

Accomplishing More Together: Influences to the Quality of Professional Relationships Between Special Educators and Paraprofessionals

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Elizabeth E. Biggs¹, Carly B. Gilson¹, and Erik W. Carter¹

Abstract

Fostering and maintaining strong collaborative relationships are critically important for paraprofessionals and special education teachers working together to provide a high-quality education for students with severe disabilities. Through in-depth interviews with 22 teachers and paraprofessionals comprising nine educational teams, we examined educator perspectives on what influences the quality of their professional relationships, as well as how their perspectives on these influences converged or diverged. Teachers and paraprofessionals identified five themes of influences to the quality of their relationships: teacher influences, paraprofessional influences, shared influences (i.e., related to the collective efforts of teachers and paraprofessionals), administrative influences (i.e., related to school and district leaders), and underlying influences (i.e., related to contextual or other factors). The findings highlight the complex nature of these relationships and emphasize the importance of supporting teachers and paraprofessionals as they work together to meet the needs of students with severe disabilities. We offer recommendations for future research and practice aimed at strengthening the quality and impact of special educator–paraprofessional collaborations.

Keywords

paraprofessionals, collaboration, autism, intellectual disability, severe disabilities

Developing effective professional relationships among school staff is essential to providing students with high-quality educational experiences (Browder & Cooper-Duffy, 2003; Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 2012). Indeed, collaboration is celebrated as a keystone to success in schools meeting the needs of any student (Goddard, Goddard, & Tschannen-Moran, 2007). The importance of educators working in concert with one another becomes even more apparent for students with the most extensive support needs. Teachers and paraprofessionals have affirmed the need for teamwork and effective collaborative relationships in providing quality educational programs for students with severe disabilities (e.g., Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007). Moreover, research has demonstrated the positive impact of collaborative development and implementation of individualized support plans for students with severe disabilities (e.g., Hunt, Soto, Maier, & Doering, 2003). Indeed, the most desired outcomes for students with severe disabilities—learning, membership, and participation—are far more likely to be realized when educators work together effectively. Understanding how different educators can build and strengthen positive working relationships with one another is critically important to ensuring students receive a high-quality education.

¹Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, USA

Corresponding Author:

Elizabeth E. Biggs, Department of Special Education, Peabody College, Vanderbilt University, Box 228, Nashville, TN 37203, USA.
Email: elizabeth.e.biggs@vanderbilt.edu

In special education, teachers and paraprofessionals regularly work together to serve students with severe disabilities. Changes in workforce trends highlight the prominent place of these partnerships in the education of students with disabilities. In fact, there are 416,798 full-time equivalent (FTE) paraprofessionals working with 378,614 FTE special education teachers in public schools across the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). An estimated 70% of these paraprofessionals work closely with students with severe disabilities, with many providing support throughout the day (Carter, O'Rourke, Sisco, & Pelsue, 2009; Fisher & Pleasants, 2012).

Despite the prominence of teacher–paraprofessional partnerships, current research has not investigated ways to strengthen these relationships. Instead, most attention has been focused on what constitutes inappropriate and appropriate service delivery. This work has addressed important themes: the appropriateness of paraprofessional roles (e.g., Fisher & Pleasants, 2012), the quality of training many paraprofessionals receive (e.g., Carter et al., 2009; Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010), the extent to which paraprofessionals receive adequate supervision from educators (e.g., Chopra, Sandoval-Lucero, & French, 2011), and potential alternative models of special education service delivery and support (e.g., Carter et al., 2016; Giangreco & Suter, 2015). Strengthening the utilization of paraprofessionals in special education settings involves investigating these complex issues; however, it also requires understanding what might influence the quality of working relationships between paraprofessionals and teachers.

Strong professional relationships with teachers are necessary for paraprofessionals to receive high-quality support and leadership. Indeed, federal law supports the use of paraprofessionals to assist in the provision of special education services when they are “appropriately trained and supervised” (Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act [IDEA], 2004, Sec. 300.156). Guidelines for appropriate utilization of paraprofessionals (e.g., Causton-Theoharis, Giangreco, Doyle, & Vadasy, 2007; CEC, 2011) emphasize two primary requirements: (a) Paraprofessionals must be used to provide supplemental, not primary, instruction; and (b) paraprofessionals must receive ongoing support, direction, training, and feedback from highly qualified, certified special education teachers. These requirements hinge on paraprofessionals having strong relationships with teachers.

Teachers have shared that successfully navigating professional relationships with paraprofessionals can be challenging (Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl, 2001). Yet, despite the enduring challenge and importance of positive teacher–paraprofessional working relationships, very little attention has been focused on this topic. Understanding educators' views on their relationships may help others (a) understand the challenges and successes that mark their experiences, and (b) explore ways educators can strengthen their professional relationships and be supported to work effectively together. The voices of special education teachers and paraprofessionals are relatively scarce in the literature, and studies addressing their direct perspectives typically have included either teachers *or* paraprofessionals (e.g., Fisher & Pleasants, 2012). Prior research has not gathered and integrated both teacher and paraprofessional perspectives regarding what influences the quality of their professional relationships with one another. The aim of the present study was to include the voices of teachers and paraprofessionals working with students with severe disabilities within and across educational teams to answer the following question: What influences the quality of special education teacher and paraprofessional relationships?

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from three diverse public school districts serving urban, suburban, or rural communities. Using data from the school year prior to the start of the study, the number of FTE special education paraprofessionals in each district ranged from 185 to 560 ($M = 409$). District student enrollment ranged from approximately 30,000 to 82,000. Average race/ethnicity of students ranged from 5.0% to 44.9% ($M = 22.6\%$) African American/Black, 0.2% to 5.6% ($M = 3.3\%$) Asian American, 31.1% to 83.1% ($M = 60.2\%$) White, 5.1% to 19.6% ($M = 11.8\%$) Hispanic/Latino, and 0.4% to 4.6% ($M = 2.1\%$) Other. The percentage of students eligible for free/reduced-price meals ranged from 11.9 to 72.7 ($M = 42.3\%$). Schools were either public, integrated schools or community-based transition programs affiliated with public high schools; none was a separate special education school.

Participants in each district were recruited through an email to all special education staff with a brief description of the project, study inclusion criteria, and directions to contact the research team to learn more. As educators expressed interest in the study, their names were added to a database, and they were encouraged to share information about the project with other teachers or paraprofessionals in the district. The database of interested educators comprised 92 teachers and 89 paraprofessionals.

From this database, purposeful sampling (Maxwell, 2012) was used to select nine teams working with students with severe disabilities (i.e., eligible for the state's alternate assessment) that represented the three districts and three school levels (i.e., elementary school, middle school, and high school/transition). For a team of educators to be selected, a special education teacher and one or two of the paraprofessionals he or she supervised had to consent to participate. A teacher's caseload had to consist of two or more students with severe disabilities, and paraprofessionals needed to spend either (a) half their day supporting students with severe disabilities or (b) half the students they supported needed to have severe disabilities. A member of the research team called teachers from the database to ensure both they and their paraprofessional(s) met inclusion criteria; many interested educators did not meet the criteria for working with students with severe disabilities, and they were invited to later attend focus group interviews conducted as a companion study.

We selected the nine teams stratified across districts and school levels that were the first to collectively meet inclusion criteria by providing consent and confirming they work with students with severe disabilities. We stopped collecting data after these initial nine teams because analysis pointed to data saturation (i.e., perspectives of educators participating in interviews toward the end of the project aligned closely with participants in earlier interviews, and no new information was being generated from later teams). Twenty-two educators (nine teachers and 13 paraprofessionals) participated in the study. Five teams consisted of a teacher and one paraprofessional; four consisted of a teacher and two paraprofessionals. Demographics for these educators are displayed in Table 1.

Participating teachers and paraprofessionals completed brief questionnaires prior to or immediately following their interviews. Questionnaires addressed demographic characteristics and professional roles and responsibilities, with items developed using a combination of information found in the literature (e.g., Carter et al., 2009; Fisher & Pleasants, 2012) and professional experience. Of the nine special education teachers, eight (88.9%) reported supervising two or three paraprofessionals, and one (11.1%) supervised only one paraprofessional. Teachers reported assigning paraprofessionals the following responsibilities *sometimes* or *often*: one-to-one direct support for students (100%), support instruction in special education settings (100%), support social skill instruction (100%), assist with personal care (88.9%), support instruction in general education settings (66.6%), clerical/non-instructional responsibilities (66.6%), and support instruction in community-based settings (44.4%).

Of the 13 paraprofessionals, six (46.2%) reported working closely with only one special education teacher, five (38.5%) with two teachers, and two (15.3%) with three teachers. To provide information about whether paraprofessionals primarily filled individual or program support roles, they reported how many hours per school day they spent providing one-to-one direct support for students. Two (15.4%) paraprofessionals reported providing this support for 1 hr or less, three (23.1%) for 1.5 to 2 hr, four (30.8%) for 3 to 4 hr, and four (30.8%) for 6.5 or more hr. All eight paraprofessionals working in elementary and middle schools indicated they *often* supported students in inclusive, general education classrooms. The two high-school paraprofessionals reported *rarely* working with students in inclusive classrooms, and the three working in community-based transition programs reported *never* supporting students in inclusive classrooms.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each participating member of a team. All interviews were conducted by one of two doctoral students who were interested in teacher–paraprofessional relationships because of their previous experiences as special education teachers. The interviewers contacted each participant to schedule a convenient location and time for an interview outside instructional hours. Most interviews occurred after school in a quiet classroom or office space, and they ranged in length from 42 to 78 min ($M = 60$ min). Interviews were audio-recorded, and participants received a US\$50 gift card.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics.

Pseudonym, role	Gender	Race/ ethnicity	Age	Highest education	Years worked	Student grade levels	# students (# AA)
Team 1, District A, Elementary							
Heather, T	F	W	18-29	Bachelor's	3	3rd-4th	9 (9)
Theresa, P	F	B	40-49	High school	16	K-4th	55 (15)
Team 2, District A, Middle							
Naomi, T	F	B	30-39	Master's	8	5th-8th	19 (4)
Danielle, P	F	B	40-49	High school	13	5th-8th	8 (8)
Team 3, District A, High/Transition							
Travis, T	M	W	18-29	Master's	3	12+	9 (9)
Samuel, P	M	W	50-59	Associate's	3	12+	9 (9)
Team 4, District B, Elementary							
Janelle, T	F	W	18-29	Master's	5	2nd-4th	9 (5)
Jacqueline, P	F	B	30-39	Associate's	3	2nd-4th	9 (5)
Team 5, District B, Middle							
Kimberly, T	F	W	30-39	Bachelor's	2	6th-8th	12 (8)
Kayla, P	F	W	30-39	High school	1	6th-8th	12 (8)
Penny, P	F	B	50-59	Bachelor's	1	6th-8th	12 (8)
Team 6, District B, High/Transition							
Kristina, T	F	W	18-29	Master's	1	9th-12th	9 (9)
Cathy, P	F	W	50-59	Associate's	13	9th-12th	10 (3)
Lisa, P	F	W	40-49	High school	11	9th-12th	8 (8)
Team 7, District C, Elementary							
Sarah, T	F	W	40-49	Master's	8	K-2nd	4 (4)
Tiffany, P	F	W	40-49	Associate's	7	K-2nd	4 (4)
Amber, P	F	W	30-39	Associate's	6	K-2nd, 5th	12 (1)
Team 8, District C, Middle							
Michelle, T	F	W	30-39	Master's	8	8th	15 (4)
Tamara, P	F	B	30-39	Bachelor's	6	6th-8th	9 (5)
Team 9, District C, High/Transition							
Annie, T	F	B	18-29	Bachelor's	1	12+	7 (7)
David, P	M	W	50-59	Bachelor's	2	12+	7 (7)
Kasey, P	F	W	30-39	High school	4	12+	7 (7)

Note. Age = participants reported age at time of study using age ranges; years worked = number of years of experience in special education; # students = total number of students; # AA = number of students eligible for alternate assessment; T = special education teacher; P = paraprofessional; F = female; W = White; B = Black/African American; high school = high school diploma or general educational development (GED); M = male; associate's = any earned associate or vocational degree.

Interviewers took efforts to reduce personal bias and maintain consistency by following a written interview protocol. Protocols for teacher and paraprofessional interviews were designed within a larger project and developed by reviewing existing literature about teachers and paraprofessionals, soliciting expert advice, and evaluating conceptual support for each topic. Protocols were piloted through interviews with a team of one teacher and one paraprofessional before beginning to recruit for the larger project; only minor changes were made to the wording of questions following these pilot interviews. Questions were organized in related sections and aligned, so similar questions were asked of teachers and paraprofessionals, but the teacher interview protocol included an additional section on preparation and training to work with paraprofessionals that was designed to elicit responses for a separate research topic within the larger project. Table 2 lists each interview question within the four sections for paraprofessionals and five sections for teachers. For both types of participants, protocols included introductory questions to build rapport at the beginning of the interview, possible follow-up probes to encourage participants to expand on their responses, and wrap-up

Table 2. Special Education Teacher and Paraprofessional Questions in Semi-Structured Interviews.

Teacher questions	Paraprofessional questions
Section 1. Understanding the working relationship	
My understanding is that you work closely with paraprofessionals. Can you tell me about what this is like?	My understanding is that you work closely with special education teachers. Can you tell me about what this is like?
What aspects of working with paraprofessionals have gone well, and what tells you this is the case?	What aspects of working with these teachers have gone well, and what tells you this is the case?
What things have helped strengthen your working relationship with the paraprofessionals you work with?	What things have helped strengthen your working relationship with the teachers you work with?
What aspects of your work with paraprofessionals have not gone so well, and what tells you this is the case?	What aspects of your work with teachers have not gone so well, and what tells you this is the case?
Section 2. Roles and responsibilities	
What aspects of your work do you do jointly with paraprofessionals?	What aspects of your work do you do jointly with these teachers?
What sorts of work do you delegate to your paraprofessionals to do on their own?	What kind of work is delegated to you to do on your own?
How would you describe your role in relationship to the paraprofessionals with whom you work—are there words or phrases that come to mind?	How comfortable would you say you are taking on these various roles?
What responsibilities do you have in regard to supporting the work of paraprofessionals?	Who determines the roles and responsibilities you have, and what degree of independence do you have in working with students?
What specific things do you do to supervise paraprofessionals or support the work they do, and how often do you do those things?	What things do the special education teachers you work with do to help support your work with students?
Are these roles and responsibilities explicitly outlined for you by the school or district, or are they inferred/assumed?	Do you meet regularly with the special education teachers with whom you work?
How comfortable would you say you are taking on these various roles?	
Section 3. Training and preparation to work with paraprofessionals	
In what ways were you prepared to work with paraprofessionals in these roles?	
Go back in time to when you first began working closely with paraprofessionals. How well prepared did you feel you were?	
Section 4. Benefits, challenges, and the perceived impact on students	
What kind of impact do you think your work with paraprofessionals has on the students on your caseload?	What kind of impact do you think your work has on students?
How do you think having paraprofessionals enhances or detracts from the quality of education your students receive?	How do you think having paraprofessionals like yourself enhances or detracts from the quality of education your students receive?
How does your relationship with paraprofessionals enhance or detract from your ability to effectively meet the needs of students on your caseload?	How does your relationship with special education teachers enhance or detract from your ability to meet the needs of students you support?

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Teacher questions	Paraprofessional questions
Section 5. Increasing effectiveness	
What are the most important things special education teachers need to know or skills they need to have to work effectively with paraprofessionals?	What are the most important things special education teachers need to know or skills they need to have to work effectively with paraprofessionals?
What do you think would be the best way to prepare pre-service teachers for working with paraprofessionals?	What are teachers you work with currently doing to support you that makes you more effective?
What ongoing support or professional development would help you to be more effective working with paraprofessionals now?	What else could they do to help make you more effective?

questions to close the interview. Interviewers used the protocols as a guide and used a conversational approach that gave participants latitude to expand and comment on any topics they considered relevant. Both interviewers also completed reflection sheets immediately after each interview, which involved (a) recording overall impressions from the interview, (b) noting salient themes, and (c) describing similarities and differences from interviews with other team members. These reflection notes served as a communication tool between the two interviewers.

Data Analysis

The research team was comprised of the two interviewers who also served as primary coders, as well as a third researcher not involved in the interviews who provided peer evaluation and critique. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, de-identified with pseudonyms, and imported into NVivo 10 (NVivo 10: Qualitative Data Analysis Software, 2012), a software program used to aid in coding and analyses. The group adopted a team-based approach to strengthen trustworthiness of analyses (Patton, 2002). The two primary coders used a constant comparison method, in which existing codes were frequently compared with previous uses to ensure consistency (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Each person independently coded the same four transcripts from two educator teams, using open coding to assign a code to a comment from the transcript. Coders tagged all comments directly answering the present research question from any section of the transcripts. Coders reviewed entire transcripts during coding, although all interview questions did not necessarily elicit responses relevant to the research question addressed in the present article. Coded comments ranged in length from a single sentence to several paragraphs. Whenever appropriate, coders used *in vivo* codes to name a code using the language of the participant. After coding the first set of transcripts independently, the two coders met to compare codes and develop an initial set of open codes. They then independently coded the remaining transcripts, either using existing codes or recommending new codes. The two coders held several consensus meetings (i.e., after coding interviews from one or two teams) to reach agreement to add new codes, rename existing codes, and revise descriptions of codes. They coded all interviews from one team before proceeding to new interviews. Coders also used memos to describe nuances of code descriptions and reflect on similarities and differences within and across teams.

After all transcripts had been initially coded, the two coders used axial coding strategies to identify themes. They met to share ideas and discuss patterns before deciding to collapse codes or identify themes. To finalize the coding scheme, they checked and re-coded passages as necessary. Throughout the entire process, the two coders met with the third team member who provided peer debriefing, feedback, and critique of assumptions. Data were considered substantive enough to be reported as a theme when patterns could be detected in multiple quotes across different participants. The team analyzed the extent to which references to each theme appeared across different roles or teams (summary table available upon request).

Although these frequencies were used to detect patterns of ideas, primary analysis focused on grounding participants' meanings in context and did not rely extensively on these counts (Creswell, 2007).

During data collection and analysis, several strategies were used to support the credibility and trustworthiness of the data (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Creswell, 2007). First, data were analyzed across teachers and paraprofessionals who worked with one another, as well as across different schools and districts. Second, an audit trail documented both raw data (i.e., interview dates and times, transcripts, hand written field notes, interviewer reflection sheets) and data analysis (i.e., from all steps of coding). Third, coders kept careful memos throughout the coding process to accumulate a record of reflections about the different identified themes, as well as similarities and differences between and across teams. Fourth, the team reduced bias during analysis using a team-based approach with consensus coding and the involvement of a third member who provided peer debriefing and critique.

Findings

Throughout the interviews, educators often highlighted why the quality of their teacher–paraprofessional relationships was important. For example, one paraprofessional indicated, “I think [our relationship] works really well, because the two of us, I think we’re getting some real good outcomes for our students. I think we’re able to accomplish more together than she would separately.” Participants discussed five themes of influence that affected the quality of special education teacher and paraprofessional relationships: (a) teacher influences, (b) paraprofessional influences, (c) shared influences (i.e., related to the collective efforts of teachers and paraprofessionals), (d) administrative influences (i.e., related to school and district leaders), and (e) underlying influences (i.e., related to contextual or other factors). In the following sections, these influences are defined and illustrated with selected quotes. The notation of teacher (T) or paraprofessional (P) is used to identify the role of quoted participants.

Teacher Influences

Teacher mind-set. Participants frequently discussed how attitudes of teachers were salient influences on their relationships. Teachers who positively influenced relationships with paraprofessionals were described as being open, understanding, confident, flexible, focused on students, and dedicated. For example, nearly all participants talked about teachers respecting paraprofessionals, being open to working with them, and partnering with them effectively. Kimberly (T) stated, “I mean, we are a team. I don’t see [paraprofessionals] as anything less than me.” Paraprofessionals also affirmed the importance of this idea. Jacqueline (P) explained,

Teachers need to know that even though they are the lead teacher, the main teacher, they shouldn’t treat their educational assistant less, or kind of like degrade them, or be so negative to them because they are assistants. So if teachers know that, then I think the whole classroom will work out, I really do. We’re all equal in so many ways.

Another dimension of teacher mind-set addressed being understanding and responsive—demonstrated when teachers approached their relationships with patience, empathy, and thoughtfulness. Heather (T) explained, “Everyone has their days where they’re on it 100%, and sometimes you have a day where, you know, you’re tired and something happened last night. So, just kind of having the understanding that everyone is human helps.” Participants also talked about teacher confidence, discussing the importance of teachers feeling comfortable providing supervision, delegating responsibilities, addressing conflicts, and collaborating with paraprofessionals. One paraprofessional, Penny (P), emphasized, “You’re essentially the boss . . . you’ve got to learn how to be comfortable in that role.” For many novice teachers, confidence was challenging. Kristina (T) described herself at the beginning of her first year: “I was perpetually nervous. I was nervous because, one, I’m shy, and two, [the paraprofessionals] knew way more about the room than I did, but I was still the person who was like in charge.”

Finally, many participants talked about teachers being flexible (i.e., willing to change and adapt as needed), focused on students (i.e., emphasizing and prioritizing students' learning and well-being), or motivated and dedicated (i.e., being committed and enthusiastic about their work). For example, Naomi (T) shared, "The big picture in the end is just making the classroom a positive learning environment for the child. As long as everybody involved has in mind that the child comes first, then everything else kind of falls in place."

Teacher proficiency. Teachers' organization, skills and knowledge, and professionalism were each frequently discussed as central qualities related to their overall effectiveness in their jobs that also influenced their relationships with paraprofessionals. For example, Heather (T) explained the importance of teachers being prepared and organized: "If you have everything set out for [paraprofessionals], they're able to do their job successfully." Tamara (P) agreed,

It's easier to work when things are organized. And I know you get thrown a monkey wrench and you have to adapt to change, which, it just happens, and you do. But you find the teachers that are more organized, when things change it still kind of flows along.

Cathy (P) summarized how she was affected when she felt a teacher she formerly worked with did not demonstrate these types of qualities, saying, "It puts more pressure on you . . . and you become frustrated, resentful, angry . . . you know, they're not following through on their end of the bargain by being the teacher."

Teacher leadership. Participants talked about teacher leadership in many different ways. Almost all discussed the influence of teachers' leadership through the type of support and supervision they provided. For example, every teacher and almost every paraprofessional discussed the way teachers facilitated responsibilities. Participants valued clear and explicit communication with paraprofessionals about classroom tasks, as well as when teachers considered the strengths of paraprofessionals in making decisions. Amber (P) talked about clear and explicit communication while facilitating roles and responsibilities: "What has helped me? Well, what's helped me the most? Probably having the resources, the teachers helping you, telling you what to do, because sometimes we're on our own." Travis (T) explained the importance of considering paraprofessionals' strengths, interests, and personalities: "I just like to play off of their strengths, and just, the same philosophy that I have for people with disabilities, looking at strengths rather than what they can't do—abilities rather than disabilities." Michelle (T) explained another side to this idea:

I still like them to be a little bit challenged . . . Let's say they like working with kids with autism. You know, they need to work with other students as well . . . They need to have that kind of, you know, different skill-set in their repertoire.

Participants from every team also discussed when teachers included paraprofessionals by making them feel valued, welcomed, and needed. Many emphasized the importance of thanking paraprofessionals, showing them appreciation for the quality of their work, and conveying the importance of their roles. Theresa (P) wished she felt more appreciated: "I don't really need praise, but to acknowledge what you've done. And that sometimes just to realize that, to acknowledge that you couldn't have done it on your own." Both Naomi and her paraprofessional, Danielle, often talked about including paraprofessionals by seeking their input or encouraging their participation in meetings. Naomi (T) explained how her leadership style changed:

I guess when I first started it was kind of hard, because when you go as a teacher you expect just to manage the kids, not to have to manage an adult as well . . . As I've taught more, I've learned to make that relationship better, to where at first it was more managing, now it's more of we work together. I know at the end of the day if something goes wrong or something, my name is up top, but we do a lot of things together. And it's more of us, rather than me saying, you do this, you do this, you do this, we sit down and we decide . . . and we do it together.

Danielle's (P) comments captured how this type of leadership made her feel valued:

I love not being labeled "the parapro." Oh, she's just the parapro, so her opinion doesn't matter. You know, they value what I have to say, they trust what I, what I add to the conversation. They include, they include all of us, all the paras, and I love, that's so important. Because if I'm unhappy, just with any situation, if you're unhappy you're not gonna do your best.

Three dimensions of teacher leadership related to how teachers shared information with paraprofessionals: equipping paraprofessionals through training and instruction, setting expectations, and communicating transparently about information that paraprofessionals need to be successful in their roles. Cathy (P) summarized, "I just think that communication is a big key to working well together." Many paraprofessionals wanted support or training from teachers to collect data, understand individualized education programs (IEPs), learn about specific disabilities, or address challenging behaviors. Penny (P) shared,

[Teachers] also need to understand they may have people working with them who lack some skills, and part of your job as a leader is to help those people develop those skills . . . So, if I'm their leader, I need to immediately understand if it's the skills this person lacks because it's a job that they're not fit to do, or is it something where I can identify some teaching, some training to help close the gap.

However, Penny's teacher Kimberly (T), as well as many other teachers, shared the challenge of finding time to provide training:

It's difficult. They get a county training that goes over the manual and stuff like that, but for the classroom it's hard to pull any time . . . okay, let's go, you and I go sit down so I can train you.

Naomi (T) described what she learned about setting expectations when things did not go well working with previous paraprofessionals:

And I think with my other parapro, I never sat down and explained what my expectation was. With Danielle, as soon as we came in, I already had everything laid out. This is what, these are my expectations . . . So I feel like with my other ones, if I set out the expectations at the beginning, this is how I want, this is what I want it to look like, then I think it would work.

Finally, two other dimensions of leadership related to ways teachers addressed paraprofessional performance: monitoring paraprofessionals and providing feedback. Although some teachers shared providing feedback was challenging because they did not want to be confrontational, paraprofessionals valued and wanted feedback when it was honest, frequent, and constructive. Many teachers and paraprofessionals also discussed the way their relationships were affected negatively when performance was not discussed, or when it was addressed in ways that felt critical or judgmental to paraprofessionals instead of constructive and supportive.

Paraprofessional Influences

Paraprofessional mind-set. Participants discussed how the attitudes and dispositions of paraprofessionals readily influenced their relationships with teachers. Paraprofessional mind-sets that were a positive influence on these relationships included being amenable and cooperative, motivated, and focused on students. Nearly every participant emphasized paraprofessionals' amenability (i.e., having a mind-set of cooperation, flexibility, and understanding). Similar to other paraprofessionals, Jacqueline (P) reflected, "I just go with the flow, so I just do what is asked or what I see needs to be done." Her teacher, Janelle (T), appreciated her disposition:

So I feel like I'm very fortunate, because Jacqueline, I'll tell her to do something one time, and she remembers it, like, she just does it from then on out. She goes above and beyond to do things without me having to ask her. [She] doesn't ever complain.

Paraprofessionals also described when this can be difficult. Cathy (P) reflected, “To be quite honest, transition is hard for me sometimes, because you get used to doing the same routine over and over, and you don’t want to change. Sometimes it’s good to change, and sometimes it’s not.” However, she also described how being willing to change was important in her role as a paraprofessional, saying, “You know, I’m here to help. We’re supposed to be team players.”

Many participants talked about paraprofessionals being motivated and emphasizing the needs of the students. Motivation was described as demonstrating passion about working with students with disabilities (i.e., “a true love for it”). David (P), who worked more than 20 years in different careers, finally felt he found his calling: “But now I know this is what I want to do the rest of my life, because I know I’m giving back.” Illustrating how she prioritized students, Danielle (P) shared,

We try not to make anything personal about us. That’s when it gets messy. [You] always gotta put the kids first, in everything. Even if it’s something that I don’t want to do . . . it’s not about me, it’s about them.

Paraprofessional proficiency. Participants discussed the importance of qualities of paraprofessionals related to their overall effectiveness in their job, including their skills and knowledge, willingness to learn, and professionalism. Participants from every team emphasized the value of paraprofessionals’ skills and knowledge, but they also indicated paraprofessionals’ varied backgrounds, minimal pre-service training, and limited professional development often did not fully equip them for their jobs. Amber (P) summarized this challenge, saying, “Sometimes I feel like I need more, like more information on what to do, because I don’t know what to do. I didn’t go to school for that. That’s probably the hardest part, just not knowing what to do.” This training gap was initially surprising to some teachers, such as Travis (T): “I had the false assumption that [paraprofessionals] had kind of the same or similar training that I did with this population. And as I went on I realized that is obviously not the case.” Although many echoed these challenges, these different backgrounds were also sometimes discussed more positively. Travis later concluded, “You’ve got more knowledge on the subject matter but at the same time they have a lot of life experience that could probably be helpful in this situation.”

Many addressed paraprofessional proficiency as having a willingness or eagerness to learn, which was shown when paraprofessionals took an active role in asking questions, seeking help, or pursuing professional development. Some teachers, such as Heather (T), believed paraprofessionals did not attend professional development opportunities because they were not required: “There’s classes offered, but a lot of [paraprofessionals] don’t want to go . . . A lot of them have the mind-set at 3:15 I’m done.” Conversely, Danielle (P), who became a paraprofessional with no prior experience, shared she readily sought ways to grow and learn:

I didn’t know anything about any of the disabilities at all . . . So, I started going to the library and doing a lot of research, just reading, reading up on everything, just paying attention to the kids, and asking questions about the kids, and reading their IEPs. The teacher would allow me to read the IEPs, and I would just jot down things about them and I just research, research.

Finally, some participants discussed when unprofessional actions created challenges in relationships. Examples included using the phone during class, not adhering to a suitable dress code, and discussing inappropriate topics with or near students.

Classroom initiative and voice. Many teachers and paraprofessionals addressed the extent to which paraprofessionals had a level of initiative or voice in the classroom as an important influence. Paraprofessionals were described as positively influencing these relationships when they filled needs in the classroom, provided input, or offered feedback or encouragement to teachers but still worked with the teacher’s careful leadership and guidance. Naomi (T) and Danielle (P) described the initial difficulty of finding an effective balance between teacher leadership and paraprofessional initiation. Danielle (P) recalled,

[Naomi] would never really give me any feedback. I mean, she was just so used to doing everything herself, because prior to me coming to her, she's had bad experiences with paraprofessionals . . . So now she's got this para that's sitting over here like, okay, lady, it's my job to help you . . . So, I started making life skills things, or making suggestions, can we try this? I wouldn't just come all out and just do it, like, too much, just a little, just to see how she would react, you know. Because I never want to, you know, they say some paraprofessionals have the potential to just try to take over, you know. So they get, you would be mindful of that, too, because you want to build a good relationship with your teacher, you know. Because if we're not working good together we won't be any good for kids.

Participants also shared examples of paraprofessionals going beyond the leadership of the teacher. These examples were given when teachers and paraprofessionals described a relationship as not going well, including when paraprofessionals felt teachers were not fulfilling their job responsibilities. Lisa (P) and Cathy (P) described a teacher who was always on her computer “doing her IEPs,” leaving instruction and classroom management to them. Lisa (P) recalled how they became the primary instructors even when they did not want to:

It's like, ya'll are here to deal with the children, I'm here to stay at the computer. And it, it just made us feel like not wanting to come to work for a while. I mean, you know, cause it just, there was static in the room . . . And I think the kids could feel it sometimes, too. You know, they're like, she don't want us bothering her for nothing. And that's the way we felt, we shouldn't bother her with nothing. So, it's like we're on this little island and she's over here on this little island, but yet we're in the same room.

However, participants emphasized the positive influence of initiative when it was balanced with supportive leadership and involved paraprofessionals seeking out ways to support teachers, rather than take over. Penny (P) summarized,

I think that's part of the working, what the working relationship should be, you know, the subordinate employee relationship that it's sort of your job to see, okay, this is my basic job, but how can I anticipate and figure out—these are the things that my leader or my boss has to do, what are some things I can do to kind of help her to be able to function better in her job.

Shared Influences

Rapport. Teachers and paraprofessionals talked about several different dimensions of rapport that readily influenced their relationships with one another. For example, many articulated the value of establishing communication that promotes trust and openness. Kimberly (T) was grateful for the reciprocity of trust and communication with her paraprofessionals:

If I did something wrong, or if they didn't like what I did, you know, tell me. And they have. They've come to me and were like, that really wasn't, you know, I didn't like that. And I'm like, okay, thanks for telling me, let's fix it. What about if I did it this way, would that have been better for you, or something like that, so. And the same thing, I can go with them and tell them the same thing.

Participants also discussed interpersonal connections among teachers and paraprofessionals. Teachers and paraprofessionals frequently discussed compatible personalities, which occurred when teachers and paraprofessionals initially “clicked” with one another, or when they took time to get to know one another's personality. In addition, many participants shared examples of how building personal relationships, showing kindness, and having fun together contributed substantially to positive professional relationships. Lisa (P) described Kristina (T) as a teacher, a boss, and a friend:

Being the teacher, because I know this is her room, so whatever she says goes, because she is the teacher. Being a friend, more like, we can openly talk about anything . . . I feel like I can talk to her and tell her any of my concerns, and not that I'm gonna get treated different because of it, that we can work it out.

Some participants even felt like family, as was the case for Sarah (T) and her paraprofessionals: “We’re very much a family and we’ve all been here the same amount of time. So we all kind of know what the other one needs . . . and we work really, really well with each other.” Sarah (T) shared Tiffany and Amber were her “support system” when she underwent a serious medical treatment: “They really stepped up to the plate . . . I couldn’t have asked for better friends, assistants.” This closeness was echoed by her paraprofessionals. Tiffany (P) explained, “You’re gonna be with these people more than you’re with your family sometimes, and some of the stuff you go through is very challenging. And you’ve gotta feel like these people have your back.”

Shared vision. Participants from nearly every team emphasized the need for teachers and paraprofessionals to share a long-term vision for their classroom, be invested in the same goals, and hold similar expectations for students. Investment in a common goal helped some paraprofessionals, such as Penny (P), better understand why things needed to happen in the classroom in certain ways:

I’m a “why person.” I need to know why we have to do this, what is the point, you know, draw me a picture. And then once I understand the benefits of this, why we have to do this, then okay, let’s do it.

Kimberly (T) used the metaphor of being the “captain of the ship” to demonstrate how she and her paraprofessionals steer toward “the ultimate goal of teaching the child”:

It’s letting them know that the captain can’t sail by themselves. I mean, it takes us all. And I think that [Kayla and Penny] have that mentality, too, so it’s easier. I look at the other classroom that has, you know, different [paraprofessionals] and different personalities, and they don’t all have a common outcome, they don’t have that common goal. And I think that’s what we have, is we need to get this accomplished. And I let mine know where I want to take the students, where I see them going, so that we, we all have that in common.

Administrative Influences

Facilitation and support. School and district leaders were described as influencing these relationships through the extent to which they provided responsive support for teachers and paraprofessionals. Many participants addressed the need for administrators to be approachable, listen to teachers and paraprofessionals, and respond to their needs and challenges as they work closely with one another. Janelle (T) was disappointed when her work with paraprofessionals did not seem to be a priority for her administrators:

I’d say that’s at the bottom of their list. They’re trying to figure out the new, you know, how to do the new testing . . . so everything is just changing, and I think that that’s where their mind is . . . and not necessarily the environment that’s actually happening.

Many participants also described administrators’ facilitation and support in the ways they equipped teachers and paraprofessionals to be effective in their work with one another. For example, teachers identified the need to have professional development and support directly related to helping them work more effectively with paraprofessionals. Many teachers felt they needed more district-level support and training, whereas a few thought school-level administrators would be more familiar with the specific individuals or circumstances involved. Finally, participants voiced the challenge of finding shared time to collaborate or communicate and described how administrators influence these relationships when they foster collaboration—such as by providing educators shared time for planning, collaboration, training, or to attend professional development together. When asked what she felt was needed to be more effective working with her paraprofessionals, Kimberly (T) simply replied, “Time—time together.”

Direction and evaluation. Many participants, especially teachers, also discussed ways administrators influenced these professional relationships through the nature of their oversight and direction. Several participants discussed the need for administrators to clearly communicate their expectations for teacher and paraprofessional roles by being upfront, as well as receptive to educators’ voices. Many also indicated the importance of administrators monitoring and addressing teacher and paraprofessional performance to

ensure accountability and provide support if issues arose within their professional relationships. In addition, some highlighted the roles of administrators in setting a foundation for strong relationships by considering personnel capability and personality compatibility within potential teams when making choices about hiring and placement, as well as by seeking educator input during these decisions.

Underlying Influences

Shared challenges. Teachers and paraprofessionals frequently discussed the influence of circumstances beyond their control. For example, many discussed challenges when there was a notable age difference between them, specifically citing difficulties when the teacher was younger and had less experience than the paraprofessional. Participants described the ways their relationships were challenged from burnout, turnover, compliance demands, as well as many other stressors. Cathy (P) candidly discussed some of these challenges:

Teachers are very gung ho in the beginning, and then they become comfortable, and then they slack off, and then you just don't do anything. And it's either, you're bored to tears and you just want to, you know, bang your head up against the wall, or you decide to, you know, take the initiative to do something with the students . . . Just because I think they get, they do get burnt out, and there is a lot of demands on the teacher with all the federal guidelines and IEP's . . . there's a lot of demands on the teacher, so they take away their love for teaching and why they got into this in the first place, because they've become the secretaries, and we've become the teachers.

Guiding beliefs. Participants spoke about how intrinsic ideas about teachers or paraprofessionals influenced these relationships. Examples of these guiding beliefs included perceptions about the value of paraprofessionals, about what were appropriate roles for teachers and paraprofessionals, or about the characteristics of the people who fill these roles. Tension sometimes occurred in relationships when teachers and paraprofessionals were guided by different ideas. For example, Travis and Samuel held different beliefs about the personal characteristics of paraprofessionals. Although Travis (T) thought paraprofessionals did not share his motivation and passion, Samuel (P) emphasized the compassion and intrinsic qualities of people who become paraprofessionals. Conversely, paraprofessionals and teachers whose guiding beliefs aligned talked about their relationships more positively.

Hierarchy. Participants from every team addressed the inherent position of responsibility and authority between teachers and paraprofessionals because of the nature of these supervisory relationships. Participants spoke about the ultimate authority and accountability of teachers, the differences in certification and pay between teachers and paraprofessionals, and the important distinctions between roles for these educators. Some teachers and paraprofessionals felt their relationships were challenged when this hierarchy felt uncertain, unstable, or unfair. However, many recognized how this hierarchy was important. Heather (T) reflected, "I think [paraprofessionals] are able to do their job well and I'm able to do my job well, because they're doing their job. Their job is not to teach; my job is." Penny (P) echoed this, "[Paraprofessionals] need to know their roles. You're there to assist, not to run things. That's why we're assistants."

Comparing Perspectives Across Roles

Consistent patterns emerged across participants overall. Generally, both teachers and paraprofessionals identified and emphasized similar influences on the nature and quality of their professional relationships with one another. For example, teachers and paraprofessionals shared perspectives about the significant influence of each of the different dimensions of teacher leadership, teacher mind-set, paraprofessional mind-set, and their rapport. Furthermore, there was considerable agreement across and within teams of educators, and at least one participant from every team addressed each different influence. The perspectives of educators within teams generally aligned, except for in one team. In this team, the teacher and paraprofessional addressed many of the same influences but differed in describing how they functioned in their relationship. Both also seemed less satisfied with their relationship and described more challenges than other participants.

There were a few other differences in the perspectives shared during the interviews across teams and roles. Across teams, a greater percentage of teachers and paraprofessionals in one district addressed certification and pay as an aspect of hierarchy than in the other districts. Differences were not seen across school levels (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school). Across roles, the perspectives of teachers and paraprofessionals diverged in four ways. First, although teachers and paraprofessionals sometimes raised concerns about the professionalism of the other person in the relationship (i.e., as a dimension of teacher or paraprofessional proficiency), they rarely talked about it for themselves. Instead, teachers addressed *paraprofessional* professionalism and paraprofessionals discussed *teacher* professionalism. Second, although teachers and paraprofessionals both addressed the ways having a shared vision for their classroom influenced the professional relationship with one another, this influence was emphasized more often by paraprofessionals than by teachers. Third, although both teachers and paraprofessionals discussed several different shared challenges, teachers were more likely than paraprofessionals to identify this as an important underlying influence. Fourth, teachers generally emphasized the importance of all administrative influences more often than paraprofessionals, but particularly related to administrative direction and evaluation.

Discussion

Effective professional relationships between special education teachers and paraprofessionals are critical to ensuring students with severe disabilities receive high-quality educational experiences. Previous research efforts centered on understanding the complexity surrounding paraprofessional utilization (e.g., Fisher & Pleasants, 2012; Giangreco et al., 2010), establishing guidelines for appropriate paraprofessional utilization (e.g., Giangreco & Suter, 2015), and searching for alternatives to overuse and misuse of paraprofessional services (e.g., Carter et al., 2016). However, sparse attention has been dedicated to understanding the nature and quality of working relationships between teachers and paraprofessionals. Pinpointing the different influences strengthening or challenging these relationships provides insights into what might prepare educators to be successful working with one another, repair professional relationships that are struggling, and strengthen existing relationships. This study explored relationships between paraprofessionals and their supervising teachers, identifying several different influences that may shape the nature and quality of their work together. These findings extend the literature in several important ways.

Teachers and paraprofessionals highlighted five themes of influences to the quality of their professional relationships with one another. Whereas some influences addressed the personal contributions of teacher or paraprofessional attitudes, qualities, and actions (i.e., teacher and paraprofessional influences), some were related to their concerted efforts (i.e., shared influences), and many others were beyond the control of these individuals (i.e., administrative and underlying influences). Participants emphasized the importance of each influence and did not address anything as a singular or primary driving force. This emphasizes the need to recognize that many different things could be the source of challenge or success as teachers and paraprofessionals navigate their professional relationships with one another. Building and strengthening these professional relationships may require attending to any number of teacher, paraprofessional, shared, administrative, and underlying influences.

The perspectives of participants illustrated how the interplay of mind-sets, characteristics, and actions of key stakeholders—teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators—shape the nature and quality of these professional relationships. Other studies have also addressed the communal nature of schools and the different ways staff members have an impact on one another (e.g., Goddard et al., 2007). The findings from this study specifically address the importance of well-balanced and concerted attitudes and efforts of teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators to high-quality teacher–paraprofessional relationships. Teachers and paraprofessionals spoke positively about their relationship with one another when the influences of these three parties were balanced, and they shared the negative impact when any one party was either too passive or too overpowering. Examples included when paraprofessionals felt they had no meaningful role, or when they took over too much; when teachers were too overbearing in their leadership, or when they seemed absent in their support and supervision; and when administrators made decisions without listening to the input of teachers or paraprofessionals, or when they made no active effort to support their work with one another.

Although the findings reaffirm the importance of issues identified in previous studies addressing paraprofessional utilization (e.g., appropriate roles, training, and supervision for paraprofessionals; Fisher & Pleasants, 2012; Giangreco et al., 2010), they also extend the literature by suggesting myriad other influences that might shape these relationships. The challenges schools experience with regard to paraprofessional services are not likely the result of any single influence. Thus, focusing extensively on only one area—such as paraprofessional training—will likely have only a modest impact on improving the quality of these relationships. The findings highlight the complexity of issues surrounding teacher–paraprofessional relationships and underscore the need to consider many different influences, both within and beyond teachers and paraprofessionals themselves. For example, although the role of principals in promoting trust and fostering a collaborative school culture has been investigated (Tschannen-Moran, 2001), the specific influences of school and district administrators on cultivating strong relationships between special education teachers and paraprofessionals have not been closely explored.

Finally, teachers and paraprofessionals strongly emphasized the importance of this area of inquiry and were eager for their voices to be heard. The recruitment efforts yielded a large number of responses ($n = 181$) from educators who wanted to participate, and many expressed gratitude for the opportunity to focus on these issues. This is a testament to the significance of research focused on this aspect of educational service delivery and the importance of providing opportunities for educators to share their voice. Furthermore, teachers and paraprofessionals often discussed the ways these professional relationships had significant impact on their own happiness and job satisfaction—important issues for the field given the challenges related to turnover and retention of these educators (e.g., Ghore & York-Barr, 2007; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008).

Implications for Practice

Although building and maintaining positive relationships are mutual charges for all involved, our findings have implications for the individual contributions of several key stakeholders. First, teachers are the leaders of classrooms. Although some influences may be outside their control, they have considerable potential to cultivate or hinder strong cooperative relationships with paraprofessionals through their mind-set, proficiency, and leadership. Teachers should take seriously the importance of their roles working with paraprofessionals by (a) approaching these relationships with an attitude of openness and collaboration, (b) demonstrating proficiency and professionalism in all their interactions, and (c) leading well by communicating clearly and explicitly, fostering paraprofessional strengths, and making efforts to show paraprofessionals they are valued and appreciated.

Second, paraprofessionals should recognize that they can meaningfully contribute to having positive relationships with teachers through their mind-set, proficiency, and nature of sharing their input and skills in the classroom. Although many paraprofessionals focus on directly supporting students, they may be able to better impact their classrooms and schools through approaching their roles as being a direct support to teachers (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012). This type of support involves paraprofessionals respecting the leadership of teachers as they share their input, use their strengths, and strive to grow and learn.

Third, school and district administrators have important roles in nurturing these relationships by providing intentional and individualized support for both teachers and paraprofessionals. Specifically, administrators influence these relationships through how they provide direction, their presence and availability to support educators and encourage collaboration, and their swiftness and effectiveness in addressing problems that arise—including misconduct or underperformance.

Finally, these findings have implications for teacher preparation programs. Given the complex and multifaceted nature of these relationships, it is important teachers are prepared to supervise and lead paraprofessionals successfully. Despite the CEC (2012) guidelines that pre-service teachers have the skills to “structure, direct, and support the activities of paraeducators” (p. 3), very little attention has been given to preparing teachers specifically in this area. Pre-service preparation programs should include core components about building teachers’ knowledge and skills to effectively lead and work with paraprofessionals. Although it is one thing to provide pre-service teachers an overview on effective training methods to teach a paraprofessional a specific skill (e.g., a

prompting system), it is quite another to teach and assess competency of pre-service teachers interpersonal and leadership skills (e.g., communication, conflict management, building rapport, organization).

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of this study suggest other pathways for future research. First, member checks were not conducted with participants. Because these checks can further evaluate the accuracy of the findings, future researchers should engage participants in this way. Second, although interview analysis examined findings across participants and teams, our approach did not triangulate across multiple data sources (e.g., observations of meetings or classrooms). Gathering additional data could deepen understanding of these relationships. In addition, interviews occurred at a single point in time. Future research involving sustained engagement would enable exploration of whether and how relationships evolve over time. Third, this study involved a relatively small number of participants from three districts in a single region. Although participants represented multiple grade levels and diverse schools, the experiences of these educators may have been shaped by contexts or administrative approaches differing from other locales. Future research involving participants from other regions is needed to examine how perspectives related to the influences to teacher–paraprofessional relationships are similar or different from those in our sample. Fourth, the scope of perspectives involved in this study may have been limited. A strength of this study was including multiple teams of educators. However, requiring participation of multiple team members may have made the study more appealing to educators who felt positively about their relationships, although interviews were conducted individually. Future research should consider how to broaden the scope of included perspectives to expand the portrait of these complex, multifaceted relationships.

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Author Biographies

Elizabeth E. Biggs, MA, is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Special Education at Vanderbilt University. Her research focuses on improving inclusive education and developing social communication interventions for students with severe disabilities and complex communication needs.

Carly B. Gilson, M.Ed., is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Special Education at Vanderbilt University. Her research interests focus on strengthening the post-school transition to promote meaningful pathways to postsecondary education, competitive employment, and inclusive community settings for adolescents and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Erik W. Carter, Ph.D. is a Professor of Special Education at Vanderbilt University. His research and writing focus on promoting inclusion and valued roles in school, work, community, and congregational settings for children and adults with intellectual disability, autism, and multiple disabilities.

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