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An Examination of the Working Relationships Between General Education Teachers, Special Education Teachers, and Paraprofessionals in General Education Settings

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by

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ABSTRACT

An Examination of the Working Relationships Between General Education Teachers, Special

Education Teachers, and Paraprofessionals in General Education Settings

by

Rita Lynn Page Hosay

The purpose of this study was to provide an examination of the relationships between general

education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals and the influences of these

relationships on students with disabilities. This study was conducted through the process of semi-

structured interviews with general education teachers, special education teachers, and

paraprofessionals working in two Tennessee school districts. The researcher found that

communication practices, training, perspectives, time, role expectations, development of

partnerships, and the creation of supportive environments affect the development of working

relationships among special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and general education

teachers. The researcher found that these relationships influence the experiences of students with

disabilities in a significant and meaningful way. The researcher provides recommendations for

current practices to promote the development of successful working relationships and provides

suggestions for future research.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my beautiful family, Gus, Ike, Lil, Rose, Haley, Bailey, Holt, and Dee. I love you all with all that I have. This one is for you, Daddy.

"To give anything less than your best, is to sacrifice the gift." ~ Steve Prefontaine

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Background

From the outset, the education of individuals with disabilities has proven a challenge for public schools (Osgood, 2008; Rotatori et al., 2011; Spring, 2020). According to Osgood, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the education of individuals with disabilities was largely focused on custodial care which led to many individuals with disabilities being institutionalized. In rural areas, many students with disabilities did not have access to public education services (Osgood, 2008). However, through legislation many changes occurred that transformed special education in the United States (Spring, 2020). Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (RA) of 1973, the Families Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) of 1974, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 all had a bearing on special education in the United States (Rotatori et al., 2011). According to Spring (2020), the civil rights movement of the 1960s led to improvements in the treatment of students with special learning needs. Specifically, Spring noted the significance of Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) *v*. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in ensuring that all children be provided access to public education. In their synthesis of the literature regarding collaborative practices, Paulsrud and Nilholm (2020) indicated, "The influence of education policy should not be underestimated" (p. 13). Changes in education policy have had a tremendous effect on the education of students with disabilities. Another critical piece of legislation was Public Law 94-142 which was passed in 1975 and renamed in 1990 to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Spring, 2020). IDEA guaranteed all children with disabilities the right to equal opportunity access to public education. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004:

Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of

individuals to participate in or contribute to society. Almost 30 years of research and

experience has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made

more effective by having high expectations for such children and ensuring their access to

the general education curriculum in the regular classroom, to the maximum extent

possible. (pp. 2-3).

The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEIA) in 2004

provided schools with guidance regarding the composition of Individualized Education Plan

(IEP) teams. The creation of a multi-disciplinary team consisting of the parent, student (when

appropriate), general education teacher(s), special education teacher(s), school administrator(s),

and an interpreter of results/data laid the groundwork for establishing IEP development as a

collaborative process (Kochhar-Bryant & Heishman, 2010).

The establishment of a collaborative team brought about a positive shift in the way

schools approached the education of students with disabilities; this approach partially fulfills

IDEIA's requirement that school systems use teams to determine how best to include students

with disabilities in regular educational programming (Spring, 2020). The term *inclusive*

education first came about in the work of Marsha Forest in a workshop held in 1987 (Jorgensen,

2018). According to The Association for the Severely Handicapped (TASH) (2021), inclusion

exists when:

All students are presumed competent, are welcomed as valued members of all general

education classes and extra-curricular activities in their local schools, fully participate

and learn alongside their same age peers in general education instruction based on the

general education curriculum, and experience reciprocal social relationships (para. 1).

Despite the term *inclusion* having long been a component of educational discourse, IDEIA does not specifically mention the term (Wrightslaw, 2021). Rather, the language in IDEIA indicated schools serve students with disabilities in the general education setting as the first or least restrictive option utilizing supplementary aids and services. According to IDEIA, the term *supplementary aids and services* means aids, services, and other supports that are provided in the regular education classes or education-related settings to enable children with disabilities to be educated with nondisabled children to the maximum extent appropriate (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Therefore, supplementary aids and services can include accommodations, modifications, the support of a special education teacher or paraprofessional in the general education setting, adaptive devices, and/or training for general education teachers. By providing students with significant educational needs the supports they need to be successful in general education settings, IDEIA had created a shift in thinking as students with special education needs became general education students first.

According to the U.S. Office of Special Education Services (U.S. Department of Education, 2020) in the *42nd Annual Report to Congress, 2020:*

> In 2018, a total of 6,001,138, or 95%, of the 6,315,228 students ages 6 through 21 served under IDEA, Part B, were educated in regular classrooms for at least some portion of the school day. The majority (64.0 %) of students ages 6 through 21 served under IDEA, Part B, were educated inside the regular class 80% or more of the day. Also, 17.9% of students ages 6 through 21 served under IDEA, Part B, were educated in the regular class 40% through 79% of the day, and 13.1% were educated inside the regular class less than 40% of the day (pp. 53-55).

Given the large number of students receiving special education services in the general education classroom, the challenge for educators is to determine how to establish productive teaching relationships to ensure that each child receives their education in the *least restrictive educational* (LRE) setting possible. According to Berry (2019), collaboration is a continuum of services that includes consultation, collaboration, and co-teaching. McLesky et al. (2017) found teacher collaboration has positive effects on student achievement. However, navigating collaborative relationships is difficult, as general and special education faculty may teach multiple classes or have multiple students on their caseloads with educational disabilities. In addition, teachers must also learn how to provide students with all necessary Individualized Education Plan (IEP) accommodations and/or modifications so that their educational programming is implemented as their IEP is written; failure to do so could have negative implications for students and teachers (Jones, 2012). Likewise, paraprofessionals face the difficult task of including students with disabilities in general education settings while also focusing on components of student care that can encompass medical needs, behavioral needs, communication deficiencies, socialization needs, and supplementing academic instruction (Zhao et al., 2021).

In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* was published by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. *A Nation at Risk* was a scathing report on the state of education and demanded more in education (more reading, math, science, arts, testing, and accountability) while connecting problems in the United States economy to educational downfalls (Ansary, 2007). According to Ansary, despite the data in the report not being representative of current trends in education, *A Nation at Risk* was used as a political tool in Ronald Reagan's quest for re-election. In using the rhetoric of getting tough on education, Reagan sought to appeal to female voters who were

viewed as sympathetic to issues related to education. Many of the inaccuracies in *A Nation at Risk* were dispelled in the *Sandia Report* published in 1990. However, the *Sandia Report* received very little attention, and politicians including Presidents George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama continued to make their political bids on the failing state of education (Ansary, 2007). In 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was signed by then President George W. Bush, and it has had a profound effect on education since that time. No Child Left Behind increased the federal government's role in education by tying federal funds to requirements for states. No Child Left Behind also placed an emphasis on improving the outcomes for students identified as English language learners, children who were economically marginalized, a member of an underrepresented group, and students receiving special education services (Klein, 2015). In addition, No Child Left Behind required that evidence-based practices be used across all grade levels to improve student outcomes (Swanson et al., 2012). Together, all these legislative reforms have had a significant impact on the education of individuals with disabilities.

In 2018, the results of the *State of the Special Education Profession* survey were published. The *State of the Special Education Profession* was a compilation of information from 1500 special education teachers on matters related to special education. Four primary themes were identified; (a) use of the IEP, (b) assessment of teacher competence, (c) family engagement, and (d) the need for systems-support for the delivery of special education services (Fowler et al., 2019). Fowler et al. further indicated that "Respondents also value collaboration with general education and related service personnel and expressed concerns about levels of systems-support for deep and meaningful collaboration" (p. 10). On a global scale, many nations have sought to improve the educational opportunities for students with disabilities. The Salamanca Statement

came as a result of a 1994 conference of 92 governments in Salamanca, Spain. This statement comprises The Framework for Action which states:

> Inclusion and participation are essential to human dignity and to the enjoyment and exercise of human rights. In the field of education this is reflected in bringing about a 'genuine equalisation of opportunity.' Special needs education incorporates proven methods of teaching from which all children can benefit; it assumes human differences are normal and that learning must be adapted to the needs of the child, rather than the child fitted to the process (Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education, 2020, para. 8)

The Framework for Action provides a description of the inclusive school as one where "all children should learn together, where possible, and that ordinary schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, while also having a continuum of support and services to match these needs" (Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education, 2020, para. 8). A recognition of the importance of both collaboration and inclusion exists at the federal and state levels; however, the work of how to make inclusion a reality for students with disabilities rests in the hands of individual IEP teams.

Statement of the Problem

Although the literature confirmed the importance of relationships between general educators, special educators, and paraprofessionals, it does not provide an in-depth explanation of how teachers and paraprofessionals use these relationships to provide for the education of students with disabilities in the general education setting. Given the high number of students receiving special education services within the general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2020), it is essential to have a well-developed understanding of how general

education teacher, special education teacher, and paraprofessional relationships are cultivated to provide students with disabilities with educational services in general education settings.

Significance of the Study

This study provided insight into the complexity of the relationships between general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals and the influences of these relationships on the education of students with disabilities. Although several studies in the literature discussed the importance of examining collaborative practices, little attention has been given to exploring these practices among teachers and paraprofessionals actively working in general education settings. Using a qualitative approach, this study examined the individual roles of special educators, general educators, and paraprofessionals by exploring their perceptions and experiences. This study contributed to the body of knowledge concerning teacher and paraprofessional practices by examining the influences of these relationships on students with disabilities.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this narrative study was to examine how general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals perceive their relationships as they provide educational services to students with disabilities in general education settings in grades pre-K-12 in two Tennessee school districts. This study used semi-structured interviewing, thematic analysis, and memoing. For the purposes of this study, *teacher-paraprofessional relationships* and *general education teacher-special education teacher relationships* referred to their participation in activities to support students through the development of IEPs, engaging in consultation with partner teachers and paraprofessionals, communicating student expectations and progress, engaging in lesson plan development, assisting students with disabilities to engage

meaningfully with peers in the general education setting, sharing of resources and ideas, and co-teaching. The study included only licensed educators and paraprofessionals who were actively teaching in general education settings in public schools in grades PreK-12.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this study was educational equity theory. Throughout much of the history of education in America, students with disabilities have experienced a significant disadvantage when accessing public education (Osgood, 2008; Rotatori et al., 2011; Spring, 2020). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2018), "Equity in education means that schools and education systems provide equal learning opportunities to all students" (p. 24). The OECD continues, "Equity is a fundamental value and guiding principle of education policy, but it is not necessarily actualised in education systems around the world" (p. 24). Hoy and Miskel (2013) explained "individuals' beliefs about whether they are being treated fairly or not" is known as *equity theory* (p. 154).

According to Fowler and Brown (2018) equity theory was developed by J. Stacy Adams in 1963 to illustrate the significance of salaries to individuals. Adams (1963) found that inequity was pervasive in all aspects of industry and government and stated that, "Whenever two individuals exchange anything, there is the possibility that one or both of them will feel the exchange was inequitable" (p. 422). Using that premise, educational equity theory is used to study how students receive access to education regardless of their social status, ethnicity, disability, or background. Within the realm of professional relationships, the possibility exists for individuals to feel that they are experiencing inequities in their interactions. Given that individuals working with students with disabilities must navigate potential inequalities for both themselves and the students they serve, it is important for educators to have a better

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understanding of the influences of working relationships of general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals on the experiences of students with disabilities.

Research Questions

This research study examined how relationships between general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals influence the provision of education services for students with disabilities in general education settings by asking the following questions.

Essential Research Question

How do the relationships between general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals influence the experiences of students with disabilities in general education settings?

Supporting Questions

Question 1: How do general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals describe their roles working with students with disabilities in general education settings?

Question 2: How do teachers and paraprofessionals describe their relationships with other teaching personnel in general education settings?

Question 3: What factors do teachers and paraprofessionals perceive as inhibiting the formation of these relationships?

Question 4: What factors do teachers and paraprofessionals perceive as promoting the development of these relationships?

Question 5: What strategies or techniques do teachers and paraprofessionals find successful in helping them to form relationships that are conducive to supporting students with disabilities in general education settings?

Definition of Terms

1. *Teaching relationship:* A teaching relationship is an interaction whereby two teachers from different disciplines and/or a paraprofessional form a partnership to implement a student's IEP accommodations and modifications to deliver educational services in the general education setting.

2. *Collaboration:* According to Robinson (2008), collaboration is a process that allows staff groups with different occupations to combine their resources to solve problems that occur in teaching practice. Collaboration includes consultation, co-planning, co-teaching, coaching (Mofield, 2020).

3. *General Education Teacher*: General education teachers instruct students in core curriculum areas and conduct standardized assessments based on general education expectations for learning.

4. *Inclusion:* Inclusion is the education of students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers in general education settings. Inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings should be planned, purposeful, and meaningful to the student educationally, socially, and/or behaviorally.

5. *Individualized Education Plan (IEP)*: An IEP is an individualized plan that addresses how a student's disability adversely affects his/her educational performance and provides school staff with information regarding the student's present levels of performance. In addition, an IEP outlines goals, objectives, accommodations, services, and supports needed to address the educational impact of the student's disability.

6. *Paraprofessional:* According to IDEA (2004), paraprofessionals/educational assistants/teaching assistants are individuals who are employed to meet the complex

needs of students with disabilities under the direction of a licensed educator.

Paraprofessionals work in both general and special education settings.

7. *Special Education Teacher*: Special education teachers are fully licensed teachers who are responsible for the education of students with disabilities.

Federally Recognized Disability Categories

Currently, 13 disability categories are recognized at the federal level through IDEA. These disability types include

- intellectual disabilities

- hearing impairments

- deafness

- speech or language impairments

- visual impairments (including blindness)

- emotional disturbances

- orthopedic impairments

- autism

- traumatic brain injuries

- other health impairments

- specific learning disabilities

- deaf-blindness

- multiple disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

In addition, children ages 3-9 may also be identified as having a developmental delay that could affect the child in one or more areas including cognition, physical development,

socialization, communication, and adaptive behavior (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). For a student to be eligible for special education and/or related services, the child must have a qualifying disability that causes an educational impact (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). According to IDEA, students identified with an intellectual disability must have significant delays in both cognitive and adaptive functioning. Hearing impairments may be permanent or fluctuating and include deafness. Speech or language impairments are classified as disorders of communication and include stuttering, problematic articulation, vocal impairments, and/or problems with receptive, expressive, or pragmatic language. Visual impairments are impairments in vision that exist despite correction and can include blindness. Emotional disturbances may include schizophrenia, depression, physical symptoms, difficulty building relationships, or an inability to learn not explained by other factors. Orthopedic impairments may be caused by disease, cerebral palsy, amputations, fractures, or burns. Autism is a developmental disability that significantly affects communication and socialization. Traumatic brain injuries are acquired injuries that result in impairments in cognition, language, executive functioning, sensation, motor and physical functioning, and/or speech. Other health impairments are chronic or acute health problems such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, diabetes, heart conditions, sickle cell anemia, epilepsy, Tourette syndrome, leukemia, and kidney disease. Specific learning disabilities include disorders of reading (dyslexia), spelling, written expression, and mathematical processing. Deaf-blindness encompasses co-existing hearing and visual impairments. The category of multiple disabilities indicates the presence of co-existing disabilities that result in severe educational needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

Limitations and Delimitations

The participants in this study were individuals employed as either general education teachers, special education teachers, or paraprofessionals working in PreK-12 public schools. The participation in this study was voluntary. As such, the experiences of others who did not volunteer for participation are not represented. This study did not include the perspectives of other key individuals working in school settings such as speech-language pathologists, administrators, counselors, and nursing staff. Also, the participants were all from the same regional area which is largely rural and bound by policies and procedures pertaining to the State of Tennessee.

Chapter 1 Summary

Increasing demands to provide all students with access to the general education curriculum frequently require general educators, special educators, and paraprofessionals to navigate incredibly complex collaborative relationships to establish environments suitable for both academic and social learning. This chapter provided a brief introduction to various pieces of legislation that has altered special education in the United States including PARC *v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, IDEIA (2004), and NCLB (2002). This chapter established educational equity theory as the theoretical framework for the study and introduced the reader to the terms *general education teacher*, *special education teacher*, *paraprofessional*, *inclusion*, *collaboration*, and *teaching relationship*. Moreover, this chapter established the purpose of this study which was to provide an examination of the relationships between general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals and the influences of these relationships on students with disabilities.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

The Social Framework of the School

In their examination of the school as a social system, Hoy and Miskel (2013) indicated that schools are social systems framed in the context of structural, individual, cultural, political, and pedagogical elements. Using a variety of systems perspectives, Hoy and Miskel described schools as open-systems models that are affected by external and internal factors. As a social system, the school operates on an open system, is interdependent, goal oriented, structural, normative, sanction bearing, political, peopled, conceptual, and relative and has a distinctive culture. Understanding the significance of a school's climate, culture, politics, and environment is critical to the ultimate success of the school in terms of teaching and student learning. Hoy and Miskel defined learning as "experience [that] produces a stable change in someone's knowledge or behavior" (p. 43). Therefore, according to the authors, the purpose of education is to produce students capable of demonstrating a change in knowledge. How educators and schools bring about such a change is the focus of current educational research. At the heart of understanding how to help students with disabilities to make educational progress is the desire for significant change in student learning and behaviors.

Smith (2001) noted that Peter Senge placed an emphasis on the decentralization of leadership within organizations "so as to enhance the capacity of all people to work productively toward common goals." In the current framework of traditional schooling, leadership still emphasizes a centralized approach. However, in the context of educating students with disabilities, a higher level of collaboration – or *decentralized leadership* – and cooperation among parents, educators, paraprofessionals, school leaders, and specialists is required. Berry (2021) stated, "A shared sense of responsibility for the education of students with disabilities can

have positive effects for both teachers and students" (p. 95). The benefits of inclusive education are many; however, much work is required for individual teams to engage in significant collaborative relationships.

Pugach et al. (2020) questioned the role of curriculum theory in preparing teachers for inclusive education. The authors identified the paucity of special education courses in general education teacher preparation programs as a systemic problem. Furthermore, Pugach et al. concluded that special education teachers have not been included in discussions regarding general education curricula:

> Special education has claimed an authentic sense of advocacy in protecting the educational rights of students who have disabilities and assuring that their voices are heard and securing their access to the general education curriculum. But that same kind of unrelenting advocacy has not extended to preparing special education teachers to participate in the development of strong general education curricula (p. 95).

In much of the discussion regarding the education of students with disabilities, the authors found special education teachers are regarded as instructional experts while general educators are regarded as content experts. This division of roles has contributed to the barriers that exist to forming collaborative relationships. Pugach et al. additionally acknowledged and discussed the *hidden curriculum*. According to the authors, the hidden curriculum exists as "power differentials between high- and low-income parents of students who have disabilities, or how collaboration plays out between general and special education teachers" (p. 96). Aspects of a hidden curriculum frequently affect how students with disabilities are included in general education settings.

Roles and Responsibilities

Overall, the primary finding in the literature regarding the roles and responsibilities of general educators, special educators, and paraprofessionals is a lack of clearly defined roles and expectations (Mason et al., 2021). Tzivinikou (2015) stated, "The collaboration of special and general education teachers is one of the most important factors related to the effectiveness of the education of pupils with special education needs" (p. 109). To understand the collaborative process and its relationship to IEP implementation, knowledge of the roles and responsibilities of those involved in the day-to-day collaborative process is required. This literature review provides information regarding roles, perceptions, experiences, barriers, and suggestions.

The Role of the Special Education Teacher

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Section 602 details the specific requirements for special education teacher licensure (IDEA, 2004). IDEA also specifies that lesson planning requires a certified teacher; therefore, both general and special education teachers are ultimately responsible for planning instruction for students. Concerning educator roles in collaboration, Dieker and Rodriguez (2013) reported that special educators are often relegated to the role of assistant in higher level math and science courses due to a lack of content knowledge in these areas – thus leading to fewer opportunities for differentiation of instruction. Using a mixed-methods design, Ní Bhroin and King (2020) found that special education teachers were primarily responsible for IEP development and most shared a copy of the IEP with general education teachers (86.7%). Interestingly, paraprofessionals in Ní Bhroin and King's study were the least likely individuals to receive a copy of the IEP (24.1%). Using semi-structured interviews and observations, Mihajlovic (2020) found special education teachers generally taught in small groups, one-to-one, and in conjunction with general educators.

Given the many aspects of a special education teacher's role – lesson planning, IEP development and implementation, collaboration with school staff and parents, implementing academic and behavioral programming, and addressing the needs of students with various educational and/or medical disabilities – it is understandable that special education teachers were more likely to experience burn-out (Caputo & Langher, 2015; Monnin et al., 2021). Zabel and Zabel (2002) and Berry (2021) found high rates of turnover for special education teachers due to job-related stress. The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded this problem through increased teacher shortages nationwide (Monnin et al., 2021). Berry (2021) further noted that the shortage of special education teachers is quite problematic in rural areas as these positions are more difficult to fill.

The Role of the Paraprofessional

The Council for Exceptional Children (2015) provided a list of the standards necessary for effectively trained paraeducators. Those standards include possessing a knowledge of learner development and learning differences, learning environments, curricular content knowledge, assessment, instructional planning and strategies, professional learning and ethical practice, and collaboration. According to Mason et al. (2021), paraprofessionals fill instructional gaps created by a shortage of special education teachers and increasing numbers of students identified with educational disabilities. Moreover, both Mason et al. (2021) and Ostlund et al. (2021) found the role of the paraprofessional was viewed as underestimated given the number of responsibilities that paraprofessionals assumed in the general and special education settings. Ostlund et al. found that paraprofessionals are viewed as both caregivers and educators. In addition, Ostlund et al. found that paraprofessionals are constrained by hierarchical classroom and school structures that may lead to an underappreciation of their role.

In a meta-analysis of the existing studies on paraprofessional implemented behavior interventions, Walker et al. (2021) found that paraprofessionals often serve as the instructor for students with disabilities. This finding is contradictory to the guidance provided in IDEA, Part B, Section 300.156, which stipulated that paraprofessionals should work under the supervision of certified special education teachers to assist in the provision of special education and/or related services (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b). Walker et al. additionally drew conclusions between a lack of special education teacher training resulting in a lack of paraprofessional training that ultimately resulted in evidence-based practices not being followed. Walker et al. also found that paraprofessionals were employed to provide behavioral interventions to students with autism, intellectual disabilities, and multiple disabilities in both inclusive and non-inclusive settings. Walker et al.'s work illustrated the need for support and training for paraprofessionals and educators to address the severity of needs that students with complex disabilities have.

In a mixed methods analysis, Zhao et al. (2021) examined the tasks completed by paraprofessionals assisting students in general education settings. Overall, the authors found that paraprofessionals provided physical caretaking, supported student organization, managed difficult behaviors, and promoted student independence. Moreover, Zhao et al. found that collaboration between paraprofessionals and teachers was critical to student success. In an analysis of the roles of paraprofessionals in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Germany, Fritzsche and Kopfer (2021) found confusion existed regarding the roles of educational assistants and that paraprofessionals were often charged with tasks that they are not qualified to complete. Furthermore, the authors found paraprofessionals' autonomy was subject to organizational control that undermined their professionalism (Fritzsche & Kopfer, 2021). In an examination of the perspectives of over 1,800 paraprofessionals, Fisher and Pleasants (2012) found the

paraprofessionals provided behavioral support, implemented teacher-planned instruction, supervised students, and provided personal care support for students with disabilities.

The Role of the General Education Teacher

As the authority on the general education curriculum, general educators play an integral role in the education of students with disabilities (Kochhar-Bryant & Heishman, 2010). As all students are considered general education students first, general education teachers must accept their responsibility in meeting the educational needs of each student assigned to them regardless of the student's educational status (Fowler et al., 2019). The IRIS Center at Peabody College (2021) identified the role of a general education teacher as being responsible for their duties in educating students with disabilities, assisting in IEP development, collaborating with families and specialists, and conducting assessments of students' abilities. Despite these expectations, Woods et al. found the general education teachers in their study had experienced low involvement in the IEP process and feeling as if their input was not as valuable. In addition, general education teachers reported they were not provided adequate supports to serve students with special needs in their classrooms. Narrative data was collected and revealed that some general education teachers viewed special education as a separate system (Woods et al., 2018).

An Examination of Collaboration

According to Berry (2019) collaboration exists as a continuum of involvement ranging from consultation to collaboration to co-teaching. In an examination of the co-teaching process, Tzivinikou (2015) found in-service for paired teams of general and special education teachers was effective for improving collaboration, application of knowledge, decreasing conflict, and increasing teacher responsibility for all students. According to Tzivinikou, co-teaching requires that teachers work together to provide instruction to students with or without educational

disabilities. Co-teaching is more demanding in that teachers must work together to overcome many of the barriers to collaboration (lack of time, personality differences, lack of resources, or lack of training). Co-teachers must be mindful that the special education teacher and/or paraprofessional does more than merely assist. To mitigate that notion, Tzivinikou recommended that both partners assume ownership in the instructional process for all students.

Paulsrud and Nilholm (2020) completed a review of the literature regarding cooperative practices between general and special education teachers. Citing increased pressure on educators from global initiatives for standardized testing, the authors indicated educators must *teach to the test* and risked neglecting the educational needs of students with disabilities. Paulsrud and Nilholm explained that collaboration includes cooperative teaching, consulting teaching, supportive resource programs, and instructional assistants. They also saw co-teaching as existing in five primary models that included:

- *one teach, one assist*
- *station teaching*
- *parallel teaching*
- *alternative teaching*
- *team teaching*

The authors noted that co-teaching most often occurred as the *one teach, one assist* or the *parallel* model. In the *one teach, one assist* model the special education teacher frequently assumed a subordinate role. In the parallel teaching model the class was divided into two groups by the teachers. To establish successful co-teaching, Paulsrud and Nilholm stated that participation should be voluntary and administrative supports should be in place. In a consultative model special education teachers function as experts giving advice to general

educators. However, the authors argued consultations could be more successful if both the general and special education teachers functioned as consultative partners. In addition, the authors found IEP instruction was not the focus in inclusive environments as the standardized curriculum was the primary focus. General education teachers more often taught new material and interacted more frequently with larger groups of students. Also, general education teachers were more focused on the content while special educators focused on life skills (Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2020). Such conflicting approaches to inclusion led to less than inclusive learning environments for students. When the teachers were flexible and cooperative, better classroom conditions were established. In addition, Paulsrud and Nilholm found shared planning was associated with shared ideas and that chemistry between educators and aligned teaching styles were important factors to successful co-teaching. A lack of training, insufficient professional development, and low administrative supports were identified as barriers to the inclusion process.

In a review of the current state of the performance of students with disabilities, Fuchs et al. (2018) overwhelmingly indicated performance was 'abysmal.' The authors cited general education's inability to address the needs of students with disabilities adequately as a part of the problem. According to Fuchs et al., initiatives such as inclusion and co-teaching, and the dissolution of the resource room and comprehensive development classroom have not yielded the benefits intended by researchers in the 1980s and 1990s. However, Fuchs et al. argued that such practices do have merit; however, their implementation has not been as intended and the provision of such services in a narrow vacuum has had a limiting effect. The authors stated:

One likely explanation of this result is that SWD differ in the severity of their learning difficulties. Those with more severe problems need an intensity of instruction that goes

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well beyond what cooperative learning, co-teaching, and other whole-class approaches

provide." (p. 129)

Despite decades of education reform regarding best practices for students with disabilities,

interpretation and implementation of these reforms has continued to prove difficult for states,

districts, schools, and individual teaching staff.

Preservice Teacher Perceptions Regarding Collaboration

Much of the previous research regarding collaborative relationships focused on the

perceptions of preservice teachers as did Da Fonte and Barton-Arwood's (2017) work regarding

preservice teacher candidates' perceptions about collaboration. The preservice teachers identified

time management, content knowledge, and communication as areas of concern. Relating to

content knowledge, the authors found the preservice candidates were receptive to learning from

each other while simultaneously being concerned about a lack of specific content knowledge.

Regarding communication, Da Fonte and Barton-Arwood found preservice teachers were

concerned with themes such as respect, understanding, and avoiding conflict.

Likewise, Stities et al. (2018) examined whether preservice teachers felt well-prepared

regarding inclusion as a means of assessing program effectiveness. To conduct their study the

researchers surveyed and interviewed 120 preservice teachers (special and general educators)

who were planning to teach in early childhood or elementary school. The results indicated that

assuming the general educator was responsible for inclusion was associated with a more positive

view of inclusion. Concerning the definition of inclusion, most of the preservice teachers

indicated that inclusion was "including special education students in general education classes"

(p. 30). Participants cited their coursework and internships as helping prepare them to teach

students with special learning needs in inclusive settings. In addition, participants indicated they

had concerns regarding their abilities to teach students with diverse needs and being fair. Most of the participants indicated they needed additional experience in inclusive settings to be adequately prepared for their teaching. For the final two questions participants indicated they needed more training in differentiation as well as support from other staff and administrators to be prepared for teaching students in inclusive settings (Stities et al., 2018).

Ritter et al. (2020) conducted a quantitative study to examine the effects of pre-service teacher pairings on their attitudes toward collaboration. Teachers were grouped as either general education pairs, special education pairs, or a combined team of a special educator and a general educator. They then attended a seminar and completed a 12-week course working in a school setting. The results indicated the teams of different discipline teachers had a more positive attitude toward inclusion. General education teachers working in this pairing showed the most significant gains in their attitudes toward inclusion and general competence. The results of Ritter et al.'s study demonstrated the benefits to educators working in collaborative pairs. Draper (2019) indicated collaboration is associated with increased teacher efficacy and more collegial teacher relationships.

Teacher Perceptions of Collaboration and Inclusion

Several studies addressed the phenomenon of teacher perceptions of collaboration and inclusion. To understand more fully the inclusion opportunities for students with significant disabilities, Zagona et al. (2017) examined, through surveys and interviews, general and special educators regarding their preparation programs and professional development activities. Zagona et al. found a significant relationship between teacher discipline (general or special education) and their levels of skill development relating to individualizing instruction, pacing instruction, and adapting content standards. The authors also found a significant relationship between teacher

type and participation in IEP meetings, decision making relating to instruction, and collaboration with other professionals. In addition, Zagona et al. found that teachers who had completed coursework on inclusion were more prepared to implement inclusive education. Through teacher interviews, Zagona et al. were able to identify barriers to inclusion such as staffing, high caseloads, difficulty with modifying instructional activities, and teachers who were resistant to collaborative partnerships.

In an examination of the perceptions of general and special education teachers working in two rural school districts in New Hampshire, Berry (2021) found a shared sense of responsibility for all students was critical to establishing a supportive school culture conducive for inclusion. The author conducted a project called Support and Training for Educators in Rural Areas (SATERA) which spanned 4 years and was completed in three phases. In the first phase, teacher perceptions of shared responsibility were explored through in-person surveys. Overall, the author found general education teachers felt they shared responsibility for educating students with disabilities to a greater extent than special education teachers believed them to share. This finding highlighted a discrepancy between how special and general education teachers viewed their responsibilities. In addition, special education teachers largely believed they alone were responsible for the education of students with disabilities citing their legal responsibilities for IEP implementation. Both general and special education teachers agreed they were responsible for assessing student progress, modifying the curriculum, and managing student behavior. Regarding the general education classroom, special education teachers believed their primary role was to support students at scheduled times. A small percentage of special education teachers believed they were responsible for both co-teaching and co-assessing students with disabilities. However, general education teachers reported feeling their relationship with special education

teachers was more for consultative purposes rather than sharing instruction. Special educators perceived general educators as a source of professional support. However, the need for common planning time was identified by both general and special education teachers as a barrier to collaborative relationships. Regarding professional development opportunities, both general and special educators indicated a desire for training on differentiation and co-teaching. Thirty-six percent of special education teachers indicated that they wanted training in content areas; general education teachers indicated a desire for training regarding curriculum modifications, accommodations, and specific disability types (Berry, 2021).

In Phase 2 of the study the research team provided five 90-minute workshops to the educators on the topics previously identified as areas of need (Berry, 2021). Sixteen teachers, paired voluntarily in general and special education teams, participated in the professional development sessions. School administrators restructured the schedule to allow teachers time for collaboration. Teachers could co-plan using Planbook.com and Google Documents. In Phase 3, a special and general education pair of teachers requested to co-teach 13 students for two academic years. The students were individuals without disabilities (n=6), those with a Section 504 plan (n=3), and those with IEPs (n=4). The students with IEPs were identified as having high incidence disabilities. The results indicated students with disabilities almost doubled the gains in reading comprehension when compared to a normative group. In the area of reading fluency, students with IEPs performed below the norm group and experienced fewer gains. Regarding math concepts and applications, the students in the co-taught course scored above those in the normative group. Overall, the students with IEPs experienced higher gains than the students in the normative group. Another important observation from Berry's work is the gain of social

benefits for students. One educator indicated students in the co-taught class learned "empathy, respect, and kindness" (p. 103).

In an examination of the differences in perspectives among teacher educators, Sheppard and Wieman (2020) found teachers from math and special education backgrounds differ significantly in how they approach math instruction for students with learning differences. The authors indicated it was essential for educators to learn about each other's disciplines in order to collaborate. In a qualitative study, Biggs et al. (2016) used purposeful sampling to identify nine teams of special education teachers and educational assistants working with students with severe disabilities. Through interviewing these educational teams, Biggs et al. found teacher mindset had a significant effect on the success of the teacher-paraprofessional relationship with more respectful, responsive, and understanding teachers creating more equitable working relationships. The authors also found that teacher proficiency was associated with better collaborative partnerships, and teacher leadership was identified as essential to establishing consistent communication practices. In addition, the authors found that teachers who were more organized and prepared were viewed as more successful (Biggs et al., 2016).

Caputo and Langher (2015) evaluated the perceptions of special education teachers regarding their collaborative practices, their associated feelings of support, and how relationships with general education teachers corresponded with the inclusion of students with disabilities. The authors used the *Collaboration and Support for Inclusive Teaching (CSIT) Scale* and the *Maslach Burnout Inventory, Educators Survey (MBI-ES)* with 276 special education teachers. The teachers were 224 females and 52 males teaching in special education at middle schools and high schools in Rome. The CSIT assessed support provided by general education teachers, collaboration, school-level inclusion practices, and attitudes toward disability. The MBI-ES

examined emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. Increased emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low personal accomplishment on the MBI-ES were associated with increased levels of burn-out as assessed by the CSIT. Caputo and Langher found moderate associations between collegial collaboration and higher feelings of acceptance. As the literature has indicated, special education teachers experience higher levels of isolation and increased burn-out (Zabel & Zabel, 2002); therefore, the authors' intent was to establish a case for increasing collaborative practices between general and special education teachers (Kaff, 2004). Caputo and Langher (2015) indicated support from general education teachers is crucial to special educators' feelings of inclusion, accomplishment, and acceptance. Special educators tend to perceive inclusion of students with disabilities in a more positive manner when they are well supported by their general education colleagues (Caputo & Langher, 2015).

Biggs et al. (2019) conducted a qualitative study with special educators and educational assistants to identify what competencies are necessary for educators to collaborate well with educational assistants and to determine how educators should be prepared for such partnerships. The researchers found that *balanced leadership* skills were essential to educators having good working relationships with educational assistants. Biggs et al. (2019) indicated that special educators demonstrating balanced leadership possessed supervisory knowledge and skills and were able to establish positive partnerships. They also found that special educators should be knowledgeable of paraprofessionals' educational backgrounds and able to identify classroom roles and responsibilities. Five skill competencies for educators were identified: (a) assertive communication, (b) collaboration skills, (c) coaching skills, (d) organization skills, and (e) conflict management skills (Biggs et al., 2019).

In an examination of general education teachers' perspectives on collaboration with occupational therapists, Bradley et al. (2020) found general education teachers lacked knowledge of the roles and responsibilities of occupational therapists. This finding suggested that general education teachers were lacking in their knowledge of the expectations of related service providers which mirrored some of the confusion regarding the roles of special education teachers and paraprofessionals. In a review of the literature regarding collaborative relationships between special educators and physical education teachers, Klein and Hollingshead (2015) found many physical education teachers felt unprepared to teach physical education standards adequately to students with disabilities.

Given the increasing prevalence of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders and the need for these students to have access to the general curriculum, Able et al. (2015) explored the supports teachers and students require to be successful in the inclusive classroom. The authors began their study by acknowledging the challenges students with autism face in general education settings that can include navigating complex social relationships and the challenge of participating in unstructured academic settings. Proximity to typically developing peers does not indicate inclusion for students with autism spectrum disorders. "Research suggests physical integration does not necessarily equate to full social inclusion" (Able et al., 2015, p. 45). In analysis of teacher perspectives at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, Able et al. found that students with autism spectrum disorders had social relationship needs, lacked self-advocacy skills, experienced difficulties with transitions, and wanted their peers to be better educated about autism. The teachers in Able et al.'s study indicated feeling overwhelmed and in need of supportive school communities. Furthermore, the teachers indicated

they needed to know more about autism, appropriate accommodations, facilitating socialization, and promoting advocacy for students with autism (Able et al., 2015).

Paraprofessionals' Perceptions Regarding Collaboration and Inclusion

In their study, Biggs et al. (2016) identified the importance of paraprofessional mindsets. Paraprofessionals who were cooperative, motivated, and focused on students contributed to establishing better collaborative partnerships. Paraprofessional proficiency was identified as another important influence on collaborative relationships. Proficient professionals were described as willing to learn and willing to seek assistance. Teachers and educational assistants indicated that having a shared vision was necessary for long-term success (Biggs et al., 2016). Fisher and Pleasants (2012) found that paraprofessionals were concerned about a lack of appreciation and lack of training for assigned tasks, and paraprofessionals reported concerns about high rates of turnover as a result of low wages. The paraprofessionals in Fisher and Pleasants' study reported increased paraprofessional staffing was associated with less interaction between general education teachers and students with disabilities. The paraprofessionals also voiced concerns about being considered the primary instructors for students with disabilities (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012).

In an analysis of the perceptions of special education teachers and educational assistants, Mason et al. (2021) found that time constraints were one cause of minimal of opportunities for teacher and paraprofessional supervision. Paraprofessionals reported feeling they were not respected and indicated they lacked necessary training. Paraprofessionals also indicated much of their training was not differentiated or job-specific and was a "waste of time." Special education teachers in Mason et al.'s study indicated they had insufficient training regarding supervision of paraprofessionals. In addition, some special education teachers indicated that paraprofessionals

were hired without being provided a full description of what their job entailed which led to issues with turnover and job dissatisfaction. The authors indicated this lack of clarity in job roles and expectations had the potential to lead to conflict between special educators and paraprofessionals (Mason et al., 2021).

Perceptions of Other Stakeholders

In a study examining the perceptions of stakeholders in special education, Woods et al. (2018) gathered data from general education teachers, one special education teacher, a psychologist, a counselor, parents, and school administrators. The special education teacher reported having daily or weekly contact with parents as opposed to the general educators who made less frequent contact with parents. Administrators reported active involvement with IEP development; however, they described not having contact with families of students with special needs outside of this process (Woods et al., 2018).

Biggs et al. (2016) found that school and district leaders played a role in influencing collaborative relationships among teachers and educational assistants. Similarly, Lambrecht et al. (2020) explored the school administrator's role in developing collaborative relationships among general and special education teachers. Overall, administrators in Lambrechet et al.'s study reported using transformational and instructional leadership practices to promote collaboration. However, the researchers found that when collaborative practices were considered, no statistical relationship could be determined between transformational practices and IEP implementation. A positive relationship was established between instructional leadership and IEP implementation. Both leadership types had moderate effects on collaboration. As a reassurance of fidelity of service and as a means for enhancing collaboration, all involved stakeholders working with

students with special learning needs should receive a copy or abbreviated version of the IEP and assume an active role in IEP implementation (Lambrecht et al., 2020).

Musyoka et al. (2017) examined teacher perceptions of working with students with deafness and hard of hearing. The results indicated many of the teachers expressed a need for more training on various disabilities and that they needed training on how to teach students with specific learning disabilities. The teachers indicated feeling unprepared by their teacher programs and felt unprepared about how to communicate with their students. Musyoka et al. found many of the teachers needed more training on teaching strategies and behavior management techniques. In addition, the teachers expressed a need for training on how to make student-specific materials. The teachers also stated that implementing IEPs was a challenge and that they lacked a specific curriculum for their students. Indeed, Musyoka et al.'s study established the need for collaboration in education. Although many of the teachers in Musyoka et al.'s study were certified in deaf education, they needed a more comprehensive set of skills for educating their students.

In a qualitative analysis of the perceptions of parents, teachers, and school administrators regarding the services provided for students with autism spectrum disorders, Iadarola et al. (2015) found tension existed between all groups (teachers and paraprofessionals, school staff and school administration, teachers and parents, and special education staff and general education staff). The researchers found the supervisory aspects of the relationship, varied backgrounds and ethnicities, and the need for training for educational assistants were all factors in causing problems in the teacher-paraprofessional relationship. Special education teachers in Iadarola et al.'s study indicated general education teachers had a lack of knowledge regarding students with autism spectrum disorders which resulted in a division between the two teacher sub-groups.

Overall, educators reported that a lack of support and resources led to tension between themselves and school administration. Likewise, parents expressed that they did not feel as if their families or teachers were supported by school administration. To bring about a decrease in the perceived tensions among these groups, Iadarola et al. (2015) suggested staff training and creating school cultures of acceptance for students with disabilities.

Collaboration and Student Success

Gosselin and Sundeen (2018) explored how collaborative planning, interprofessional collaboration, and co-teaching benefited students with extensive needs in the area of literacy instruction. The authors indicated cohesiveness of the IEP team and coordination of services among general and special educators (speech-language therapist, special education teacher, paraprofessional, and physical therapist) along with the student's family had a tremendous impact on the student's overall success. Moreover, the authors noted that fragmentation of services had the potential to lead to failure. To remediate problems with collaboration, Gosselin and Sundeen suggested IEP teams have shared language, goals with a specific focus, and a plan for sharing information.

Using case studies and interviews, Cameron and Tveit (2019) examined the impact of multidisciplinary collaboration on educational programming for young children with significant disabilities. The findings yielded information on the internal and external aspects of collaboration. Regarding internal features, Cameron and Tveit identified communication, frequent contact, and shared goals as indicative of the collaboration process. Regarding external features, the researchers identified connection to the student, opportunities, and expertise as additional factors affecting collaboration. Connection to the child was associated with successful collaboration (Cameron & Tveit, 2019). Gebhardt et al. (2015) conducted an analysis of the

collaborative practices of general and special education teachers at the elementary and secondary levels in Austria by examining teaching practices, teamwork, school-level factors, and background variables. The results indicated that elementary teachers rated their experiences more favorably than teachers at the secondary level which may be a result of the difficulty of scheduling for collaboration at the high school level (Gebhardt et al., 2015).

Jortveit and Kovac (2021) completed a narrative study with eight educators in Norway. The teachers were general educators (four) and special educators (four) and were identified as having good engagement in collaborative partnerships. The educators were interviewed in pairs. The results showed that the teachers had established a common understanding of their educational principles, valued inclusion, were focused on students, valued diversity, and had zero tolerance for the mistreatment of students with disabilities. Despite the many important findings of their research, Jortveit and Kovac (2021) had a very small sample size that limited generalizability of their results. Hansen et al. (2020) framed their study using social practice theory to conduct a comparison of inclusion and exclusion practices among educators. The authors indicated the categorization of school services was a barrier to collaborative practices and inclusion. Hansen et al. argue current educational practices remain exclusionary for students with special learning needs and suggested a transformative approach to content, teaching methods, and the systemic organization of education.

Collaboration with Paraprofessionals and Associated Student Outcomes

Carter et al. (2016) examined using special educators and paraprofessionals to train typically developing students to support the inclusion of students with significant disabilities at the high school level. Using one social and one academic goal per student as a measure of intervention effectiveness, the researchers found students with significant disabilities

experienced a significant increase in the number of social interactions they had with typically developing peers. Carter et al. also found that students with significant disabilities had more active participation in their general education settings. In addition to Carter et al.'s research focusing on the efficacy of using peer supports for students with significant disabilities, they illustrated the importance of having well-trained special education teachers and paraprofessionals who were able to implement innovative ideas.

In an effort to explore increasing student engagement in the general education setting, Russel et al. (2015) explored the proximity of paraprofessionals to students. The researchers acknowledged that paraprofessionals were typically in close proximity to students with disabilities when in general education settings. However, the researchers noted that excessive interactions between educational assistants and students ultimately had negative effects on the academic and social success of students with disabilities. Russel et al. found that when contact between the assistants and the students was curtailed, students experienced an increase in problematic behaviors. Using a fading method, the researchers were able to demonstrate a successful use of decreasing student and educational assistant proximity to facilitate an increase in student engagement with the general education teacher. While Russel et al.'s study was limited to a small sample size and was conducted with young children and no students of other ages, it illustrated the importance of professional development for paraprofessionals. With proper training on behavioral techniques, paraprofessionals can successfully support the inclusion of students with significant disabilities in the general education setting.

Gifford et al. (2018) ascertained that a paraprofessional was able to increase independent learning opportunities using applied behavior analysis for a student with Down syndrome and an intellectual disability. The researchers targeted nine *learning to learn* skills for the student that

included: remaining seated, attending to group instruction, imitating the motor movements of peers, completing fine motor tasks, responding to communicative attempts from peers, following group directions, successfully navigating transitions, responding to unusual events, and responding to unusual events while establishing joint attention with a peer. Gifford et al. found that the student's independence for all target skills increased by 68.1% from baseline data. The work of Gifford et al. demonstrated that with sufficient training, educational assistants can have a tremendous impact on student success.

In a study that used in situ training, Ledford et al. (2017) found targeted training and feedback for educational assistants improved educational outcomes for students with severe autism and developmental delays. Through changing environmental arrangements and prompting, trained paraprofessionals were able to help students make positive behavior changes and increase social interactions. Ledford et al. noted that feasibility of the study results posed a practical issue for school staff as teachers often indicated they were not prepared to provide coaching and feedback to educational assistants. Given that time constraints is a known barrier to collaborative relationships (Ostlund et al., 2021), teachers and educational assistants struggle to have opportunities to engage in coaching and feedback sessions.

Mrachko and Kaczmarek (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of seven studies that examined the process for teaching educational assistants to implement social communicative interventions for young children with autism. The authors found that four of the seven studies they reviewed indicated that educational assistants were able to support spontaneous communication with fidelity when provided training (Mrachko & Kaczmarek, 2016). Knight et al. (2018) collaborated with educational assistants to create video modeling lessons for students with autism and intellectual disabilities. The researchers found that video modeling, which is

based on the work of Bandura and social learning theory, was effective for teaching academic skills. The results indicated that the three students in the study became more independent and their need for adult support decreased (Knight et al., 2018).

In a study examining the effectiveness of paraprofessionals utilizing peer support to facilitate inclusion for students with low incidence disabilities, Brock and Carter (2015) found that three of four students were able to increase their social interactions significantly while maintaining their acquisition of academic skills. To accomplish this goal, the researchers provided 4½ hours of training on peer support arrangements to special education teachers. The special education teachers then trained the paraprofessionals who initiated peer support engagements. While peer support is supplemental to direct instruction from a certified teacher, Brock and Carter's research demonstrated it is an effective way to involve paraprofessionals to help students learn to engage with their peers. Their work embodied the notions of IDEA 2004 which recommended that paraprofessionals should be supervised by teachers.

In a meta-analysis examining the services provided by paraprofessionals for 59 students with autism spectrum disorders, Walker et al. (2019) found paraprofessionals were effective in helping these students improve their communication and social skills. The paraprofessionals were also able to help students make improvements with challenging behaviors, improve academics, and learn life skills. They also found that interventions provided by paraprofessionals in general education settings resulted in more significant changes in student behavior when compared to those same interventions delivered in the special education setting. Walker et al. cautioned that collaboration between general educators, special educators, and paraprofessionals is critical to paraprofessional effectiveness. This meta-analysis further illustrated the need for teacher training, as general and special educators must be both knowledgeable of how best to

interact with paraprofessionals. Walker et al. (2019) explained that paraprofessionals have the double role of being the individuals who work most frequently with students with autism spectrum disorders and most often being the least trained. The lack of training for paraprofessionals is a systemic problem that affects student success as well as the collaborative process.

In a meta-analysis of 76 studies, Jones et al. (2020) examined the effectiveness of paraprofessionals with the implementation of reading interventions. The authors cited the impact of the Matthew Effect (identified by Stanovich in 1986) which indicated that students who are good readers will continue to make improvements while those who struggle with reading will only get further behind. Jones et al. indicated that targeted reading interventions serve to address the needs of these struggling students. As paraprofessionals were frequently identified as the individuals providing interventions with at-risk students (Reddy et al, 2019; Walker et al., 2019), their importance and need for training and support cannot be underestimated. Jones et al. (2020) explained the role of a teacher was to provide core instruction; however, paraprofessionals were able to extend learning through one-on-one and small group instruction.

Biggs et al. (2017) examined the role of educational assistants providing guidance for peer interaction supports for four middle school students using IPADs with the Proloquo2Go™ software for communicative purposes. The authors explained the importance of peer support arrangements in supporting the inclusion of students with significant disabilities in general education settings. Biggs et al. (2017) cited Giangreco (2010), who reported that educational assistants could hinder the inclusion of students with disabilities without additional supports. Therefore, the authors established that peer supports had the potential to bridge the gap between students relying entirely on educational assistants and integrating with their peers. The authors

found that having educational assistants facilitate peer interactions the potential for social

interaction increased and provided additional opportunities for students to practice using their

communication devices. Biggs et al. (2017) identified time as a barrier to collaborative planning

for establishment of effective communication systems for students with significant disabilities

due to the need for input from speech-language teachers, general educators, paraprofessionals,

and special educators.

Collaboration and Meeting Students' Basic Needs as a Prerequisite to Learning

Fisher and Crawford (2020) examined the effects of implementing Maslow's Hierarchy

to facilitate school change in a school with large numbers of students living in poverty. Many of

the students were experiencing conditions such as food insecurity, being raised by grandparents,

lacking school supplies, and not being prepared for kindergarten. The program began with

meeting the physiological needs of students by providing food on Fridays (backpack program) to

all students. Educational resources were then made available to students, staff, and families. The

school adopted a mission of getting to know all parties as individuals and worked to increase

communication with families through workshops and family nights. By first meeting the needs of

students, staff, and families, the school in Fisher and Crawford's study transformed from the 10th

percentile (failing status) to the 90th percentile (distinguished status) in a period of seven years.

Given that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are at a disadvantage in terms of

vocabulary knowledge (Goldstein et al., 2017), children who are struggling with lower

socioeconomic status as well as a disability are at a distinct disadvantage in terms of making

educational progress.

Collaboration and Virtual Learning

The researcher found limited research focusing on collaboration while teaching virtually. Considering the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, Fogo and Requa (2020) presented a discussion of their experiences educating teacher candidates virtually using the theoretical framework of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). To implement their instruction, the authors used Zoom meetings with lectures and break-out groups and combined general and special education students. Fogo and Requa (2020) found that using collaborative groups for online learning proved productive for their students and had the potential for future use by special and general education teachers when scheduling in-person sessions proved difficult. As many districts transferred to online learning models to mitigate problems that medically fragile students attending a traditional in-person school might encounter during the pandemic, collaboration among special and general educators for students with special learning needs became an important area of concern. In a survey of PreK-8th grade general education teachers, Bradley et al. (2020) found teachers more often communicated with occupational therapists by email (91.2%) as opposed to in-person communication (83.8%). Given that a lack of time is consistently reported as a barrier (Bradley et al., 2020), using online communication (email, shared documents, virtual meetings) has the potential to serve as a reliable means for increasing collaborative opportunities.

Response to Intervention

Public education has faced continuous change throughout history, and perhaps no recent change has had a greater effect on the identification of students with specific learning disabilities than Response to Intervention (RTI). The sweeping changes included in the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) have reshaped the ways students at risk

of academic failure receive interventions and how these students are evaluated for special education eligibility. By implementing these regulations, the United States changed both general education and special education practices. In a study examining the relationship between RTI and collaborative practices, Gomez-Najarro (2020) argued that RTI has the potential to facilitate collaboration between general and special education teachers.

In the RTI model, all students are to receive high quality, evidence-based instruction on basic skills (reading, math, written expression, and behavior) (Swanson et al., 2012). In addition, universal screeners identify students at risk of having learning difficulties. Students are placed in tiered instruction based on their scores on benchmark assessments. All students have access to Tier I instruction. Tier 2 instruction is implemented for children with a high level of need for intervention and are taught in smaller groups with an emphasis on addressing their individual learning needs. Students in Tier 3 receive the most intensive instruction in small groups. Progress monitoring data is maintained for students in Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention. If a student does not make the expected progress after receiving high quality, evidence-based instruction, they may be evaluated for a learning disability (Swanson et al., 2012).

To assess the perceptions of special education teachers concerning the advantages and disadvantages of the RTI model, Swanson et al. (2012) conducted observations, conducted focus groups, and completed interviews of 17 special education teachers who participated in the study in Year 1. Due to changes in positions, 12 special education teachers were available to participate in the study in Year 2. To assess instructional practices in reading, the authors used the Instructional Content Emphasis-Revised (ICE-R), and to assess instructional practices in mathematics, the authors developed and used the Math Observation Tool (MOT). They found:

1. The RTI model provided early identification of students with special learning needs and led to quicker access to intervention.

2. The teachers identified being able to serve students who did not qualify for special education with evidence-based instruction as a second advantage.

3. A third benefit was increased collaboration with other educators through team meetings.

4. A fourth advantage was seeing students with special learning needs as belonging to all teachers (general and special education).

5. The fifth identified advantage was the increased opportunity for special education teachers to consult with general education teachers.

Disadvantages noted by the special education teachers included much busier schedules as a result of an increased amount of paperwork, and they found scheduling and coordinating services problematic. Furthermore, the special education teachers indicated more staff were needed to implement the RTI model fully (Swanson et al., 2012).

Using a case study method, Gomez-Najarro (2020) enlisted 1st- through 5th-grade general education teachers, a psychologist, special education teachers, an RTI coordinator, a special education facilitator, an assistant principal, and a principal to participate in a study of the dynamics of RTI meetings. Gomez-Najarro observed 24 RTI meetings and eight referral meetings; she noted who participated in the meetings and analyzed the content of their discourse. Through the observations, analysis, and follow-up interviews, Gomez-Najarro found that special education teachers actively participated in the referral process and that collaboration was most often the result of teacher initiative. Her findings reinforced that scheduling was a barrier to special education teachers' participation in RTI meetings. Moreover, the author found that

collaboration with a special education teacher helped general education teachers to understand students' needs better and how to best approach instruction (Gomez-Najarro, 2020).

In an examination of collaborative practices among speech-language pathologists (SLPs) and general educators, Watson and Bellon-Harn (2013) indicated SLPs can use their knowledge base of language processes integrated with literacy skills to provide Tier 2 Response to Intervention (RTI) services in collaborative partnerships with general educators. They also offered helpful suggestions for collaboration which included understanding one's role in the collaborative partnership, obtaining administrative support, engaging in planning activities, and becoming oriented with classroom activities as well as tips for how to provide Tier 2 instruction, and strategies for progress monitoring.

In a study examining the perceptions of general education and special education teachers regarding the effectiveness of the RTI model and the severe discrepancy (SD) model as a means of identifying students with specific learning disabilities, Armendariz and Jung (2016) surveyed 160 general education teachers and 119 special education teachers from Orange County, California. The authors found special education teachers were more likely to accept the severe discrepancy model and were more likely to believe the RTI model was an acceptable tool of assessment for a child's problems. General education teachers were more likely to endorse the RTI model for evaluating students of diverse backgrounds compared to special education teachers. Special education teachers believed that the RTI model was more helpful with developing intervention strategies than general education teachers. Overwhelmingly, the results indicated special education teachers and general education teachers used and understood data differently given the nature of their respective positions (Armendariz & Jung, 2016).

The RTI model is a useful tool for improving student outcomes and creating multi-disciplinary collaboration advantages for increased student learning, access to high quality instruction for all students, increased collaboration between general and special education teachers, and the proper identification of students with learning disabilities. However, with associated increased work responsibilities and accountability measures, consideration must be given at the state and district levels regarding the provisions of adequate training and support if the RTI model is to be implemented with fidelity. In addition, consideration must be given to the differences with which general and special educators use and interpret data using the RTI model.

Response to Intervention[2] Behavior

In 2016, the Tennessee Department of Education published a guidance document for the reconceptualization of the RTI process. This document has since served as the guide for implementing tiered educational and behavioral interventions throughout the state. As RTI was initially implemented as a tiered approach to meet the academic skill deficits of students, Response to Intervention[2] Behavior (RTI[2]B) was the state's response to a tiered approach for meeting behavioral needs of students. According to the state's framework document:

> Similar to RTI[2] for academics, RTI[2]-B includes universal prevention efforts within Tier I to promote a positive school- and class-wide climate. Through a focus on strong Tier I behavior supports, schools can create a culture where all students and teachers are respected and included in their community. (Tennessee Department of Education, 2016, p. 6)

Through the implementation of the RTI[2]B process, the Tennessee Department of Education proposed that districts would experience improved school climate and student achievement,

additional instruction time, decreases in absenteeism, and fewer interruptions to learning, office referrals, and suspension (Tennessee Department of Education, 2016).

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) involves a system-wide approach to meeting both the educational and behavioral needs of students through using tiered interventions, progress monitoring, positive behavior interventions, professional development, curriculum design, and school, district, and community collaborations (Carta & Young, 2019). Although the terms MTSS and RTI are often used interchangeably, the approaches are different. Both approaches include the use of tiered interventions and progress monitoring. However, MTSS is a more comprehensive approach and RTI is considered one element of the overall approach.

Benner et al. (2013) have indicated students with emotional and behavioral challenges are more likely to have limited access to general education instruction – thus placing them at an increased likelihood of experiencing academic problems. Given the extent of behavioral difficulties students with emotional difficulties experience, a decreased emphasis is placed on academics, and children with emotional and behavioral problems are more likely to have lower grade point averages and increased absenteeism. Multi-tiered systems of support are identified as an effective approach to addressing the behavioral needs of students with emotional and behavioral difficulties (Bradshaw et al., 2012). Central to the idea of school-wide behavior improvements is the approach of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). An essential element of PBIS is universal screening for behavior. Benner et al. suggested the use of a *can't do/won't do assessment* for behavior following survey level assessments for academics. Benner et al. recommended the use of interdependent group contingency systems as a means for

improving behavior for students with emotional and behavioral problems in a whole-group setting.

Factors Associated with Inhibiting Relationship Development

In a mixed methods study, Ostlund et al. (2021) explored collaborative practices between special education teachers and paraprofessionals in a comprehensive development classroom setting who were assigned to help students identified as having intellectual disabilities. Using a qualitative approach, Ostlund et al. interviewed four special education teachers and five paraprofessionals who reported that a lack of time impinged on collaboration practices as planning time was most often devoted to solving practical problems rather than joint planning. In Ostlund et al.'s study, the special education teacher was viewed as the lead collaborative partner. The authors found insufficient professional development and a limited supervision as barriers for the development of paraprofessionals' skills. Unclear expectations were considered barriers to the success of collaborative relationships between special education teachers and educational assistants (Ostlund et al., 2021).

Barnes et al. (2021) explored the challenges and benefits of collaboration between special education teachers and educational assistants working with students with social-emotional disorders. The authors stated that poor collaboration affects classroom functions that could be mitigated through creating a classroom environment where paraprofessionals feel valued. This approach is associated with less staff turnover (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012) and better student outcomes (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007). Barnes et al. identified solidarity, clarity of roles, and creating a culture of respect as best practices in educator-paraprofessional collaborative relationships. The authors explained that solidarity focuses on using "we" language, practicing active listening, demonstrating teamwork practices, and deferring. Barnes et al. explained that

the practice of deferring to the educator and paraprofessional to confirm what action is to be taken builds mutual respect and consistency within the classroom. Clarity of roles was absolutely necessary to establishing well-defined classroom responsibilities for both teachers and educational assistants.

Reddy et al. (2019) conducted a synthesis of professional development research and found that paraprofessionals are likely to have received limited training despite being the most likely individuals to provide behavioral interventions; Walker et al.'s (2019) research produced similar findings. Bradley et al. (2020) found unclear roles, limited time, and minimal resources were barriers to collaborative relationships among general education teachers and occupational therapists. In a review of the literature, Tzivinikou (2015) found collaboration was affected by teacher attitudes, level of preparation and planning, and the implementation of inclusion practices through implementing individual student goals, accommodations, and supports.

Factors Associated with Promoting Relationship Development

According to Draper (2019), "When students with disabilities are separated from typical students, so are their teachers, leaving little opportunity for collaboration" (p. 31). Separation of students and teachers is the first and most critical barrier to collaboration. Draper noted that professional development activities for special education and general education staff are generally held as separate events. Draper further suggested the use of e-communication to address time constraints and planning consultation with each stakeholder in the collaborative process to obtain a better understanding of their role.

Jones (2012) suggested the use of the *Special Education Students at a Glance* approach (SESG) which uses three forms: the *Beginning of Year (BOY)* form, the *End of Year (EOY)* form, and the *Inclusion Running Record (IRR)* as tools for enhancing collaboration among general and

special education teachers. According to Jones, the BOY form was presented to general educators by a special education teacher to establish an understanding of each student's unique educational needs per their IEP. The EOY form aids general education teachers by providing insight regarding the individualized programming each student with an IEP received. The IRR form is recommended for use by paraprofessionals providing inclusion services. Jones (2012) explained that the use of the IRR form allowed paraprofessionals to keep track of services provided with corresponding time amounts ensuring fidelity.

Given that time constraints are a significant barrier to effective collaboration, Da Fonte and Barton-Arwood (2017) and Black and Hill (2020) offered suggestions to resolve this problem. Da Fonte and Barton-Arwood suggested teachers keep their meetings goal-directed to conserve time. In addition, the authors suggest using the *What, How, Who* planning approach developed by Murawski (2012). Da Fonte and Barton-Arwood suggested that using this approach allowed teachers to identify what needs to be taught, how it will be taught, and who (which students) needs additional support. To address content knowledge concerns, Da Fonte and Barton-Arwood suggested special education teachers develop a fact sheet containing disability-specific and/or student-specific dos, don'ts, characteristics, and teaching strategies. The authors additionally advised that general education teachers should develop content sheets to aid the special education teacher with understanding the content addressed in the general education classroom. Employing such techniques has the potential to enhance opportunities for collaboration and for the general education teacher and special education teacher to have a fully developed perspective of their co-collaborators role in educating students with disabilities. Da Fonte and Barton-Arwood advised that teachers should spend time developing relationships, practicing communication skills, and learning discipline-specific terminology. Due to the

scheduling being a limiting factor to adequate collaboration, Black and Hill (2020) proposed educators use quick collaboration meetings for working together to address a need. The authors suggest that such meetings be focused on accomplishing one task, be brief, and occur frequently (Black & Hill, 2020).

As there are more educational assistants (415,000) working in public school settings than special education teachers (340,000) (U.S. Department of Education, 2017), the need for training for paraprofessionals is paramount. Mrachko and Kaczmarek (2016) found that providing feedback to paraprofessionals was critical, and that modeling instructional and behavioral interventions was also found to be an effective technique for training educational assistants. Lequia (2018) found that training is critical for educational assistants to enhance and not hinder social communicative outcomes for students with disabilities at all grade levels. Lequia stated, "placement in the general education setting does not guarantee membership or meaningful participation" (p. 331). However, educational assistants are able to serve as the mechanism for including students with significant disabilities in the general education setting. Lequia suggested caution must be used as students with disabilities relying heavily on educational assistants can lead to academic and social opportunities being limited. Lequia also found that students receiving adult support have lower levels of social acceptance. Therefore, peer support in the general education setting was critical, and proper training for educational assistants was considered an absolute must.

In an effort to be better informed about the role of paraprofessionals in inclusive art classroom settings, Burdick and Causton-Theoharis (2012) found creating a climate of respect was essential. Students with disabilities and paraprofessionals want to be welcomed into classroom settings where they feel valued and respected. To create a welcoming environment for

paraprofessionals, Burdick and Causton-Theoharis suggested that art teachers address paraprofessionals in a professional manner, provide adequate space for the paraprofessional and their belongings, discuss and clarify roles and expectations, and discuss the student's needs and strategies to address these needs. Likewise, to create a welcoming environment for students with disabilities, art educators should ensure physical accessibility, provide resources and materials, provide visual access to instruction, modify instruction as needed, and encourage peer support and engagement. Providing time for communication and paraprofessional support were both recommended strategies (Burdick & Causton-Theoharis, 2012).

Gerzel-Short et al. (2018) provided recommendations and a list of priorities for enhancing collaboration:

- promoting a sense of belonging for educational assistants

- being specific with communication

- understanding and honoring the experiences and backgrounds of educational assistants

- incorporating various coaching models

- sharing pertinent student information

- enhancing professional development opportunities.

The authors stressed that collaboration with paraprofessionals results in benefits such as effective communication, rapport building, and decreased conflict among school staff. Collaboration was considered to support student learning, improve student behavior, and to increase student engagement (Gerzel-Short et al., 2018).

Hedegaard-Soernsen et al. (2018) indicated co-teaching is considered true collaboration by citing the work of Murawski and Lochner (2011) who stated true collaboration serves to

"benefit all students socially, behaviourally, and academically." To accomplish this task, Sheppard and Wieman (2019) suggested that teacher educators: (a) agree on common educational philosophy, (b) complete math activities together, (c) collaborate to assess and plan interventions, and (d) define the math skills or standards that students should have difficulty in mastering. These suggestions could lend themselves to collaborative practices among general and special educators working with K-12 students, as well. Biggs et al. (2019) indicated that teachers should be prepared for working with educational assistants in their teacher preparation programs as these programs were found to be lacking in providing training regarding the supervision of educational assistants. Biggs et al. further indicated that teachers should receive ongoing professional development and support from the district level. In a discussion of how to help students with disabilities participate in physical education activities, Klein and Hollingshead (2015) suggested encouraging peer partners, providing necessary supports, increasing opportunities for professional development, using paraprofessionals, and collaborating with physical education teachers and physical therapists.

In a study conducted in Spain evaluating general education and special education teachers' preparation for inclusion, Rojo-Ramos et al. (2021) found 68.3% of educators stated they were not prepared to engage in inclusive education. The authors acknowledged that inclusive education was a major challenge that required system changes in teacher preparation programs and required school leaders to establish collaborative cultures. To bring about these changes, Rojo-Ramos et al. suggested educators should be involved with curriculum development in teacher preparation programs. The authors suggested inclusion training must be initial and ongoing and that cooperation with families is imperative. By establishing cooperative

partnerships, educators are better positioned to establish relationships with students and their families which ultimately yields positive outcomes.

Special Educators as Teacher Leaders

As Northouse (2019) wrote, adaptive leaders prepare and encourage people to address change. Although the name implies emphasis on the leader, the emphasis in adaptive leadership is follower-centered. Northouse explained that adaptive leaders are able to help followers engage in activities that "mobilize, motivate, organize, orient, and focus the attention of others" (p. 393). Adaptive leadership, then, is a complex process whereby leaders help others to produce change. In addition, adaptive leaders guide others in addressing situational challenges, technical challenges, and adaptive challenges. According to Northouse, adaptive leaders are individuals who have an overall view of their responsibilities which assists with identifying challenges and possible solutions. Adaptive leaders can help give a voice to all members in an organization. As the experts in their field, special education teachers serve in the role of teacher-leader. Although IEP development and implementation is a team process, much of the responsibility of these processes falls to special education teachers (Collins et al., 2017).

Professional Learning Activities

In an examination of the effects of special education and general education pre-service teachers learning together, Weiss et al. (2017) suggested that teacher preparation programs should do more than merely teach teachers to cooperate; the authors recommended that collaborative learning should be both initial and ongoing for educators to develop successful co-teaching practices. Using concept mapping, Weiss et al. found that preservice teachers in a co-taught group were able to use collaborative strategies more efficiently to facilitate IEP development. In a case study examining the results of teachers engaging in professional learning

communities with a focus on teaching math skills to students with disabilities, Tan and Thorius (2019) found that participants were able to reduce tensions and improve overall teaching practices with targeted education on inclusive math practices and universal learning procedures.

Chapter 2 Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to present a comprehensive review of the existing literature regarding collaborative practices for students with disabilities. The chapter included:

- an examination of the social framework of the school

- an examination of collaborative practices

- a review of roles and responsibilities

- information on pre-service teacher perspectives

- information on teacher perspectives

- information on paraprofessional perspectives

- information on the perspectives of other key stakeholders

- a discussion of collaboration and student success

- a discussion of the effects of collaboration with paraprofessionals and associated student outcomes

- a discussion of collaboration and meeting students' basic needs

- response to intervention and collaborative practices

- collaboration and virtual learning

- barriers to collaboration and inclusion

- suggestions for addressing barriers to collaboration

- and an examination of special educators as teacher leaders.

This literature review provided an understanding of the complexity of collaborative relationships and the ways these relationships affected the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to provide an examination of the perspectives of special education teachers, general education teachers, and paraprofessionals working in inclusive classroom settings in grades pre-K-12 regarding collaborative relationships. This study intended to fill a gap in the literature regarding how collaborative practices influence IEP implementation for students with disabilities. Included in this chapter are the research questions, the researcher's role in the study, a description of the participants and their work settings, the methods of data collection and analysis, and a description of the overall research design.

Research Questions

This qualitative research was guided by one essential research question and five supporting research questions that were presented to participants in a semi-structured interview format and designed to examine the perceptions of general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals regarding the development of working relationships and how these relationships influence the experiences of students with disabilities.

Essential Research Question

How do the relationships between general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals influence the experiences of students with disabilities in general education settings?

Supporting Questions

Question 1: How do general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals describe their roles working with students with disabilities in general education settings?

Question 2: How do teachers and paraprofessionals describe their relationships with other teaching personnel in general education settings?

Question 3: What factors do teachers and paraprofessionals perceive as inhibiting the formation of these relationships?

Question 4: What factors do teachers and paraprofessionals perceive as promoting the development of these relationships?

Question 5: What strategies or techniques do teachers and paraprofessionals find successful in helping them to form relationships that are conducive to supporting students with disabilities in general education settings?

Study Design

This study was a qualitative study using purposive sampling. To obtain participants, site permissions were obtained from each district's supervisor for two Tennessee school districts. After site permissions were obtained, an email with an explanation of the study's purpose, a copy of the informed consent document, and a link to a Google form was emailed to 16 school level administrators in the South Central Region of Tennessee (principals at all the elementary, middle, and high schools in the two districts). The email asked principals to forward the message to general and special educators and paraprofessionals working with students with disabilities in general education settings. The Google Form was used as a recruitment tool whereby interested individuals could input their first names and email addresses. Of the 21 individuals who responded by completing the Google survey, 17 indicated an interest in participating in the study. These 17 individuals were sent a follow-up email to schedule an interview with the informed consent document provided for review as an attachment. Of these 17 individuals, all were successfully contacted by email to schedule and complete an interview.

The participants included seven general education teachers, five special education teachers, and five paraprofessionals. Of the seven general education teachers:

- one was an elementary art teacher

- one was a first-grade teacher

- one was a second-grade teacher

- two were middle school English language arts teachers

- two taught high school science courses.

Of the five special education teachers:

- one taught an extended resource class at the elementary level

- one taught a middle school comprehensive development classroom

- one served as a middle school resource teacher

- one taught high school English to students with and without disabilities

- one taught a high school comprehensive development classroom

Of the paraprofessionals:

- one worked with students with severe disabilities in general and special education settings at the elementary level

- one worked with a student with a severe physical disability at the elementary level

- one worked with students with specific learning disabilities in general education classroom settings at the elementary level

- one worked as a one-on-one student in general education settings for a middle school aged child with severe disabilities

- one worked as a paraprofessional in a high school comprehensive development classroom

All participants worked some portion of their day with students with disabilities in general education settings. One of the general education teachers had many years of experience working in an industrial setting. One of the general education teachers had worked as a paraprofessional before becoming a teacher. Two of the special education teachers had also worked as paraprofessionals prior to becoming special education teachers.

One of the paraprofessionals had a Master's degree but considered their current role as a second career before retirement. All other paraprofessionals had a high school diploma; however, one individual was working on obtaining their Bachelor's degree in general education. The participants' educational experience ranged from high school diploma or to a doctoral degree in Curriculum and Instruction. Three of the general education teachers had a Bachelor's degree in education, two had a Master's degree, one had an Education Specialist's degree in administration, and one participant had a doctoral degree. Three of the special education teachers had Bachelor's degrees and two had Master's degrees.

Interviews were scheduled by email and conducted via Zoom. Prior to beginning the interview process, the researcher reviewed the informed consent document with each participant. Each participant was allowed to ask questions regarding the interview and the study. In addition, each participant was required to attest that they were a licensed educator or paraprofessional working in a PreK-12 school in a general education setting, were over the age of 18, and were physically present in the United States. Each participant verified that they were freely and voluntarily participating in the study and were able to participate by Zoom in a private location without other individuals present. The interviews lasted 60 minutes. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed manually into a Microsoft Word document and coded in an Excel spreadsheet with identifying data removed. Coded data was analyzed for themes, and emerging

themes labeled and assigned a color code. A copy of the informed consent document signed and dated by the researcher with the name of each interviewee and date of their attestation was sent to each interviewee by email for their records.

Assessment of Quality and Rigor

Anfara et al. (2002) provided strategies to explain quality and rigor in qualitative research by discussing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as they compare to the quantitative concepts of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. Credibility is viewed as providing a link between research findings and the external world. Transferability indicates results can be generalized to a larger population. Dependability ensures that results are reliable or consistently measure what they were intended to measure. Confirmability indicates the degree to which results can be confirmed or replicated by other researchers (Royse et al., 2016). In the field of qualitative research, purposive sampling is a common method of obtaining a sample population. After samples are obtained, qualitative researchers use methods such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups to obtain data (Family Health International, 2021). For the purposes of this study, purposive sampling and in-depth interviews were used.

To ensure trustworthiness, all data was coded in the manner as described by Nowell et al. (2017). According to Nowell et al., credibility can be assured through peer debriefing – the process used in this study. The researcher's dissertation committee provided meaningful feedback that aided the researcher in better understanding the emerging themes present in the transcribed interviews. To promote transferability, all information was provided in precise detail concerning the research process. Transferability was achieved through the informed consent document being provided to interviewees for review prior to the interview process. In addition,

the researcher reviewed the informed consent document in detail with each interviewee and was responsive to any questions presented by the interviewees. To ensure dependability, an audit trail was used to maintain raw data (without identifiable information). All interview data was transcribed with identifying data removed to ensure that potentially sensitive information provided by the participants was redacted (Royse et al., 2016). To promote credibility, member checking was used for all quoted material to verify participants' responses (Morse, 2015). The Zoom recordings of the interviews were deleted after the transcription process was completed and all quotes had been verified for clarity with the interviewees. In addition, reflexivity was addressed through memoing. Memoing was completed using observational and reflexive memos to help provide clarity and understanding to the researcher. Per Nowell et al., confirmability can be obtained if the study is able to first obtain credibility, transferability, and dependability.

Ethical Considerations

To avoid any potential ethical compromises, this research was conducted according to East Tennessee State University's Institutional Review Board policies and procedures. All participation was on a voluntary basis with the purpose of the study, potential risks, and purpose of collected data clearly described to participants. Participants were given the option to discontinue the interview process at any time. Potential ethical considerations for this study included the researcher-participant relationship (Sanjari et al., 2014). The researcher was considered an insider-expert, as she worked in the same district as 12 of the participants. To avoid compromising the data, the researcher selected participants at random based on their responses to the initial email describing the study. The researcher assured participants of the anonymity of their responses and explained how collected data would remain confidential and protected. To protect the identity of the participants, all identifiers were removed from the data in

the transcription process. Also, after validating participant responses in a follow-up meeting, the initial audio recordings were deleted to protect participant identities.

Role of the Researcher

Given the qualitative nature of this study, the researcher's role was to serve as a collector, analyzer, and interpreter of the data obtained. The data collected was obtained through semi-structured interviews that were transcribed, coded, and analyzed for thematic representations. The researcher provided an analysis of the thematic representations based on a comprehensive review of the literature regarding collaborative relationships and inclusive practices.

Chapter 3 Summary

This chapter provides a detailed description of the methodologies used to obtain, analyze, and interpret data regarding the perceptions of special education teachers, general education teachers, and paraprofessionals regarding collaborative relationships, IEP implementation, and inclusive practices for students with disabilities. The research questions, study's design, assessment of quality and rigor, ethical considerations, and researcher's role were all described in detail to promote credibility and to ensure confirmability in the event that future researchers were interested in replicating this study.

Chapter 4: Analysis of the Data

The purpose of this research was to examine the phenomenon of relationships between general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals and the influences of these relationships on the education of students with disabilities. This qualitative research was guided by one essential research question and five supporting research questions that were presented to participants in a semi-structured interview format.

Essential Research Question

How do the relationships between general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals influence the experiences of students with disabilities in general education settings?

Supporting Questions

Question 1: How do general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals describe their roles working with students with disabilities in general education settings?

Question 2: How do teachers and paraprofessionals describe their relationships with other teaching personnel in general education settings?

Question 3: What factors do teachers and paraprofessionals perceive as inhibiting the formation of these relationships?

Question 4: What factors do teachers and paraprofessionals perceive as promoting the development of these relationships?

Question 5: What strategies or techniques do teachers and paraprofessionals find successful in helping them to form relationships that are conducive to supporting students with disabilities in general education settings?

Research Structure and Findings

Findings of this phenomenological study were gathered through the process of qualitative inductive inquiry. Prior to conducting the interviews, approval for the study was obtained through East Tennessee State University's Institutional Review Board. The researcher conducted research in two Tennessee school districts. Site approvals were provided by each district level superintendent. Virtual interviews with general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals from two school districts were conducted via Zoom. Participants were recruited using a questionnaire through Google Forms; each potential participant had to meet the qualifiers of working in a Tennessee school district as a paraprofessional, general education teacher, or special education teacher with students with disabilities in grades PreK-12. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. These interviews were reflective of the essential research question and five supporting questions; however, they were centered on 10 additional questions that examined the phenomenon being studied. A total of 17 interviews were conducted during February and March 2022.

After completion of each interview all data were transcribed with all identifying information removed. The transcription was entered onto a spreadsheet, coded, and examined for themes. To ensure credibility, statements that were included in the study as a quote were verified through peer debriefing (Nowell et al., 2017). To promote transferability, all information concerning the research process was provided in precise detail. Transferability was achieved through the informed consent document provided to interviewees for signature prior to the interview process. In addition, the researcher reviewed the informed consent document in detail with each interviewee and answered any questions they posed. To ensure dependability an audit trail was used to maintain raw data (without identifiable information), and all interview data was

transcribed with identifying data removed to ensure that potentially sensitive information was redacted (Royse et al., 2016). The Zoom recordings of the interviews were deleted after the transcription process was completed and all quotes had been verified for clarity by the interviewees. Reflexivity was addressed through memoing which was completed using observational and reflexive memos to help provide clarity and understanding to the researcher. Per Nowell et al., confirmability is achieved if the study is able first to obtain credibility, transferability, and dependability.

Participant Profiles

General Education Teacher Participant 1 holds a master's degree in chemistry and has taught 10-15 years. This participant transitioned to teaching as a second career and has taught at the high school level for the duration of their career.

General Education Teacher Participant 2 holds a master's degree in curriculum and instruction and has 20-25 years of experience. This participant served as a special education teacher before becoming an elementary school teacher.

General Education Teacher Participant 3 holds a bachelor's degree in elementary education and has taught for 10-15 years. This participant currently serves as a specialty area teacher with all experience being in the Kindergarten through 6th grade range.

General Education Teacher Participant 4 holds an education specialist's degree in administration and supervision and has 25-30 years of experience. This participant has taught both elementary and middle school grades.

General Education Teacher Participant 5 holds a bachelor's degree in elementary education. This participant worked for 10 years as a paraprofessional prior to becoming a teacher. This participant has taught elementary grades for the past five years.

General Education Teacher Participant 6 holds a bachelor's degree in elementary education and has taught in the 10-15-year range. This participant has taught lower elementary grades for the duration of their career.

General Education Teacher Participant 7 holds a doctorate degree in curriculum and instruction and has taught for 35-40 years. This participant was a special education teacher several years ago. This participant currently serves as a high school teacher.

Special Education Teacher Participant 1 holds a master's degree in special education and has taught in the 0-5-year range. This participant worked as a paraprofessional for 5-10 years prior to becoming a teacher. This participant currently serves as a high school teacher.

Special Education Teacher Participant 2 holds a master's degree in counseling and has taught for 35-40 years. This participant has served in a variety of teaching and coaching positions for the duration of their career. This participant currently serves as a comprehensive development teacher at the high school level.

Special Education Teacher Participant 3 holds a bachelor's degree in biology and has taught for 15-20 years as a comprehensive development teacher at both the middle and high school levels.

Special Education Teacher Participant 4 holds a master's degree in special education and has taught in the 10-15-year range. This teacher has taught at both the elementary and middle school levels.

Special Education Teacher Participant 5 holds a bachelor's in special education and has taught in the 0-5-year range. This participant currently teaches students with moderate to severe disabilities at the elementary level. This participant has prior experience as a paraprofessional.

Paraprofessional Participant 1 holds a master's degree in library science. This participant has worked as a one-on-one paraprofessional for students with co-occurring educational and physical disabilities. This participant has 0-5 years of experience at the elementary level.

Paraprofessional Participant 2 holds a high school diploma. This participant has 5-10 years of experience at the elementary and middle school levels as an inclusion support paraprofessional and direct services paraprofessional.

Paraprofessional Participant 3 holds a high school diploma. This participant has 20-25 years of experience working with students with moderate to severe disabilities at the elementary level.

Paraprofessional Participant 4 holds a high school diploma. This participant has worked as a one-on-one paraprofessional for 0-5 years with students with moderate to severe disabilities at the elementary and middle school levels.

Paraprofessional Participant 5 holds a high school diploma. This participant has 0-5 years of experience as a one-on-one paraprofessional and classroom assistant for students with moderate to severe disabilities at the high school level.

Researcher Notes and Memos

Following each interview, the researcher transcribed each interview; through the transcription process, the researcher used the technique of memoing to note perceptions of the data from each interview. These memos were used to help with further analysis of the collected data for emerging themes. In addition, these memos allowed the researcher to take note of any biases based on her experiences as a special education teacher. The themes identified across the three subgroups (special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and general education teachers) allowed the researcher to note similarities and differences across the participants' responses. All

17 participants were willing to engage with the researcher and were responsive to all questions. All participants readily shared their thoughts in an open and honest manner that led to productive interviews and provided rich data for researcher analysis.

Interview Results

After each interview the researcher transcribed the participant's responses verbatim while removing any identifying information to protect participant confidentiality. After transcription was completed, the researcher reviewed the transcribed data and made notes using the process of memoing. When all interviews were transcribed and memoed, the researcher began the process of coding the data. The data coding process involved multiple steps as themes emerged in the collected data. Themes were categorized according to their frequency of occurrence and relevancy to the questions posed using open, axial, and selective coding (Williams & Moser, 2019). Similar themes were merged as appropriate. To promote credibility, member checking was used for all quoted responses to verify participants' responses (Morse, 2015).

Seven themes emerged; they were (a) communication, (b) partnership, (c) role expectations, (d) lack of training, (e) supportive environments, (f) lack of time, and (g) lack of perspective.

Supporting Question 1

How do general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals describe their roles working with students with disabilities in general education settings?

General education teachers described their roles as partners and collaborators. General Education Teacher Participant 7 said, "All of us have to be there for the kids. You have to be there for the students foremost. No one does their job in isolation."

General education teachers frequently described themselves as being responsible for implementing IEP accommodations. Two general education teachers described themselves as guides and responsible for the whole child. General Education Teacher Participant 1 said:

> I am a guide. There is so much more than just teaching kids academics. I try to teach them about life. My kids don't always come from good home environments. I try to help them understand that there is more to life than what they know.

The special education teachers in the study overwhelmingly described themselves as advocates and servant leaders. Special Education Teacher Participant 1 indicated, "I see myself as an advocate for my students. That's why I am here." Special Education Teacher Participant 2, who teaches high school students in a comprehensive development classroom, described their role as a facilitator and a guide by saying:

> I try to set a standard for the kids. They need to be on time. They need to finish the tasks assigned to them. We talk about being kind and gentle. We talk about having personal skills and getting along with people. I talk about this being their job. I talk about accepting others. I try to teach my kids about the world. I want them to understand that a bigger world exists outside of their small community. We have hard conversations. I want them to make the decisions about what they are going to do with their lives. I'm a facilitator. I'm a boss. But, I'm right there in the boat with them trying to help them.

Special Education Teacher Participant 4 described their role as that of a helper and an advocate when they said:

> I tell students that I help everybody. I help students that need help. Sometimes, my students get stuck and say, "I'm stupid; I'm dumb." They are middle schoolers and this is

a hard age for them. I tell them that they may learn differently and that's okay. I tell them that I am here to help them so they can understand information better and learn better.

The research indicated that special education teachers are also cognizant of their duties. One special education teacher described their role as a teacher of skills and another described their role as an implementer of IEPs. Throughout the interview process many participants described special education teachers as experts and responsible for initiating interactions regarding students with disabilities. General Education Teacher Participant 3 said:

> The special education teachers that I work with are great. They really know the kids. They know what their needs are, and they have really helped me to understand how to help the kids in my classroom. They give me a copy of the IEPs-At-A-Glance and explain what accommodations the kids need. I know that I can go to them when I have questions. They are also really good to send me an email if something is going on with the kids.

The paraprofessionals in the study generally described themselves as helpers and caregivers. One paraprofessional described their role as an educator, while another described their role as an advocate. Paraprofessional Participant 1 indicated:

> I tell people I'm an assistant. I assist the teacher; I assist the student I am assigned to; I assist the other students. You know, I am just trying to help people in general. I try to advocate for my student. I ask people to clear the pathways for her outside because of her wheelchair. I try to help the other students to learn to think about keeping the pathways in the classroom clear and to remember to hold doors open for her. I know I can't change everything. But I try to make sure her needs are met and people are educated about what her needs are.

Paraprofessionals described their roles differently based on the severity of their students' disabilities. Paraprofessionals working with students with mild to moderate disabilities described themselves as helpers, and paraprofessionals working with students with severe to profound disabilities described themselves as caretakers. Paraprofessional Participant 4 said:

> I wait for my student to get to school. I get the student out of the car. I take the student to breakfast. I help the student do their work. If the student needs to go to the restroom, I help the student do that. If my student isn't feeling well, I try to figure out what is going on with them. I help them stay in the regular class by taking work that she can do on their level.

Likewise, Paraprofessional Participant 5 indicated:

> I work one-on-one with a child with special needs. I am this child's direct caregiver when the child is at school. I make sure the child's educational needs are met, and I help the child to meet their IEP goals. I am responsible for the child from the time the child gets to school until the child leaves.

Supporting Question 2

How do teachers and paraprofessionals describe their relationships with other teaching personnel in general education settings?

The participants provided varied descriptions of their relationships. The general education teachers in the study most frequently described their relationships as that of a partner with their fellow teachers, one teacher saw their role as a connector, and another described their role as that of a peacemaker and encourager. General Education Teacher Participant 6 indicated, "There are five us in my grade level, and I am the peacemaker of the group. I try to jump in and do what I have to do and go on with it. I have found myself being the encourager."

Reflecting on their partnership with fellow teachers, General Education Teacher Participant 2 said:

> We collaborate together to make sure that we're fulfilling all of the educational needs of the students. If we have a student we say needs something in particular, we all work together the best we can to serve that child out of the 80 or so students that we have. We try to serve each child individually in the best possible way.

General Education Teacher Participant 7 described their relationships with other staff members as, "Our relationships are ones of mutual respect. We are supporting students instructionally and behaviorally. We should know our roles. I would describe it as a partnership."

The special education teachers described their relationships in the general education setting as advocates for students, helpers to general education teachers, and supporters of students. Two special education teachers described ways they felt supported through their partnerships with general education teachers. Special Education Teacher Participant 5 indicated, "I coordinate with the general education teachers to know what skills relate to the standards they are teaching. I stay in the loop, and the general education teachers include me in everything in they are teaching." Special Education Teacher Participant 1 said:

> I attend ELA (English Language Arts) PLCs (Professional Learning Communities), and they are extremely beneficial. The general education teachers are very helpful. They are very good to update me. The other day, they helped me to figure out how to do my projections. I thought I would have to go to an administrator for help but instead they helped me.

Special Education Teacher Participant 2 indicated:

We had a couple of students who need the support of the agriculture program. They have

worked so hard to help us create a situation where kids can go to those classes. They are

awesome. We support each other. It takes everyone buying in. Everyone has to be on

board from the administration all the way down.

Both special education teachers and general education teachers described the importance of the

work done by paraprofessionals. Special Education Teacher Participant 2 indicated:

There's no way any of this could be done without them. If see a component that someone

is struggling with, then bam, they are helping. I could not function in this classroom or do

all the things we do without an assistant.

Likewise, Special Education Teacher Participant 5, who was formerly a special education

assistant, indicated:

I was an assistant beforehand. I know what they are going through. I know what their

struggles are. You know, they don't get paid for what all they have to do. I am very

respectful of that. I respect them and they respect me. We have an understanding of what

our job is and that is to help students the best we can.

General Education Teacher Participant 1 indicated: "My aide (paraprofessional) is very good

with special education accommodations. We coordinate up front when the kids have to take a

test. This allows them to leave them room to be read to without making a big production."

General Education Teacher Participant 6 spoke to the role paraprofessionals play in the general

education setting, "I just love having an assistant in my room. Anytime something isn't working,

I ask her what she thinks we can do. We can throw ideas at each other and kind of see what

works the best."

Overall, paraprofessionals indicated their relationships with other teaching personnel vary based on the type of environment (supportive and welcoming compared to unwelcoming) in which they are working. Paraprofessional Participant 2 indicated:

With some teachers, I feel very welcome in their classroom and they are just as nice as they can be. Then, there are other teachers that make me feel like I shouldn't be in their rooms when I walk in. If I feel welcome, then I am more willing to do more. If I feel unwelcome, it makes me feel like I can't work with the kids.

Paraprofessional Participant 3 described a similar experience: "Some teachers don't want you in their rooms, and you know it. They don't want to welcome the child. The child is a general education student first." Paraprofessional Participant 4 described a more welcoming experience:

I have a good relationship with the general education teachers because they welcome my student and me in their classrooms. The homeroom teacher pulls my student in, and talks to the student, and makes the student feel like they are a part of the classroom.

Supporting Question 3

What factors do teachers and paraprofessionals perceive as inhibiting the formation of these relationships?

Overall, the participants indicated a lack of communication, lack of role definition, lack of training, lack of time, and lack of perspective as factors that inhibit the development of working relationships between special education teachers, general education teachers, and paraprofessionals. Concerning a lack of communication, General Education Teacher Participant 2 indicated, "Just having a conversation – that would solve a lot of problems." Similarly, Special Education Teacher Participant 5 said:

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I feel like some teachers are more willing to share their experiences than others. I

personally try to share everything I can and try to keep communication as open as

possible. But, sometimes, I feel like there is a lack of communication. We could be more

open. When I worked as a special education assistant, I worked with a teacher who was

great at communicating and sharing information. The next teacher that I worked with

wasn't a good communicator. That made my job really tough.

A lack of role definition was identified as an inhibiting factor by most of the participants. Special

Education Teacher Participant 1, who had previously worked as a paraprofessional, indicated:

When I started as an assistant, I had no clue what I was doing. I really didn't even know

there was a special education teacher that I was supposed to report to. That was

something that I wished that I would have known, and I probably could have done a

much better job.

Special Education Teacher Participant 1 further described how a lack of role definition affects

paraprofessionals from classroom setting to classroom setting:

I think it is harder on the paraprofessionals. Because a general education teacher and I

might see it different. If they go into one class and a teacher expects one thing, then the

next teacher expects something else. It makes it hard for the assistant to decide what they

are supposed to do.

Paraprofessional Participant 1 made the following statement, "I'm confident. I have to be careful

about my boundaries in the classroom. I don't want to overstep my role." General Education

Teacher Participant 5, who had formerly worked as a paraprofessional said:

As a special education assistant, there were times that the teacher did not communicate what they wanted me to do in the classroom. What they preferred or not. So, you know, I did not know the limit of what I should or should not do.

Likewise, General Education Teacher Participant 6 made the following statement regarding a lack of role definition while also describing a lack of training:

Sometimes, with an assistant, you don't know where your boundaries are. Like what can I ask them to do and what should they not be doing. I don't remember a single class in college that even talked about somebody other than me and the students being in our classroom.

Two of the general education teacher participants shared that they were proactive about defining expectations for paraprofessionals working in their room – an approach that had contributed to successful experiences.

Concerning training deficiencies, only one participant indicated that they had received any training in college on how to work with other professional staff regarding the education of students with disabilities. Likewise, only two participants (one general education teacher and one paraprofessional) indicated that they had received any on-the-job training or professional development experiences regarding working relationships. Special Education Teacher Participant 2 indicated:

Getting along with people should be something that you do. Nobody in the administration, nobody at central office – nobody has time to try to work out problems between adults because they are not supposed to be there. You know what I mean? We're supposed to be able to come in here and make things happen. And, the bottom line is,

when these kids walk in the door, we should make this the best eight hours that they have every day.

Paraprofessional Participant 3 who has worked as a paraprofessional for 20-25 years felt differently and indicated:

With the general education teachers, they need training. Training on students with special needs and training on how to interact with the students and the assistants. I think bringing training in for the teachers would help so much. Training doesn't just need to be a one-time thing. It needs to be repeated.

Most of the participants indicated that a lack of time made working together particularly difficult. General Education Teacher Participant 2 said:

The thing that inhibits us in any setting is a lack of time. When we have in-services, we are focused on curriculum. But, honestly, there are so many bigger things going on. Every moment we have is filled with paperwork, grades, and TCAP scores. There isn't time to focus on building relationships or learning how to work together.

Special Education Teacher Participant 1 described a lack of time due to scheduling challenges:

I think the way our school is set up, you don't have a lot of the same planning times. So, it is really hard to get with those people and to sit down and talk. And, most of our teachers are coaches. So, after school isn't a good time either because we are all in sports activities.

General Education Teacher Participant 6 indicated a lack of time when trying to work with the special education teacher:

And back to the special education teacher. I know that they are very busy. I know that they have students in class all day. We really don't see her as much as we do the

assistants unless there is a problem or something specific that needs to be communicated

to us.

Differences in perspective were identified as an inhibiting factor in the development of working

relationships, and two of the special education teacher participants cited a divide between general

and special education. Special Education Teacher Participant 1 indicated:

I think there is a gap between general education and special education. Sometimes, I

don't think the general education teachers get it. They don't understand that we have had

this meeting and you are supposed to legally do these things. Sometimes, these teachers

take offense with us telling them they have to do things for the kids. I wish – I think if

general education teachers knew a little bit more, and maybe we (special education

teachers) don't understand enough about them either. We don't know what they are going

through.

General Education Teacher Participant 1 indicated that a lack of exposure to students with

disabilities affects staff perspectives:

Sometimes, teachers are standoffish. They don't think they have the energy for working

with kids with disabilities. I think being able to observe your special education peers

really helps. Getting to see them work and learning from them. Also, I think attending the

Special Olympics should be mandatory.

Supporting Question 4

What factors do teachers and paraprofessionals perceive as promoting the development of

these relationships?

The participants indicated having good communication, establishing partnerships through

relationship building, and working in supportive environments as conducive to the establishment

of working relationships between paraprofessionals, general education teachers, and special education teachers. General Education Teacher Participant 5 described an experience that led to student success:

> I had a student with autism who had been virtual all the previous year. I worked closely with the special education teacher to make sure that the student was comfortable in the classroom. We talked back and forth on a daily basis. The special education teacher brought me tools that I could use with the student to help the student understand how much longer they had to work on a task. The student also had a seating preference. The special education teacher, and I talked about. I utilized the special education teacher's skills. We communicated a lot, and I was open to suggestions.

The participants suggested that partnerships could be established through relationship building and be based on common interests. Paraprofessional Participant 1 said, "The teacher that I am with now likes the same sport that I do. We have bonded over our common interest in that sport."

> Likewise, General Education Teacher Participant 1 indicated, "The educational assistant that I work with is from the same state that I am. In a way, we are connected by that, and we cheer for the same football team."

> Special Education Teacher Participant 3 indicated that partnerships could be built with special education staff by first building relationships with students with disabilities:

> The general education teachers don't always know how to interact with our kids. They rely on me and the assistants to interact for them. If they could know the kids as people, it would create a better partnership for us all.

> Special Education Teacher Participant 5 indicated that partnerships were established through "Communication, education, and consistency. Respect is important too. You have to

respect each other. Everyone has to understand that we are all part of a team that is working together to help the kids."

Overall, special education teachers and paraprofessionals indicated that feeling welcome or supported in the general education setting was beneficial for them and students with disabilities.

Supporting Question 5

What strategies or techniques do teachers and paraprofessionals find successful in helping them to form relationships that are conducive to supporting students with disabilities in general education settings?

The participants offered many suggestions for forming relationships. Creating relationships based on common interests was viewed as important for the establishment of relationships between general education teachers and paraprofessionals. Increasing exposure to students with disabilities, keeping lines of communication open, and fostering relationships with the students were all viewed as essential to maintaining good working relationships. Defining roles and expectations for paraprofessionals was viewed as important by all participants. Moreover, establishing shared planning times was viewed as critical to allowing staff to communicate in a meaningful manner. General Education Teacher Participant 7 indicated:

> It would be nice for people to have time to get together and just talk. Talk about what would work. Establish goals. I think that would be really helpful. It all starts with establishing expectations and keeping up with accountability.

Essential Research Question

How do the relationships between general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals influence the experiences of students with disabilities in general education settings?

All of the participants interviewed for this study indicated that the influence of teacher (special education and general education) and paraprofessional relationships on students with disabilities is considerable. Paraprofessional Participant 1 indicated:

I think that it does enhance the experience for the student. The student has two adults that they can turn to, and I think that is helpful. The student is able to feel more comfortable and secure. The student knows they have two adults that they can turn to with problems.

Special Education Teacher Participant 1 indicated:

Kids pick up on tension. It doesn't matter what their age is. They know when something isn't right. If one of the general education teachers lets me know that a kid is having a hard time. Then, I'm going to check on the student and make sure they are okay.

General Education Teacher Participant 7 said:

I feel like having good relationships helps the students to not get singled out. They are never made to feel different. When the kids see the relationships that I have with the special education assistant and teacher, then they know those are people they can turn to. They love those people. If I have to leave the room, the kids are going to act the same.

Chapter 4 Summary

Chapter 4 describes the findings of this study. The purpose of this study was to understand how working relationships are developed between general education teachers, paraprofessionals, and special education teachers and how these relationships influence the

experiences of students with disabilities in the general education setting. Data presented in

Chapter 4 was collected through interviews with 17 participants who were special education

teachers, general education teachers, or paraprofessionals who worked with students with

disabilities in PreK-12th public schools in two Tennessee school districts. All interviews were

recorded via Zoom in order for them to be transcribed by the researcher. After the interviews

were completed, they were transcribed, memoed, and coded. Coding the interview data allowed

the researcher to identify emerging themes. Those themes and associated quotations that

correspond to the essential research question and five supporting research questions were

described in Chapter 4.

Chapter 5. Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this narrative study was to examine how general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals perceive their relationships as they provide educational services to students with disabilities in general education settings in grades PreK-12 in two Tennessee school districts. This study used semi-structured interviewing, thematic analysis, and memoing. For the purposes of this study, teacher-paraprofessional relationships and general education teacher-special education teacher relationships referred to participation in the development of IEPs, engaging in consultation with partner teachers and paraprofessionals, communicating student expectations and progress, engaging in lesson plan development, assisting students with disabilities to engage meaningfully with peers in the general education setting, sharing of resources and ideas, and co-teaching. The participants included only licensed educators and paraprofessionals who were actively teaching in general education settings in public schools in two Tennessee counties in grades pre-K – 12.

This study was guided by educational equity theory which is used to study how students receive access to education regardless of their social status, ethnicity, disability, or background. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2018), "Equity in education means that schools and education systems provide equal learning opportunities to all students" (p. 24). In public schools in the United States, school districts provide students with disabilities with access to instruction in the least restrictive educational setting (U.S. Department of Education, 2017c). For many students with disabilities, the least restrictive educational setting is the general education setting. The efforts of general education teachers, paraprofessionals, and special education teachers in combination are often required to support student learning in the general education setting. Central to this study was the researcher's interest in understanding

how the relationships of educational professionals influence the educational experiences of students with disabilities. Given the significant disadvantages historically experienced by individuals with disabilities in educational systems (Osgood, 2008; Rotatori et al., 2011; Spring, 2020), the researcher aimed to fill a gap in the literature regarding the influences of educator relationships on the experiences of students with disabilities. The following research questions were used to guide the research:

Essential Research Question

How do the relationships between general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals influence the experiences of students with disabilities in general education settings?

Supporting Questions

Question 1: How do general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals describe their roles working with students with disabilities in general education settings?

Question 2: How do teachers and paraprofessionals describe their relationships with other teaching personnel in general education settings?

Question 3: What factors do teachers and paraprofessionals perceive as inhibiting the formation of these relationships?

Question 4: What factors do teachers and paraprofessionals perceive as promoting the development of these relationships?

Question 5: What strategies or techniques do teachers and paraprofessionals find successful in helping them to form relationships that are conducive to supporting students with disabilities in general education settings?

Chapter 1 provided an introduction to the topic and the problem statement. Chapter 2 provided a review of the relevant literature. Chapter 2 discussed the methodology used in the study. Chapter 4 provided a description of the findings. Chapter 5 provided a discussion of the findings.

Supporting Question 1 Discussion

How do general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals describe their roles working with students with disabilities in general education settings?

The findings indicate that participants differed in the ways they described their roles according to their position. General education teachers were more likely to describe themselves as partners, guides, and collaborators. When identifying themselves as partners, general education teachers indicated they had an equal relationship with their grade level peers. General Education Teacher Participant 2 indicated: "We are partners. We are working together to try to educate all of our students and to meet all their needs." Special education teachers were more likely to describe their roles as advocates and servant leaders. Special Education Teacher Participant 2 indicated: "When you look at what I do, I am a servant leader. That's my leadership style."

Because special education teachers and paraprofessionals work closely together, they may have more of a tendency to identify with the other's role in the education of students with disabilities. Two of the special education teachers interviewed in this study had previously worked as a paraprofessional. Special Education Teacher Participant 5 indicated, "I really value the assistants. I know what it is like to do their job. I never ask them to do anything that I wouldn't do."

The identification of paraprofessionals as valuable stakeholders in the lives of students with disabilities and an emphasis on servant leadership indicates special education teachers approach their relationships with paraprofessionals in an equitable manner. These findings are consistent with the findings of Paulsrud and Nilholm (2020) in their examination of collaborative teaching practices. In their research, special education teachers functioned as experts on individual students while general education teachers focused more on content and taught larger groups of students. Paraprofessionals in this study typically described their roles as helpers and caregivers. Paraprofessional Participant 5 said:

> I work one-on-one with a child with special needs. I am this child's direct caregiver when the child is at school. I make sure the child's educational needs are met, and I help the child to meet their IEP goals. I am responsible for the child from the time the child gets to school until the child leaves.

This statement mirrors the work of Zhao et al. (2021) who examined the tasks completed by paraprofessionals while assisting students in general education settings. Overall, the authors found that paraprofessionals provided physical caretaking, supported student organization, managed difficult behaviors, and promoted student independence. Paraprofessional Participant 3 indicated that they try to manage students' behaviors in the general education setting stating, "We (general education teacher and I) work together. But, it depends on the student you have. I try to keep the child in their seat and attentive."

Supporting Question 2 Discussion

How do teachers and paraprofessionals describe their relationships with other teaching personnel in general education settings?

The findings indicated that general education teachers were more likely to describe their relationships as partnerships. General Education Teacher Participant 1 said, "We collaborate together to make sure that we're fulfilling all of the educational needs of our students." Special education teachers described their relationships with general education teachers as more supportive with the focus being on the students. Special Education Teacher Participant 2 described relationships in the following manner:

> When you're working to have your students be part of a regular program, it is a blend. It is a blend of administration, the teacher, and the assistant. It is like as we're flying the airplane, we are actually building as it while we're flying.

Special education teachers were also more likely to indicate that a division exists between special education and general education with a lack of perspective from both parties. Special Education Teacher Participant 1 indicated:

> I think there is a gap between general education and special education. Sometimes, I don't think the general education teachers get it. They don't understand that we have had this meeting and you are supposed to legally do these things. Sometimes, these teachers take offense with us telling them they have to do things for the kids. I wish – I think if general education teachers knew a little bit more, and maybe we (special education teachers) don't understand enough about them either. We don't know what they are going through.

This reported lack of perspective is problematic when considering that students with disabilities are often in general education settings for much of their day. In an examination of the perceptions of general and special education teachers working in two rural school districts in

New Hampshire, Berry (2021) found a shared sense of responsibility for all students was critical to establishing a supportive school culture conducive for inclusion.

Both general education teachers and special education teachers indicated the importance of the work done by paraprofessionals while commenting on positive and problematic relationships. General Education Teacher Participant 6 said, "I just love having an assistant in my room. Anytime something isn't working, I ask her what she thinks we can do. We can throw ideas at each other and kind of see what works the best." General Education Teacher Participant 4 indicated:

> Sometimes, I feel like the assistants really lack in training. They come into the job not knowing what to do and that can create problems in the classroom. Some assistants that I have worked with have overstepped their bounds because they lacked training.

These findings are similar to the research completed by Biggs et al. (2016) who found teacher mindset had a significant effect on the success of the teacher-paraprofessional relationship with more respectful, responsive, and understanding teachers creating more equitable working relationships.

Supporting Question 3 Discussion

What factors do teachers and paraprofessionals perceive as inhibiting the formation of these relationships?

Overall, the participants were able to identify many factors that they found as inhibiting the formation of working relationships. Hindrances included a lack of communication, role expectations, lack of training, lack of time, and lack of perspective. A lack of communication was found to be the most significant factor contributing to poor relationships. Participants felt

this lack of communication was due to time constraints and was compounded by a lack of role identification. Special Education Teacher Participant 4 indicated:

> I have always tried to understand where the teachers (general education) are coming from when I get frustrated with them at their viewpoint. So, the one thing I always tell them is "you know, I get it; I know you have a lot to do." I approach it as what can I do to help you, what can I do to help you and the student be successful.

In their review of the literature, Mason et al. (2021) found the literature lacked information regarding clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and expectations of general educators, special educators, and paraprofessionals. Likewise, I had difficulty finding literature describing the role expectations.

Many of the participants described a lack of time as leading to a breakdown in communication. General Education Teacher Participant 5, who had previously worked as a paraprofessional, said:

> As a special education assistant, there were times that the teacher did not communicate what they wanted me to do in the classroom. What they preferred or not. So, you know, I did not know the limit of what I should or should not do.

Supporting Question 4 Discussion

What factors do teachers and paraprofessionals perceive as promoting the development of these relationships?

The findings indicated that participants viewed having good communication, establishing partnerships through relationship building, and supportive environments as conducive to the establishment of working relationships. Using case studies and interviews, Cameron and Tveit (2019) examined the effects of multidisciplinary collaboration on educational programming for

young children with significant disabilities. Regarding internal features, Cameron and Tviet identified communication, frequent contact, and shared goals as indicative of the collaboration process. General Education Teacher Participant 5 mirrored the findings of Cameron and Tveit through a description of an experience showcasing open communication that led to student success:

> I had a student with autism who had been virtual all the previous year. I worked closely with the special education teacher to make sure that the student was comfortable in the classroom. We talked back and forth on a daily basis. The special education teacher brought me tools that I could use with the student to help the student understand how much longer they had to work on a task. The student also had a seating preference. The special education teacher, and I talked about. I utilized the special education teacher's skills. We communicated a lot, and I was open to suggestions.

Supporting Question 5 Discussion

What strategies or techniques do teachers and paraprofessionals find successful in helping them to form relationships that are conducive to supporting students with disabilities in general education settings?

The findings of this study indicated the teachers and paraprofessionals considered the establishment of relationships based on common interests as important. Many of the participants in this study suggested building relationships through identifying common interests. General Education Teacher Participant 6 said, "Sometimes, I think it is good to just get together and talk. Not about kids or work. But, about your life and really get to know each other."

In addition, findings suggested that increasing exposure to students with disabilities, keeping lines of communication open, and establishing relationships with the students were all

viewed as essential to establishment of good working relationships. In their research involving both general education and special education teachers, Jortveit and Kovac (2021) found that having good engagement led to more successful collaborative partnerships. In addition, Jortveit and Kovac found that teachers with successful partnerships had established a common understanding of their educational principles, valued inclusion, were focused on students, valued diversity, and had zero tolerance for the mistreatment of students with disabilities. The findings of Jortveit and Kovac mirror the sentiments of Paraprofessional Participant 4:

I have a good relationship with the general education teachers because they welcome my student and me in their classrooms. The homeroom teacher pulls my student in, and talks to the student, and makes the student feel like they are a part of the classroom.

Defining roles and expectations for paraprofessionals was viewed as important by all participants. Moreover, establishing shared planning times was viewed as critical to allowing staff to communicate in a meaningful manner. General Education Teacher Participant 4 indicated, "In my room, I like to divide and conquer. When an assistant comes in, I make a place for that person, and I establish what my expectations are from the beginning."

The paraprofessional participants in the study indicated that having a supportive environment was critical to promoting successful relationships. Paraprofessional Participant 2 described the following experience:

With some teachers, I feel very welcome in their classroom and they are just as nice as they can be. Then, there are other teachers that make me feel like I shouldn't be in their rooms when I walk in. If I feel welcome, then I am more willing to do more. If I feel unwelcome, it makes me feel like I can't work with the kids.

Special Education Teacher Participant 5 indicated that successful partnerships were established through "communication, education, and consistency. Respect is important too. You have to respect each other. Everyone has to understand that we are all part of a team that is working together to help the kids."

This sentiment mirrors the findings of Barnes et al. (2021) which identified solidarity, clarity of roles, and creating a culture of respect as best practices in educator-paraprofessional collaborative relationships. Barnes et al. explained that solidarity focuses on using "we" language, practicing active listening, demonstrating teamwork practices, and deferring thus establishing feelings of mutual respect and consistency within the classroom.

Essential Research Question Discussion

How do the relationships between general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals influence the experiences of students with disabilities in general education settings?

All of the participants interviewed for this study indicated that the influence of teacher (special education and general education) and paraprofessional relationships on students with disabilities is considerable. Paraprofessional Participant 1 indicated:

> I think that it does enhance the experience for the student. The student has two adults that they can turn to, and I think that is helpful. The student is able to feel more comfortable and secure. The student knows they have two adults that they can turn to with problems.

Special Education Teacher Participant 1 indicated:

> Kids pick up on tension. It doesn't matter what their age is. They know when something isn't right. If one of the general education teachers lets me know that a kid is having a hard time. Then, I'm going to check on the student and make sure they are okay.

General Education Teacher Participant 7 said:

> I feel like having good relationships helps the students to not get singled out. They are
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> never made to feel different. When the kids see the relationships that I have with the
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> special education assistant and teacher, then they know those are people they can turn to.
>
> They love those people. If I have to leave the room, the kids are going to act the same.

These experiences are similar to the findings of Biggs et al. (2016). Through interviewing teams of special education teachers and paraprofessionals, Biggs et al. found teacher mindset had a significant effect on the success of the teacher-paraprofessional relationship with more respectful, responsive, and understanding teachers creating more equitable working relationships. The authors found that teacher proficiency was also associated with better collaborative partnerships and found that teachers who were more organized and prepared were viewed as more successful. Furthermore, teacher leadership was identified as essential to establishing consistent communication practices. Biggs et al. identified the importance of the paraprofessional mindset; paraprofessionals who were cooperative, motivated, and focused on students contributed to establishing better collaborative partnerships. Paraprofessional proficiency was identified as another important influence on collaborative relationships, and proficient professionals were described as willing to learn and willing to seek assistance. Teachers and educational assistants indicated that having a shared vision was necessary for long-term success.

Recommendations for Practice

After a review of the relevant literature and an analysis of the data collected, the researcher has made the following recommendations for practice:

- The establishment of clearly defined roles and expectations are essential to the development of working relationships between general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals (Mason et al., 2021). Establishment of these roles and expectations should be written and reviewed with all parties by administrative staff. A review of roles and expectations should be conducted any time there is a change in staffing or student needs (Biggs et al., 2016).
  - To establish such roles, educational teams should work to determine together to clearly define each individual's responsibilities.
    - For example, the special education teacher is responsible for generating each student's IEP at-a-glance and reviewing it with the general education teacher and paraprofessional to ensure understanding of IEP goals and accommodations.
    - Likewise, the general education teacher is responsible for implementing each student's accommodations and alerting the special education teacher if a student is having academic or behavioral difficulties in the general education classroom.
    - Another such example would be having the paraprofessional be responsible for taking the student to the school nurse for prescribed medication at 11:00 a.m.
- Defining roles and responsibilities in a clear and concise manner, allows for greater understanding and communication between all involved staff members (Biggs et al., 2016).

- Providing adequate training is imperative (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012; Mason et al., 2021; Musyoka et al., 2017). Staff need to be well-versed regarding the students' needs, and also need a fundamental understanding of disability types and teaching strategies.
  - To provide training on each individual student's needs, the special education teacher should review the student's IEP with all staff members involved in meeting the student's educational needs prior to the beginning of the school year or anytime there is a change in the IEP.
  - If a school has a student or students with educational needs that necessitate additional training or professional development, educators should work with school and district leaders to identify what training is needed and to secure access to the training in a timely manner.
- Planning times should be inclusive and scheduled on a regular basis (Berry, 2021; Ostlund et al., 2021; Tan & Thorius, 2019; Weiss et al., 2017). Planning meetings or professional learning communities (PLCs) should consist of general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals. These individuals should establish a clear plan on how to meet their students' needs and revisit this plan as often as necessary.
  - In order to establish common planning times, school administrators must develop the school schedule in such a way that allows for general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals to have designated time on a monthly or bimonthly basis for planning.
- Establishing clear modes of communication regarding student needs is a priority (Bradley et al., 2020; Draper, 2019; Gerzel-Short et al., 2018). Staff need training on how to

communicate effectively regarding student progress despite hectic scheduling and/or workload.

- o Collaborative teams should work together to determine the modes of communication that work best for them on a daily basis (face-to-face, phone calls, email, notes, virtual meetings) and use these methods as often as needed to communicate regarding student progress.

- School and district leaders should work to establish a vision for educating students with disabilities and develop effective supports for these students in general education settings (Kochhar-Bryant & Heishman, 2010). School and district leaders should be involved in the education of students with disabilities, be knowledgeable of their needs, and be able to support staff in challenging situations (Iadarola et al., 2015; Stites et al., 2018).

  - o School and district leaders should designate time to meet with involved stakeholders and determine the needs of students with disabilities. This team should determine what is needed to support student learning (professional development, learning materials, support staff) and the means for securing these supports. School leaders should determine how the effectiveness of the identified supports will be assessed after they are in place.

  - o In addition, a chain of communication should be established at both the school and district level so that staff can communicate their concerns regarding individual students effectively while maintaining professionalism and student confidentiality.

    - For example, if a paraprofessional is having trouble each day with a student in the cafeteria, this individual would communicate this

information to the student's special education teacher and general

education teacher. This team of individuals would meet to explore

possible solutions to address the student's behavior. In the event the team

is unable to find a working solution, they would seek administrative and/or

district support through a collaborative meeting and/or IEP meeting.

- General education staff should work to establish supportive and welcoming classroom

environments where students with special learning needs and special education staff feel

comfortable (Gerzel-Short et al., 2018).

  - o To create such an environment staff should first be trained on how to support

    students with special learning needs in the classroom setting.

  - o General education teachers should work to establish a rapport with special

    education teachers and paraprofessionals and vice versa.

  - o All staff should work to establish a rapport with students with special learning

    needs by getting to know them as individuals (learning what their interests and

    activities are).

  - o Staff should work together to understand each student's IEP and how to best meet

    their learning needs in the general education setting.

Recommendations for Future Research

The researcher has identified the following recommendations for future research:

- A qualitative study could be designed that examines the perceptions of other key

individuals involved in the education of students with disabilities (administrators, parents,

speech-language pathologists, behavior specialists, occupational therapists).

- A qualitative study could be designed to explore the influences of teacher-paraprofessional working relationships on students with disabilities following training on collaborative practices.

- A qualitative study could be designed to explore how students with disabilities experience the interactions between general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals.

Conclusion

As the number of students with disabilities participating in instruction in general education settings has increased, the need for school staff (general education teachers, paraprofessionals, and special education teachers) to have effective partnerships has also increased (Kochhar-Bryant & Heishman, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2020). School staff are challenged more than ever before regarding the expectations of educating students with disabilities. Working relationships among general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals are a complex phenomenon that are influenced by perceptions, expectations, training, time, communication skills, and school and district support (Barnes et al., 2021; Biggs et al., 2016; Mason et al., 2021). The purpose of this study was to examine how general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals perceive their relationships as they provide educational services to students with disabilities in general education settings in grades pre-K-12 in two Tennessee school districts.

The researcher found that communication practices, training, perspectives, time, role expectations, development of partnerships, and the creation of supportive environments are critical to the development of working relationships among special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and general education teachers; these factors subsequently influence the

experiences of students with disabilities. Although this study was conducted with two school districts, the findings are consistent with the current research. This study contributed to the body of knowledge concerning teacher and paraprofessional practices by examining the influences of these relationships on students with disabilities. Through creating a better understanding of how working relationships between paraprofessionals, general education teachers, and special education teachers are developed and what needs to be done to support these relationships, the potential exists for educators to influence the educational experiences of students with disabilities in a more meaningful and positive manner.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Guide

The study was framed by one essential question with five supporting questions. The

interview process included a collection of six demographic questions and 10 interview questions.

To provide additional clarity to the structure of the study, the research questions and interview

protocol are both included:

Demographic Questions:

1. What is your age?
2. What is your educational background?
3. What is the most advanced degree you have obtained?
4. How many years have you been teaching or working as a paraprofessional?
5. What role do you currently serve in?
6. What grade levels and area do you teach in?

Interview Questions:

1. How do you describe your role as a general education teacher, special education teacher, or paraprofessional?
2. Who typically initiates relationships in general education settings?
3. What do these relationships look like? What are your roles? What are the roles of your partner teacher?
4. Were you trained concerning teacher-paraprofessional or special education teacher-general education teacher relationships in your educational program? If so, what training did you receive?
5. Since becoming a teacher or paraprofessional, have you received professional development on how to engage in working relationships? If so, please describe that training.
6. What factors inhibit the development of teacher-paraprofessional or special education teacher-general education teacher relationships in a school setting? How do you address these factors?
7. What factors promote the development of teacher-paraprofessional or special education teacher-general education teacher relationships in a school setting?
8. How do you feel these relationships influence the experiences of students with special learning needs?
9. What advice would you give to new teachers or new paraprofessionals (general and special education) regarding the formation of working relationships in general education settings?
10. What can your school and district leaders do to facilitate the development of working relationships between paraprofessionals and general and special education teachers?

Appendix B: Researcher Reflexivity

Table 1

Researcher Reflexivity

Researcher: My educational background is in general education, K-8 (Bachelor's), clinical psychology (Master's), special education: mild to moderate disabilities (Master's), administration and supervision (Education Specialist degree), and school leadership (Doctoral degree). I spent 15 years teaching as a special education teacher before becoming the assistant director of special education for my district. I have been in the role as assistant director of special education for the last year. When I began teaching, I worked almost exclusively with students with autism spectrum disorders (8 years). The last seven years of my teaching experience were spent in a middle school resource setting working with students with a variety of disabilities. I have taught students with disabilities from ages 3 to 21 years. In addition, I have had the opportunity to collaborate with paraprofessionals, parents, general educators, school and district leaders, occupational therapists, speech-language therapists, vision specialists, physical therapists, and music therapists. I have directly supervised approximately 30 paraprofessionals of various ages, backgrounds, and levels of experience in my time in the classroom. I have taught in comprehensive development settings, extended resource settings, resource settings, inclusion settings, and have engaged in co-teaching at the elementary and middle school levels. I acknowledge that my background in special education shapes my views regarding inclusive education and collaboration. I am deeply passionate about meeting the educational needs of students with disabilities and implementing IEPs with fidelity.

VITA

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