Supporting and Supervising Paraprofessionals:

A Framework for Strengthening Professional Relationships between Special Education Teachers and Paraprofessionals

Elizabeth Biggs, Carly Blustein, and Erik Carter
Vanderbilt University
Providing a Strong Education

Education
Joint Position Statement of AAIDD and The Arc

Statement
To prepare them to participate in our democratic society, students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities* will receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) that includes individualized supports and access to a general education curriculum in inclusive settings with peers of the same age.

Issue
The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that students with disabilities be educated to the maximum extent possible with students who are not disabled. Despite this law, many students within our constituency remain segregated in self-contained classrooms in separate schools, with limited or no opportunities to participate academically and socially in general education classrooms and school activities. Segregation of students in schools perpetuates the alienation of these students. Many do not have access to the same academic and extracurricular activities and services provided to other students. Frequently, these students leave school unprepared for adult life in the community.

Additionally, many schools lack sufficient and/or trained educators and support personnel to provide an appropriate education. Despite some gains, special education programs continue to be under funded, particularly by the federal government. Some communities still oppose special education and seek to limit educational opportunities for students in special education. Indeed the education of students with disabilities has been under assault on numerous fronts by the press, school officials and the public.

- “Provide necessary related educational support services to maximize the educational experience.”
- “Be provided by properly qualified, prepared, and supported teachers, related services personnel, and other staff.”
The Critical Role of Educational Professionals

- **Paraprofessionals**: 457,893
- **Special Educators**: 405,831

Source: www.ideadata.org
Changing Professional Partnerships

Source: www.ideadata.org
Research Questions

1. What factors positively and negatively influence the nature of professional relationships between special education teachers and paraprofessionals who work with students with severe disabilities?

2. How are special education teacher and paraprofessional perspectives of these factors similar or different?

3. What is the impact of these professional relationships on classrooms and students?
Method
Method

District B

9 Special Education Teachers
13 Paraprofessionals

District A

District C

Teacher
Para

Teacher
Para

Teacher
Para

Teacher
Para

Teacher
Para

Teacher
Para
Participants

- 22 total participants were interviewed (9 special education teachers; 13 paraprofessionals)
- 86% female
- Years of experience: range from <1 to 16 ($M = 5.7$ years)
- Student caseload/ number of students supported: range from 4 to 55 ($M = 12$)
Participants’ Roles and Responsibilities

What types of roles do teachers assign to paraprofessionals?

- One-to-one direct support: 100%
- Support instruction in special education: 100%
- Support social skills instruction: 100%
- Assist with personal care: 89%
- Support instruction in general education: 67%
- Clerical/non-instructional responsibilities: 67%
- Support instruction in community-based settings: 44%
Participants’ Roles and Responsibilities

One-to-one Paraprofessional Direct Support

- 1 hour or less
- 1.5 - 2 hours
- 3 - 6 hours
- 6 hours or more
Interview Procedures

- One-on-one interviews (60-90 minutes)
- Semi-structured interview protocol with questions and follow-up probes
- Used a conversational approach to moderating interviews

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Interviews</th>
<th>Paraprofessional Interviews</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Understanding the professional relationship</td>
<td>• Understanding the professional relationship</td>
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<td>• Roles and responsibilities</td>
<td>• Roles and responsibilities</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Preparation and training to work with paraprofessionals</strong></td>
<td>• Perceived benefits and challenges</td>
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<td>• Perceived benefits and challenges</td>
<td>• Ideas to increase effectiveness</td>
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<td>• Ideas to increase effectiveness</td>
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Data Analysis

- Transcribed verbatim audio recorded interviews
- Grounded theory approach using constant comparison method of coding
- Team-based approach
  - Periodic meetings as a whole team for feedback and critical reflection
- Two primary coders

  Independently Coded → Met for Consensus
Results
What factors influence the nature of professional relationships between special education teachers and paraprofessionals?
Teacher Influence

• Teacher Mindset
• Teacher Proficiency
• Teacher Leadership
# Teacher Mindset

*The nature of a teacher’s attitude or disposition*

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<tr>
<td><strong>Openness and partnership:</strong> Teachers are open to working collaboratively with paraprofessionals, receptive to input, and respect paraprofessionals as equals in the classroom</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Flexibility:</strong> Teachers are open minded and able to adapt as needs and circumstances arise</td>
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<td><strong>Confidence:</strong> Teachers are confident in their abilities to support paraprofessionals (e.g., delegating responsibilities, addressing conflicts, and collaborating)</td>
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<td><strong>Understanding and responsiveness:</strong> Teachers value building and maintaining strong personal relationships with paraprofessionals through patience, empathy, and thoughtfulness</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Emphasizing students:</strong> Teachers focus on and prioritize students’ learning and well-being as they work with paraprofessionals</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Motivation and dedication:</strong> Teachers are motivated by their students, dedicated to their classroom, and enthusiastic about their work</td>
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Teacher Mindset

OPENNESS AND PARTNERSHIP

“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”

- Jacqueline, elementary school paraprofessional

“I mean, we are a team. I don’t see them as anything less than me… [A challenge] is just trust, because I want to control everything. So it’s letting go of that, and giving them a task, and for me to know that it’s going to get done, and to my liking.”

- Kimberly, middle school teacher
# Teacher Proficiency

**Effectiveness working with students, paraprofessionals, and fulfilling other roles**

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<tr>
<td><strong>Skills and Knowledge:</strong> Teachers have experience, knowledge, and skills to effectively instruct students, work with paraprofessionals, and complete other responsibilities</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td><strong>Organization:</strong> Teachers have organizational skills and established routines</td>
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<td><strong>Professionalism:</strong> Teachers conducting themselves in a professionally appropriate manner, including in their interactions with paraprofessionals and students</td>
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Teacher Proficiency

PROFESSIONALISM

“When the teacher becomes, you know, disengaged and doesn’t care anymore, 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.”

- Cathy, high school/transition paraprofessional

ORGANIZATION

“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.”

- Tamara, middle school paraprofessional
### Teacher Leadership — Managing Responsibilities

The nature of the support or supervision teachers provide

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<tr>
<td><strong>Facilitating Roles and Responsibilities:</strong> Teachers clearly and explicitly delegate and communicate responsibilities to paraprofessionals</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Including Paraprofessionals:</strong> Teachers invite paraprofessionals into meaningful roles in the classroom and create a culture that makes them feel valued</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Considering Paraprofessional Strengths:</strong> Teachers take into account the strengths, interests, or personality of paraprofessionals when making decisions for the classroom</td>
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Teacher Leadership

INCLUDING PARAPROFESSIONALS

“I guess when I first started it was kind of hard, because when you go as a teacher you expect 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.

- Naomi, middle school teacher

“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.”

- Danielle, middle school paraprofessional who worked with Naomi
# Teacher Leadership— Sharing Information

The nature of the support or supervision teachers provide

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<tr>
<td><strong>Training and Instructing Paraprofessionals:</strong> Teachers provide formal training and informal support or instruction to help increase paraprofessional knowledge, skills, and proficiency</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Setting Expectations for Paraprofessionals:</strong> Teachers are upfront, explicit, and clear in communicating with paraprofessionals expectations of their roles</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Communicating Transparently:</strong> Teachers openly share information (e.g., schedules, unexpected changes, conversations with parents or administrator) that may be important for paraprofessionals to know</td>
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“I think that’s what a good leader does, is surround themselves with people who have good strengths and that understand how to capitalize and put those strengths to work. They 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 jog that they’re not fit to do, or is it something where I can identify some teaching, some training to help close the gap.”

- Penny, middle school paraprofessional
### Teacher Leadership – Addressing Performance

**The nature of the support or supervision teachers provide**

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<tr>
<td><strong>Monitoring and Evaluating Paraprofessionals:</strong> Teachers are involved in providing accountability for paraprofessional performance through participating in formal evaluations or through providing ongoing or informal monitoring</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Providing Feedback:</strong> Teachers provide positive but constructive feedback to paraprofessionals to help increase their effectiveness in their roles</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Appreciating Paraprofessionals:</strong> Teachers thank paraprofessionals for the work they do, show them appreciation, and convey they feel the work of paraprofessionals is important</td>
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Teacher Leadership

PROVIDING FEEDBACK

“It becomes sort of this adversarial thing… He will just [provide feedback] publicly, and I think that that’s sort of a, it’s an authority thing. You know, you’re where you are and I’m here… So I think if he were to do something, just, or maybe do it privately, if he had an issue, I think that would be a good way.”

- Samuel, high school/transition paraprofessional

APPRECIATING PARAPROFESSIONALS

“Just more support from the teachers, whether it be, 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.”

- Theresa, elementary school paraprofessional
Paraprofessional Influence

- Paraprofessional Mindset
- Paraprofessional Proficiency
- Classroom Initiative/Voice
# Paraprofessional Mindset

**The nature of a paraprofessional’s attitude or disposition**

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<tr>
<td><strong>Amenability:</strong> Paraprofessionals are cooperative and compliant in fulfilling their job duties, patient and understanding with teachers as issues arise, and adaptable to new changes and tasks.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Emphasizing students:</strong> Paraprofessionals focus on and prioritize students’ learning and well-being as they support the work of teachers.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Motivation:</strong> Paraprofessionals are excited about their jobs and motivated to come to work each day because they enjoy working with the teacher and/or have a strong passion for students with disabilities.</td>
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Paraprofessional Mindset

AMENABILITY

“I just go with the flow, so I just do what is asked or what I see needs to be done.”
- Janelle, elementary school paraprofessional

EMPHASIZING STUDENTS

“I try to keep the kids, I try to put the kids first in everything. And that’s what we do. 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. So we just try to keep that in mind. We always try to do what’s best for the kids.”

- Danielle, middle school paraprofessional
## Paraprofessional Proficiency

**Effectiveness working with teachers, students, and fulfilling other roles**

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<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge and experience:</strong> Paraprofessionals have foundational knowledge and relevant experience that supports their effectiveness supporting teacher’s work with students.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Willingness to learn:</strong> Paraprofessionals seek opportunities to learn and grow by asking questions, asking teachers for help, learning independently, or pursuing professional development.</td>
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<td><strong>Professionalism:</strong> Paraprofessionals conduct themselves in a professionally appropriate manner both inside and outside of the immediate classroom context, including in their interactions with teachers and students.</td>
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Classroom Initiative and Voice

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<tr>
<td>Paraprofessionals feel supported by their teacher’s leadership to take initiative in the classroom, provide input about instruction, share their voice in decisions, or provide feedback and encouragement to teachers.</td>
<td>8</td>
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A teacher’s perspective:

“I like the fact that, you know, she is willing to think outside the box. She wants to do different things. She wants to actually help in the classroom, and she’s there for the kids. I like the fact that, you know, some paraprofessionals, you know, they say the teacher, whatever she tells me to do, that’s what I’m gonna do, and I’m not gonna do no more, no less. And [Danielle] is willing to do more than that, even outside of the classroom. If I don’t ask her, if another teacher asks her, or the principal asks her to do something, she, she’ll do all that.”

- Naomi, middle school teacher
Shared Influence

- Rapport
- Shared Vision
Rapport

The nature of the way teachers and paraprofessionals get along with one another

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<td><strong>Open communication:</strong> Teachers and paraprofessionals communicate with one another with openness and honesty.</td>
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<td><strong>Respect:</strong> Teachers and paraprofessionals show respect for one another or hold each other in high esteem.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Compatible personalities:</strong> Teachers and paraprofessionals share things in common, have complementary personality traits, or take time to get to know one another and learn each other’s personality.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Personal relationships:</strong> Teachers and paraprofessionals consider one another friends, care for one another personally, or make efforts toward building a relationship that is more than work-related.</td>
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The nature of the way teachers and paraprofessionals get along with one another

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<td><strong>Showing kindness:</strong> Teachers and paraprofessionals show warmth, kindness, and friendliness in their interactions with one another.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Trust:</strong> Teachers and paraprofessionals trust, depend on, and have confidence in one another.</td>
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<td><strong>Having fun:</strong> Teachers and paraprofessionals laugh, joke, or have fun with one another.</td>
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Rapport

RESPECT

“I think the respect has to be there to begin with, or you have to develop that respect. But the more they let us in on what’s going on, the better it’s going to be, as far as the teaching aspect together, plus the learning of that student.”

- Tiffany, elementary school paraprofessional

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

“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. It’s like we’re on the same level, but even though in the end, whatever she says goes. But it’s more like teamwork stuff, you know, I guess, in a way to put it. 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.”

- Lisa, high school paraprofessional
## Shared Vision

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<td>Teachers and paraprofessionals are bought into a shared vision for their classroom, driven by the same goals for their students, and set expectations for students accordingly.</td>
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### A teacher’s perspective:

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 EA’s 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.

- Kimberly, middle school teacher
Administrative Influence

- Training and Supporting Paraprofessionals
- Fostering Collaboration
- Monitoring and Addressing Performance
- Communicating about Staff Expectations
- Hiring and Selecting Staff
- Training and Supporting Teachers
## Administrative Influence

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<tr>
<td><strong>Training and Supporting Paraprofessionals:</strong> School or district leaders support paraprofessionals by listening and responding to concerns, showing them appreciation, and equipping them to be successful</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fostering Collaboration:</strong> School or district leaders encourage collaboration between teachers and paraprofessionals through shared time or shared professional development</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Monitoring and Addressing Performance:</strong> School or district leaders provide accountability for teacher and paraprofessional conduct and performance</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Communicating about Staff Expectations:</strong> School or district leaders communicate with teachers and paraprofessionals about expectations for their roles</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Hiring and Selecting Staff:</strong> School or district leaders make every effort to hire, select, and place teachers and paraprofessionals that will be effective working with one another and with students</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Training and Supporting Teachers:</strong> School or district leaders support teachers by listening and responding to concerns and equipping them to work effectively with paraprofessionals</td>
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Administrative Influence

TRAINING AND SUPPORTING PARAPROFESSIONALS

“I feel sorry for new paras. I really do, because we don’t have the support. We don’t have a person that we can call on and say, you know, I’m having a hard time with my teacher, what should I do?... I don’t feel comfortable going to the administrator, because their teachers come first, and that’s just how it is.”

- Danielle, middle school paraprofessional

FOSTERING COLLABORATION

“A training where everyone, see, we don’t ever have time. There’s very few times where the three of us are together alone. If anything, it’s in the morning, and we have two minutes before the first student comes, but, very rarely. .. So if there was a professional development where you can just, like, every group is together, and you are given the time to go over what’s going well, what’s not going well, how can we fix this? Just that time alone is important... And then, for, like, the district to facilitate questions that will bring up those issues and conversations.“

- Annie, high school/ transition teacher
Underlying Influences

• Shared Challenges
• Guiding Beliefs
• Hierarchy
# Shared Challenges

*Issues or circumstances beyond the control of teachers or paraprofessionals*

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<td><strong>Age Difference:</strong> Challenges from navigating the supervisory relationship when the teacher is younger and has less experience than the paraprofessional</td>
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<td><strong>Burnout and Turnover:</strong> Challenges from issues related to burnout, high levels of stress, and turnover in these positions</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>External Circumstances and Expectations:</strong> Challenges from outside circumstances and pressures (e.g., student socio-economic status, compliance demands, other stressors)</td>
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Shared Challenges

BURNOUT AND TURNOVER

“The 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 that 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 in this in the first place, because they’ve become the secretaries, and we’ve become the teachers.”

- Cathy, high school paraprofessional
### Guiding Beliefs

*Ideas or perceptions about teachers or paraprofessionals*

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<td><strong>Value of Paraprofessionals:</strong></td>
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Guiding Beliefs

VALUE OF PARAPROFESSIONALS

“There’s not enough of me to go around, so I need other adults that can help me, and they do.”

- Janelle, elementary school teacher

“The teacher can’t do it all by herself. I mean, if it wasn’t for us, then there’d be a lot of stress on the teacher.”

- Jacqueline, elementary school teacher who worked with Janelle
## Hierarchy

**Order of position, responsibility, and authority between teachers and paraprofessionals**

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<td><strong>Authority and Accountability:</strong> Teachers have more responsibility and authority than paraprofessionals, including being ultimately accountable for student outcomes and services</td>
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<td><strong>Distinction between Roles:</strong> Positions of teachers and paraprofessionals are comprised of different responsibilities, roles, and expectations</td>
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<td><strong>Certification and Pay:</strong> Different expectations for teachers about training and certification also mark differences in salary</td>
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AUTHORITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

“[Teachers] are ultimately legally responsible for the services for that child.”

- Michelle, middle school teacher

“[Teachers] are essentially the boss. I mean, it’s not a huge span of control, but [they’ve] got to learn how to be comfortable in that role.”

- Penny, middle school paraprofessional
Impact

• Impact on Students
• Impact on Staff
Impact

IMPACT ON STUDENTS

“I think it’s a great thing because there’s, the students see that we support each other so they’re not gonna try and work the system that way. There’s not any real animosity and that tension because everyone senses that kind of tension and stuff.”

- Kasey, high school paraprofessional

IMPACT ON STAFF

“I worked in a bad place for a year and a half, and it was miserable. And it really helps to have people that you like. I mean, that’s probably the main reason why I, I live like 30 minutes away from where I work. And that’s one of the reasons that I drive 30 minutes back and forth. So, it’s an hour round trip, each day. And it’s because of the people that I work with. And, you know, I have good kids, but you know, some of their parents are entitled feeling, and they, you know, make things difficult. But the people that I work with are just why I drive that far every day.”

- Janelle, elementary school teacher
Key Implications
Discussion

- The nature of human relationships are multifaceted and complex.

- Descriptive questions yield descriptive answers → our questions sought to understand the positive and negative influences on these working relationships.

- Our findings generally echoed across districts, clusters, and roles.

- Paraprofessionals and teachers, on the whole, agreed that many of these same influences were important.
Limitations/Directions for Future Research

- Research questions and findings do not address weight or importance of factors
- Small sample concentrated in one region of the state
- Elective sampling and requirement to participate as clusters may have positively skewed our findings

Future research

- Use additional methodologies
- Investigate most important ways to bring positive change
- Examine how findings align or diverge across different samples
Back to the Big Picture

- Paraprofessional positions are rapidly outnumbering the number of teacher positions.
- Important work is being done to examine appropriate use of paraprofessionals and identify alternative supports to one-to-one direct paraprofessional support.
- The nature of the relationships between special education teachers and paraprofessionals is important
  - Preparation and support for special education teachers to work effectively with paraprofessionals
  - Factors influencing these relationships in inclusion settings
- Factors identified by teachers and paraprofessionals may also be related to other supervisory relationships in the field.
Questions?
Thank You!

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