REACHING OUT: EXTENDING COLLABORATION & TRAINING TO PARAEDUCATORS

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ABSTRACT

In the United States, special education paraeducators constitute a population of educators that provide integral services to our students with special needs. This population of educators is historically and currently poorly trained and supervised; yet, they work with the most challenging conditions and student population. Existing literature has unveiled a dismal state where the paraeducators job demands are increasing while their training and support remain relatively stagnant. An area where research has not highlighted as thoroughly is the impact of the dysfunctional, hierarchical system in which paraeducators operate. In essence, paraeducators are victims of a dysfunctional system that leaves them stagnant in their learning and in a position of marginalization. To begin including and valuing these individuals and thus improving our schools, practitioners must go back to the basics and increase the extent in which we demonstrate our appreciation of paraeducators by acknowledging and including them in more collaborative relationships and providing adequate training.

Keywords: Special Education. Special Education Paraeducators (SEP). Support Staff. Communication. Training. Consultation. Power.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Consultation, collaboration and ongoing professional development infuse educational practices; effective practitioners are masterful at the art of consultation and collaboration and continue their learning throughout their careers. Typically, the individuals with whom educators collaborate with or provide professional opportunities to are either other professionals or parents. Yet, how many times have we interacted with school site support staff when engaged in consultation, collaboration, and ongoing training? Beyond asking for attendance records, have you consulted with the attendance clerk regarding interventions for increasing attendance? Have you collaborated with the library technician on gathering reading books for a reading intervention or sat beside them in training on effective reading practices? When you passed a paraeducator in the break room, did you have a conversation?

If you cannot remember the last time you collaborated or consulted with support staff, you are not alone. The support staff on school sites is often an overlooked human resource that can provide information and with whom we should be extending our consultation, collaboration, and training efforts. In fact, special education paraeducators (SEP) are members of the support staff who provide support to our students and special education programs; yet, they often go unnoticed. In existing research in the United States, paraeducators have proven themselves beneficial to educational programs in many respects. Unfortunately, literature in the United States and England also describe a trend where without the proper supervision, training, and collaboration, a paraeducator's benefits can take a turn towards being detrimental to students. With increasing attacks to the education system through budget cuts, high stakes testing, and public outcry, maximizing and ensuring effectiveness among our educational teams is paramount, support staff included.

1.1 Paraeducator Paradox

Special education paraeducators provide special education services to students with disabilities under the guidance of classroom teachers and other certificated personnel with regard to the instruction of reading, writing and mathematics. In practice, direct services typically take the form of educational supports and focuses services on student educational outcomes. These services include, but are not limited to, teaching functional skills (CARROLL, 2001), implementing academic interventions (VADASY; SANDERS & PEYTON, 2006), connecting to parents and communities (CHOPRA *et al*., 2004), and assisting in behavior modification (MEULLER; STERLING-TURNER & MOORE, 2005).

The research in the United States on paraeducators has illustrated their strengths and importance in providing services to students (DOWNING; RYNDAK & CLARK, 2000; FRENCH, 1998). Unfortunately, more striking in the literature is the problematic relationship of having untrained individuals working with the most challenging students. Paraeducators have increased responsibility for providing instructional services to students with disabilities, yet the degree to which they are qualified to meet such demands remains relatively stagnant. As a result, the students who need the most support from qualified personnel are lagging behind their non-disabled peers. This paradox is potentially harmful to students.

In recent studies that investigated the relationship of paraeducators to student outcomes, findings have been disheartening. Although the bulk of the literature reviewed in this study is based heavily on research conducted in the United States, similar issues arise internationally. For example, the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project, originating from researchers out of the University of London, was one of the largest scale investigations on the impact of paraeducators on student outcomes (BLATCHFORD *et al.*, 2009). Researchers conducted a five-year longitudinal study on teaching assistants, or paraeducators, in an effort to describe the roles and characteristics of support staff and their impact on student behaviour, learning, and academic progress. The DISS findings indicated that there was little to no difference between academic outcomes of students who received support from paraeducators in comparison to those who did not. In fact, there was a negative relationship for students who received support in the areas of English, math, and science.

In the United States, Giangreco and his colleagues have investigated paraeducators over many years and wrote several research and practice articles to address this potentially harmful paradox. Some of Giangreco, *et al.´s* work have been most notable when looking at

paraeducators who are "one on one" aides. Although school staff and parents have identified paraeducators as a resource to relieve some school pressures, research has shown that "one on one" paraeducators have detrimental effects on student outcomes. Giangreco, Edelman and Broer (2010) argues that paraeducators increase student perceptions of stigmatization, encourage dependence or over-reliance on adults, and cause a barrier to peer and teacher interactions.

1.2 A Problem with the System

In the United States, paraeducator research has revealed that the paraeducator paradox is not something that can be fixed with individual paraeducators, but rather a greater approach to changing the paraeducator system is needed. Embedded in the paraeducator literature are the paraeducators´ perceptions of their general lack of power (RUEDA & MONZO, 2002) and a sense marginalization (ERNST-SLAVIT & WENGER, 2006; LEWIS, 2005). Power underlies discussions about paraeducator collaboration, interactions with other educators, and training and supervision.

In Chopra's *et al.* (2004) study, the paraeducators reported power issues surrounding a lack of respect and trust from administrators and teachers. The power differential manifested itself in the paraeducators' lower pay, being called an "aide or assistant" rather than a paraeducator, an expectation to assume the role of a substitute teacher without comparable compensation, a teacher belief that the paraeducator role was unnecessary, and a lack of training support. Echoing Chopra *et al*., in Ernst-Slavit's and Wenger's (2006) study on bilingual paraeducators, power issues emerged where paraeducators self reported a sense of marginalization. They were rarely supervised and when they were supervised, the paraeducators were expected to maintain the dominant school culture even if it was contrary to what they believed was in the best interest of their students. Power issues also manifested itself in the paraeducator' work space and collaboration with their supervising teachers. The paraeducators had poor working conditions and often had to seek out teachers for support and communication during their lunchtime rather than having the collaboration readily available to them.

1.3 Ineffective Systems for Training

Paraeducator training opportunities can be inconsistent, nonexistent, or specific to districts, school sites, and classrooms. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC, 2005) suggested that paraeducators have competency in 10 domains that include instructional, behavioural, legal, and disability awareness skills. In the United States, although there are national paraeducator websites, training modules, and resources available, paraeducators often come to the job with the bare minimum of requirements. They are forced to learn how to provide services to students through trial and error or on the job training.

In a recent study on paraeducator knowledge and preparedness, Carter *et al.* (2009) investigated the level of knowledge paraeducators held and used the CEC standards as a framework. The writers found that paraeducators reported moderate levels of knowledge of CEC standards. Paraeducators often performed their duties with a limited mastery of those competencies. Katsiyannis, Hodge and Lanford (2000) reviewed several federal court cases involving the faulty delivery of special education services. Through the review, the authors found that in many cases, paraeducators were scrutinized for their lack of training.

1.4 Ineffective Systems for Collaboration

In addition, the issue of not having enough collaboration time is not a new one. School staff, regardless if they are support or certificated, often voice concerns regarding time to collaborate. Finding the time and the means to collaborate is a systemic problem. In the DISS project, teachers reported that they often did not have the time to collaborate with their paraeducators, or they felt that they were unskilled to provide paraeducators with quality supervisory support (BLATCHFORD *et al.*, 2009). In other cases, teachers did not view supervision as one of their roles when working with paraeducators. French's (1998) research delved deeper into the supervising teacher's perceptions of supervision and uncovered a teacher perception that an

"ideal paraeducator was seen as a person who required very little supervision or direction" (p. 365).

1.5 A Call for Empowering the Powerless

Ultimately, the aforementioned research reveals that paraeducators are subject to a hierarchical power structure. The school system provides the framework for the power differential by offering less compensation while expecting paraeducators to occasionally assume teacher responsibilities. Trickling down from this system is the supervising teachers' interactions with paraeducators, poor working conditions, lack of collaboration and communication with teachers and paraeducator exclusion from activities. This power differential was potentially harmful to the paraeducators' ability to provide services to students (RUEDA & MONZO, 2002). Repeatedly, the power issue emerges and weaves itself throughout the literature regardless of the fact that researchers do not formally investigate it. Its reoccurrence and the paraeducators' voices suggest that power is not only an important concept to explore but also that the existing power issues have potentially detrimental impacts upon paraeducator practice. Thus, this study aimed to target issues of power and its impact on paraeducator instruction.

1.6 Theoretical Framework

Wenger's (1998) theory on communities of practice describes a group of individuals who participate in joint learning on a shared interest. Wenger defines participation as an active and complex process that suggests both "action and connection" (p. 56). Members of the community participate in varying degrees; there are core members, active members, peripheral members, and outsiders. The community of practice varying degrees of participation the boundaries can become fluid where members move in and out of various levels depending on the enterprise, their expertise, interest, and participation.

When discussing situated learning Lave and Wenger's (1991) focus on the peripheral boundary of the community of practice. They talk about how newcomers to the community of practice can gain *entrée* into the community as legitimate peripheral participants (LPP). The authors suggest that the peripherality is a complex notion where the position on the periphery can be an "empowering position" (LAVE & WENGER, 1991, p. 36), participants are poised to gain knowledge from the community through an apprenticeship type of model and consequently become active members of the community. The trajectory of LPPS (legitimate periphery participants) who are empowered is inward, towards the center of the community. Lave and Wenger also suggest that the peripherality can be a "disempowering position" where participants remain on the peripheral and never gain full membership into the community. Communities of practice can be ineffective when members feel marginalized or excluded from the decision making processes of the community (WENGER *et al.*, 1998).

Using a community of practice framework to investigate the educational setting is logical because educators and parents are all engaged in the enterprise of educating children. Participants in the system, namely parents, teachers, administrators, students, and support staff engage in the enterprise of learning in varying degrees. Paraeducators, by way of their job description to assist certificated personnel in instruction, are also engaged in the enterprise of teaching and learning. They provide direct services to children and appear to be active members in the community of practice. However, as this study demonstrates, their level of participation is actually stilted by systemic issues that force them into positions of marginalization.

2 METHOD

2.1 The Sampling Criteria

Dukes Unified School District (DUSD), a fictitious name, is a large, urban school district in the United States. The district serves over 132,000 students who are diverse in ethnic background, socio-economic status, and language proficiency. On average, 12% of the students receive special education services. DUSD also has more than 15,800 employees at district and school levels. The study included elementary school special education paraeducators (SEP) in DUSD.

The participating SEPs worked with elementary aged students with mild to moderate disabilities who attended various schools in DUSD. The study took place over a 12-month period that included data collection and data analysis.

Attempts were made to acquire a large, random sample of participants; however, possibly due to lack of interest in participation, the sample was more akin to a convenience sample. For example, although XX elementary schools in DUSD were asked to participate, only 28 schools expressed interest in participating in the study, comprising 94 SEPs. Of the 94 SEPs, 21 SEPs volunteered to be participants in the study. Sixteen of the potential participants met the criteria of working with students with mild to moderate disabilities in a small group instructional setting. All were asked to be part of the study. Four individuals were removed from the study due to lack of consent for student or paraeducator participation in the videotaping portion of the data collection. Twelve participants remained. The 12 participants represented a diverse array of age, education levels, and experience. The participants also represented schools that were from a wide range of socio-economic status, from low to high income schools.

2.2 Measures

Four qualitative measures were used to elicit paraeducator perceptions regarding power. The first was a paraeducator demographic questionnaire identifying demographic information, job duties and typical day activities. The second measure was a Paraeducator Ecocultural Narrative Interview (NGUYEN, 2011, PENI), which was a semi-structured interview designed to elicit narratives that provided insight into the participants' instructional activities, job duties, and power perceptions. The third measure was a Video Elicited Interview (VEI), a 15-minute semi-structured interview, participant selected segment of video of the participant providing small group instruction to students. Similar to the PENI, the VEI was designed to elicit responses that addressed the SEP's duties, perceptions of power, and instructional practice.

2.3 Procedures

Data collection took place over an 8-week period and was divided into three phases. In Phase One, the questionnaire was administered. In Phase two, it was used in conjunction with the PENI as a starting point to elicit more information on the paraeducators' job duties and the activities that they engaged in daily. PENI guided questions were used to elicit narrative responses. In Phase Three, SEPs were videotaped. The SEP selected 30 minutes of SEP small group instruction to be videoed. The SEP was prompted to select a 10-15 minute portion of the video to be used in the VEI. Data was analyzed using a qualitative approach. All interviews were transcribed. The interviews, video, and questionnaires were analyzed using deductive and inductive approaches to data analysis by using a priori and emerging codes based on the theoretical frameworks of communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participants.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Institutional, School, and Supervising Teacher Factors

According to Wenger (1998), communities of practice develop from larger, social, historical, institutional, and cultural contexts. For the special education paraeducator, the overarching communities of practice that they operate within are the institution and school communities. In the current study, data revealed that institution and school factors guided the SEPs' practice and left them as marginalized members of the community. SEPs enacted on the communities' interpretations of special education law, district and school policies, and supervising teacher schedules that were created without SEP input.

3.2 Institutional and School Influences

Overall, the SEP's job was dictated by the special education law and on the Dukes Unified School District (DUSD) model of special education service delivery. In an effort to embrace the tenets of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), specifically the undergirding principles of free appropriate public education (FAPE) and least restrictive environment (LRE), DUSD implemented Specialized Academic Instruction (SAI) in 2007. SAI was an effort to design supports around students' needs rather than force them into pre-set programs. This ideology presented itself as a marked shift from how special education staff, including special education paraeducators (SEP) provided services in the past. Ironically, in an effort to include more students and meet their needs, the district adopted the service delivery model with little enlistment of the stakeholders' input and inadvertently marginalized the SEPs of this study.

Interview data revealed that the SAI movement changed the setting in which SEPs provided their instructional services. SEPs were moved from providing concentrated, individual, small group instruction in a space of their own, to spreading their services across multiple classrooms, to multiple children, through different times of the day. Seven out of the 12 SEP participants found themselves providing services in settings and programs that were novel to them. Five out of the seven SEPs reported challenges with the changes in their service delivery model. Gina described a negative impact of this model upon her ability to provide services: "What happened is that [the district] disbanded the special day class…We are now covering every kid that has an IEP; [whisper] It's not working… We're spread really thin… we're literally running around trying to service kids" (Gina, PENI).

The change in location of the service delivery to general education classes also impacted the way in which SEPs provided services. In the years prior to the SAI movement, SEPs used a "pull-out" model of service delivery. In this model, students went to a separate classroom and received services from the SEP on their deficit skills. The "pull-out" model enabled SEPs to autonomously design a consistent schedule where a homogeneous ability and skill group of students arrived at a specified time, day, and location to receive services.

In contrast, the SEPs referred to the SAI service delivery as "push-in" services or "mainstreaming." In the "push-in" model, SEPs went into the general education classroom to support all students. This model forced SEPs to rely heavily on what the teachers were doing in the classroom. Unfortunately, they had very little communication with teachers prior to entering the classroom, so SEPs resorted to providing impromptu services depending on what they

interpreted as was needed to support students. Daniel described it as "piggy-backing" on what the teacher was doing (Daniel, PENI). Often, this piggy backing manifested itself as SEPs moving around the room, keeping students on task, and supporting the instruction by modifying assignments for students with disabilities.   Mary captured this "piggy backing" best when she described her duties during push-in: "I am supporting the class….the teacher [tells] me, 'Mary I want you to do [this]…' It's up to the teacher; whatever he wants me to do" (Mary, PENI).

3.3 Impact of the Supervising Teacher on SEP Instruction

Analysis from SEPs' questionnaires and interviews revealed that the SEPs' duties were dependent on the supervising teachers' schedule. The supervising teachers, both the special education and general education teachers, instructed the paraeducator on what schedule to follow. This schedule was established by the teacher with no input from the SEP. The teachers set the content to be taught, the time it would be taught, and how the SEP supported the instruction. Six out of 12 SEPs listed their instructional activities in terms of time, number of students they worked with, and the subject area they covered. A prime example was Annie's responses to the demographic questionnaire prompt – Describe your typical day – Annie listed all of her duties according to the supervising teacher's schedule.

> **Annie (Questionnaire):**
> **8-8:20 –** Math Whole Group: Assist teacher with behaviors and assist in demonstrations…
> **9:00 –** Readers and Writers' Workshop: Generally, teacher reads to the whole group on the rug. I assist when necessary….

Teacher schedules dominated the SEPs' work day by structuring it and dictating when, where, and with whom the SEP would work with. On another level, the interactions with current supervisors also served to push SEPs' towards more marginalized participation roles within the community of practice. Current supervisors were the individuals that the SEPs had direct contact with during the data collection period of this study. These supervisors included administrators,

special education teachers, and general education teachers. Overall, the SEPs had positive things to say about their current supervisors. They said supervisors helped them improve their teaching practices, communicated, collaborated with them and provided instructional materials. Louise described her interactions with her supervisors as a learning experience: "I like to observe whatever teacher I'm working with…I like to observe and listen. That is how you learn. I'm constantly listening to how [my current supervisor] is interacting with the children" (Louise, VEI). In interactions like these, SEPs acted more like legitimate peripheral participants. Through observation and interaction with the teacher, SEPs learned how to interact with their students. However, twenty percent of the references to current supervisors indicated that SEPs did not benefit from learning from their supervisors, but rather their supervisors tended to limit interactions between themselves and the SEPs. In these instances, the SEPs were marginalized due to a lack of communication. Mary discussed how she attempted to interact with teachers in order to give them information on how students were progressing. Mary initiated these interactions, but the teachers rarely did the same. The lack of reciprocity of communication left Mary feeling like her contribution to the community of practice had very little meaning.

> **Interviewer**: Do teachers typically ask you [what you are doing]?
> **Mary**: "Not really. I have to furnish the information. Sometimes they don't ask me. I feel like they should ask me because I do feel a little bit like my work doesn't mean much."

Thus, when SEPs felt supported by their supervisors in terms of communication and permission to observe and learn how to interact with children, SEPs were more akin to a legitimate peripheral participation. Unfortunately, teacher schedules and at least 20% of references to current supervisors indicated that much of the SEPs' decision making abilities were removed from their schedules or interactions were either negative or limited. In these instances, SEPs were not situated in the periphery, they were marginalized.

3.4 Remaining on the Periphery

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), legitimate periphery participants (LPP) can become empowered as they move towards higher degrees of participation. In these scenarios, LPPs learn similar to apprentice – with increased learning comes increased participation. SEPs' opportunities to learn and subsequently move away from the periphery towards more active and core roles within the community come by way of their formal and informal training. All 12 SEPs referred to training resources. These references indicated that they all had access to some form of training.

3.5 Training

Half of the SEPs in this study had access to formal training. Three of the SEPs worked for the district long enough to attend several professional development trainings early in their careers as paraeducators. Specifically, Gladys, Mary, and Annie all attended mass, district trainings on specific scripted phonics programs. Three other SEPs, Nina, Debbie, and Evelyn, received formal trainings that entailed behavior and academic intervention specific to disabilities such as autism and emotional disturbance. The six remaining SEPs of the study never received formal training. The remaining half of the participants of this study completed their training from watching teachers and informally getting trained by supervisors. In this respect, SEPs were similar to legitimate peripheral participants where they observed, took direction from, and deferred to their supervisors for support.

3.6 Inadequate Training

Even though all of the SEPs reported that they had access to either formal or informal training, an analysis of the SEPs' negative comments regarding training revealed that there was not enough training or the training was not adequate to meet the demands of being a paraeducator.

For example, Evelyn commented that the district only required the base minimum of qualifications, the passage of a basic skills test. This minimal requirement did not paint an adequate picture of the true skills needed to perform the SEP role effectively. Evelyn described how training was important to SEPs. They needed training on how to work with students, how to deal with behavior problems, and how to interact with their supervisors.

> **Evelyn (PENI):** "I feel that the aides need more training. They need to all be [behaviourally] certificated…. Why not [behavior] training? Give them that opportunity when the teachers have in-service days, do it for the aides too. Make the training appropriate for what they do."

Ultimately, SEPs had access to formal and informal training opportunities. When SEPs were adequately trained, they expressed positive statements about their supervisors and formal training opportunities. The majority of the comments about training, however, indicated that SEPs did not have adequate learning opportunities. The impact of lack of learning suggests that SEPs did not have a trajectory of becoming more active members in the community of practice, but rather they remained on the periphery.

3.7 Discussion: The Paraeducator Power Paradox

A paraeducator is an individual who provides direct services to students under the supervision of a professional. Using a community of practice framework, the job description suggests that paraeducators are active participants in the community. Existing research also support this active role with detailed studies on special education paraeducators (SEP) implementing academic interventions (VADASY, *et al.*, 2006), bilingual paraeducators interacting with parents (CHOPRA, *et al.*, 2004) and SEPs working with students to modify challenging behaviors. Yet, the underlying theme of much of the literature is this concept of a distinct power differential that results in poorly trained and supervised individuals. Paraeducators report that they are very cognizant of power differences (RUEDA & MONZO, 2002). The literature indicates they are

not considered active members of the community of practice, but perhaps they are more on the periphery or marginalized (ERNST-SLAVIT & WENGER, 2006).

The current study reveals findings that suggest that SEPs are caught in a power paradox. In one respect, SEPs hold power by providing direct services to students on a regular basis. Their workdays are spent primarily with students. Yet, the dependency on the supervising teacher and the training they receive indicate that the SEPs are void of decision making power. Consequently, they exist on the periphery of the community of practice.

The literature generated from U.S. researchers and the current findings of this study on training indicate that training is generally inadequate to meet the SEPs' job demands. Formal training is minimal. Informal training is dependent on the individual supervisors and the level of communication that SEPs have with their supervisors. Those who are learning from their supervisors do so through observation and instructions on how to execute a task. An apprenticeship relationship between the supervisors and SEPs of this study does not exist. Thus, SEPs, though ideal candidates to be viewed as LPP, are actually non-legitimate peripheral participants. They remain, at the very most, on the periphery of the community of practice both in this study and in the literature.

4 IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Increase Collaboration and Communication

Although there are several practice texts that illustrate how to supervise and collaborate with paraeducators (PICKETT & GERLACH, 1997; NEVIN *et al.*, 2009), the continued emergence of paraeducator literature and the voices of this study indicate that paraeducators are not receiving the level of collaboration and communication needed to be effective instructional resources. Special education paraeducators (SEP) would benefit from increased collaboration and communication with members of the community of practice. On one side of the picture, 80% of SEPs' comments discussed how they valued their current supervisor to teach, guide, and support them in their practice. On the other hand, 20% of the references to current supervisors were negative comments about communication. When SEPs had increased communication with

their supervisors, they reported that they were more supported in their learning and instructional practices. These opportunities to communicate and collaborate with supervisors were often during informal times such as breaks and transitions rather than from supportive structures in the school system.

French's (1998) study on paraeducator and teacher relationships indicated that when there was structured collaborative time or communication via written lesson plans, then collaboration and communication increased. It would benefit educators to increase the opportunities for collaboration and communication around students and instruction. Setting aside time or implementing communication systems can be as simple as sharing lesson plans, starting or ending the school day earlier or later one day a week for whole school collaboration, providing, summer institutes, or joint attendance at professional development. Increasing collaboration and communication would also encourage SEPs to participate in decisions and would allow them to be mentored by their supervisors to achieve true legitimate peripheral participation and entry into the community.

4.2 Increase Training Opportunities

Current literature and this study illustrate that the level of training that paraeducators receive is relatively stagnant. Paraeducators are asked to provide direct instruction to students, yet they do so with very little instructional training. The SEPs of this study were reliant on some formal training that was offered to them prior decades or informal training from supervisors. SEPs would benefit from formal training on instructional strategies and practices that meet the diverse learning needs of students with disabilities. These strategies can be content specific, but it may benefit SEPs more if they learn strategies that can cross the multiple contexts and academic disciplines. Training on more versatile strategies will allow SEPs to be more flexible and have a repertoire that can meet a variety of demands.

For informal training, SEPs of this study were dependent on their supervisor teachers. Informal training can be improved by providing SEPs with more exposure to different teaching styles and educators. This exposure would ideally be structured where SEPs can observe different

teachers across different grade levels and content areas. The observation would be supported with communication with the teacher about the his/her practice. This communication would increase the SEPs understanding of the teacher's own decision making practice while communicating the details of the instructional strategy to encourage SEP application. In addition, informal training can also take the form of networking with other paraeducators from different fields. During this networking session, SEPs can exchange information and instructional ideas.

4.3 Limitations of Study

The findings of this study attempted to uncover where special education paraeducators (SEP) are situated within their communities of practice and how that position impacts their perceptions of power. This study makes explicit the implicit messages of previous studies on power differentials and the marginalization of paraeducators. Although there are several limitations to this study, the information regarding SEPs' position within the community of practice can provide insight to districts, school sites, and special education programming on how to effectively support and empower individuals that are poorly supported historically. Essentially, it may serve as a platform to begin fixing a clearly dysfunctional system.

The methodological limitations to the current study include limited sample size. Although the study sought to have a larger, random sample size, the reality was that the sample size was dependent on more of a convenience sample. However, the qualitative research design was purposeful in eliciting voices of an otherwise voiceless educator population. These voices make explicit the embedded message of existing literature in the United States. In addition, a focus on case studies was appropriate when considering that each paraeducator was unique in their learning experiences, training, school site expectations, and level and quality of supervision. Although the participants were diverse, their voices illustrated a common theme of concerns regarding training and supervision. When coupled with existing literature, these findings on power, marginalization, training and supervision serve to strengthen a call for increased support to paraeducators. The findings have the potential to inform the field about the current practices

and relationship dynamics that exist; and consequently, develop policy solutions to a problem of power differentials for educators who are historically underrepresented.

5 CONCLUSION

The paraeducator paradox, having our most unskilled human resources working with our most challenging students, is a product of a dysfunctional system that leaves paraeducators stagnant in their skill set. The system presents power differentials and marginalization where paraeducators are subject to the will and skill of their supervising teachers and bereft of any formal training. This study explicitly identifies institutional, school, and teacher factors as agents that contribute to a dysfunctional system. Special education paraeducators (SEP) are part of a school where there is a common goal adopted by all participants and stakeholders. By definition of their job descriptions and their job responsibilities, they are part of a community of practice, yet their decision making power is removed, leaving them marginalized and feeling powerless. The core members of the community (i.e. district, school, and supervising teacher) created a structure where the SEPs' job duties and their execution were dictated to them. They were told when, where, and with whom to provide services. The current study brings to light that power issues cannot be silenced and implications of this study speak to increase support for training, collaboration and communication in an effort to de-marginalize paraeducators.

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Table 1 – Ranges of Participant Demographics.

# of SEP	Age range in years	Experience in years	Education level
4	48+	11+	Some College to Bachelor
5	42-48+	7-10	High School to Some College
3	30-41	5-6	High School to Some College
1	24-29	0-2	Bachelor

Table 2 – Examples of Informal Training.

SEP	Informal training through supervisors
Erin	Interviewer: Is there any training? Erin: It's more so [my supervising teacher]….If I don't understand, she'll show me how to do it. But, there's no formal training coming in (PENI).
Louise	One of our sped resource teachers did an inservice for all of us… on dealing with small reading groups (VEI).
Daniel	The training usually comes from [my supervising teacher] (PENI).