Matrix: Within Case Analysis of Participants

CODE	Sub-theme	FG	LS	Admin
Theme 1	Theme I: Theme One: High variation of working conditions for paraprofessional who serve students with significant disabilities			
1	Work with 3-5 students SD	X	X	
2	Number of student change over the year	X		
3	More than 1 student SD per class	X		
4	Extreme variation of student SD needs	X	X	
5	Instruct students in small group, one to one formats in general education and learning resource classrooms		X	
6	Nominal as defined by job description: Implement programs designed by licensed staff		X	X

For the cross-cases analysis of subgroup participant perceptions across each of the three cases. For the across-case analysis, the participant roles from each district were organized across the top of the matrix. Table 11 offers an example of a partial matrix of Theme 1 used in the cross-case analysis of sub-groups school

districts. In this example paraprofessionals shared they worked with three to five students with significant disabilities during the school day. All subgroups reported the number of these students served varied over the course of the school year. Paraprofessionals and administrator believed there was more than one student with a significant disability per classroom and student needs were highly variable. There was agreement across subgroups for all districts regarding paraprofessionals instructed students in small group and one to one formats within general education and learning resource classrooms. Paraprofessionals and special education teachers also reported that these paraprofessionals also taught in additional non-classroom environments such as lunchroom, hallways and playground areas. Appendix G offers additional examples of matrices.

Table 11

Example Matrix: Perceptions of Respondent Groups Across Cases

Theme I: Theme One: High variation of working conditions for paraprofessional who serve students with significant disabilities	Focus Group LEA1	Focus group LEA3	Administrator LEA1	Administrator LEA2	Administrator LEA3	Teacher LEA1	Teacher LEA2	Teacher LEA3
1. Work with 3-5 students SD	X	X	X					
2. Number of students SD changes over the year	X	X			X		X	X
3. More than 1 student SD per class	X	X		X	X			
4. Extreme variation of student SD needs	X	X	X			X		X
5. Instruct students in small group, one to one formats in general education and learning resource classrooms	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
6. Paraprofessionals teach in additional non-classroom environments	X	X				X	X	X

Third Member Check

Upon completion of the data analysis resulting in 7 themes and the 95 subtopics one member from each participant subgroup was asked to review the themes and sub-themes identified from data. These participants were selected based on their convenient availability. An electronic document that listed themes and subtopics was provided to the member check participants. A face-to-face review was conducted with a special education teacher, while the special education administrator and paraprofessionals opted to discuss the review of the findings by phone. A discussion with one participant from each subgroup was conducted to assure verification of the participants' point of view. Their feedback, comments, and clarifications were added to the data and addressed in the results (Meyers, 2000).

Document Review

The review of documents provided evidence to supplement the perceptions of the participants. Two types of documents were received from district administrators: job descriptions for paraprofessionals and documents describing training opportunities. Extraneous documents that reflected trainings that were not intended for paraprofessionals or which paraprofessionals were not welcomed to attend were not used in this review.

A document review matrix was developed to help organize the content of the documents. Similar to other matrices used to organize the interview and focus

group data, the seven themes were listed on the left side of the matrix while the district name and the documented type of training and format of that training were organized across the top of the matrix. This analysis yielded only a limited amount of information. The data from this document review were then crosschecked with the transcribed interview and focus group data. The data derived from this process contributed to the study by providing information that supported participants' perceptions. Additionally, any job descriptions that were not directly relevant to paraprofessionals who are assigned to work with students with disabilities (e.g., Title I or library personnel) were also omitted from the data analysis. The two sets of data were reexamined again with the dissertation advisor to confirm or disconfirm the results.

Validating the Accuracy of Data

Validity is supported in qualitative research when the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participants and the readers of the report (Creswell, 1998). Because different kinds of inquiry are sensitive to different aspects of real-world variations, matrices were used to display and compare data from different sources. These matrices were used to develop deeper insight and build a coherent justification for themes through examining consistencies and inconsistencies (Patton, 2002).

Data triangulation. Patton (2002) suggested that triangulation strengthens a study by using several kinds of data collection strategies. Triangulation of data

from several sources was used in this study to search for consistencies in the findings. Different data sources were triangulated by examining evidence obtained through interviews across subgroups for three districts, focus groups for two districts and document collection from each district.

Additional precautions were established to support credible and defensible findings, with attention to establishing both descriptive and interpretive validity. The accuracy of interpretation of the participants' perceptions was safeguarded through the use of low inference descriptors (Aguinaldo, 2004). Low inference descriptors were used to promote the validity of this study and included the use of descriptions phrased closely to the participants' statements, the use of direct quotes, the use of information taken directly from researcher notes, the use of verbatim transcriptions. In addition to these precautions member checks and peer review of the data analysis were also used.

Member Checks. Three Member checks were conducted in the study. First, after the first focus group, the researcher conducted an immediate member check with one focus group participant regarding accuracy the discussion notes taken during the focus group. Second, after the interview and focus group content were transcribed, a member from each sub-group was randomly selected to review the accuracy of the transcript of the interview or focus group in which they participated. Third, a final member check was conducted to confirm or disconfirm the accuracy of the data analysis by taking the themes back to the participants and

determining whether the participants felt they were accurate (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002).

Peer debriefing. Discussion of the interpretations and conclusions with my dissertation advisor were used to enhance the accuracy of the interpretation of the findings. My advisor has 30 years experience with programs for students with significant disabilities and has supervised programs for students with significant disabilities including paraprofessionals in those programs. In addition, she has more than 20 years experience in teacher preparation programs related to the instruction of students with significant disabilities. She also has experience with qualitative research procedures. This debriefing helped me to check for researcher bias in each phase of the study and helped to establish that the findings resonated with someone other than myself (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002). I received ongoing feedback on the interpretation of the data.

Summary

This study examined the factors related to practices, the training experiences and opportunities, and training needs of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities in inclusive elementary schools. In three school districts, information was collected through face-to-face interviews, focus groups and review of related documents. The verbatim interview data were analyzed by using constant comparative analysis of verbatim transcripts for each participant group for each district. A master code list of 456 units of meaning was

created. The units of meaning were sorted in to 26 broad themes that were ultimately collapsed into seen final themes. The original 456 units of meaning were further collapsed into 95 sub themes supporting the final seven themes related to paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities. Matrices were used to organize the data for case-by-case analysis within each district and cross-case analysis of the subgroups across districts. The results of this analysis are presented in the following chapter.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This study examined the perceptions of special education administrators, special education teachers and paraprofessionals about the practices of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities in elementary general education classrooms in three Oregon school districts. The participants were asked to share their perceptions to address four research questions:

1. What are the responsibilities of paraprofessionals serving students with significant disabilities in general education elementary school settings?
2. What orientation and initial preparation for working with students with significant disabilities do paraprofessionals receive when hired?
3. What ongoing training opportunities are provided to paraprofessionals related to the instruction of students with significant disabilities?
4. What are the training needs of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities?

The findings were derived from a cross-case analysis (Cresswell, 1994; Stake 1995) involving three school districts resulting in seven major themes related

to paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities. A categorical aggregation of the data ultimately generated seven themes and 95 supporting subtopics. Table 11 provides a list of the seven themes. Four of these themes relate directly to the four research questions. Three additional themes emerged in the data analysis. In this chapter the seven themes are described, as well as their related sub themes.

Table 11

Table of Major Themes

	Theme
One	Responsibilities of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities are poorly defined, complex, and varied.
Two	Instructional practices of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities should address a functional curriculum and need specialized strategies to meet the unique needs of these students.
Three	Paraprofessional preparation and training activities are sporadic and lack a systematic approach.
Four	Paraprofessionals and administrators identified training content needs for paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities
Five	Paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities feel frustrated and unappreciated
Six	Paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities need guidance and supervision
Seven	There is a shared concern that students with significant disabilities are not receiving a good education.

Theme One

Responsibilities of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities are poorly defined, complex, and varied.

Theme one includes three sub-themes. These include the varying types of student disability, the multiple conditions and settings for instruction and the lack of defined paraprofessional job responsibilities.

Varying Types of Student Disability

A common perspective from all respondents was the need for general educators, special educators and paraprofessionals to understand how significant disabilities and the degree of the disability impact students' learning. There were similar opinions across both the paraprofessionals and the special education teacher respondent groups that paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities are assigned to work with an array of students with significant disabilities. One special education teacher stated "...[students] mostly have developmental disabilities...who [*sic*] are significantly behind their peers in adaptive, social-emotional, as well as cognitive skills ... also children with autism." Several paraprofessionals from two districts shared comments similar to the following "[I] work with autistic students, with children with cerebral palsy, different mental disabilities, mood disorder, sensory disorders, dyslexia and multiple behavioral issues, SED students who have to be watched closely because of violent outbursts toward other students and also students with MR [mental retardation]." Paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities from both focus groups stated that they worked with one to five students with significant disabilities during the school day. The number of students may have

varied over the course of the school year and often there was more than one student with significant disabilities in a classroom.

Instructing Across Multiple Conditions and Settings

There was strong agreement among all groups across all districts that paraprofessionals instruct students in both small group and one-to-one formats within general education and learning resource classrooms. Paraprofessional participants from two districts discussed similar experiences regarding the variation of daily instructional setting and conditions. One paraprofessional participant reported, “my responsibilities involve working one-on-one with the autistic students within small group situations in the learning center and also assisting them in their time in the classrooms.” Another paraprofessional said, “I do in-classroom work with most of the students that I work with...I do one-on-one support with some of the fourth grade girls, but I also sometimes pull them out and do it in gym, learning drills.” Yet another paraprofessional shared “I may be working in small groups with the kids....we provide direct instruction whether it is in a classroom setting or in a learning center setting in small group or one-on-one.” One special education teacher also reported “some of the paraprofessionals work one-on-one to support the kids in the classroom [or] teaching or helping the student in a regular classroom.” Administrators and teachers reported that paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities in their district might be following students “day-to-day, where students are supposed to go.” While “others work in

the classroom providing support to the teachers who are giving instruction,”
“paraprofessionals work one-on-one with the kids but it’s largely all done in a
classroom and small groups with the kids.”

Paraprofessionals described responsibilities that extend well beyond the
classroom setting. For example one paraprofessional described

I get boys off the little bus, get them into breakfast, feeding them, getting
them going into their classrooms. I also work at recess with some of these
ones who have a disability making sure that they don’t run and that they
play safely on the playground.

Another paraprofessional offered this experience:

Two other boys that I have need encouragement in eating. I often times cut
their food, sometimes spoon it in. The autistic boy that I work with, eating
is not an easy thing for him. His [cafeteria] environment easily distracts
him.

All paraprofessionals and special education teachers alike recognized that
paraprofessionals teach in many non-classroom environments such as lunchroom,
hallways, bathrooms and playground area. One teacher shared “they
[paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities] will escort
them to class if they need escort to class.” Similarly, special education
administrators also recognized that paraprofessionals who work with students with
significant disabilities work in various settings. One special education
administrator’s perspective was that paraprofessionals who are expected to work
with students with significant disabilities are struggling to keep the students in the
general education classroom:

There is more pull out where the assistant is actually taking the student out of the classroom a little bit more often. The students with significant disabilities—we're trying to get them more into the classroom and do more inclusive stuff. But they are more used to having the student come out with student services.

The paraprofessionals also shared that they experience a large variation of practices between the special education teachers who supervise them. For example, one paraprofessional explained, "I have found really a great deal of variance over the 8 years I have worked and I think part of the difference is from school to school. It's just that the differences are significant."

Lack of Defined Paraprofessional Job Responsibilities

All participants identified a need to clarify the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities in their districts' current job descriptions. All respondent groups agreed that paraprofessional "responsibilities defined in the job descriptions are limited in description." One special education administrator added, "There are those responsibilities in the job description, but there are the other responsibilities that kind of develop as people actually do jobs." As stated by one administrator:

Their [paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities] responsibilities are nominal as described in their job description. A few of these responsibilities throughout the school day may include communicating with other team members that work with the same students, communicating back and forth with the learning specialists, collecting data, reviewing data, [and] brainstorming sometimes with the related service providers to come up with ways to help the students be more successful.

A review of documents provided by each of the school districts yielded additional information. Two of three district administrators provided a copy of the district's job description. For one district, the job description provided was developed prior to district's move to an inclusive model in serving students with significant disabilities. Prior to this new model, most students with significant disabilities were served outside the district by a regional education service district. The other school districts provide three different job descriptions that broadly outlined various paraprofessionals' employment descriptions including Title I, speech and language assistants and other instructional assistants. Both district administrators shared that these job descriptions were probably out of date and needed to be revised.

When asked about the daily instructional responsibilities of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities, district administrators from all districts offered a concise response, explaining that, "Paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities implement programs that are designed and managed by licensed staff." Two special education administrators clearly stated, "It is up to the special education teachers to make sure students are receiving appropriate instruction and paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities do not make decisions about what they do." Another participating administrator shared "When something goes wrong with a kid's program, it is the special education teacher from whom correction and

resolution is expected, not the paraprofessional. Paraprofessionals are an extension of the special education teacher.”

One special education teacher shared that for paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities to know what to teach they “look at the technical page of the IEP and gather materials.” Another special education teacher shared that the paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities “should research the curriculum that they are supposed to use.”

Participants from both paraprofessional focus groups agreed that although they are not completely sure what their role is, they are the primary gatekeepers for students they serve. These paraprofessionals reported that they felt that they were “responsible to ensure a quality education for these kids...but we don’t know what that entails.” Furthermore, they felt that they “have to know a little about everything.” They also reported that they are in constant contact with their students with significant disabilities throughout the school day. Other responsibilities throughout the school day may include communicating with team members who work with the same students, communicating back and forth with the learning specialist, collecting data, reviewing data and brainstorming with the related service providers to “come up with ways to help the student be more successful.”

All respondents from each subgroup across all districts shared that they think paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities are assigned duties beyond their job descriptions and are often expected to perform

responsibilities typically identified for licensed personnel. Responsibilities such as program planning, the development of specialized protocols, the development of specially-designed instruction to be implemented across settings and designing positive behavior support systems were reported as common responsibilities among paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities. Respondents agreed that these responsibilities go far beyond the generic paraprofessional job description. For example, one special education administrator shared that district policies and procedures require that “Paraprofessionals implement programs that are designed and managed by licensed staff.” She added, “Now realistically, I think that especially when paraprofessionals have a lot of experience and skills, teachers sometimes ask them to take on some of their responsibilities.”

Theme Two

Instructional practices of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities should address a functional curriculum and need specialized strategies to meet the unique needs of these students.

This theme addresses the unique learning of students with significant disabilities. These needs included functional curriculum and specialized strategies and approaches, and several additional considerations related to curriculum and instruction.

Students with Significant Disabilities have Unique Learning Needs

Respondents within each subgroup across districts shared a similar belief that students with significant disabilities required the use of special teaching strategies. Teachers and paraprofessionals across districts recognized that students with significant disabilities require highly repetitive opportunities to learn a skill and apply what is learned across contexts, including general education environments. One paraprofessional participant shared her thoughts about the difference between supporting students with learning disabilities and students with significant disabilities:

Kids with less significant disabilities you can talk in terms of the need to spell better, addition and subtraction, but we're nowhere close to that with him...in the 5th grade working on the letter A...

Another paraprofessional from the other focus group discussed her perspective about specific learning needs of the student she worked with, saying, "I can just try to teach it and it is really baby steps. For my student I was with 5 years I can look back and see the progress now, but boy when I was in it, it's like every day you take a couple steps forward and 10 steps back." Another paraprofessional shared "we worked on that for 6 months."

Specialized Strategies and Approaches

When asked about instructional strategies that paraprofessionals used when working with students with significant disabilities, all administrators and all special education teachers indicated that highly specialized instructional strategies and approaches are commonly needed. These strategies and approaches included

prompt hierarchies and teaching methods such as discrete trial teaching and structured teaching. One administrator specifically stated, “in the district for students with autism we use the STAR curriculum. That’s a very prescribed curriculum that needs to be done in a very precise manner.”

One special education teacher offered a verbal list of specialized strategies and considerations associated with instruction, “for students with significant disabilities, those would include things like Edmark, the STAR program, touch math, functional routines, CLRAS, FACTOR, prompt hierarchy, how to prompt, when to prompt, working with teams, how to work with other professionals, how to work with several kids in small groups, and how to work in a one-on-one settings”

Another special education teacher discussed:

In the district we are expected to have reading programs that are evidence-based. For example our school district has a reading adoption so they are required to use this reading curriculum; However if the students are not able to learn that reading curriculum then that’s when we use the modified curriculum or other research-based curriculum to teach the skills that they are missing. So they are required to use those research-based curriculums to teach the students.

The third special education teacher shared the types of strategies used, stating “Basically we go back to the TEACCH model...We talk about the environment...visual schedules, visual aids...discrete trial format to pre-teach vocabulary and labels.”

The strategies and approaches mentioned above are commonly associated with the instruction of students with significant disabilities. However, while

administrators and teachers mentioned specific teaching strategies, only one paraprofessional of eight focus group members mentioned specific teaching strategies when referring to training needs stated, "I think a lot more discrete trials would be great." This paraprofessional also identified Edmark as a reading curriculum. No other discussion by the paraprofessionals mentioned specific instructional approaches or teaching methods commonly associated with the instruction of students with significant disabilities.

Functional Curriculum Content Areas

Paraprofessionals in both focus groups offered an in-depth description of the content areas that they addressed while working with elementary students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings. One group of paraprofessionals said that their instructional day was primarily based on highly specialized content and a functional curriculum focus. Content areas described included daily living skills, social communication skills, behavior and safety skills and academic skills.

Daily living skills. One paraprofessional reported daily instructional activities included teaching students with significant disabilities daily living skills. Teaching routines such as walking within school, going to the cafeteria and waiting in line were also mentioned. For example, a paraprofessional described, "So with these routines it is year after year and you wonder are they ever going to get it? But if they do, maybe it will take a full year to learn a specific task." These paraprofessionals shared that their students need to work on daily living skills and

personal management skills like “caring for themselves when making healthy food choices or using the bathroom and staying clean and the appropriate use of hands.” Another paraprofessional added “sitting at a desk, attending, keeping eyes on the teacher and holding a pencil.”

As one paraprofessional from focus group LEA3 discussed:

I help get [*sic*] going and meet in the cafeteria. He’s a high-need child. The two other boys that I have, they need encouragement in eating. I often times cut their food, sometimes spoon it in. The autistic boy that I work with, eating is not an easy thing for him. His environment easily distracts him.

Another paraprofessional from focus group LEA3 discussed her experience with teaching a student how to sit in a chair:

For my students we could work all year on just sitting in the chair. You know, being ready to learn. Like you said, the behavior is not there, then the learning can’t really take place. The focus part, and again that’s something that’s kind of inherent in autism, and I can just try to teach it and it is really baby steps.

A paraprofessional from focus group LEA 1 reflected:

For most kids they know that they go to the bathroom, wait till you get in the bathroom, then you pull the pants down, and so this is something that we are still working on with some of our students. It is a visual routine, you know. You go into there, then you pull the pants down.

Functional social communication skills. One group of paraprofessionals reported that students they worked with needed to learn communication skills such as establishing or maintaining eye contact, learning how to interact, gaining attention, saying hello, waving hello, saying words, indicating basic needs, expressing wants, making choices, using a visual communication system and using

sign language. A paraprofessional from the other focus group from LEA 3 shared her thoughts about the need for students to learn communication skills:

Then I think too...teaching them how to interact socially. It's just that they can't do that. They are off in their own little world. And someone said just getting someone to look at them or to say hi is a celebration. So I guess the focus would be...the behavior and what I've learned is that a lot of the behavior is because they can't communicate. That behavior is communication so I've tried to train myself to look for why is this person acting like this? He's not pinching me because he doesn't like me. He is pinching me because he is trying to tell me something and he can't. So to try to teach them appropriate ways to communicate...

Social/leisure skills. Paraprofessionals from both focus groups shared perspectives regarding social skills for students with significant disabilities through a unique lens. The paraprofessionals described teaching social skills as teaching the students with significant disabilities to be “of little bother to others.” They also described social skills for students with significant disabilities based on the degree of acceptance by typical peers, how well students with significant disabilities fit in with the class and how “well” the students with significant disabilities are able to “deal with stress by coping, being patient and the ability to share space.” Additional social skills included adapting to the environment, using appropriate behavior, learning how to play and staying in assigned areas. One paraprofessional described how she and her students experience recess:

Well, I do have a recess duty where I have those fifth graders, and the ones that are high-needs tend to stand under my umbrella, and I have to try to get them to interact with other students, and even play ball amongst each other so that they're doing something, and also I have a sixth grade recess duty where one of the students that is high-need, that needs a lot of activity, she's

at that recess. So I'm trying to get her to run and shoot hoops and do those kinds of things.

Behavior and safety skills. Another paraprofessional provided a different perspective on recess.

I also work at recess with some of these ones who have a disability making sure that they don't run and that they play safely on the playground, if there's an anger issue, they don't erupt and cause problems with other kids.

The paraprofessionals also discussed their responsibilities to manage extreme behavioral issues in the classroom by "keeping [students] on task, diffusing situations that can be explosive, or breakdowns, coordinating with coworkers as well as teachers."

Academics. Participants indicated that in addition to teaching the highly modified general academic content, additional learning priorities for students with significant disabilities need to be addressed at the same time. These priorities include sitting at desk, attending to the speaker, keeping eyes on the teacher during lecture and using materials such as a pencil and so on. The paraprofessionals reported that they do try to instruct students with significant disabilities in core academic content areas and that they try to keep their instruction "in the general content area, but the skills needed are too different and we do not know what to do." Several paraprofessionals from each focus group shared their well-intended practices and frustrations related to teaching reading, writing and math. One paraprofessional described her efforts to address academics and her student's frustration "He doesn't write. He doesn't know how to hold a pencil. He doesn't

know how to do any of that. For him, a lot of it is just social. He needs to feel comfortable in his surroundings.” Another paraprofessional explained, “The academics are on the lower end of that...We go along with what the teacher does...” Another paraprofessional interjected “and we encourage.” The previous paraprofessional continued “...and we give them the assistance.” Yet another paraprofessional provided examples:

Usually with reading words, if they can read those five words competently, quickly, and not sounding out, if they know those words then I will change them and give them five new words. Like with math, if we’re working on facts of 10, and they’re getting all of that right, then maybe we’ll do facts of 15. If they’re getting that right, we’ll jump up. So I continue on. With multiplication they usually have to pass at least two multiplications two times in order to move on up. And the advantage for me is that, if I am doing reading words or spelling words with a student, then the next time I go to test them for their report cards, and they don’t know it any longer, then I just go back, and we re-add that into their reading or spelling or whatever it is. Besides the rote memorization, we’ve got the magnetic letters. We’ve got shaving cream to write with.

Another paraprofessional from the same district contributed to the discussion related to the instruction of academic content:

High-frequency words, we test them on those, which ones they don’t know, and then we create a homework grid that maybe has five words on it, repeated over and over again....we use Read Well with our students. And that does fluency and decoding skills and comprehension feeds into it together. And they have to pass an actual assessment before they can move on to the next one, and the Edmark.

Additional Considerations Related to Curriculum and Instruction

Curriculum access. During a member check review, one administrator shared that she believed that “smaller districts and rural

districts seem to have a harder time accessing the appropriate curriculum needed for these students.” During one face-to-face interview, one special education teacher shared that paraprofessionals are “responsible for exploring the reading curriculum that might work for the kids they serve.”

Additional instructional decisions. It was apparent that the paraprofessionals were responsible for making decisions regarding instructional materials. A paraprofessional shared, “...materials used are based on what area they might need.”

One paraprofessional from the other focus group explained his process for identifying instructional materials for each student:

For me, when I do instruction with a student individually, it’s what area they might need. Say, this one student has to be working on math skills or sewing skills or writing skills, I’ll just find some of the things that we have, resources that we have in our Special Ed. Department, use those, figure out, unless a teacher has asked me to use a certain program.

Theme Three

Paraprofessional preparation and training activities are sporadic and lack a systematic approach.

This theme is organized into four subtopics. Subtopics address lack of orientation for paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities, minimal relevance of in-service training for these paraprofessionals, sporadic on-the-job training and paraprofessional attitudes that create barriers to training.

Orientation Opportunities for Paraprofessionals Are Absent

There was complete agreement by all respondents across districts regarding the absence of an orientation process and pre-service opportunities for paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities. Moreover, paraprofessionals in both focus groups indicated the need to be informed about the student's learning needs and characteristics prior to working with the student. For example, "if I had prior knowledge about the student I am assigned, before working with the student, than I would feel better about my own practice." One special education teacher perceived that the "district only hires paraprofessionals who are already trained." However, she was not able to specifically identify how this training occurred. But did mention that these paraprofessionals previously served a recess "duty aides" for the district. Another special education teacher implied that she "uses a wait-and-see strategy" regarding paraprofessional preparation. The administrators from each district indicated that the special education teachers assigned to manage the paraprofessionals are responsible for making sure that the paraprofessionals are able to "do their job."

District Level In-Service Training has Minimal Relevance for Paraprofessionals Who Serve Students with Significant Disabilities

When asked about district-level or building-level preparation of paraprofessionals for instructional responsibilities with students with significant disabilities, all respondents from each district reported that none occurred. When asked about district-level in-service training that included information specific to

preparation of paraprofessionals for their instructional responsibilities with students with significant disabilities respondents reported variation in annual in-service opportunities. Subgroups across all three districts shared that at least one district-wide in-service opportunity per year did occur. The administrators also shared that an in-service training opportunity was available to paraprofessionals and that they were “invited to attend.” However, an administrator stated, “The content provided was not specifically geared towards paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities.”

When asked about content addressed during district in-service training, two of the three special education administrators reported that in-service sessions for personnel are based on job descriptions. The licensed special education teachers and two administrators reported, “District-wide in-services are usually coordinated by human resource personnel. These in-services are for all classified district personnel with or without instructional responsibilities.” However, paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities and special education teachers spoke about the lack of relevance of in-services training for paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities.

Special education teachers and paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities across all districts felt that in-service training lacked relevance for those paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities. One administrator reported that the “district was struggling with the

quality and relevance of in-service training opportunities for all instructional personnel, including licensed special education teachers.” During the member check conversation one administrator added that “professional development communities need to be created at the school level and that regularly scheduled meetings with a set agenda to be addressed through out the year needed to happen for teacher and paraprofessional teams.” As stated by this administrator, “We all want to provide good in-services and training, but we do not know how to go about it.”

On-the-Job Training Practices for Paraprofessionals are Sporadic

When asked how paraprofessionals access training, administrators shared that the district offers ongoing training to paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities as needed. One administrator and teachers from two different school districts reported that paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities are expected to go to their building principals to identify their training needs. Responses from special education teachers suggested that training and job-related support for paraprofessionals occurred in various ways. The special education teachers offered their perceptions of paraprofessional job-related training and support. One teacher said “We might bring in the paraprofessionals on non-scheduled workdays as needed or they may have paraprofessionals stay after hours if there is an urgent need for training a certain paraprofessional.” Another teacher stated that training occurs by “sometimes

having books available for the paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities.” This special education teacher also stated “The district hires paraprofessionals to work with students significant disabilities who are already trained so there is not a lot of training needed at the building level.” A third teacher identified these additional strategies as “sometimes meeting with paraprofessionals during lunch. They could come in early for help or stay after school, where we get together in a group.” An administrator added in a member check discussion that when providing information and feedback to paraprofessionals “we need to think of paraprofessionals as learners and provide them direct instruction and modeling on how to work with these students.”

A special education administrator and the special education teacher from one district said, “paraprofessionals are likely relying on each other for training.” While another administrator believed that paraprofessionals’ training should include “on the spot modeling, directing, hoping the person has a lot of good common sense, and doing some demonstration and then the person is on their way.” Paraprofessionals from both focus groups stated that they rely on their “...parent instinct when working with students with significant disabilities or just learn from other paraprofessionals, if training is needed.”

Administrators and teachers across all three districts shared that training efforts for paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities did occur to some degree. The documentation provided by the school districts

further supported the perceptions of special education administrators and special education teachers that some training opportunities were provided to paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities. Two districts provided documents supporting efforts to provide paraprofessional training.

The administrator from the district that had adopted the inclusive model for nearly 10 years provided the most documents regarding recent training for paraprofessionals who work with student with significant disabilities. These documents included meeting agendas, in-service training agendas and outlines of curriculum used during specially scheduled training sessions. The special education teacher from this district also provided copies of a staff development curriculum that she developed and used to prepare paraprofessionals assigned to work with students with significant disabilities. Collectively the documents provide a rich description of efforts in the district to support both the licensed and paraprofessional staff working with students with significant disabilities.

Documentation of training activities at the district-level and at the school-level included information regarding inclusion, specific instruction for students with significant disabilities and methodologies commonly associated with students with significant disabilities. The rights of students with significant disabilities to a free appropriate public education, the implications of specific disabilities, strategies for working through challenging communicative behaviors, the safe use of physical

restraints, the implementation of specially-designed functional curriculum, importance of data keeping, and how to make modifications within the general education core curriculum were topics addressed during the paraprofessional trainings. Unfortunately, it was not possible to conduct a paraprofessional focus group for this district. Therefore I was not able to obtain paraprofessionals' perceptions or applications of these training efforts.

The administrator in the district with the longest history of inclusion provided documents that listed the roles and responsibilities of teachers, paraprofessionals and specialized service providers. An unpublished draft of a paraprofessional guide that included some information about students with significant disabilities was also provided. The drafted document was more than 10 years old and, as reported by a special education teacher from this district, no further work had been done to update or finalize this guide. This guide, to the best of the special educator's knowledge, was never disseminated. Nevertheless, this document described the role of the paraprofessional. The document included definitions of disabilities; and it discussed the use of an IEP and the importance of confidentiality. It provided a few example curricula associated with students with learning disabilities and an overview of routine-based instruction when teaching students with significant disabilities. Data collection examples, prompt strategies, an explanation of the importance of positive behavior supports for the individual

student, and the need for a collaborative relationship between teachers and paraprofessionals when educating students with significant disabilities were also included in the drafted reference guide. Additionally, at the time of the data collection period for this study, the district website provided information relevant to working with students with significant disabilities such as teaching within routines and using prompts.

The administrator from the school district that had most recently adopted the inclusion model reported that no documents were available due to the recent restructure. However, the absence of information in itself is informative (Patton, 2002, p. 500). The administrator from this district shared “The job description for paraprofessionals is also being updated in that the existing one does not accurately reflect current responsibilities and duties.” It was additionally reported that leaders in this district are actively working on organizing training opportunities for both teachers and paraprofessionals. This effort does reflect an acknowledgement of the need for training of professionals who work with students with significant disabilities.

Paraprofessionals from the district that recently adopted an inclusive model reported that they do meet with teachers to review current activities related to students. One paraprofessional stated, “We find out that this kid is playing you against me. Telling you that he already did that with me, and then you find out that

I didn't do it with him." In describing workshops, seminars and more formal formats for training, the paraprofessionals shared:

We have had some seminars and some things that have been publicized and we can ask to go to them. Whether it is approved or not, is a toss in the hat. And we have had some on-the-job things. We had one recently about how to hold the child and how not hold the child. But it was very short.

Both paraprofessional focus groups reported that training did occur "a few years back," but ongoing training and support as described by paraprofessionals from both focus groups was nearly absent and inconsistent. As reported by the paraprofessionals, there was "little coaching or feedback from teachers regarding instruction and that on-site training is just not happening." One paraprofessional shared, "there is too much time between [*sic*] we ask for help and receiving the help needed. Sometimes, it is weeks before someone responds to our request for help and when you bring something up, it's just shot down." Several paraprofessionals shared that they feel that they are "not trained and lack confidence in teaching these students." Another paraprofessional stated that she is "winging it. I who is in a walker being held up by a belt, and I am thinking how am I supposed to help this person? She is paralyzed and I have no training at all. Looking back I am shocked!"

One paraprofessional did report that her school scheduled an all-student, late-start day and all personnel, including paraprofessionals, are required to report to work based on their regular hours. She continued, "on the first Monday of the

month due to late-start school schedule, we sit down and with the 10 of us, we network with each other.” However, no information was shared about what was covered during the late-start opportunities.

All paraprofessionals strongly agreed that they are in need of more and immediate training related to their daily instructional responsibilities for students with significant disabilities. All agreed that they want consistent on-the-job training and feedback. When asked how much time is needed with the supervising teacher for training or support is needed, a general consensus of one focus group conveyed that “2 hours would be great...even if we met for 45 minutes to an hour would be sufficient, once a month. Anything is better than what we have now.”

Paraprofessional Attitudes Create Barriers to Training

Two administrators suggested that for some paraprofessionals, their attitudes and preconceived notions about student behaviors hinder them from benefitting and learning during training opportunities. One administrator suggested that paraprofessionals “lack awareness of their [own] training needs and may also misunderstand the value of training opportunities provided by the district.” Another administrator believed that the paraprofessionals “perceive the training opportunities are more valuable when a outside contracted expert is brought in”.

One administrator described challenges faced with experienced paraprofessionals:

...sometimes that is a challenge when people make the assumptions that they know how to do things. So it is a re-teaching process, and it also gets into attitudes, and there are a lot of attitudes that go along with that...our

high school for example. We have a staff that has been there a very long time, and they were quite offended that we might do in-service training with them.

She continued:

...One of the biggest part of their job at the high school is supporting the kids behaviorally. And these are all people that have been moms, and they know how they raised their own kids, and oftentimes I have caused some of the issues. They would believe that kids were being lazy, or weren't trying. They weren't understanding the behaviors that students were presenting. That would be misread and would create a bigger problem. So, as we tried to have communication with them, it got so they were very offended. And I felt we were very tactful in how we presented it. And then, we brought in several experts and the experts offended them.

This same administrator suggested that paraprofessionals perceive training opportunities differently depending on the age group of students they are working with. For example

...Elementary folks, they love it, when we've had a lot of people that are newer to the district, and so they want to be trained. So it is just the different groups, and learning how to read them. And I really do feel that everyone brings a lot to the table. And we need to honor that...

The three administrators suggested that paraprofessionals easily misunderstood the value or intent of a training opportunity. One administrator shared that "Somehow the feeling has been, if you tell me I need to learn more, and then you must think I don't do the right thing. And it is hard to help people move past that." As stated by the third administrator, some paraprofessionals may feel "too intimidated to attend." During two separate member check discussions with an administrator and a special education teacher, these participants shared similar feelings in regards to why paraprofessionals feel confused or offended by on-the-job feedback from their

supervising teachers. As stated by the administrator during a member check discussion, “some paraprofessionals have been working with kids for a long time with no input from anyone. They assume that they know best and are offended by feedback on behalf of the student.” All three administrators agreed that it was appropriate for paraprofessionals to be compensated for their time when training opportunities extended beyond regularly scheduled work time.

Theme Four

Paraprofessionals and administrators identified training content needs for paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities.

When asked what content should be included in ongoing training opportunities for paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities all paraprofessionals across both focus groups shared that they want to be taught how to teach. Paraprofessionals agreed that they felt “unprepared” about how to best teach students with significant disabilities.

It was also very clear from the paraprofessionals that they wanted more information about students with significant disabilities and that they wanted information about the characteristics of various disabilities and what those characteristics mean for student learning. Special education administrators and two of the three special education teachers felt that paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities did not understand the degree to which a significant disability impacts student learning.

Paraprofessionals reported that they do try to instruct students with significant disabilities in core academic content areas and, as one paraprofessional explained, they “try to keep instruction in the classroom, but the skill needs are too different and we do not know what to do.” One paraprofessional replied, “I want to know what to expect from the students with significant disabilities in general education settings” and “what other things need to be addressed at the same time?”

Another paraprofessional from the focus group LEA 3 shared her difficulty in knowing what to teach, explaining that, “...there are too many things to teach at once.” One administrator believed that paraprofessionals “need to learn about the use of environmental supports and specialized equipment.” Individual member check discussions with one paraprofessional revealed that this paraprofessional felt that data-taking activities are inconsistent and undefined and that training on this is needed. In a member check with an administrator stated that she felt overall “there is lack of systematic data gathering practices in relation to the instruction of students with significant disabilities and training for teachers and paraprofessionals is necessary.”

Theme Five

Paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities feel frustrated and unappreciated.

Paraprofessionals from both focus groups discussed a lack of preparation and training, low pay, lack of follow-through from licensed personnel, lack of

support, lack of materials, minimum opportunities for teaming and lack of role definition. They indicated that these concerns resulted in feelings of being disrespected. For example, one paraprofessional shared frustration about not being welcome to attend an IEP meeting of the student she was serving daily:

I was told no, because I asked if I could go to one [IEP meeting] and I really felt left out of the loop. It would be nice to let us in and say these are the needs. We feel you are doing XYZ, or you are not doing XYZ in a positive manner. And say let's get back on track and say let's do this, instead of waiting until the end of the year to go nowhere.

Another paraprofessional expressed feeling underappreciated "I feel like the scapegoat when things go wrong." The paraprofessionals also reported that they were exhausted and at times they felt that they were unsafe. One paraprofessional described feeling "fearful due to the extreme behaviors of some students with significant disabilities." A paraprofessional from focus group LEA 1 shared that inconsistent guidance from the supervising teacher and the need to guess how to teach a student led to feelings of failure on the job. She stated, "so I have three ways of doing this stupid thing over the course of two months. And as far as I'm concerned it is probably all worthless, those past two months..." The paraprofessionals expressed frustration on-the-job. As stated by one paraprofessional, "When you are in the trenches you lose the perspective. You are treading water, you know?" Another paraprofessional provided an example of how her experience when learning how to work with a student with autism resulted in feelings of despair:

When I first started, that was the hardest. I was told not to take anything personally, and if that student was having a bad day I took it that I was not doing my job. It was my fault that the student was having a bad day. You would take it home with you, and you were in tears.

Paraprofessionals from both focus groups shared feelings of isolation. One paraprofessional clearly described her feelings, “I’ve had a hard time knowing where I fit in with my learning specialist, I don’t really know where I stand. I don’t want to come off like, oh, you think you know everything. That’s not the case. We are trying to do the best for these kids.” The teachers and paraprofessionals from the two school districts with most recent adoption of district-wide inclusive practices reported that the shift of service model also added to the frustration of personnel at the building level. One paraprofessional gave an example of such a change “Last year we were in an area that was all together with the two teachers, but the problem was that it was too small of an area. So, now they have moved them into classrooms, actual classrooms, but the classrooms are a school apart.” To continue this point, another paraprofessional in that program added, “for right now we are biding our time and getting a lot of exercise. When you have a specialist that is located on the other side of the building, it makes it hard to connect because you are going from a spot that is away from your department.”

All special education teachers shared that they think that paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities may feel that they are under-supported and have a lack of preparation for their instructional responsibilities. Furthermore, two of the three administrators believed that part of the problem with

paraprofessionals feeling unsupported is their own “problematic attitudes related to following special education teacher’s direction.” One administrator offered that if paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities “had more knowledge of how to use the general education curriculum that they would feel better about their practices.” The administrators also stated that paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities are vital personnel and are highly valued.

Theme Six

Paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities need guidance and supervision.

An issue discussed in detail by paraprofessionals who worked with students with significant disabilities related to special education teachers’ practices of supervision. Three important subtopics became apparent in this theme. Paraprofessionals from both focus groups shared that they had respect and empathy for the special education teachers who supervise them. The paraprofessionals also shared that they were in need of guidance from these special education teachers. Thirdly, administrators and paraprofessionals also felt that special education teachers were not prepared for their supervisory role.

The paraprofessional expressed respect and empathy for special education teachers. As respectfully expressed by one paraprofessional, “The teachers are in the trenches too...they are overwhelmed and do not have the time to do what they

need to do.” However, paraprofessionals from both focus groups clearly expressed their need for access to the supervising special education teachers. Paraprofessionals across groups also indicated that they experienced a large variation of practices between the two or more special education teachers who supervised them. As one paraprofessional stated “it makes a big difference as far as how much time the specialist spends on us.” Another paraprofessional shared “I have had some very good experiences...”and “I’ve had specialists I’ve talked to, who have given me instructions.” Another said “sometimes I was more confused after they gave me the instructions than I was before.” The paraprofessional groups described their needs for guidance from the special education teachers “about what to do, what materials to use, and how to use the materials or at least have time to make the materials needed...materials are not available.” Sometimes the special education teacher was not directly involved in recommendations but rather passing on directions from other professionals. For example, one paraprofessional reported, “What I teach has always come down from the autism specialist in our district.”

Paraprofessionals need guidance and supervision. The paraprofessionals and administrators also expressed the need for supervising special education teachers to communicate effectively with paraprofessionals and include them in the team. One administrator shared:

In practice, paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities are given little to no explanation on how to teach something and there is an overall lack of communication between special education

teachers and paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities.

One administrator shared during the member check that “special education teachers simply do not have or are given the time to meet and directly support paraprofessionals.”

Special Education Teachers Are Not Prepared for their Supervisory Role

Special education administrators and two special education teachers stated that special education teachers are under prepared for their leadership role. As described by one administrator “...the [special education teachers] are confused about what their roles are in terms of being a supervisor...the special education teacher is a leader, a manager, a coordinator.” This administrator also reflected that she expects that this need is addressed during the teacher-licensure preparation level. Two of three administrators explained that the special education teachers who supervise paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities lack knowledge about how to supervise paraprofessionals. Along with this perceived lack of leadership ability, special education teachers need to know “how to offer follow through, and offer supportive and corrective feedback” to paraprofessionals, according to one administrator. Another administrator reflected that the “level of the supervising special education teacher leadership ability impacts paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities practice.” This administrator recognized that special education teachers should be “able to observe paraprofessionals who work with students with significant

disabilities objectively, systematically and thoughtfully.” Furthermore, this administrator indicated that supervising special education teachers “need to understand that they need to build their schedule and their program so they provide themselves the opportunity to do this...and need to have the ability and willingness to listen” to the paraprofessionals that who are responsible for supervising. One administrator during a member check discussion shared “... teachers need to learn conflict management, conflict resolution and collaborative problem solving when working with paraprofessionals.”

Theme Seven

There is a shared concern that students with significant disabilities are not receiving a good education.

Though it was recognized by all groups across districts that students with significant disabilities require a highly specialized focus, there was confusion about how to address these unique needs. Participants believed there was a lack of understanding related to the educational needs of students with significant disabilities and misunderstanding of how to best teach these students. A concern about the quality of education for students with significant disabilities clearly emerged from both focus group conversations with paraprofessionals. In addition, separate member check discussions with an administrator and a paraprofessional included concerns related to the questionable quality of education for students with significant disabilities. Perceptions regarding student programming were shared by

the administrator “we teach kids how to be dependent because we do not know what else to do...often kids are passed on from year to year without anyone really paying attention to these students’ and how their educational year has progressed.”

Each special education administrator believed that paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities, the general education teaching community and even special education teachers have a general misunderstanding of the behavior of students with significant disabilities. One special education administrator explained that, “along with the paraprofessionals’ low student expectations, there is a lack of understanding about student behavior.” The administrators from each district and two special education teachers acknowledge that paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities tended to have a “reliance on their parental instincts” and the “tendency to parent can be problematic and can interfere with their own practices and opportunities to learn.” Another administrator stated that the paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities “do not know what to do for a student who has very complicated needs.” Another administrator shared a concern that “we place the most complex and difficult student with the least trained and prepared instructional personnel.” Yet, a third administrator confided that a paraprofessional is likely “delivering all of the instruction that has nothing to do with the kid and that these students are likely to receive a lack of adequate instruction from the beginning.” This administrator also confided that during instruction, paraprofessionals “are

winging it. They do not know how or what to teach and that they are using a best guess, just feeling the way through instruction.” In a member check discussion, this administrator added “paraprofessionals often design their own approach, because the districts have simply not provided them with the information they need to implement a meaningful program for these students.” A general impression common across paraprofessionals and administrators is that paraprofessionals impact the quality of student learning. One administrator offered, “What students with significant disabilities learn, depends on the paraprofessional’s strengths.”

Another administrator reflected during the member check discussion:

Through no fault of their own, paraprofessionals enable students with significant disabilities. They often just do the work to the task for them because they believe getting it done is the goal, rather than student learning through the process...and that paraprofessionals feel sorry for these students and they do not understand that students sometimes need to struggle while learning.

Two special education teachers and one administrator emphasized similar perspectives regarding the absence of knowledge among staff on how to teach students with significant disabilities. As clearly stated by one administrator “not only do the paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities not know what to do with kids with significant disabilities, the special education teachers, those who are supposed to know, are not sure what to do.” During a focus group, one paraprofessional shared “I’m struggling and doubt that the teacher knows what she was doing.” She explains below:

I don't mean this as a slap of the specialists per se, but I have had specialists give me things to do and a certain way to do it and then come back a few days later and say, oh I was wrong. We are going to do it this way now.

There was enthusiastic agreement among an entire paraprofessional focus group when one member stated, "many times we are told we'll just take the data and we'll try to figure it out." Another paraprofessional added, "I would ask a specialist and they would be like 'I don't know.' I would say if you don't know, and I don't know then I guess I am going to have to wing it."

Several paraprofessionals shared their concerns about the seeming lack of understanding of the needs of students with significant disabilities by the general education teachers. Both groups of paraprofessionals felt that general education teachers needed training and support in understanding the needs of these students. One group of paraprofessionals reported that they are troubled by general education teachers' "lack of acceptance of these kids and the kinds of gossiping about these kids that happens during the school day." The paraprofessionals also reported that they felt like the "building principals seem to also misunderstand these kids and their [paraprofessional] role."

Paraprofessionals also shared that they "need more help and support when dealing with student safety and crisis management issues." For example:

I've got a behavior plan for [a student] because he's a runner...it all depends on any situation that he's in. If it ticks him off enough, he may run...I created a Boardmaker for each step of the day for him. And for

every path he completes along that board, the chart for him, we're surrounding his name sticker, his nameplate that's on his desk, with stickers.

One paraprofessional shared about a situation in which the same behavior intervention approach has been used for on a student for two years and questions what the instructional focus is. She explained, "When you are in the trenches, you lose the perspective. I've been doing this behavior thing for practically the last 2 years, ... It's been ages. And sometimes when you are in the middle of doing all of that, "you really lose track of the flow."

One focus group of paraprofessionals collectively agreed that they often "ask parents about what works instructionally and what should they focus on in the general education classroom." Paraprofessionals pointed out that they are "trying to do what works" by "relying on parents and each other" about what and how to teach students with significant disabilities. The paraprofessionals participants reported that they are "winging it." They stated that they "do not know how or what to teach and that they are using a...best guess...just feeling the way through with instruction...and that they rely on their own way of teaching." When discussing what they teach, two focus group members had a brief discussion. One paraprofessional asked, "Do they do life skills?" Another responded "not at the elementary age. The high school has some. I think the only thing would be like potty training. You know how to encourage bathroom behavior or chewing with your mouth shut...social skills...for other kind of life skills." These

paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities explained they are teaching by conjecture, “I do what I feel is working at the time or I do what seems to work for other paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities...I don’t know if you need actual curriculum.” Yet another focus group member shared that “what I feel I’ve kind of been doing in the past year is working....so very, very basic. The successes are tied to the sort of the things that I feel good about with him.”

As shared by another paraprofessional:

I’ve definitely been given things to do “Do this with him” And I look at it, and it doesn’t make sense to me. And, it is like if it doesn’t make sense to me, then it isn’t going to make sense to this little guy. They pick up on that, and I think that fuels their frustration, which I think fuels our frustration, and it becomes a quagmire.

The findings above suggest that paraprofessionals are clearly struggling with what to teach, how to teach and how to provide effective educational experiences for the students with significant disabilities. And with this emerges the common perception by all subgroups, that students with significant disabilities experience an inequity in the quality of their education when compared to typical peers and peers with milder disabilities. To clearly depict this perception, one paraprofessional poignantly reflected, “there must be more for these kids.”

Summary

The findings in this study are numerous and complex. Several important themes were identified related to the roles, responsibilities, practices and training

needs of paraprofessionals who worked with elementary-grade students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings. The need for guidance and supervision by licensed personnel, and feelings of paraprofessionals' frustration also emerged from the data. A summarization of these findings and the implications of these findings are discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Framing the Issues

Paraprofessionals, as discussed here, are non-licensed special education personnel who are commonly assigned to daily instructional responsibilities for students with the most complex and challenging educational and behavioral learning characteristics (Giangreco & Doyle, 2002). Paraprofessionals have been identified as the most unprepared, under-trained and inadequately supervised school personnel (Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2001; Giangreco, Smith, & Pinckney, 2006). Yet paraprofessionals often provide the majority of instruction for students with significant disabilities.

Students with significant disabilities commonly have complex learning needs and require highly individualized and specialized instruction (Ghere & York-Barr, 2003). Teaching technologies and recommended curriculum associated with the education of these students are numerous, complex and require highly-skilled personnel. When students with significant disabilities are primarily educated by paraprofessionals (Giangreco & Doyle, 2002) it is possible that students with significant disabilities may ultimately be receiving education of questionable quality.

The literature related to the practices and training needs of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities is limited. The potential impact of paraprofessionals on the learning of students with significant disabilities may

depend upon the daily practices, orientation and ongoing training opportunities provided to these personnel.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the daily responsibilities, preparation and training needs of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities in inclusive public elementary settings as perceived by special education administrators, special education teachers and paraprofessionals. Review of district documents related to the responsibilities and training of paraprofessionals who served with students with significant disabilities provided additional information.

Summary of Findings

Seven themes emerged from the findings of this cross-case study. One-to-one interviews with three special education administrators and three special education teachers, two paraprofessional focus groups and a review of related documents for three school districts provided information related to the four research questions that framed this study. The data suggested the number of years a district inclusive practices has little impact on the participant perceptions regarding the issues related to paraprofessionals who served with students with significant disabilities. Rather an analysis of subgroups perceptions across districts offered the most information. While there were similarities of perceptions within and across subgroups regarding the lack of role clarification, lack of relevant job descriptions and lack of paraprofessional orientation, the differences across

subgroups offered interesting outcomes in the data. Administrators, teachers and paraprofessional held varying views on paraprofessional practices, training needs and influences of paraprofessional attitudes. All subgroups did perceive a concern about the quality of education that students with significant disabilities received.

The first research question was designed to provide a description of the instructional responsibilities of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities in inclusive elementary school settings. Theme one describes the varied responsibilities of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities. Special education teachers and paraprofessionals reported that paraprofessional roles, responsibilities and instructional conditions were inconsistent from day-to-day. Paraprofessionals reported that they were often assigned responsibilities that extend well beyond their written job descriptions and the classroom setting. Paraprofessionals reported that they spend most of their instructional days with students with significant disabilities but were unsure what constituted a good quality education for these students. These paraprofessionals were under the impression that they were responsible for determining what students should be doing and learning, whereas, the special education administrators and teachers perceived that plans for student instruction were adequately provided to these paraprofessionals.

Theme two also extended the information related to the first research question. This theme addresses the learning needs of students with significant disabilities. This theme focuses on the functional academic curriculum and the need for highly specialized instructional approaches commonly associated with students with significant disabilities. The data revealed that paraprofessionals struggled to provide meaningful access and experiences in the general education curriculum for students with significant disabilities.

A unique aspect identified in the education of students with significant disabilities was the identification of highly individualized learning priorities that required the use of highly specialized instructional strategies. These students often required one-on-one support, even when learning within group settings. Participants identified a need to teach a specialized functional curriculum, use specialized behavior management, and use assistive technologies with these students. The paraprofessionals were the only subgroup that offered specifics about their daily instructional practices in relationship to functional curriculum areas such as daily living, functional communication, social, leisure, safety and functional academics related to the instruction of students with significant disabilities.

Theme three addressed the second research question. This theme revealed an absence of orientation opportunities for paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities in all three districts. An overall lack of systematic initial preparation of these paraprofessionals was revealed in Theme

two. Theme three also presented information on research question three: What ongoing training opportunities are provided to paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities? The findings related to this theme showed that in-service training opportunities for all three districts rarely addressed the training needs of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities. Additionally, on-the-job training of these personnel was sporadic and lacked follow-up. Paraprofessionals who worked with students with significant disabilities relied on the advice of other non-trained paraprofessionals.

Paraprofessionals who worked with students with significant disabilities were also expected to inform the building principals of their training needs. This theme also revealed that special education teachers and general education teachers often mistakenly assumed that these paraprofessionals were adequately trained upon being hired.

Research question four addressed the training needs of these paraprofessionals. Theme four offered information regarding training content needs, as perceived by the paraprofessionals, teachers and administrators. Paraprofessionals from both focus groups reported an interest in learning about the unique learning characteristics of students with significant disabilities. They also wanted to know how various disabilities impact learning. These paraprofessionals also clearly indicated that they wanted training in how to teach using highly specialized strategies. They expressed the need to be trained in what to teach in

both general education settings and in specialized settings. They needed to know how to significantly modify the grade-appropriate general education curriculum.

Three additional themes related to the research questions emerged. These themes expanded the scope of the results. Theme five illuminated the job dissatisfaction of the paraprofessionals who worked with students with significant disabilities. Theme six highlighted the perception that special education teachers lacked preparation for their supervisory responsibilities related to these paraprofessionals. Paraprofessional expressed empathy for teachers. They recognized the wide responsibilities of special education teachers. However the paraprofessionals also felt a sense of isolation and felt dismissed as a team member. Paraprofessionals shared that they wanted and needed guidance and feedback related to their instructional responsibilities. A common perspective among administrators suggested that the lack of effective supervisory practices was a consequence of teachers being poorly prepared for their leadership role related to paraprofessionals.

Theme seven revealed that paraprofessionals felt that students with significant disabilities received instruction of questionable quality. There was a perception of an overall lack of understanding of students with significant disabilities at the school level. There was a perception that paraprofessionals and teachers alike lacked knowledge of the unique learning needs of students with

significant disabilities and lacked knowledge of evidence-based strategies related to instruction. The paraprofessionals described struggling to identify what to teach while in the general education setting. They indicated that their primary concerns were about student behavior and stated their responsibilities were to “not let the students” with significant disabilities “bother others in the classroom...or cause a problem with other kids.” The data in this study suggested that there was an overall absence of clearly defined instructional priorities for students with significant disabilities by both the general education and special education personnel.

Implications for Practice

Paraprofessional Job Descriptions, Orientation and Responsibilities

The length of time the LEA had used an inclusive model in the education of students with significant disability did not appear to be related to differences in paraprofessional orientation, in-service experiences or daily instructional experiences for paraprofessionals serving students with significant disabilities. Job descriptions across all three districts were either out-of-date or absent. Current job descriptions for paraprofessionals who worked with students with significant disabilities were reported to be minimally relevant to their actual duties.

As supported in previous studies, there was a need for clarification of paraprofessional roles and responsibilities (Boomer, 1994; Carroll, 2001; Doyle, 2002; French, 1998; Freschi, 1999; Hilton & Gerlach, 1997). There was a clear

need for an orientation process that introduced the paraprofessional to the district and its vision, mission, goals, policies, procedures, calendar, and emergency and safety procedures. According to French (2003) this orientation should include a tour of the school, introduction to staff and explanations of routine procedures, such as how to report absences and participate in fire drills (French, 2003). A team-level orientation should, at a minimum, clarify team member roles and responsibilities and provide information about student goals and objectives, behavior plans, management and health concerns, and safety (Carroll, 2001). In reality, however, the paraprofessionals often did not receive an orientation either to the district or to their individual positions. From the very beginning, paraprofessionals were faced with ambiguity regarding their roles, a lack of understanding of why and how to instruct students with significant disabilities and with the uncertainty of their potential contribution and membership within the school team. Recent research indicates that paraprofessionals considered a systematic orientation process to be an indicator of the degree of value and respect that a school district placed on paraprofessionals as employees (Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2001). The absence of initial paraprofessional preparation and the lack of relevant in-service education opportunities for paraprofessionals are commonly documented throughout the professional literature and confirmed in this study.

School district human services personnel were reported to be the main coordinators of annual in-service training opportunities. These training opportunities were often organized to include all non-licensed personnel and thus they were often not relevant to specific daily responsibilities and instructional practices of paraprofessionals who served students with significant disabilities. Administrators also shared that these trainings were based on the paraprofessional job descriptions. The same job descriptions that were considered to be out-of-date and not relevant to the daily instructional practices of these paraprofessionals.

In addition, all subgroups stated that paraprofessionals were likely to be assigned duties beyond their job descriptions and often expected to perform responsibilities that were typically identified for licensed special educators. The participant subgroups across the districts recognized that the instructional practices among paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities vary widely. Moreover, the paraprofessionals were unclear as to what their roles and responsibilities should be regarding the instruction of students with disabilities. Again these findings concurred with what has been indicated in the previous professional literature related to paraprofessionals (Boomer, 1994; Carroll, 2001; Doyle, 2002; French, 1998; Freschi, 1999; Hilton & Gerlach, 1997; Miramontes, 1990).

This study revealed information that extends the current research literature related to paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities. In

this study, the paraprofessionals reported that they felt they were the primary “gatekeepers” for students with significant disabilities. They were the ones expected to make sure that these students received a good education.

This role confusion is troubling. One has to ask, how did this interpretation occur? What has transpired over time to bring paraprofessionals this misperception? These paraprofessionals felt a great sense of responsibility for the students they were assigned to teach. However, a recurring message that they were not sure what to do, what to teach, how to teach it and with good intention were relying on their best guess emerged. This approach to educating students with significant disabilities may well compromise all stakeholders and jeopardize the ability of the school district to ensure a free and appropriate education for these students.

The recognition of the circumstances discussed above may serve as a beacon of light for change. The awareness among those who guide the work of paraprofessionals of the need for appropriate paraprofessional job descriptions may be a starting place from which school districts can create change. By providing accurate job descriptions, providing relevant orientation, adopting or developing a training curriculum and providing training for paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities, may improve educational outcomes for these students. This study indicated that these changes should include providing

additional orientation and ongoing training for the teachers who directly supervise these paraprofessionals.

A Shared Concern that Students with Significant Disabilities Are Not Receiving a Good Education

This study illuminates a major concern that students with significant disabilities could feasibly be at considerable risk of receiving an education of inadequate quality. Previous research pointed out that paraprofessionals are the least trained instructional staff in public schools (Carroll, 2001; Doyle, 2002; Freschi, 1999; Hilton & Gerlach, 1997; Miramontes, 1990). Nonetheless, they spend up to 90% of their workday educating students with significant disabilities and spend the majority of their day with little to no supervision, feedback or direction from licensed personnel (Downing et al., 2000; French 1998; Katsiyannis et al., 2000; USDE, 2003). This study confirmed and expanded concerns about the quality of education for students with significant disabilities. The recognition by paraprofessionals that the students with significant disabilities with whom they work with may receive a poor quality education was noteworthy. Paraprofessionals sensed that there was more to be done with these students and with needed training and support, they could be an asset in the effort to educate these students.

Administrators in this study also recognized this dilemma and openly expressed concerns that paraprofessionals were not sufficiently informed about what and how to teach students with significant disabilities. These administrators appeared to understand that in the current system, paraprofessionals are the primary deliverers

of special education instruction for students with the most complex and challenging educational and behavioral learning characteristics. There was a general sense from the special education administrators that those paraprofessionals who worked with students with significant disabilities lacked understanding of the behavior of students with significant disabilities and had low expectations for these students.

It was alarming that paraprofessionals found themselves “winging it using best guess and just feeling the way through with instruction” when working with students with significant disabilities. Paraprofessionals relied on their own way of teaching and looked toward one another for guidance. The notion emerged that what a student with a significant disability learned was dependent on the things that the paraprofessional “feels good about.” The reliance on untrained fellow paraprofessionals and minimal supervision, as described by the paraprofessionals in this study, clearly may put students with significant disabilities at risk for not receiving appropriate educational opportunities. The data suggest that researchers and educators should work together to explore ways to improve the educational opportunities for students with significant disabilities through clarifying the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals and providing effective training for the paraprofessionals and for teachers who directly supervise their work.

Unique Learning and Instructional Needs of Students with Significant Disabilities

This study suggested that there may be differences in responsibilities and training needs between those paraprofessionals who work with students with milder disabilities and those paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities. The learning needs of students with significant disabilities are unique. At least one respondent within each subgroup across each district believed that the unique aspects related to the education of students with significant disabilities included the need for these students to expand functional skills and increase independence in the utilization of these skills rather than to accumulate numerous academic skills. Learning priorities for these students were based on highly-individualized priorities within expanded functional curriculum areas, rather than primarily addressing academic curriculum content based on age and appropriate grade level. Additionally, highly individualized instruction occurred across several contexts and conditions rather than mainly occurring in the classroom.

As described in the literature and confirmed in this study, effectively teaching a functional curriculum for students with significant disabilities requires an ability to utilize highly specialized instructional strategies. Paraprofessionals must be able to select and use an array of specific teaching strategies, techniques and supports in the promotion of academic and functional life skills. These paraprofessionals are also often responsible for the use of highly specialized equipment. They are often expected to adhere to specialized protocols related to

health care, positioning, mobility, feeding and an array of other very crucial and necessary special considerations when working with students with significant disabilities.

This study illustrated that the education of students with significant disabilities requires specialized competencies beyond the minimal core competencies identified in the professional literature for all paraprofessionals. The identification of relevant competencies for paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities could help in identifying more relevant job descriptions, orientation, and training efforts. Competencies for teachers of students with significant disabilities have been recently identified by CEC (2009). It would be logical to identify added competencies for paraprofessionals who serve these students as well.

Ongoing Training and Training Content Needs of Paraprofessionals

The need for paraprofessional preparation and training is clearly identified in the research literature (Carrol, 2001; French, 1999a; Gerlach & Hilton, 1997; Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001; Katsiyannis et al., 2000; Mehaffey & Rea, 2003; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). The overall ongoing training of paraprofessional personnel in this study was inconsistent, sporadic and, as reported by participants across each subgroup, largely left to the paraprofessional to seek on their own initiative. This train-as-needed approach during non-regularly scheduled work days or times assumes that paraprofessionals who work with students with

significant disabilities have some foundational training and those paraprofessionals faced with “urgent needs” will request help and receive special attention. On the contrary, as described by the paraprofessionals in this study, most paraprofessionals were not even minimally prepared for their instructional responsibilities. Without any scheduled days or times for training, they will rarely know when to request assistance.

Participants for this study described seeking information from fellow untrained paraprofessionals, relying on their own parenting instincts, and seeking advice from the parents of these students. These practices may compromise the quality of education for students with significant disabilities. Furthermore, paraprofessionals described continually needing to perform their duties as if they were trained even though they had little preparation and no ongoing training, guidance or feedback. District documents indicated that the paraprofessionals in this study were invited to attend some relevant training opportunities provided for teachers, such as training regarding students with autism, but only if their instructional workday was not interrupted. One special education teacher did provide documents that she used to provide training to paraprofessionals based on the need of the students with significant disabilities on her caseload. Unfortunately, I was not able to conduct a focus group for paraprofessionals in that district to identify the effects of this training as perceived by the paraprofessionals.

This study began to illuminate some essential content to address in the training of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings. The data revealed that training for these paraprofessionals needed to begin at a foundational level. The data revealed that the paraprofessionals understood that the students they served needed a functional curriculum in addition to the academic curriculum. However, the paraprofessionals also revealed their lack of knowledge about content or priorities of a functional curriculum related to the education of individual students with significant disabilities. Paraprofessionals needed to have an understanding of how the characteristics and the degree of the disability impacted student learning across instructional contexts. As illustrated by their comments, paraprofessionals in this study, needed to understand the importance and use of task analysis, evidenced-based teaching strategies, management of challenging student behaviors, collection of meaningful student-performance data, and processes for making relevant decisions on how and when to modify the general education curriculum. These training needs are supported in the literature associated with the instruction of students with significant disabilities (Dalrymple & Ruble, 1992; Downing, 2000; Ghore et al., 2002; Rainforth & York-Barr, 1997).

However, to simply state that paraprofessionals needed training on the concepts related to a functional curriculum, as mentioned above, is not enough. The paraprofessionals revealed that they need to know when and how to use strategies,

supports and methodologies during instruction across contexts throughout the school day. Due to this lack of knowledge regarding instruction for students with significant disabilities, it appeared that they perceived the primary focus to be managing behaviors rather than providing instruction across academic and non-academic settings.

As seen in this study, paraprofessionals and teachers alike needed training on what to do for these students when learning challenges and problematic behaviors occurred. Many of these paraprofessionals did not understand that problem behaviors were symptoms of learning needs and could be seen as opportunities for instruction. Unfortunately, as expressed by these paraprofessionals, many paraprofessionals assumed that these kinds of behaviors must be eliminated so that others students and teachers are “not bothered.” This lack of awareness and misinterpretation of what education means for students with significant disabilities can contribute to a poor quality education for students with significant disabilities.

Paraprofessionals Feel Job Dissatisfaction

Similar to findings of Giangranco, Edelman, and Broer (2001) the current study revealed that paraprofessionals felt isolated, unappreciated and under-trained. They perceived themselves to be assets in the education of students with significant disabilities, but understood that they needed guidance. They shared that they want to

a part of the solution rather than a part of the problem in education of students with significant disabilities.

While the administrators' perceived paraprofessionals as valuable contributors in the education of students with significant disabilities, an additional point of view surfaced. Two of the three administrators shared that paraprofessionals' attitudes and resistance to following the lead of their supervising special education teacher possibly contributed to their feelings of dissatisfaction. As one administrator said, "If paraprofessionals knew more about the general education curriculum, they would feel better." Administrators reported that paraprofessional attitudes were barriers to their own training, yet the paraprofessionals shared a yearning to be trained, recognized and appreciated.

Special Education Teachers Are Under Prepared to Supervise Paraprofessionals

This study also pointed to a reoccurring theme of the lack of supervision and guidance for paraprofessionals. All district personnel interviewed in this study suggested that supervision of paraprofessionals was vital. The administrators, paraprofessionals and one teacher respondent shared that they thought special education teachers were underprepared for their role in the supervision and management of paraprofessionals. The related literature revealed that little attention is paid in licensure programs to prepare teachers for leadership in the supervision of paraprofessionals (French, 2001; Lindeman & Beegle, 1988; Salzberg & Morgan, 1995).

Special education teachers entered the teaching field with minimal information on how to manage adults, such as paraprofessionals. These adults are likely older than beginning special education teachers and have been working in the school for an average of 10 years (Riggs & Mueller, 2001; SPeNSE, 2001). Upon hire, these teachers were expected to be coordinators of resources, managers of adults and leaders of the educational team (Pickett & Gerlach, 1997; Salzberg & Morgan, 1995).

Paraprofessionals shared that they were in need of guidance from these special education teachers. However, they reported that teachers' guidance and directive support to paraprofessionals was inconsistent and lacked clarity. The paraprofessionals in this study made an important distinction between having respect for the teachers assigned to oversee their work and having trust in the teachers' ability to guide them in the education of students with significant disabilities. Related literature points out that teachers of student with significant disabilities need to be objective observers, trainers, inclusion specialists and managers of paraprofessionals who serve students with disabilities (French, 2003).

A general consensus among the paraprofessionals and administrators in this study was that the special education teachers themselves require additional knowledge in the highly specialized curriculum and instruction needed for the education of students with significant disabilities.

These paraprofessionals were faced with waiting for effective ongoing training and supervision that generally was absent in the current practices of the special education teachers who oversaw their daily responsibilities. As seen in this study, the paraprofessionals' responsibilities were highly complex. With little to no preparation and training regarding the general education curriculum or the highly specialized curriculum associated the instruction of students with significant disabilities, they were often faced with not knowing what to do for the students they were assigned.

They were often expected to act as a liaison between the general education community and the special education teacher (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2004; French, 1998; Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001; Pickett, & French, 1997) with infrequent and inconsistent opportunities to meet with their supervising general education and special education teachers (French, 1998). They were also faced with the likelihood that others who were supposed to be guiding their work had little knowledge of how to educate students with significant disabilities.

A shared concern that students with significant disabilities are not receiving a good education.

Findings in this study do not reveal systems of training and support to provide this information or to address the many other training needs of these paraprofessionals. More importantly these dilemmas, considerations and points of

view may have an ultimate impact on the quality of education provided to students with significant disabilities across inclusive school environments.

Paraprofessionals, teachers and administrators who participated in this study showed concern about the quality of education for students with significant disabilities. Within this context, it was promising that despite feelings of frustration and isolation, paraprofessionals as well as administrators and teachers perceived paraprofessionals to be valuable contributors to the education of students with significant disabilities. Administrators indicated that paraprofessionals could be more valuable assets given more effective training and supervision.

Limitations

At the time my dissertation committee approved my proposal, limitations of this study were recognized and discussed. This initial study offered only a special education perspective. This study was a first step, beginning with understanding the perspectives, practices and training needs of paraprofessionals whose primary work is directly with students with significant disabilities. Additional voices will be crucial to understanding the issues more broadly in future research, particularly the voices of the general education teachers and building principals.

Like much research in its initial phase this study was limited in several ways (Riggs & Muller, 2001). First, timing and timelines put constraints on the potential participants. Upon approval from the Human Subjects Research

Institutional Review Committee in early June, I distributed requests to potential participants. The data-gathering phase of the study began in June. Interviews and two focus groups were conducted throughout the summer. I made several attempts to arrange for a third focus group throughout the fall. During this time, two of the districts went through personnel changes. A third focus group was not conducted in one of these districts, even after second and third rounds of invitations for paraprofessionals to participate in a focus group were provided to the new special education administrator for distribution to paraprofessionals. Consequently, a smaller number of participants participated in this study than initially planned. Lack of this third focus group limited findings, particularly because the teacher in this third district was unique in her development of training materials and activities for paraprofessionals who served students with significant disabilities.

I am also aware of limitations that could result from any bias that emerged unintentionally from my past experiences as a paraprofessional who worked with students with significant disabilities in elementary school settings. Additionally, my familiarization with a few paraprofessionals and teacher participants may have caused a few of these participants to be hesitant to talk in that I am was familiar with their district special education administrator. Even though they seemed to have been forthright with there is no way of knowing if inhibition did occur.

Given my own experience as paraprofessional who served students with significant disabilities who had a wide array of experiences while working under

the direction of several special education teachers, there is some possibility that could have interpreted the data based my own experiences, years ago.

To address this concern, I used several precautionary procedures to assure neutrality and authenticity of the findings. In addition to a dissertation committee review, an additional expert in the education of individuals with significant disabilities also reviewed the focus group questionnaire and face-to-face interview questionnaire prior to beginning data collection. Systematic data collection and multiple data sources were utilized to preserve validity of the data. All interviews were audio-taped and the data were transcribed verbatim. Member checks were conducted from each subject group to ensure accuracy of the transcripts. In addition, all ethical considerations were included in my research methods and procedures in dealing with informed consent, confidentiality and freedom of participation or non-participation. Prior to data collection, I explained each of these aspects to the participants and a written form outlining these responsibilities was read and signed by the participants giving consent for the research. Another important precaution was the purposeful representation of school districts that were in different phases of inclusive practices for students with significant disabilities.

Generalization and Alternative Explanations of Results

Exploratory studies often require a precautionary notice that there may be a tendency for enthusiastic researchers to jump to premature conclusions, as indicated by Patton (2002). I recognize that misguided exuberance could result in

inappropriate representation of the findings. Thus, I offer the information in this study only as a preliminary step to future exploration concerning the identification of relevant competencies for paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities, the daily instructional practices and specific training needs of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities.

While several findings from this study are consistent with previous studies, such as the lack of paraprofessional preparation, absence of relevant job descriptions, feelings of job dissatisfaction, limited access to supervisory special education teachers, and concerns for the quality of education for students with significant disabilities, the small number of cases in this study offers a limited representation of the paraprofessional, special education teacher and special education administrator workforce. The opinions shared in this study conveyed individual viewpoints with regard to the daily practices and training needs of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities. Perceptions of the building principals and general education classroom teachers may have served to further describe the responsibilities and training needs of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities from a general education perspective. Additionally, a direct observation of paraprofessional practices in working with students with significant disabilities could possibly further confirm or disconfirm these paraprofessionals practices and training needs.

Strengths of the Study and Potential Contribution to the Field

Despite the limitations of this pilot study, this research offers several strengths. This study provides a contribution to the field by adding to the limited research that has examined the practices and training needs of paraprofessionals who specifically work with students with significant disabilities. This study was also a response to a request from the field. Personnel from each of the three districts expressed a previous interest in learning about the perspectives, practices and training needs of these paraprofessionals.

My knowledge and experience with the issues related to paraprofessional training and experience in special education served as a valuable resource in interpreting the data collected in this study. Having long-term experience in the field and extensive knowledge and experience in supervision, training and support of paraprofessionals, I served as an instrument within the study. According to Patton (2002), in qualitative inquiry a researcher knowledgeable about the subject being examined can offer a deep level of tacit knowledge or insight to the authenticity and credibility of the findings (p. 108). Knowing several of the subjects from each subgroup and being familiar with participating school districts, I provided a forum in which subjects felt comfortable being candid and comprehensive about their perceptions of the issues and their experiences related to the education of students with significant disabilities. An established and sound relationship with many participants in this study was vital in assuring

trustworthiness of the data in this qualitative research (Patton, 2002, p. 567).

The credibility of the results was reflected in the member check component of this study. Each member check participant shared that they felt that the findings were an accurate reflection of the issues related to paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities.

Future Research

This cross-case study presents an initial look at the specific daily instructional practices and training needs of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities. Further investigation to include the perceptions of building principals and general education teachers is needed along with direct observation. Future research to take a broader and more in-depth look at the issues raised in this study is warranted. Enhancements to this study through utilization of a greater number of participants and participating school districts in addition to expanding the scope of participants to include the general education perspective are important and timely. In addition, conducting direct observations of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities and the teachers who supervise them would be of great value in the investigation of the daily practices and training needs of these paraprofessionals.

Throughout the professional literature there are inconsistencies in perceptions of paraprofessional daily instructional practices, responsibilities and training needs. For example, in a recent study Giangreco and Broer (2005) reported

that paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities spend less time on instruction than those paraprofessionals who work with students with milder disabilities. In this study, however, the researchers classified daily-living activities as non-instructional. Problematically, daily-living activities are currently described in the professional literature as a major emphasis in instruction for students with significant disabilities (Westling & Fox, 2009). A clear understanding of daily practices of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities is needed to establish meaningful competencies, develop relevant training opportunities and identify guidelines for paraprofessional supervision that may ultimately improve the education of students with significant disabilities. More information is needed about the knowledge and practices of both special education teachers and the general education teachers in relationship to the supervision of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities.

Future research needs to investigate how local school districts and supervisory personnel at the school level prepare paraprofessionals for their instructional role. There is a need to identify successful pre-service, in-service and on-the-job training strategies that are effective in enhancing paraprofessional instructional practices when working with students with significant disabilities. There is also a need to explore the perceptions and practices of both general and special educators in their efforts to guide and support paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities.

The essential functions of paraprofessionals involved with the education of students with significant disabilities can differ from those of paraprofessionals who work with students with milder disabilities, such as learning disabilities. However, the professional literature does not identify how the training needs of the paraprofessional subgroups differ from one another. It appears that paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities require specialized competencies to provide appropriate education for students with significant disabilities. The professional literature, as confirmed by this study, suggests that paraprofessionals are expected to be instructional experts without sufficient preparation, pre-service preparation, in-service or on-the-job training and without ongoing supervision (Giangreco & Doyle, 2002; Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; R. L. Simpson et al., 2003; Young & Simpson, 1997).

Adequately trained paraprofessionals are necessary in the education of students with disabilities. Recognizing that broad core competency areas relevant to all paraprofessionals working with students with disabilities should be considered as only a partial set of competencies for paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities appears to be critical. Paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities require an additional set of competencies related to the complex and intricate instructional practices associated with the education of students with significant disabilities. In addition, competencies that

paraprofessionals can apply when including students with significant disabilities in general education curriculum and addressing state academic and literacy standards need to be developed and applied. The need for specific competencies for positive behavior support related to students with significant disabilities was also highlighted in this study. Research related to the identification of competencies for paraprofessionals associated with their highly-specialized instructional responsibilities is limited.

The results of this study suggest that paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities continue to be assigned responsibilities without adequate preparation. When systems of orientation, in-service training, and ongoing training and support are established and teachers are better prepared for their role in supervising paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings, then research efforts may better investigate how these practices impact student outcomes. Research is needed to develop and test the feasibility and efficacy of training systems for these paraprofessionals and the teachers who supervise them.

Other areas requiring specific sets of competencies for paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities may also emerge with further research. For example, the professional literature offers limited information related to the unique training needs of paraprofessionals across the elementary, middle and high school grade levels. Moreover, the differences in the training needs of

paraprofessionals working with students with significant disabilities included in general education classrooms have not been compared with those paraprofessionals who work in self-contained, special education classrooms.

Reliable and validated models of pre-service preparation as well as models for in-service and on-the-job training that are consistent with exemplary personnel preparation practices are needed for paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities (Carrol, 2001; Freschi, 1999; Hilton & Gerlach, 1997; Lang & Fox, 2003; Lasater et al., 2000; NRCP, 1991; Wallace et al., 2001). These models could contribute to clarifying roles, assigning appropriate responsibilities, identifying competency requirements, highlighting of training needs, and identifying indicators associated with effective supervision of these paraprofessionals.

There is a consensus in the literature and this study confirms that paraprofessionals are inadequately supervised (French, 1998, French & Pickett, 1997; Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2001; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). As illustrated in this study, licensed personnel responsible for the support, preparation and ongoing training of paraprofessionals may hold the erroneous view that paraprofessionals are sufficiently prepared for responsibilities related to educating students with significant disabilities (Blalock, 1993; Carroll, 2001; French & Pickett, 1997; Hilton & Gerlach, 1997; Katsiyannis et al., 2000; Lindeman & Beegle, 1988; Salzberg & Morgan, 1995; Vasa et al., 1982; Wadsworth & Knight,

1996). As demonstrated by this study, there is a need for further research regarding the preparation of special education teachers for the supervision of paraprofessionals and the impact that preparation could have on outcomes for students with significant disabilities. As confirmed in the this study, teachers responsible for the supervision and training of paraprofessionals received no to little preparation for their leadership responsibilities (Drecktrah, 2000; French 1998; Morgan & Ashbaker, 1997) during their licensure preparation or during staff development opportunities once hired. In addition, there are limited studies that explore how special education and general education teachers are prepared for their role in supervision of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings. Further research is needed to explore these issues, develop curricula for preparation of special and general educators regarding their roles in supervision, and study the outcomes of this preparation on paraprofessionals' practices in relationship to the education of students with significant disabilities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there remains a significant need for research to identify daily instructional practices related to a functional and academic curriculum for paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities. The identification of competencies that are necessary for instructional responsibilities of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities is vital to

improving practices. When competencies aligned with the specific daily instructional responsibilities of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities are identified, then models of preparation, in-service training and on-the-job training approaches can be developed and validated. Then, research regarding the relationship between paraprofessional training and its impact on student outcomes could be conducted.

There is a continued need for the development of special education policies that support and enhance efforts related to training paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings. Systems for the orientation, in-service training, and ongoing training are needed for paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities. IDEA requires that students with disabilities receive FAPE, and one component of FAPE is specialized instruction to address IEP goals. Since the literature indicates that students with significant disabilities require highly-specialized instruction and that these students receive a large percentage of their instruction from paraprofessionals, it appears to be a priority for paraprofessionals to be adequately trained to provide this highly-specialized instruction.

Further investigation regarding how teachers are prepared for their supervisory responsibilities related to students with significant disabilities is also needed. Teachers who supervise these paraprofessionals need professional

development opportunities at the district level that address working with, managing and teaching adults. It is also important for teacher-preparation programs to prepare teachers for their supervisory responsibilities related to paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities, so that newly practicing teachers enter the field with an understanding of their leadership responsibilities.

Finally, it is important for future research to explore how the preparation of teachers regarding their supervisory responsibilities and the training of paraprofessionals influences teacher-paraprofessional teaming. Future research should investigate how teacher and paraprofessional preparation efforts impact learning for students with significant disabilities. Research efforts, such as this initial study, could serve as a means to further identify issues critical to improving the experiences of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings, so these students may ultimately benefit through more meaningful and more equitable learning opportunities.

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APPENDIX A
PARTICIPANT LETTERS

**Paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities: District Special
Education Administrator Cover Letter**

Dear Special Education Administrator,

My name is Regina Moreno and I am a doctoral student at Portland State University, Graduate School of Education: Special Education. I am beginning a study on paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities in public schools across three local school districts. Through qualitative inquiry, I hope to understand the daily responsibilities of paraprofessionals who serve kindergarten to fifth grade students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings by utilizing one-to-one interviews with special education administrators, focus group discussions with paraprofessionals who serve kindergarten to fifth grade students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings, and review of documentation of any plans, guides or feedback related to paraprofessional in-services or trainings for the 2006-2007 school year.

I would like to take this opportunity to invite you and your district to participate in this valuable inquiry. You are being asked to take part because your district has been identified as practicing inclusive practices with kindergarten to fifth grade students with significant disabilities who are being served by paraprofessionals during the school day.

As part of the study, I am interested in your opinions and attitudes about the responsibilities, training experiences and training needs of paraprofessionals who serve kindergarten to fifth grade students with significant disabilities.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in a thirty-minute interview, which involves answering questions about paraprofessionals' daily responsibilities, training experiences and needs related to the instruction of students with significant disabilities, in your district. Additionally you will be asked to provide any documents related to the in-service or training of paraprofessionals for the current 2006/2007 school year and to inform building principals that paraprofessionals who currently serve students with significant disabilities will receive a written invitation to participate in a focus group discussing their daily responsibilities, training experiences and needs related to the instruction of students with significant disabilities.

It is estimated that this study will take 30 minutes of your time for the interview and up to 30 additional minutes to gather relevant documents. These activities will be scheduled at times that are convenient for you. I assure you that safeguards will be implemented in order to insure your participation and the districts name remains confidential.

Should you decide to participate, you will receive a copy of Kent Gerlach's handbook "Let's Team Up: A checklist for Paraeducators, teachers and Principals". You may not receive any direct benefit from taking part in this study, but the study may help to increase knowledge that may help others in the future. The paraeducator focus group participants will also receive a copy of Kent Gerlach's handbook and will be invited, at no cost, to attend an in-service on the effects of paraeducator proximity on students with disabilities, following the focus group meeting in your district.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be linked to you or identify you will be kept confidential. Subject identities will be kept confidential by the use of data coding throughout the entire process of the study, with the exception of your initial signature for informed consent. This document will be protected and will only be in the possession of the researcher.

The districts' participation and your participation are entirely voluntary. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your relationship with the researcher or with Portland State University in any way. If you decide to take part in the study, you may choose to withdraw at any time without penalty. Please keep a copy of this letter and the consent form for your records. If you have concerns or problems about your participation in this study or your rights as a research subject, please contact the Human Subjects Research Review Committee, Office of Research and Sponsored Projects, 111 Cramer Hall, Portland State University, (503) 725-4288 / 1-877-480-4400. If you have questions about the study itself, contact me, Regina Moreno at 503 725 8355.

Sincerely, Regina M Moreno, doctoral candidate at Portland State University

**Paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities: Special Education
Administrator Informed Consent Form**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Regina Moreno, doctoral student, Portland State University, Department of Special Education, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a doctoral degree under the supervision of Doctor Ruth Falco. The researcher hopes to better understand the daily responsibilities, training experiences and training needs of paraprofessionals who serve kindergarten through fifth grade students with significant disabilities in inclusive school settings.

Why was I selected to participate?

You are selected to take part in this research project because you have administrative responsibilities related to paraprofessionals who serve one or more student(s) with a significant disability. Special education administrators, across three school districts are asked to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in a thirty-minute audio-tape recorded interview about the school districts' practices regarding their responsibilities and training experiences the district has provided for paraprofessionals who serve K through 5th grade students with significant disabilities. The researcher will contact you by phone for the purposes of scheduling by May 1, 2007. To cause you the least amount of inconvenience, the interview will take place at a time and location that you prefer.

What will the administrators who participate be asked to do?

- a. Participate in a thirty-minute audio-tape recorded interview about the school districts' practices regarding the responsibilities and training experiences the district has provided for paraprofessionals who serve K through 5th grade students with significant disabilities.
- b. Provide consent to the researcher for contacting elementary school principals regarding the participation of the paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities, who will be asked to voluntarily participate in a focus group about their daily responsibilities, training experiences and training needs.
- c. Provide access to documents regarding the district's practices related to the districts training or in-service opportunities within the current school 2006-2007 school year (see attached list for an example of types document requested). The researcher will schedule a date and time when the researcher can obtain the documents.

What are the risks involved with participating in this study?

Researcher will ask permission to audiotape the interview with you about the study. You should be aware that, if you agree to use audiotapes, you could be recognized by those transcribing the tapes or something might say may indicate your identity to the readers of the transcripts.

Research protocols are in place to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of the information you provide. Any audiotapes that are collected will be destroyed at the end of the study (the end of August, 2007). Written records from these audiotapes will not include your name, the names of the paraprofessionals, the name of the schools or the district's name.

This study will may require up to 30 to 60 minutes of your time, as described above, that you may be spending in other activities. You may feel that the study may be interfering with your work activities. To safeguard your time, activities will be scheduled at times that you identify.

Am I required to participate?

Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to take part in this study. You may withdraw from this study at any time and it will not affect your relationship with your local school district, Portland State University or the PSU GSE-SPED Department.

What are the expectations or benefits of the study?

It is hoped that this study may help to increase knowledge about paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities and may help others in the future that are responsible for preparation of paraprofessionals for their daily responsibilities while working with students with significant disabilities. Should you decide to participate in the study, you will receive a complimentary handbook written by Kent Gerlach, an established expert in the field of paraprofessional training needs.

Who do I contact if I questions or concerns about this study?

If you have concerns or problems about your participation in this study or your rights as a research subject, please contact the **Human Subjects Research Review Committee**, Office of Research and Sponsored Projects, 111 Cramer Hall, Portland State University, **(503) 725-4288 / 1-877-480-4400**. If you have questions about the study itself, contact Regina Moreno, Department of Special Education 503 725 8355.

Signature giving consent

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the above information and agree to take part in this study. Please understand that you may withdraw your consent at any time without penalty, and that, by signing, you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies. Regina Moreno will provide you with a copy of this form for your own records.

Signature _____ Relationship/Service _____ Date _____

**Paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities:
Building Principal Letter of Information**

Dear Building Principal,

My name is Regina Moreno and I am a doctoral student at Portland State University, Graduate School of Education: Special Education. I am beginning a study on paraprofessionals who serve with students with significant disabilities in public schools across three local school districts. Through the use of focus groups of paraprofessionals, I hope to understand the daily responsibilities of paraprofessionals who serve kindergarten to fifth grade students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings, their training experiences and future training needs.

The special education director of your school district has approved an invitation for the paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities in your building to participate in this valuable inquiry. Your district has been identified as practicing inclusive practices with kindergarten to fifth grade students with significant disabilities who are being served by paraprofessionals during the school day. As part of the study, I am interested in paraprofessionals' opinions about their responsibilities, their training experiences and future training needs in relationship to serving students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings.

Upon your agreement, letters of request for their participation will be placed in their mailboxes, by May 1st, 2007, with a self addressed stamped envelope. I will be contacting you by phone, to assure your approval for dissemination of the letters of request to paraprofessionals in your school building.

If paraprofessionals in your building decide to participate, they will be asked to participate in a ninety-minute focus group (held outside of the regularly scheduled school work day) which involves answering questions about their daily responsibilities, training experiences and training needs related to the instruction of students with significant disabilities. The focus group will occur by June 10th, 2007.

Should they decide to participate, paraprofessionals will receive a copy of Kent Gerlach's handbook "Let's Team Up: A Checklist for Paraeducators, Teachers and Principals". They will also be invited, at no cost, to attend an in-service on the effects of paraprofessional proximity on students with disabilities, following the focus group meeting.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be linked to you or the identity of the paraprofessionals will be kept confidential. All written transcripts and reports of the focus groups will not mention the names of the paraprofessionals, the name of the school or district.

Thank you for help in distributing letters of invitation to the paraprofessionals in your school, who serve students with significant disabilities.

If you have questions about the study itself, contact me, Regina Moreno at 503 725 8355.

Sincerely, Regina M Moreno, doctoral candidate at Portland State University

District Special Education Teacher Cover Letter

Dear Special Education Teacher,

My name is Regina Moreno and I am a doctoral student at Portland State University, Graduate School of Education: Special Education. I am beginning a study on paraprofessionals who serve students with severe disabilities in public schools across three local school districts. Through qualitative inquiry, I hope to understand the daily responsibilities of paraprofessionals who serve kindergarten to fifth grade students with severe disabilities in inclusive settings by utilizing one-to-one interviews with special education administrators, focus group discussions with paraprofessionals who serve kindergarten to fifth grade students with severe disabilities in inclusive settings, and review of documentation of any plans, guides or feedback related to paraprofessional in-services or trainings for the 2006-2007 school year.

I would like to take this opportunity to invite you to participate in this valuable inquiry. You are being asked to take part because your district has been identified as practicing inclusive practices with kindergarten to fifth grade students with severe disabilities who are being served by paraprofessionals during the school day.

As part of the study, I am interested in your opinions and attitudes about the responsibilities, training experiences and training needs of paraprofessionals who serve kindergarten to fifth grade students with severe disabilities. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in a forty-five minute interview, which involves answering questions about paraprofessionals' daily responsibilities, training experiences and needs related to the instruction of students with severe disabilities, in your district. This activity will be scheduled at times that are convenient for you. I assure you that safeguards will be implemented in order to insure your participation and the districts name remains confidential.

Should you decide to participate, you will receive a copy of Kent Gerlach's handbook "Let's Team Up: A Checklist for Paraeducators, Teachers and Principals". You may not receive any direct benefit from taking part in this study, but the study may help to increase knowledge that may help others in the future. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be linked to you or identify you will be kept confidential. Subject identities will be kept confidential by the use of data coding throughout the entire process of the study, with the exception of your initial signature for informed consent. This document will be protected and will only be in the possession of the researcher.

The districts' participation and your participation are entirely voluntary. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your relationship with the researcher or with Portland State University in any way. If you decide to take part in the study, you may choose to withdraw at any time without penalty. Please keep a copy of this letter and the consent form for your records. If you have concerns or problems about your participation in this study or your rights as a research subject, please contact the Human Subjects Research Review Committee, Office of Research and Sponsored Projects, 111 Cramer Hall, Portland State University, (503) 725-4288 / 1-877-480-4400. If you have questions about the study itself, contact me, Regina Moreno at 503 725 8355.

Sincerely, Regina M Moreno, doctoral candidate at Portland State University

Special Education Teacher Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Regina Moreno, doctoral student, Portland State University, Department of Special Education, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a doctoral degree under the supervision of Doctor Ruth Falco. The researcher hopes to better understand the daily responsibilities, training experiences and training needs of paraprofessionals who serve kindergarten through fifth grade students with severe disabilities in inclusive school settings.

Why was I selected to participate?

You are selected to take part in this research project because you have responsibilities related to paraprofessionals who serve one or more student(s) with a severe disability. Special education teachers, across three school districts are asked to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in a 45 minute audio-tape recorded interview about the school districts' practices regarding their responsibilities and training experiences the district has provided for paraprofessionals who serve K through 5th grade students with severe disabilities. The researcher will contact you by phone for the purposes of scheduling by May 30, 2007. To cause you the least amount of inconvenience, the interview will take place at a time and location that you prefer.

What will the special education teachers who participate asked to do?

1. Sign an initial consent to participate and return the signed consent to the Regina Moreno along with your initial contact information, no later than one week of receiving this request for consent, in the provided self-addressed and stamped envelop.
2. Participate in a 45 minute audio-tape recorded interview about the school districts' practices regarding their responsibilities and training experiences the district has provided for paraprofessionals who serve K through 5th grade students with severe disabilities.

What are the risks involved with participating in this study?

Researcher will ask permission to audiotape the interview with you about the study. You should be aware that, if you agree to use audiotapes, you could be recognized by those transcribing the tapes or something might say may indicate your identity to the readers of the transcripts.

Research protocols are in place to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of the information you provide. Any audiotapes that are collected will be destroyed at the end of the study (the end of August, 2007). Written records from these audiotapes will not include your name, the names of the paraprofessionals, the name of the schools or the district's name.

This study will may require up to 45 to 60 minutes of your time, as described above, that you may be spending in other activities. You may feel that the study may be interfering with your work activities.

Am I required to participate?

Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to take part in this study. You may withdraw from this study at any time and it will not affect your relationship with your local school district, Portland State University or the PSU GSE-SPED Department. Should you decide to participate in the study, you will receive a complimentary handbook written by Kent Gerlach, an established expert in the field of paraprofessional training needs.

What are the expectations or benefits of the study?

It is hoped that this study may help to increase knowledge about paraprofessionals who serve students with severe disabilities and may help others in the future that are responsible for

preparation of paraprofessionals for their daily responsibilities while working with students with severe disabilities.

Who do I contact if I questions or concerns about this study?

If you have concerns or problems about your participation in this study or your rights as a research subject, please contact the **Human Subjects Research Review Committee**, Office of Research and Sponsored Projects, 111 Cramer Hall, Portland State University, **(503) 725-4288 / 1-877-480-4400**. If you have questions about the study itself, contact Regina Moreno, Department of Special Education 503 725 8355.

Signature giving consent

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the above information and agree to take part in this study. Please understand that you may withdraw your consent at any time without penalty, and that, by signing, you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies. Regina Moreno will provide you with a copy of this form for your own records.

Signature _____ Date _____

Special Education Teacher Initial Contact Information

In the event that you are interested in participating in this study please return this signed consent along with your contact information. Once, received, Regina Moreno will be contacting you, so that she may answer any questions that you may have.

In the event that you are interested in participating in this study please return this signed consent along with your contact information. Once, received, Regina Moreno will be contacting you, so that she may answer any questions that you may have.

Please fill out the following information and along with a signed letter of consent; please send to Regina Moreno, using the provided self-addressed stamped envelope, within 5 days of receiving this request.

Thank-you for your consideration in participating this study,

Respectfully Regina M Moreno (PSU Doctoral Candidate)

Name _____

Phone number (s) _____

Email address _____

Comments _____

Paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities
Paraprofessional Cover Letter

Dear Special Education Paraprofessional,

My name is Regina Moreno and I am a doctoral student at Portland State University, Graduate School of Education: Special Education. I am beginning a study on paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities in public schools across three local school districts. Through the use of focus groups, I hope to understand the daily responsibilities of paraprofessionals who serve kindergarten to fifth grade students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings, their training experiences and future training needs.

I would like to take this opportunity to invite you to participate in this valuable inquiry. You are being asked to take part of the study because your district special education administrator has identified paraprofessionals in your school paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities. As a part of the study, I am interested in your opinions and attitudes about paraprofessionals' responsibilities, their training experiences and paraprofessionals training needs when they serve kindergarten to fifth grade students with significant disabilities.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in a focus group which involves answering questions about paraprofessionals' daily responsibilities, training experiences and needs related to the instruction of students with significant disabilities. A focus group is a series of planned discussions designed to share ideas, perceptions and opinions about a certain area of interest. The meeting is conducted in a relaxed environment. The focus group will take approximately 90 minutes of your time. As a result of this study, you may experience minimal concerns about the information you decided to offer in order to inform the study. However, I assure you that safeguards will be implemented in order to insure the information and opinions you share remain confidential.

Should you decide to participate, you will receive a copy of Kent Gerlach's handbook "Let's Team Up: A checklist for Paraeducators, teachers and Principals". You will also be invited, at no cost, to attend an in-service on the effects does paraprofessionals' proximity on students with disabilities, following the focus group meeting in your district.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your relationship with the researcher, the school district or with Portland State University in any way. If you decide to take part in the study, you may choose to withdraw at any time without penalty. Please keep a copy of this letter for your records. If you have concerns or problems about your participation in this study or your rights as a research subject, please contact the Human Subjects Research Review Committee, Office of Research and Sponsored Projects, 111 Cramer Hall, Portland State University, (503) 725-4288 / 1-877-480-4400. If you have questions about the study itself, contact me, Regina Moreno at 503 725 8355.

Sincerely, Regina M Moreno, doctoral candidate at Portland State University

Paraprofessional Cover Letter

Dear Special Education Paraprofessional,

My name is Regina Moreno and I am a doctoral student at Portland State University, Graduate School of Education: Special Education. I am beginning a study on paraprofessionals who serve students with severe disabilities in public schools across three local school districts. Through the use of focus groups, I hope to understand the daily responsibilities of paraprofessionals who serve kindergarten to fifth grade students with severe disabilities in inclusive settings, their training experiences and future training needs.

I would like to take this opportunity to invite you to participate in this valuable inquiry. You are being asked to take part of the study because your district special education administrator has identified the paraprofessionals in your school as paraprofessionals who serve students with severe disabilities. As a part of the study, I am interested in your opinions and attitudes about paraprofessionals' responsibilities, their training experiences and paraprofessionals training needs when they serve kindergarten to fifth grade students with severe disabilities.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in a focus group which involves answering questions about paraprofessionals' daily responsibilities, training experiences and needs related to the instruction of students with severe disabilities. A focus group is a series of planned discussions designed to share ideas, perceptions and opinions about a certain area of interest. The meeting is conducted in a relaxed environment. The focus group will take approximately 90 minutes of your time. As a result of this study, you may experience minimal concerns about the information you decided to offer in order to inform the study. However, I assure you that safeguards will be implemented in order to insure the information and opinions you share remain confidential.

Should you decide to participate, you will receive a gift certificate from a local merchant (your choice- Fred Meyers, Target or Barns and Noble), a copy of Kent Gerlach's handbook "Let's Team Up: A Checklist for Paraeducators, Teachers and Principals". You will also be invited, at no cost, to attend an in-service on the effects does paraeducator proximity on students with disabilities, following the focus group meeting in your district.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your relationship with the researcher, the school district or with Portland State University in any way. If you decide to take part in the study, you may choose to withdraw at any time without penalty. Please keep a copy of this letter for your records. If you have concerns or problems about your participation in this study or your rights as a research subject, please contact the Human Subjects Research Review Committee, Office of Research and Sponsored Projects, 111 Cramer Hall, Portland State University, (503) 725-4288 / 1-877-480-4400. If you have questions about the study itself, contact me, Regina Moreno at 503 725 8355.

Sincerely, Regina M Moreno, doctoral candidate at Portland State University

Paraprofessional Informed Consent Form for Participation in a Focus Group

Dear paraprofessional, you are invited to participate in a focus group, conducted as a part of research study conducted by Regina Moreno, doctoral student, Portland State University, Department of Special Education, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a doctoral degree under the supervision of Doctor Ruth Falco. The researcher hopes to better understand the daily responsibilities, training experiences and training needs of paraprofessionals who serve kindergarten through fifth grade students with severe disabilities in inclusive school settings.

What is focus Group?

A focus group is a process for gathering a lot of information quickly through group interview and discussion. The session is conducted in a relaxed environment.

Who will participate and why was I selected to participate?

Four to six paraprofessionals from your school district who work with elementary students with severe disabilities in your school district will be invited to participate in the focus group by June 10th. You are selected to take part in this research project because you are a paraprofessional who has responsibilities related to the education of one or more student(s) with a severe disability.

What will paraprofessionals' who participate be asked to do?

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to:

- a. Participate in a ninety-minute-audio-tape recorded focus group discussion about your daily responsibilities, training experiences related to your daily responsibilities and future training needs related to K through 5th grade students you serve with severe disabilities. A facilitator, not affiliated with your school district, will present questions and encourage members of the group to respond. Participants may initiate comments regarding the questions. They may confirm or contradict others' comments and engage in discussion. All opinions will be respected.
- b. Sign an initial consent to participate and return the signed consent to the Regina Moreno along with your initial contact information, no later than one week of receiving this request for consent, in the provided self-addressed and stamped envelop.
- c. The researcher will contact you by phone for the purposes of scheduling by May 30, 2007. To cause you the least amount of inconvenience, the 4 to 6 member focus group meeting will be taking place near or in a central location within or near your school district upon your mutual availability with other focus group members, by June 10th.
- d. You *may* be asked to briefly meet with the researcher (final member check) and review the researcher's accuracy of interpretation of focus group's discussion within two weeks after the focus group has met.

What are the risks involved with participating in this study?

An audiotape recording will be made of the focus group session in order to accurately gather all of the information provided. Participants should be aware that if you agree to use audiotapes, those transcribing the tapes could recognize you or something might say could indicate your identity to the readers of the transcripts.

To safeguard your identity, research protocols are in place to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of the information you provide. The tapes will be transcribed by someone not affiliated with your district and will be given training in maintenance of confidentiality. Written transcripts will not include your name, the name of the school or the district's name. Any audiotapes that are collected will be destroyed at the end of the study (the end of August, 2007).

This study will may require up to 90 to 110 minutes of your time, as described above, that you may be spending in other activities. You may feel that the study may be interfering with your work activities.

Am I required to participate?

Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to take part in this study a. You may withdraw from this study at any time and it will not affect your relationship with your local school district, Portland State University or the PSU GSE-SPED Department.

Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to take part in this study. You may withdraw from this study at any time and it will not affect your relationship with your local school district, Portland State University or the PSU GSE-SPED Department.

Should you decide to participate in the study, you will receive a gift certificate from a local merchant (Choice: Fred Meyer, Target or Barnes or Noble), a complimentary handbook written by Kent Gerlach, an established expert in the field of paraprofessional training needs. You will also be invited to attend a free of charge post-focus group thirty-minute in-service on the effects of paraprofessional proximity on students with disabilities.

What are the expectations or benefits of the study?

It is hoped that this study may help to increase knowledge about paraprofessionals who serve students with severe disabilities and may help others in the future that are responsible for preparation of paraprofessionals for their daily responsibilities while working with students with severe disabilities.

Who do I contact if I questions or concerns about this study?

If you have concerns or problems about your participation in this study or your rights as a research subject, please contact the **Human Subjects Research Review Committee**, Office of Research and Sponsored Projects, 111 Cramer Hall, Portland State University, **(503) 725-4288 / 1-877-480-4400**. If you have questions about the study itself, contact Regina Moreno, Department of Special Education 503 725 8355.

Signature giving consent

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the above information and agree to take part in this study. Please understand that you may withdraw your consent at any time without penalty, and that, by signing, you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies. Regina Moreno will provide you with a copy of this form for your own records.

Signature _____ Date _____

Paraprofessional Initial Contact Information

In the event that you are interested in participating in this study please return this signed consent along with your contact information. Once, received, Regina Moreno will be contacting you, so that she may answer any questions that you may have.

In the event that you are interested in participating in this study please return this signed consent along with your contact information. Once, received, Regina Moreno will be contacting you, so that she may answer any questions that you may have.

Please fill out the following information and along with a signed letter of consent; please send to Regina Moreno, using the provided self-addressed stamped envelope, within 5 days of receiving this request.

Thank-you for your consideration in participating this study,

Respectfully Regina M Moreno (PSU Doctoral Candidate)

Name _____

Phone number (s) _____

Email address _____

Comments _____

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATOR

Special Education Administrators Interview Protocol

Assessment tool: Interview Protocol District Special Education Administrators

Purpose of the guide: This semi-structured guideline is intended to explore administrators' perspectives on the training experiences and needs of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities.

Date _____ Time ____ to ____ Location _____ Interviewer _____

Introduction

My name is _____ and I'll be asking you some questions in order to gain an understanding of administrators' perspectives on the training experiences and needs of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities.

Ground Rules: Before we begin the discussion, I would like to go over a few basic details about this interview.

- I'd like to tape record this interview. Taping this interview will allow me, as the interviewer to focus on you, rather than trying to jot down specific details about the discussion. I don't want to take a chance on relying only on my notes and take the chance of missing any information or miss understanding what you share.
- If at anytime during the interview you would like to turn the tape recorder off, all you have to do is press the off button and the recorder will stop.
- This session is being audio-taped, please speak in a voice as loud as mine, so that the microphone can pick it up.
- I will prepare a report using the tapes. My report will not make reference to you by name or give the name of your district. I am doing everything can to protect your confidentiality, I hope that you will speak openly and candidly about today's topic.

Question Phase and Content

Introductory Question – Tell me what your job is and how it relates to paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities?

Transition Questions – What responsibilities do paraprofessionals have in the instruction of students with significant disabilities?

Key Questions

1. What do paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities need to know about general education when working with students with significant disabilities and teachers in general education classrooms?
2. What skills should paraprofessionals be able to demonstrate when they work with these students?
3. What dispositions or attitudes should these paraprofessionals possess related to serving students with significant disabilities

4. What training opportunities do paraprofessionals typically receive once hired and before beginning the instruction of students with significant disabilities?
5. How do supervisors and teachers provide on-the-job training?
6. What training format or model do you think is the most effective way to train paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities? And who, when or how often, might this happen

Final Question

You have been very helpful. Are there other thoughts or feelings that you would like to share in order to help me further understand how you see things regarding the training of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities?

Thank-you

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

Special Education Teachers Interview Protocol

Assessment tool: Interview Protocol District Special Education Teachers

Purpose of the guide: This semi-structured guideline is intended to explore teachers' perspectives on the training experiences and needs of paraprofessionals who serve students with severe disabilities.

Date _____ Time _____ to _____ Location _____ Interviewer _____

Introduction

My name is _____ and I'll be asking you some questions in order to gain an understanding of administrators' perspectives on the training experiences and needs of paraprofessionals who serve students with severe disabilities.

Ground Rules: Before we begin the discussion, I would like to go over a few basic details about this interview.

- I'd like to tape record this interview. Taping this interview will allow me, as the interviewer to focus on you, rather than trying to jot down specific details about the discussion. I don't want to take a chance on relying only on my notes and take the chance of missing any information or miss understanding what you share.
- If at anytime during the interview you would like to turn the tape recorder off, all you have to do is press the off button and the recorder will stop.
- This session is being audio taped, please speak in a voice as loud as mine, so that the microphone can pick it up.
- I will prepare a report using the tapes. Our report will not make reference to you by name or give the name of your district. I am doing everything can to protect your confidentiality, I hope that you will speak openly and candidly about today's topic.

Question Phase and Content

Introductory Question – Tell me what your job is and how it relates to paraprofessionals who work with students with severe disabilities?

Transition Questions – What responsibilities do paraprofessionals have in the instruction of students with severe disabilities? Now I'd like to ask several questions about the district's practices regarding training of paraprofessionals' who serve students with severe disabilities.

Key Questions

7. In service - What training do paraprofessionals typically receive once hired and before beginning the instruction of students with severe disabilities?
Probe questions - a) Content of training, b) format of training and c) who provided training
8. Ongoing - I'd like to know something about how the district typically addresses the ongoing training for paraprofessionals who serve students with severe disabilities, such as, how do supervisors and teachers give on-the-job training?
Probe questions - a) Content of training, b) format of training and c) who provided training
9. What sort of information should be included when training paraprofessionals?

10. In addition, to what is provided, what additional training might further benefit paraprofessionals who serve students with severe disabilities in inclusive settings?
Probe questions - a) Content of training, b) format of training and c) who provided training
11. How might this happen?

Final Question

You have been very helpful. Are there other thoughts or feelings that you would like to share in order to help me further understand how you see things regarding the training of paraprofessionals who work with students with severe disabilities? ... Thank-you

APPENDIX D

GUIDE FOR PARAPROFESSIONALS

Paraprofessional Focus Group Interview Instrument

Date _____ Time _____ to _____ Location _____

Moderator (s): _____ and _____

Assessment tool: Focus group discussion guide with paraprofessional who work with students with disabilities

Audience: Paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities

Moderator(s): Researcher: Doctoral Candidate

Purpose of the guide: (a) This guideline is intended to explore paraprofessionals' opinions on the training experiences and needs of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities; (b) This guide is intended to provide logic and flow for the discussion; (c) Priorities of the group, however, may cause variations from this guide; and (d) This guide is intended for the use of three focus groups across school districts.

Introduction

My name is _____ and I'll be your moderator this evening. My role as the moderator is to direct the content and flow of the discussion and to make sure that we cover the main topics related to the responsibilities, training experiences and training needs of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities.

Objectives and Agenda

Our purpose today is to talk about the training experiences and training needs of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities. Our conversation will include discussions about issues related to your daily responsibilities, training experiences, training needs and other related topics. This information will help to extend the research literature relevant to the training practices of districts and the training needs of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities.

Ground Rules

Before we begin the discussion, I would like to go over a few basic details.

- This session is being audiotaped which allows me, as the moderator, to focus on you, rather than trying to jot down specific details about the discussion. Please speak in a voice as loud as mine, so that the microphone can pick it up.
- My staff and I will prepare a report using the tapes. I want to assure you in my effort to protect your confidentiality. Our report will not make reference to any one of you by name. I hope that you will speak openly and candidly about today's topic.
- I encourage you to share your opinions with the group, but please avoid side conversations while other participants are speaking.
- And remember, there aren't any right or wrong answers, so feel free to offer both positive and negative viewpoints.

Self-introductions

- I would like to quickly go around the group and give each person a moment to introduce him or herself.

Question Phase and Content

Opening Question

- Please tell us about your job and the students with significant disabilities that you work with?

Introductory Questions

- What are your responsibilities when working with students with significant disabilities?
- What is your role in the general education classroom when you serve students with significant disabilities?

Transition Question

- What sort of things do paraprofessionals teach students with significant disabilities?

Key Questions

1. What training did you have before you started working with students with significant disabilities and how did you get this training?
2. What training opportunities did you receive once hired in relationship to the instruction of students with significant disabilities?
3. I'd like to know about how your ongoing training needs are addressed. How the district typically addresses training for paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities?
4. Let's talk about your opinions regarding what sort of information should be included when training paraprofessionals to work with students with significant disabilities, for example a) Disposition and Attitudes – what do paraprofessionals need to understand about educating these students in the general education settings? b) Knowledge- what do paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities need to know about what an appropriate education for this student is? And, c) what paraprofessional skills are important to address during training?
5. I would like your opinions about ways paraprofessional might trained. What ways of training have been most meaningful for you? Why? What types of training have offered you least help? Why?
6. If you could design a training for yourself or other paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities, how might you go about it ad what would you include in the training?

Final Question

1. As I have mentioned, the goal of this group was to gain an understanding of perspectives on the training experiences and needs of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities. If you had to summarize your experience regarding your training related to working with students with significant disabilities, in one sentence, what would your sentence be?
2. You have been very helpful, (a) are there other thoughts that you would like to share in order to help me further understand your responsibilities, your experiences related to your training and the training needs of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities? (b) Is there anything else that you have thought would be very helpful for me to know?

Closing

Those are all my questions. Thank you for your participation. Your feedback is very valuable to us. At this time you are all welcomed to stay for a brief in service regarding what the current research literature reports on the effects of professional proximity with students with disabilities. Additionally, please take a complimentary copy of Kent Gerlach's (2004) book "Let's Team Up."

APPENDIX E

DOCUMENT REVIEW GUIDE

SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATOR DOCUMENT SELECTION GUIDE

Date requested _____ Requested By _____

Date Received _____ Provided by _____

Please provide any documents that you feel are pertinent to the training of paraprofessionals who work with students with severe disabilities. The researcher will be review any documents as preferred by the school district. Document review options are: (a) Review the original on site; (b) Photo copies provided with payment for cost of photocopying; (c) Photo copies made on site by researcher and payment for cost of photocopying.

Documents related to the training of paraprofessionals who serve students with severe disabilities may include information such as paraprofessional responsibilities, teaching strategies, literature, research, functional life skills, academics, assessment, paraprofessional evaluation, other.

The information maybe available through various formats:

1. Written Curriculum
2. Brochure
3. Agenda
4. Schedules
5. Checklist
6. Meeting Notes
7. Report
8. Plan for trainings or in-service
9. Feedback or training evaluations
10. Computer Software
11. District Web-site
12. Other (Please Specify)

Notes:

APPENDIX F
ANECDOTAL OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Field Notes Data Collection: INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUP

Date _____ Reporter/role _____ Setting/Environment _____ Page ____ of ____

Social Climate _____

Activity/Participants

Administrator Interview _____ Focus Group _____ Document Review _____

Characteristics the participant (s):

Note taking data code: Direct Quote = “ “, Idea/thought = !, Questions = ?, significant = *

Vague and generalized Detailed account
description

Note takers' perspective:

APPENDIX G
DATA MATRICES

School District Demographic Information Gathering Instrument

Name of district _____

Items		
Total Number of schools		
Number of Elementary Schools		
Total Student Population		
Number of students with disabilities		
Number of students with disabilities in grades k-5		
Number of students with significant disabilities in grades k-5		
Number of paraprofessionals working with students with disabilities		
Number of paraprofessionals working with students with significant disabilities		
Length of time district has used an Inclusive model		

District Special Education Administrator Demographic Information Gathering Instrument

Name of district _____

Item		
Title		
Years in position		
Highest degree of Education		
Years as Special Education teacher		
Years of experience as a special educator with teaching students with significant disabilities		
Years of experience as a special education teacher with responsibilities in supervising or working with paraprofessionals		

District Special Education Teacher Demographic Information Gathering Instrument

Name of district _____

Item		
Title		
Years in position		
Highest degree of Education		
Years as Special Education teacher		
Years of experience as a special educator with teaching students with significant disabilities		
Years of experience as a special education teacher with responsibilities in supervising or working with paraprofessionals		

Paraprofessional Demographic Information Gathering Instrument

Name of district _____ School _____

Item		
Age		
Gender		
Diplomas or Degrees		
Number of total years as a paraprofessional		
Years as a paraprofessional in this district		
Years in current position		
Years working with students with significant disabilities		
Years working with elementary students with significant disabilities		
Years working with students with significant disabilities in general education classrooms		
Other Comments?		

School Selection Guideline Instrument

To District Special Education Administrators: Please identify elementary school in which paraprofessionals who work with elementary (K-5) students with severe disabilities. Six to eight of these paraprofessionals will voluntarily agree to participate in a focus group opportunity. The date, location and the time of the focus group will be outside their workday, will be determined based upon their convenience.

In an effort to best establish participant rapport and generate an in-depth discussion during the focus group, common participant characteristics are essential. Each paraprofessional participant must meet the following criteria:

1. Has a current responsibility in the instruction of at least one student with a severe disability across various settings within the school.
2. Assigned to work 3 or more hours a day for 3 or more days a week with one or more students with a severe disability
3. Is a regularly paid employee and is not on substitute status with the school district.

	Name of School	School Contact #	Principal Name
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			

Paraprofessional Selection Guideline Instrument

Identify paraprofessionals who work with elementary (K-5) students with significant disabilities. Six to eight of these paraprofessionals will voluntarily agree to participate in a focus group opportunity. The date, location and the time of the focus group will be outside their workday and will be determined based upon their convenience.

In an effort to best establish participant rapport and generate an in-depth discussion during the focus group, common participant characteristics are essential. Each paraprofessional participant must meet the following criteria:

4. Has a current responsibility in the instruction of at least one student with a significant disability across various settings within the school.
5. Assigned to work 3 or more hours a day for 3 or more days a week with one or more students with a significant disability
6. Is a regularly paid employee and is not on substitute status with the school district.

Participant Recruitment and Participation Contact Log

	Name of Potential Paraprofessional Participant	School Assignment School contact #	Principal Name
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			

Date _____

Reporter _____

Purpose of Contact

Schedule _____

Confirm _____

Obtain Materials _____

Participant Contact information

Name _____

Phone _____

Email _____

Location _____

Activity Identified

Interview with Special education Administrator _____

Focus Group Participant _____

Details of Contact

Date of interview, meeting or material pick-up _____

Confirmation or follow-up contact _____

Agreed Location and Time _____

Comments or notes:

Document Review Data Collection Protocol

Date _____ Location _____ Reviewer _____

Purpose of the protocol: Guideline is intended to further identify important issues related to the training experiences and needs of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities.

Initial Source of Document _____

Purpose of Document _____

Type of document/Name of Document _____ **Date of Document** _____

Curriculum _____ Brochure _____ Agenda _____ Schedules _____ Checklist _____

Meeting Notes _____ Report _____ Plan for trainings or in-service _____

Feedback or training evaluations _____ Other _____ Other _____ Other _____

Content or focus of material:

Responsibilities _____ Teaching Strategy _____ Literature/Research _____

Functional Life Skills _____ Academic _____ Disposition/Attitudes _____

Knowledge _____ or Skill _____ Budget _____ Other _____ Other _____

Document linked to other sources related to the training of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities Yes _____ No _____

Describe: _____

Other information:

**Example Matrix: Examine Perceptions of Each Respondent Group
Across Three Cases**

LEA1	LEA2	LEA3								
Theme: Practices - High variation of paraprofessional-SD working conditions			Paraprofessional-SD	SPED Teacher	SPED Teacher	SPED Administrator	Paraprofessional-SD	SPED Teacher	SPED Administrator	
Definition -The number of students with a significant disability (SD), settings and locations										
1. Work with 3-5 students SD										
2. Number of students SD changes over the year										
3. More than 1 student SD per class										
4. Extreme variation of student SD needs										
5. Work in general education setting										
6. Work in SPED setting										
7. Work other locations across school setting										
8. Serve SD students 1:1										
9. Serve SD student small group										

Category One: High variation of paraprofessional-SD working conditions

Paraprofessional-SD shared that they work with three to five students with severe disabilities (student-SD) during the school day. The number of students may vary over the course of the school year and that there is often more than one student-SD in a classroom in which they are responsible for. Paraprofessional-SD also report that student-SD needs are highly variable. There is strong agreement among subgroups across all districts in that paraprofessional-SD instructs students in both small group and one to one formats within general education and learning resource classrooms. All paraprofessional-SD and special education teachers' report that the paraprofessional-SD also teach in additional non-classroom environments such as lunchroom, hallways and playground areas.

**Example Matrix: Examine Perceptions of Each Respondent Group
Across Three Cases**

LEA1	LEA2	LEA3								
Theme: Frustration Definition – P-SD feelings of dissatisfaction due to lack of belonging, supervision and support			Paraprofessional-SD	SPED Teacher	SPED Administrator	SPED Teacher	SPED Administrator	Paraprofessional-SD	SPED Teacher	SPED Administrator
144	P-SD are given responsibilities that go beyond their job descriptions		X	X	X	X		X		X
145	P-SD want to be a recognized member of the student's team		X					X		
146	P-SD perceive are the ones who are responsible to ensure best practices							X		
147	Lack of role definition		X	X	X	X		X		X
148	Want to be a part of the solution- a part of a team effort		X					X		
149	Have to know a little about everything		X					X		
150	PSD are an under-recognized asset		X					X		
151	Lack of leadership, Lack of follow through		X		X			X		X
152	Disrespected, Bring something up it's shot down		X					X		
153	PSD feel underappreciated		X				X	X		X
154	Large variation of practices between special education teachers		X			X		X		
155	Help and necessary support is unavailable		X							
156	Lack of preparation for their job		X	X	X			X		X
157	Lack of training		X	X				X		
158	Low pay		X	X				X		

**Matrix: Examine Perceptions of Each Respondent Sub-group Across
Three Cases Per Research Question**

1. What are the primary responsibilities of paraprofessionals serving students with severe disabilities in general education settings?
2. What post-hire training opportunities, related to the instruction of students with severe disabilities in general education settings, do paraprofessionals receive once hired?
3. What are the current ongoing training practices, related to the instruction of students with severe disabilities in general education settings, being offered to paraprofessionals?
4. What training do paraprofessionals need related to their services for students with severe disabilities in general education settings?

	Primary responsibilities	Post-hire training opportunities	Current ongoing training practices	What training do paraprofessionals need
LEA 1 Admin				
LEA 1 LS				
LEA 1 FG				
LEA 1 Doc Rv				
LEA 2 Admin				
LEA 2 LS				
LEA 2 FG				
LEA 2 Doc Rv				
LEA 3 Admin				
LEA 3 LS				
LEA 3 FG				
LEA 3 Doc Rv				

Example: Comparative of Administrator Perceptions Per Theme Across Districts

CODE	Theme/Subtheme- PRACTICES	Adm 1	Adm 2	Adm 3
1	PSD PRACTICES – Who they work with, Where they work, What they do and What influences their work.			
1.1	Description- Setting and condition in which PSD teach \# of students assigned 3-5 students			
	In a general education classroom setting		X	X
	In a learning center setting,		X	X
	Small group,		X	X
	One on one			
1.2	Number of student change as the year progresses			X
	More than one ESSD in one classroom			
	Extreme variation between ESSD and other high risk students (ED/BD) that the PS is responsible for			
1.3	PSD Practices and Responsibilities			
	Nominal as defined by job description	X		X
	Implement programs that are designed and managed by licensed staff	X	X	X
	PSD take the IEP and the technical page and pull the materials out of our filing cabinet and actually instruct a child			

Example: Comparative of Teacher Perceptions Per Theme Across Districts

CODE	Theme/Subtheme	LS1	LS2	LS3
1	PSD PRACTICES – Who they work with, Where they work, What they do and What influences their work.			
1.1	Description- Setting and condition in which PSD teach # of students assigned 3-5 students			
	In a general education classroom setting	X	X	X
	In a learning center setting,	X	X	X
	Small group,	X	X	X
	One on one	X	X	X
1.2	Number of student change as the year progresses			
	More than one ESSD in one classroom			X
	Extreme variation between ESSD and other high risk students (ED/BD) that the PS is responsible for	X		

Example: Comparative of Focus Group Perceptions -Per Theme

	FOCUS GROUPS	LEA1 FG	LEA 3 FG
	YEARS THE LEA PRACTICE INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH SEVERE DISABILITIES	1	20 +
CODE	Theme/Subtheme		
1	PSD PRACTICES – Who they work with, Where they work, What they do and What influences their work.		
1.1	Description- Setting and condition in which PSD teach # of students assigned 3-5 students	X	X
	In a general education classroom setting	X	X
	In a learning center setting,		
	Small group, One on one		
1.2	Number of student change as the year progresses	X	X
	More than one ESSD in one classroom	X	X
	Extreme variation between ESSD and other high risk students (ED/BD) that the PS is responsible for	X	X
	Serving student across several environments	X	X
1.3	PSD Practices and Responsibilities		

Example: Within Case Analysis of Participant LEA 1 –Theme One

CODE	Theme/Subtheme	FG	LS1	Adm 1
Theme 1	PSD PRACTICES – Who they work with, Where they work, What they do and What influences their work			
1.1	Description- Setting and condition in which PSD teach # of students assigned 3-5 students	X		
	In a general education classroom setting	X	X	
	In a learning center setting,	X	X	
	Small group,	X	X	
	One on one	X	X	
1.2	Number of student change as the year progresses	X		
	More than one ESSD in one classroom	X		
	Extreme variation between ESSD and other high risk students (ED/BD) that the P-SD is responsible for	X	X	
1.3	PSD Practices and Responsibilities			
	Nominal as defined by job description			X
	Implement programs designed by licensed staff PSD take the IEP and the technical page and pull the materials out of our filing cabinet and actually instruct a child		X	

Example: Focus Group Perception -Per Theme and Subtheme

	FOCUS GROUPS	FG1	FG3
	YEARS THE LEA PRACTICE INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH SEVERE DISABILITIES	1	20 +
CODE	Theme/Subtheme		
1	PSD PRACTICES – Who they work with, Where they work, What they do and What influences their work.		
1.1	Description- Setting and condition in which PSD teach # of students assigned 3-5 students	X	X
	In a general education classroom setting	X	X
	In a learning center setting,		
	Small group, One on one		
1.2	Number of student change as the year progresses	X	X
	More than one ESSD in one classroom	X	X
	Extreme variation between ESSD and other high risk students (ED/BD) that the PS is responsible for	X	X
	Serving student across several environments	X	X
1.3	PSD Practices and Responsibilities		
	Nominal as defined by job description		
	Implement programs that are designed and managed by licensed staff		

APPENDIX H

MEMBER CHECK LIST OF THEMES AND TOPICS

Member Check Review

This study examined the perceptions of special education administrators, special education teachers and paraprofessionals about the practices of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities in elementary inclusive settings in three Oregon school districts. The participants were asked to share their perceptions to address four research questions:

5. What are the responsibilities of paraprofessionals serving students with significant disabilities in general education elementary school settings?
6. What orientation and initial preparation for working with students with significant disabilities do paraprofessionals receive when hired?
7. What ongoing training opportunities are provided to paraprofessionals related to the instruction of students with significant disabilities
8. What are the training needs of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities?

The findings were derived from cross-case analysis (Cresswell, 1994; Stake 1995 and Yin, 1989) resulting in seven major themes related to paraprofessionals who work with elementary-grade students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings. Categorical aggregation of the data revealed 95 subtopics that support seven themes. Four of these themes related directly to the research questions. Three additional themes emerged in the data analysis. The list below provides information on the seven themes and 95 related subtopics.

Theme One: Responsibilities of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities unclear, complex, and widely varied.

1. Paraprofessionals are assigned to work with varying types of student disabilities.
2. The number of students varied over the course of the school year.
3. There was often more than one student with significant disabilities in a classroom.
4. Paraprofessionals instructed students with significant disabilities across multiple conditions and settings, both in small group and one-to-one formats within general education classrooms, specialized classrooms and non-classroom settings.
5. Paraprofessionals were assigned duties beyond their job descriptions and often expected to perform responsibilities that are typically identified for licensed personnel.
6. Paraprofessionals struggled to keep these students in the general education classrooms during academic instructional times.
7. There was a large variation of practices between the two or more special education teachers who supervise them.
8. Paraprofessional responsibilities are highly variable and some responsibilities emerge on the job.
9. Paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities are expected to implement programs designed and managed by licensed staff.
10. Paraprofessionals are not sure as to what their role is paraprofessionals feel they are the primary gatekeepers of these students' programs

Theme Two: Instructional practices of paraprofessionals primarily address a functional curriculum when working with students with significant disabilities.

11. Students with significant disabilities have unique learning needs and require specialized strategies and approaches.
12. Students with significant disabilities required the use of special teaching strategies that are different from teaching strategies used to teach students with milder disabilities.
13. Students with significant disabilities require highly repetitive opportunities to learn a skill and apply what is learned across contexts, including general education environments.
14. Students with significant disabilities require instructional in the core curriculum.

15. Students with significant disabilities have instructional needs within the core curriculum areas that are often significantly below their appropriate grade level.
16. Students with significant disabilities require instruction in functional curriculum content area (e.g., daily living, communication, motor, transitioning, self-help, social skills, behavior, play, safety, study skills, community, vocational) and functional academics.

Theme Three: Paraprofessional Preparation and Job-Related Training Activities are Sporadic and Lack a Systematic Approach.

17. Orientation opportunities for paraprofessionals are absent
18. In-service training experiences are sporadic and are of minimal relevance to the daily responsibilities of paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities.
19. At least one annual district-wide in service opportunity did occur and paraprofessionals are invited to attend.
20. In-service sessions for personnel are based on job descriptions.
21. District wide in-services are unusually coordinated by human resource personnel.
22. In-services are for all classified district personnel with or without instructional responsibilities.
23. District struggle to provide good quality and relevant of in-service training opportunities for all instructional personnel, including licensed special education teachers.
24. On-the-job related training practices for paraprofessionals are sporadic
25. Paraprofessionals are expected to go their building principals to identify their training needs.
26. Paraprofessionals' training and job-related support occurred in various ways (e.g., bring in the paraprofessionals on non-scheduled workdays, or paraprofessionals stay after hours, sometimes books are available, district hires paraprofessionals who are already trained, sometimes meeting with paraprofessionals during lunch, they could come in early).
27. Paraprofessionals are likely relying on each other for training.
28. Paraprofessionals are likely relying on their parent instincts when working with students with significant disabilities.
29. Paraprofessionals do meet with teachers to review current activities related to student, when paraprofessionals feel that it necessary.
30. Ongoing training and support from supervising teachers was nearly absent.
31. When ongoing training opportunities provided by the supervising teacher were inconsistent and not regularly scheduled.
32. Ongoing training that was provided by the supervising teachers lacked little coaching or feedback from teachers regarding instruction.
33. Paraprofessionals feel a lack of confidence in teaching these students.
34. Paraprofessionals are in need of more and immediate training related to their daily instructional responsibilities.
35. Paraprofessional attitudes create barriers to training efforts: Paraprofessionals attitudes and preconceived notions about student behaviors hinder them from benefiting and learning during training opportunities.
36. Paraprofessionals easily misunderstand the value or intent of a training opportunity.
37. Paraprofessionals lack awareness of their own training needs.
38. Paraprofessionals assume that they know how to do things and are offended that in-service trainings are mandatory.
39. Paraprofessionals may feel too intimidated to attend training opportunities.
40. It is appropriate for paraprofessionals to be compensated for their time when training opportunities extend beyond regularly schedule time.

Theme Four: Paraprofessionals want to know how to teach these students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings.

41. Paraprofessionals want to be taught how to teach.
42. Paraprofessionals feel “unprepared” about how to best teach students with significant disabilities in included and specialized settings.
43. Paraprofessionals want more information about the characteristics of various disabilities.
44. Paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities do not understand the degree to which a significant disability impacts student learning.
45. Paraprofessionals want more information about how characteristics of disabilities impact student learning, especially when in the general education classroom.
46. Paraprofessionals need to learn about the use of environmental supports and specialized equipment.
47. Paraprofessionals want more training on how to deal with problematic student behaviors.

Theme Five: Paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities feel frustrated and unappreciated.

48. Lack of preparation and training, low pay, lack of follow-through from licensed personnel, lack of support, lack of materials, minimum opportunities for teaming and lack of role definition contribute to feelings of being disrespected.
49. Paraprofessionals feel like the scapegoats when things go wrong.
50. Paraprofessionals are exhausted.
51. Paraprofessionals, at times, feel that they are unsafe or that students are in unsafe situations.
52. Paraprofessionals shared that inconsistent guidance from the supervising teacher create the need for them to guess about how to teach a student
53. Paraprofessionals have feelings of failure on the job.
54. Paraprofessionals have feelings of isolation.
55. Part of the problem with paraprofessionals feeling of being unsupported stems from their own “problematic attitudes related to following special education teacher’s direction.
56. If paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities “had more knowledge of how to use the general education curriculum that they would feel better about their practices.
57. Paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities are vital personnel and are highly valued.
58. Paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities reported that they wanted to be recognized as a valuable team member.
59. Paraprofessionals want to be a part of the solution in the education of students with significant disabilities rather than being considered as a part of the problem.”

Theme Six: Paraprofessionals need on-the-job guidance and supervision.

60. Paraprofessionals respect and have empathy for the special education teachers who supervise them.
61. Paraprofessionals are in need of guidance from these special education teachers.
62. Special education teachers are not prepared for their supervisory role.
63. Paraprofessionals experienced a large variation of practices between the special education teachers and general education teachers who supervised them.
64. Supervising special education teachers need to communicate effectively with paraprofessionals and include them in the team.
65. Special education teachers are confused about what their roles are in terms of being a supervisor, a leader, a manager, and a coordinator.

66. Special education teachers need training on how to supervise paraprofessionals at the teacher-licensure preparation level.
67. Special education teachers who supervise paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities lack knowledgeable about how to supervise paraprofessionals.
68. Special education teachers are need of "learning how to offer follow through, offer supportive and corrective feedback" to paraprofessionals.
69. The ability level of the supervising special education teacher leadership impacts paraprofessionals' practices.
70. Special education teachers need to be able to objectively, systematically and thoughtfully observe paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities.
71. Supervising special education teachers need to build the opportunity to work with paraprofessionals their daily schedule.
72. Supervising special education teachers need to have the ability and willingness to listen" to the paraprofessionals that they are responsible for supervising.

Theme Seven: There is a shared concern about the quality of education for students with significant disabilities.

73. There is a lack of understanding related to the educational needs of students with significant disabilities
74. There is a general misunderstanding of how to best teach these students.
75. Paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities "do not know what to do for a student who has very complicated needs."
76. There is a general misunderstanding of the behavior of students with significant disabilities.
77. Paraprofessionals' reliance on parental instincts" and the "tendency to parent can be problematic and can interfere with their practices and the opportunities for students with significant disabilities to learn."
78. Paraprofessionals are likely "delivering all of the instruction for these students.
79. Instruction may include no to little relevance to the students' IEP, and for these students, they are likely to receive a lack of adequate instruction from the beginning.
80. During instruction, paraprofessionals "are winging it, they do not know how or what to teach and that they are using a best guess, just feeling the way through instruction."
81. Paraprofessionals impact the quality of student learning - what students with significant disabilities learns, depends on the paraprofessionals strengths."
82. Not only do the paraprofessionals who work with students with significant disabilities not what to do with kids with significant disabilities, the special education teachers, those who are supposed to know, are not sure what to do."
83. Paraprofessionals struggle, and doubt that the teachers who supervise them knows what and how to teach these students.
84. Paraprofessionals need to be taught the importance of students, how to take the data and understand how it is used: Many times paraprofessionals are told we'll just take the data and we'll try to figure it out."
85. General education teachers need training and support in understanding the needs of these students.
86. General education teachers' "lack of acceptance of these kids and the kinds of gossiping about these kids that happens during the school day".
87. Paraprofessionals need more help and support when dealing with student safety and crisis management issues.
88. Paraprofessionals often "ask parents about what works instructionally and what should they focus on in the general education classroom."

89. Paraprofessionals are using a...best guess...just feeling the way through with instruction... and that they rely on their own way of teaching.”
90. Paraprofessionals are uniformed about various curriculums and instructional focus related to students with significant disabilities
91. Paraprofessionals believe that a life-skill related functional curriculum is taught at the secondary level.
92. Paraprofessionals perceive student successes are tied to the sort of the things that the paraprofessional feels good about.
93. Paraprofessionals are asked to do things that do not make and it doesn't make sense to them....and if it doesn't make sense to them then it isn't going to make sense to the student.
94. In regards to current instructional opportunities “there must be more for these kids”
95. There is belief that if we could help each other we could help the kids through the use best practice.

Added from Member check responses

- Lack of systematic data gathering practice.
- Teach kids how to be dependent because we do not know what else to do.
- Regular professionals development communities need to be created “one LEA is planning for this in Sept 09. Teacher paraprofessional teams from each school will be meeting at least 1x month with a set of agenda items to address through out the year.
- We all want to provide good in services and ongoing training but we do not know how to go about it
- Teachers simply do not have or are given ht time to meet with paraprofessionals
- Some paraprofessionals have been working with kids for a long time with no input for m anyone. They assume they know best and are offended with feedback in behalf of the student is given.
- Often, these students are passed on from year to year without anyone really paying attention to how these students' educational year has progressed.
- Often, paraprofessionals design their own approach, because the districts have simply not provided them with the information they need in order to implement a meaningful program from these students.
- Smaller district and rural districts seem to have a harder time accessing the appropriate curriculum needed for these students.
- We need to think as paraprofessionals as “learners” and provide them direct instruction and modeling on how to work with these students.
- Teachers need to learn conflict management, conflict resolution and collaborative problem solving with working with paraprofessionals.
- There is an inequity in the quality of education from kids with significant disabilities.
- We place the most complex and difficult student with the least trained and prepared instructional personnel.
- Though no fault of their own, paraprofessionals enable students with significant disabilities. They often just do their work for them or the task form them because they believe getting it done is goal, rather than student learning through process.
- Paraprofessionals feel sorry for these students and they do not understand that students sometimes need to struggle while learning.
- Many paraprofessionals are parent of kids with disabilities and we under-sourcing their knowledge about the lives of students with significant disabilities. We are missing out on knowing what we need to be preparing these students for, after school.

Participant check for Themes

	Theme
One	Responsibilities of paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities are not clearly defined, complex, and varied.
Two	Instructional practices of paraprofessionals primarily address a functional curriculum to meet the unique needs of who serve students with significant disabilities.
Three	Paraprofessional preparation and job-related training activities are sporadic and lack a systematic approach. Getting worse
Four	Paraprofessionals and administrators identified training content needs for paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities
Five	Paraprofessionals who serve students with significant disabilities feel frustrated and unappreciated
Six	Paraprofessionals are in need of guidance and supervision
Seven	There is a shared concern that students with significant disabilities are not receiving a good education. Education that benefit student's long term.