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# Perceptions of Educators and Paraprofessionals in a Collaborative K-2 Team

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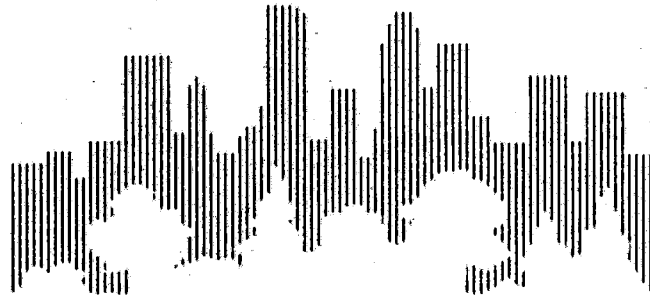
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**C • O • L • L • E • G • E**

**MASTER OF ARTS IN LEADERSHIP**

**Kristin L. Buckner**

**Perceptions of Educators and Paraprofessionals in a  
Collaborative K-2 Team**

**2007**

MASTER OF ARTS IN EDUCATION  
AUGSBURG COLLEGE  
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that the **Action Research Final Project** of

Kristin L. Buckner

has been approved by the Review Committee, and fulfills the requirements for the Master of Arts  
in Education degree.

Date of Symposium: June 19, 2007

Date Completed: September 10, 2007

Committee:

Susan O'Connell

Advisor

[Signature]

Reader

9/17/07

## Dedication

This study is dedicated to the paraprofessionals, special educators, and general educators who work collaboratively to make the futures brighter for students. And to the students who encourage us to be lifelong learners and remind us what education is truly about.

To family and friends who provide endless love and support, thank you!

## Acknowledgments

I wish to thank all of the participants of this study for their honesty, flexibility, and insight. I appreciate the time they took from their busy schedules in order to share their thoughts; they have helped shape this research project into a valuable resource.

I would like to thank my colleagues and classmates who have shown me the meaning of teamwork. They have enriched my studies and experiences and it has been a privilege to work, learn, and grow alongside each of them.

Thank you to my family and friends who have always given me a tremendous amount of love, support, and encouragement in all my personal and professional endeavors. To my informal advisor, Dr. Carol Knicker, thank you for the kind words and eternal optimism. I would also like to thank Donna Patterson, for being my reader.

Finally, it is with great gratitude that I would like to acknowledge and thank my advisor, Dr. Susan O'Connor, for her continuous support and guidance along this journey of qualitative design. Her passion for education and personal time devoted to her students is admirable; it has encouraged me to be a better educator, student, and researcher.

## ABSTRACT

### Perceptions of Educators and Paraprofessionals in a Collaborative K-2 Team

Kristin L. Buckner

June 2007

Leadership Application Project (EDC 585)

x Action Research (EDC 587) Final Project

This phenomenological analysis investigates the experiences and perceptions of paraprofessionals, special educators, and general educators working in a collaborative K-2 team. The study was conducted by researching related literature published between the years of 1998 and 2006, conducting surveys and personal interviews with paraprofessionals, special and general educators, and by examining specific state, district, and building criteria for paraprofessionals. Three objectives of the study were to: (a) clarify educators' perceptions of paraprofessionals' roles, preparation, and performance, (b) compare those perceptions to self-reports of paraprofessionals, and (c) examine the nature and characteristics of educator-paraprofessional relationships. The analysis of data revealed three main themes, which predominated the interviews -- need for role clarification of paraprofessionals, lack of professional training and education surrounding paraprofessionals and desire for more time and tools for effective communication and collaboration on an educator-paraprofessional team.

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will be used to describe any individual who works directly with special education students under the supervision of a licensed educator.

Paraprofessionals are on the frontlines each day working with students, families, special educators, general educators, as well as staff and school administration. The duties of paraprofessionals and their performance of those duties are often discussed, however, not well documented. This lack of documentation in regards to paraprofessionals leads to uncertainty in the workplace and an overall weakening of collaboration on educational teams. Gathering new or additional information will help gain insight into the perceptions of paraprofessionals and educators, which will be essential in helping to build stronger collaborative teams and, ultimately, will aide in best serving the whole student in special education.

The purpose of this study is to define what a paraprofessional is, describe the services they provide and to whom, as well as examine the varying perspectives and expectations of those working alongside them in the schools. The clear definition of roles will lead to ways paraprofessionals can best be utilized for student success and how to build healthy, collaborative relationships among professionals.

This action research study investigates the experiences and perceptions of paraprofessionals, special educators, and general educators working in a collaborative K-2 team. The study was conducted by researching related literature published between the years of 1998 and 2006, conducting surveys and personal interviews with paraprofessionals, special and general educators, and by examining specific state, district, and building criteria for paraprofessionals. Three objectives of the study were to: (a) clarify educators' perceptions of paraprofessionals' roles, preparation, and performance, (b) compare those perceptions to self-reports of



paraprofessionals, and (c) examine the nature and characteristics of educator-paraprofessional relationships.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Practical implications and the needs of special education students*

As increasingly greater numbers of students with disabilities are educated in the special and general education settings, paraprofessionals will continue to play an important role in the provision of needed support. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997), children with disabilities have the right to be educated in the least restrictive environment with their non-disabled peers, with appropriate supports and services. To ensure that students with disabilities receive the tools they need to be successful in the classroom setting, we must make sure the individuals providing the support are well trained and nourished by a team of professionals. As people working closely with students with disabilities, paraprofessionals are in a position to facilitate or hinder the goals of inclusive programming. In general, school districts, individual schools, and educators may need to reexamine policies and practices concerning the employment, training, supervision, and responsibilities of paraprofessionals to support successful educational placements for the needs of students in special education.

### *Preview of the literature*

In the past decade a relatively small, but growing, set of literature has emerged that specifically addresses paraprofessional supports for students with disabilities in the general education and special education classrooms. Only a few studies examined how to develop collaborative educational teams with paraprofessionals, special educators, and general educators. The literature reviewed in this study includes data based and non-data based sources published between the years of 1998 and 2006. These publications were found mainly in general education and special education journals. All were topically focused on paraprofessionals supporting students with disabilities in various educational settings.

The literature has addressed topics such as: the historical rise of paraprofessionals, roles and responsibilities (Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2002; Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2002), training of paraprofessionals (Riggs & Mueller, 2001), supervising responsibilities for educators (Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl, 2001), paraprofessional perceptions (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000), and collaborative team building among paraprofessionals and educators (French, 1998). There are only a few reviews of the literature on paraprofessionals; specifically collaborative education teams including paraprofessionals.

### *Historical rise of paraprofessionals*

In recent history, paraprofessionals have evolved as important members of instructional teams providing services to students with special needs. The role of paraprofessionals as instructional supports and key members of educational teams does not have a long history. The role of paraprofessionals in the past 50 years has moved from assistance with clerical tasks toward more instructional tasks. Their changing role reflects changes in educational practices, evolution of teachers' roles, shifts in legislation and policy, and shortages of qualified teachers.

Review of the related literature provides a brief timeline and history of the role of paraprofessionals. The following historical information is loosely adapted from the article, Paraprofessional support of students with disabilities: Literature from the past decade (Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2002). Over time, paraprofessionals have provided efficient, cost-effective service in school settings through a variety of roles. Paraprofessionals worked in education and human service programs as far back as the early 1900s; however, it was not until the mid-1950s that their value was recognized. The formal role for paraprofessionals was first introduced to the nation's schools after World War II, post-war shortages of teachers led local school boards to look for alternative service providers. The first paraprofessionals

performed clerical, housekeeping, and monitoring duties so that teachers could spend more time on instructional tasks.

During the 1960s and 1970s, schools hired more paraprofessionals and expanded their roles as a result of demographic pressures and provisions in federal legislation such as Head Start and Title I, which are educational programs designed to help young learners prepare for school and receive additional academic support once in school. Further specialization of paraprofessional roles occurred after the enactment of two additional federal laws: the Bilingual Education Act and the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA). The Bilingual Education Act's enactment in 1968 led to the hiring of bilingual paraprofessionals to address the shortage of certified bilingual teachers, a practice that continues today. Another major expansion in paraprofessional employment occurred after EHA's enactment in 1974, as schools and local education agencies struggled to provide individualized services for students with disabilities.

The recent trend toward increasing inclusion of students in special education in general education classroom activities will generate additional demands on paraprofessionals in regular and compensatory education assignments, as well as on those who work in special education. Paraprofessionals have traditionally been key players in Title I programs, and new provisions in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that call for intensive efforts to increase parent involvement may also generate a demand for paraprofessionals. Downing, Ryndak, and Clark (2000) explain that state regulation also played a role in the increased use of paraprofessionals. According to a review in the year 2000, eighteen states mandate the employment of paraprofessionals for certain programs; ten target special education programs. Early childhood education is another area in which some states prescribe the use of paraprofessionals. In Tennessee, for example, recent education reforms call for districts to hire

at least one paraprofessional for every three teachers in grades K-3. These changes have required the development of: (a) standards for paraprofessional roles and competencies, (b) infrastructures to prepare paraprofessionals for their new roles, and (c) administrative systems to support instructional teams at the school level. The active involvement of many different constituents—policymakers in federal and state governments, administrators in state and local education agencies, personnel developers in two- and four-year institutions of higher education, researchers, professional organizations and others—is required (Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2002).

Today, the role of paraprofessionals has continued to evolve. Educational reform efforts are promoting new roles for teachers as managers and instructional team leaders. Specifically, teachers have greater responsibilities for program and classroom management, participation in school site decision-making, and implementation of accountability systems and measures. Changes in teachers' roles have implications for the roles of paraprofessionals.

#### *Roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals*

Issues associated with paraprofessional effectiveness have been considered. In a survey of 18 matched pairs of teachers and paraprofessionals who worked together in resource programs, French (1998) confirmed that paraprofessionals serve in instructional roles, such as re-teaching material and adapting lessons to fit student needs, and that teachers value this role. However, there needs to be a distinction between the role definitions of paraprofessional as *assistant to the teacher* and as *assistant to the student* to further the performance of paraprofessionals in special education and to clarify job roles.

Paraprofessionals indicated they spent the majority of their time providing direct instructional services to students. During the remainder of their time, they engaged in a variety

of activities, including clerical tasks (e.g., copying and filing); student monitoring (e.g., bus, recess, and cafeteria duty); accompanying students (e.g., in hallways, at lunch, and recess, and in special subject areas such as art and music); assisting with classroom projects; and behavior management of individual students (Riggs & Mueller, 2001).

Others have claimed there is no documentation that demonstrates paraprofessionals enhance student performance, due to lack of understanding of the job role (Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2002). Although research is available regarding general aspects of paraprofessionals, such as where they work and with whom they work, there is limited information regarding specific aspects of the profession, such as a complete job description or how collaboration incorporates paraprofessionals. In a summary of literature on paraprofessionals from the past decade, Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, and Doyle (2002) concluded the amount of focus within literature on paraprofessional support of students with disabilities has increased and the trend continues upward. However, they feel that gaps in the literature exist in other topics such as, “acknowledging the work of paraprofessionals, guidelines for hiring and assigning them, interactions with school staff and students, and supervision” (p. 54).

#### *Training of paraprofessionals*

In regards to paraprofessional training, Riggs and Mueller (2001) completed a qualitative and quantitative study of 23 paraprofessionals working in public school elementary classrooms with grades K-5. At the end of their research, it was concluded that, although some paraprofessionals reported receiving some introductory training,

Fewer than 40% of them reported that they were oriented in these areas: their students and programs, school and classroom discipline, health and safety procedures, reporting child

abuse and neglect, home and school communication procedures, and liability issues such as transporting students (p. 57).

Paraprofessionals working in the United States are responsible for meeting the national professional guidelines of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act. NCLB is designed to help disadvantaged children reach high academic standards. The belief of NCLB is that properly trained paraprofessionals can play important roles in improving student achievement by reinforcing and augmenting a teacher's effort in the classroom. NCLB therefore requires that paraprofessionals meet higher standards of qualification. The requirements for paraprofessionals are detailed on the U.S. Department of Education (2007) website and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act of 2004.

Paraprofessionals whose duties include instructional support and who were hired after January 8, 2002, must have:

- completed two years of study at an institution of higher education;
- or obtained an associate's (or higher) degree;
- or passed a formal state or local academic assessment, demonstrating knowledge of and the ability to assist in instructing reading, writing, and mathematics.

Individuals who work in food services, cafeteria or playground supervision, personal care services, non-instructional computer assistance, and similar positions are not considered paraprofessionals, and do not have to meet these requirements.

#### *Minnesota Core Competencies for Instructional Paraprofessionals*

To be competent in a job, an individual must have knowledge, skills, and abilities to do all that is expected and required. The Minnesota Department of Education has developed a set of Core Competencies for Instructional Paraprofessionals. The competencies are statements that indicate the knowledge and skills needed for instructional paraprofessionals to work successfully

in educational settings. These should be used to guide training, portfolio development, and more. There are nine core competency areas, each with their own set of objectives—they are as follows; (1) Philosophical, Historical, and Legal Foundations of Education, (2) Characteristics of Students, (3) Assessment, Diagnosis, and Evaluation, (4) Instructional Content and Practice, (5) Supporting the Teaching and Learning Environment, (6) Managing Student Behavior and Social Interaction Skills, (7) Communication and Collaborative Partnerships, (8) Professional and Ethical Practices, and (9) Academic Instructional Skills in Math, Reading and Writing (The Minnesota Department of Education, 2006).

As a result of changes in federal and state law, the duties and responsibilities of paraprofessionals have expanded dramatically in recent years, but their training has not always kept pace. The pressure to provide special services and increase attention to individual needs, combined with the realities of school funding formulas, sometimes results in paraprofessionals overextending their responsibilities. Bilingual teaching assistants, for example, are often asked to assume the role of primary teacher—a role beyond their education and expertise (Riggs and Mueller, 2001). Paraprofessionals in compensatory education programs are often assigned to pullout instruction that they may be ill prepared to implement. Education in conflict resolution and behavior management is seldom offered to paraprofessionals assigned to student supervision tasks. Performing their responsibilities competently is a matter of great concern to paraprofessionals; however, expanding their roles has resulted, in some cases, in mismatches between paraprofessionals' preparation and the duties of their actual assignments.



*Supervising responsibilities for educators*

Some literature contends that more programs are needed in order to train general and special educators on their supervisory roles of paraprofessionals (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000). When asked how they had been prepared to supervise paraprofessionals, teachers responded they had learned it all on their own or they had taken in-service courses that had provided some preparation (French, 1998).

On the topic of teachers supervising the work of paraprofessionals, Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, and Stahl (2001) included a warning:

Far too often we move forward in new initiatives seeking educational improvements for children without reflecting on the impact that such changes will have on the people and systems that must implement and support the changes. We must identify the skills needed by the individuals who will implement the new initiatives, how and where they might get the knowledge, skills, and strategies they need, and how the system will support them. (p. 531)

Others have claimed that paraprofessionals may be feeling greater responsibility for students with disabilities because general educators are not assuming sufficient responsibility (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000). Teachers were generally satisfied with the performance of paraprofessionals; however, they are reluctant to provide supervision and preferred to think of paraprofessionals as peers rather than supervisees (French, 1998).

*Paraprofessional perceptions*

In a qualitative study of paraprofessionals' perceptions, Downing, Ryndak, and Clark (2000) interviewed sixteen paraprofessionals to determine their understanding of their role, challenges they experienced, training needs, and relationships with other team members. Their study found that many of the respondents reported they, "received no training at the onset of their job, and

felt the need for considerably more training after being in the position for a while” (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000, p. 179). These results highlight a major void that was perceived by paraprofessionals working in the field. Findings also suggest that paraprofessionals may be feeling a greater responsibility for students with disabilities because general educators are not assuming sufficient responsibility. Paraprofessionals reported a considerable degree of independence in decision-making and implementation of programs, which may not reflect desired best practice, given their minimal training and lack of teaching licensure or credentials. “Helping paraprofessionals to be valuable members of the team, but not *the* member of the team, could be beneficial not only to paraprofessionals, but also to the students they serve” (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000, p. 180).

*Collaborative team building among paraprofessionals and educators*

Riggs and Mueller (2001) in their synthesis of the literature on employment and utilization of paraprofessionals found that the literature continues to indicate that both paraprofessionals and educators would benefit, if the roles and responsibilities were clearly defined and reflected in a job description. Further, this information would assist all members of the school community in understanding the appropriate roles for paraprofessionals. An overwhelming number of paraprofessionals have indicated their relationships with staff are important to them and that good relationships are essential to creating a successful team.

Schools have an increasing responsibility to help foster supportive team environments, which include paraprofessionals, special educators, and general educators. School districts and individual schools need to ask themselves critical questions about their school environment and education programming; these self-reflective questions are essential to the evolution of student learning. Ultimately, responding to these types of questions can help schools proactively

manage their support service provisions for students with and without disabilities, including the use of paraprofessionals, in ways that are both educationally sound and fiscally responsible (Giangreco, Broer, Edelman, 2002). A school-based planning process should be developed to assist educational teams in their collaboration, specifically in a context that clarifies agreed-upon roles for paraprofessionals to assist, rather than replace, the work of qualified teachers, special educators, and related service personnel.

#### *Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium*

The educator-paraprofessional relationship is dynamic. As the needs of the school population and students' evolves, so do the professional relationships of staff members. There are many professional organizations available to educators and paraprofessionals to help facilitate their collaboration and provide them with an avenue to voice their thoughts, concerns, and questions. Specifically, the state of Minnesota has an agency available called the Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium in which members of our state's community can become involved.

The Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium, which has been in existence for over 15 years, consists of nearly forty individuals, including teachers and paraprofessionals from local school districts, and individuals from state agencies, unions, and institutions of higher education. These individuals have provided guidance to a variety of activities designed to support and enhance Minnesota's paraprofessional workforce.

The purpose of the Minnesota Paraprofessional consortium is to advise the Minnesota Department of Education regarding activities that prepare, support and recognize the paraprofessional workforce in Minnesota.

#### *Guiding Principles for Minnesota Paraprofessionals*

According to the Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium (2007), the following principles should apply to the work of paraprofessional:

- Paraprofessionals are respected and supported as integral team members responsible for assisting in the delivery of instruction and other student related activities.
- The entire instructional team participates within clearly defined roles in a dynamic changing environment to provide an appropriate educational program for students.
- To ensure quality education and safety for students and staff, paraprofessionals are provided with a district orientation and training prior to assuming those responsibilities.
- Teachers and others responsible for the work of paraprofessionals have the skills necessary to work effectively with paraprofessionals.
- By recognizing paraprofessionals' training, responsibilities, experience, and skill levels, they are placed in positions for which they are qualified, which effectively and efficiently use their skills to enhance the continuity and quality of services for students.
- Administrators exercise leadership by recognizing paraprofessionals as educational partners.

(Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium Online, 2006)

*Summary of the literature review*

The literature regarding the topic of paraprofessionals and collaborative team building is somewhat inconclusive. Although there is much information highlighting the need for clarification of the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals and those directing their work, there is a limited amount of resources and professional development programs available to help meet those needs. Further, the literature is limited in the area of how collaborative teams can be developed to include special educators, general educators, as well as paraprofessionals. This study intends to take the related literature and expand upon it to include perceptions of educators and paraprofessionals in a collaborative K-2 team. Understanding how educators and paraprofessionals view the paraprofessional roles and responsibilities can assist special

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### *Overview and rationale for the research approach*

The purpose of this study is to learn more about paraprofessionals in special education and general education settings and how collaborative educator-paraprofessional relationships can be developed on a K-2 team. This study will attempt to clarify educators' perceptions of paraprofessionals' roles, preparation, performance, and to compare those perceptions to self-reports of paraprofessionals. It also examines the nature and characteristics of educator-paraprofessional relationships.

This study is an action research project using qualitative design. Mills (2007) provides the following definition of action research:

Action research is any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching/learning environment to gather information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how well their students learn. The information is gathered with the goals of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment (and on educational practices in general), and improving student outcomes and the lives of those involved. (p. 5)

Qualitative design is research that uses "narrative, descriptive approaches to data collection to understand the way things are and what it means from the perspectives of the research participants" (Mills, 2007, p. 4). Examples of qualitative approaches used in this study include conducting face-to-face interviews, making observations, and recording interactions.

Phenomenology methodology was chosen to explore multiple individuals' experiences working as a paraprofessional or with paraprofessionals in an educational setting. Phenomenology is one of many types of qualitative research that examines the lived experiences of humans.

Phenomenological researchers hope to gain understanding of the essential "truths" or essences of the lived experience (Hallett, 1995). It is believed that a phenomenological approach will produce the most useful information for this study because it will allow me to complete long and in-depth interviews with participants to describe an essence of what it is like to be a paraprofessional or work with/supervise a paraprofessional. This type of qualitative design will allow me to collect statements, discover meaning, expose themes, and obtain a general description of the experience.

*Sample and/or site selection*

Participants were selected from members of my center-based K-2 Emotional or Behavioral Disorders (EBD) educational team in a suburban school district. Members of this team include paraprofessionals, special educators, and general educators. The sample consisted of eight female participants ranging in ages from 18 to 60 years who have experienced the phenomenon of working on a collaborative K-2 team with educator-paraprofessional relationships.

Participants are located on-campus at an elementary school in a southern, suburban district of Minnesota.

The site selection is a center-based EBD program, which is a Federal Setting III special education classroom for elementary aged students with emotional and/or behavioral disabilities. The classroom is structured to provide students with high need the appropriate amount of individualized instruction and support to help them be successful in the school environment. The average center-based EBD program has nine students, one special education teacher, and two full-time Program Support Assistants (paraprofessionals). Students often spend time in both the special education and general education classroom; the amount of time students spend in each classroom is adjusted according to the level of success of students in the center-based classroom.

Paraprofessionals assist students in both classroom settings as appropriate. There are currently four elementary schools in the district that house center-based EBD classrooms. Each of these elementary sites has two EBD classrooms, one for students in grades K-2 and the other for students in grades 3-5, for a total of eight classrooms at the elementary level. The program site used in this research project was established two years ago.

#### *Data collection procedures*

A formal Institutional Research Board application and proposal was submitted to Augsburg College and has been approved by the college committee by expedited review, IRB approval number 2006-60-2. Research and data collection began on December 1, 2006.

Data for the action research project was gathered over a six-month time period from December 1, 2006 to June 1, 2007. The study was conducted and applied in my center-based K-2 Emotional or Behavioral Disorders (EBD) classroom with paraprofessionals working under my direction as the classroom special education teacher. Due to the fact that paraprofessionals in the program also support students in the general education classroom setting, information was gathered and implemented with the general education classroom teachers as well.

Five questions were formulated to guide the data collection and analysis. These questions were developed to cover a wide topic area in regards to paraprofessionals. The following five base questions were used as guiding questions and lent themselves to emerging themes during the survey and interview portions of the study. Consequently, additional research questions emerged during the data collection process as a result of these core questions.

1. What are the job requirements and expectations for paraprofessionals according to state, district, and building criteria? Specifically, what job duties do they perform?
2. What roles do paraprofessionals play in special education and general education settings?

3. Do paraprofessionals feel prepared to perform their assigned duties, as well as feel supported by both special and general educators?
4. What are the similarities and differences between paraprofessionals', special educators', and general educators' perceptions of a paraprofessionals role in education?
5. How can educators and paraprofessionals develop student centered, collaborative educational teams?

Information for this study was collected through participant surveys and in-depth interviews in a focus group setting. A focus group is an interviewing technique that is described as a group interview in which the researcher attempts to "collect shared understanding from several individuals as well as to get views from specific people" (Mills, 2007, p. 65). The participant surveys consisted of twelve questions in which participants were asked to check (✓) the box for the number that best reflects their experiences during the past school year. Surveys were scored on a four-point rating scale, a rating of 4 means the participant *Strongly Agrees* with the statement and a rating of 1 means the participant *Strongly Disagrees* with the statement. At the end of the survey, an optional comment box appeared asking, "Do you have any recommendations that would help to improve collaboration in the K-2 team with educators and paraprofessionals?" This was an opportunity for participants to provide narrative feedback.

In-depth, face-to-face interviews were also conducted with paraprofessional and general educator participants in a small, focus group setting (2-3 participants at time). All information was audio taped upon signed consent from the participants. Twelve questions (see appendix G-H) were formulated from the five preliminary research questions and were used as a guide for the interview process. These questions were initial/tentative questions specific to each interview group, which lent themselves to evolving questions during the interview. Similar to the survey, the question, "Do you have any



recommendations that would help to improve collaboration in the K-2 team with educators and paraprofessionals?" was used as a final opportunity for participants to provide recommendations for future collaboration. All interview information and participant responses were audio taped; I took abbreviated notes during the interview and transcribed detailed information during audio playback.

Data collection began December 1, 2006 with a review and organization of literature and related research. In January 2007 surveys were distributed to paraprofessionals, special, and general educators and then collected at the end of the month for analysis. In February and March of 2007 in-depth interviews, lasting approximately one to two hours, were conducted with participants in a small focus group setting at an off-campus location. The months of April through June 2007 were used to analyze the data, revisit participants for further clarification or information, and to determine results of the study and any further recommendations.

Due to the personal nature of the study, precautions were taken to minimize risks. The researcher and participants work together on an educational team, so rapport was developed. Up to ten participants were verbally recruited by me and asked to participate in the study. Upon verbal agreement, participants were asked to sign a consent form detailing the nature of the study and informing them of the participant expectations. All data was kept confidential and pseudonyms were used, however, anonymity cannot be guaranteed. Participants had the option to withdraw from the study at any point if they deemed it necessary.

Limitations of the study may include the personal bias of participants being interviewed and surveyed, as well as the varying perspectives and qualifications of educational institutions (state guidelines, district guidelines, building guidelines). In addition, the sample will be small considering there are only two paraprofessionals working in my center-based EBD program under the direction of one special education teacher and five general education teachers. The

built from data". Once coding was completed and the themes were determined, an analysis was made and recommendations were formulated on how to best meet the needs of each professional group (paraprofessionals, special educators, and general educators) in a collaborative K-2 team.

Perceptions of paraprofessionals and educators in a collaborative K-2 team were then demonstrated, specifically how they view the job role of paraprofessionals. A summary will be presented about what aspects of the team are working well and should continue, as well as what areas could be improved upon in order to make collaboration more successful among team members.

## FINDINGS

The primary goal of this study was to examine educator-paraprofessional relationships, clarify perceptions, and determine how collaboration between special educators, general educators, and paraprofessionals can be strengthened on a K-2 team. The analysis of data revealed three main themes, which predominated the interviews – need for role clarification of paraprofessionals, lack of professional training and education surrounding paraprofessionals and desire for more time and tools for effective communication and collaboration on an educator-paraprofessional team.

The analysis of the data revealed that, in general, paraprofessionals, special educators, and general educators felt communication among team members was strong and effective in helping the students they serve. The data showed how collaboration and communication correlate with the confidence level professionals feel in serving students in special education. Although paraprofessionals and educators thought collaboration aspects of the K-2 team are strong, they all expressed concerns in their lack of initial and continuous professional training, as well as the need for role clarification for paraprofessionals and education team members.

On the survey portion of the study, participants reported areas of greatest concern as: (a) receiving necessary training, in-service, or other information needed for working with students in special education, (b) receiving training in emergency procedures, building orientation, roles, responsibilities, confidentiality and vulnerability, and (c) having time to meet as a team on a weekly basis to share information in regards to students in special education. The survey data was in alignment with reports participants shared during the interviews. The following findings are data collected during the focus group interviews. It is important to note that Lucy, Sandy, Karla, and Ariel are pseudonyms given to participants to ensure privacy.

The information was grouped into three common themes according to interview sections: (a) paraprofessionals' perceptions of their job role, preparation, and performance, (b) general educators' perceptions of a paraprofessionals' job role, and (c) characteristics of educator-paraprofessional relationships. From there, the data was further analyzed and coded into three emerging themes that both groups highlighted as ranking high in importance: (a) role clarification, (b) professional training and education and (c) communication and collaboration. Two additional themes, feelings of isolation and student connections, are highlighted at the end of the section according to information paraprofessionals shared as the low and high aspects of their profession.

Two focus group interviews were conducted, one with paraprofessionals and the other with general education teachers. The first interview was with two paraprofessionals, Lucy and Sandy, who work in the center-based EBD program as a part of the K-2 team. Prior to coming to the center-based program, Lucy worked as a paraprofessional within the building for three years with a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Sandy was hired halfway through the first year in the center-based program to assist a student with significant needs. Although the student eventually moved on to a different setting, Sandy stayed in the program due to a new district rule that allowed each center-based classroom to have two full-time Program Support Assistants (paraprofessionals). Sandy has worked within the district in clerical roles for five years and as a paraprofessional for the past two years, in substitute roles and in the center-based program.

The second interview focus group was conducted with two general education teachers who work on the K-2 team, Karla and Ariel. Karla is a second grade teacher with fourteen years of teaching experience, twelve years working in an inner city public school system and the last two

Similarly, general educators were asked what they believe a paraprofessional is and what their role is. Karla shares that she is very familiar with paraprofessionals because when she worked in the inner city school district she always had an Educational Assistant (EA) in her classroom, which is similar to a paraprofessional. Karla currently has three students in EBD in her second grade classroom; two general education full days while the other joins for only recess and lunch times. She feels the paraprofessional working in her classroom is “used primarily just for my EBD students, but also they (special education students) don’t like to be singled out, so she helps others students too, which is nice”. Both women agree it is difficult to find a definition of a paraprofessional. Ariel comments, “I’ve never even seen a job description for a paraprofessional”. Karla agrees and went on to say, “In all my years of teaching, no one has ever told us what they (paraprofessionals) are, what their job descriptions are, what they’re supposed to do, what they’re not supposed to do, and most importantly, who directs their work”. Ariel shares that she had a student in her classroom last year with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) who needed a full-time paraprofessional because she was medically fragile, however, she was unsure if this person was considered a paraprofessional. “In my mind, the paraprofessional last year and the paraprofessional I have this year have done two completely different jobs in relation to supporting students. I guess I never realized until now that they were both paraprofessionals.”

Sandy comments that, “I think there is still room for improvement in terms of job role clarification of paraprofessionals working in special education. I think that the district has a responsibility to develop clear job descriptions for our positions and then building administration needs to ensure that our duties are made clear to everyone working in the school, general education, clerical staff, and so on”. The pair was asked what they think their role should be as a paraprofessional in terms of how they should interact with students, special education, and

general education. Sandy shares, "I have always thought of it as just simply to support the kids (special education) wherever they need it. Probably the bulk of it would be in the center-base class". Lucy continues, "Right, right, but I know when I go into their (students') specialists, music or physical education, what I like to try to do is at least stand back and let our students learn that they need to answer to the teacher rather than to me. I don't want them looking at me asking if they can do something, I want them asking their teacher". Sandy agrees, "I wish those teachers would take more ownership of the student as their students, instead of deferring to us first—some are better at it than others".

When discussing student ownership with the educators and who was responsible for students in special education, Karla stresses, "You (general educators) have to take ownership of your students! They are a part of your class, they are a part of your crew, whether they are there all day or only for ten minutes". Ariel nods and says, "It's a part of our job. We work with all students and don't pick and choose who we want to be a part of our community, that would be unjust".

Lucy thinks there are things that interfere with her doing her job well when in the general education setting, such as, feeling pulled between helping student in special education and also giving attention to general education students. She states:

In the beginning of the school year we were advised by administration and special education supervisors that we should assist with clerical duties as needed, specifically enforcing playground rules during recess time. I am flexible and fine with assuming other duties, but, inevitably, every time I turn to intervene with another student, I lose track of my students with special needs. On numerous occasions, another clerk has approached me to *tell* me of a situation with one of my students that require immediate attention. I find it difficult to

balance both roles; our students need a lot of attention and the lack of structure during recess is often an extremely difficult time for them, they often need the undivided support.

Sandy feels that it "...isn't fair because we've been charged with equal responsibility to the general population during recess when we have our own special population out there. We've been told by administration that we're equally responsible for everyone, and that makes our job much more difficult when you consider our EBD students' high needs".

Both paraprofessionals share that when they are in the general education setting, all students in the classroom approach them. Although they like forming relationships with each of the students, they want to be careful not to miss out on something that is occurring with the students in special education. Sandy expresses, "I usually feel sole responsibility for my special education students even though I do not think I should feel that way; responsibility should belong to the teacher also otherwise the students never learn that authority and rely on us for everything, I do not feel that is a healthy relationship".

General education teachers believe that paraprofessionals roles should include both student contact and clerical duties. Ariel explains, "I don't want her to be hovering over the student all the time, I want the students to learn how to be in the mainstream and be independent". Karla agrees, "I think it is beneficial to have paraprofessionals in the classroom as needed, but that it should also be okay for them to assist the classroom teacher if their students were not in need of help".

In relation to working with students in EBD, educators think the most important thing a paraprofessional does in the general education is to be there to remove the student from any kind of situation that is not safe for the student or others, is stressful or anxiety producing to the student, or if the student is causing a disruption that may be hindering to the learning of other

If general education teachers had more paraprofessional time, both women agree they would have them to do more clerical work. Karla says, "If they weren't designated to EBD or special education students, it would be nice to have them help with student assessments or spend time reading with kids". When paraprofessionals work in their classrooms, educators believe they should spend the majority of their time supporting students.

The general educators conclude by saying they feel they have positive relationships with the paraprofessionals they work with and do not usually fear they are overstepping any boundaries in terms of tasks they ask them to complete. Karla feels, "I could easily talk to a special education staff member or the paraprofessionals directly if I had questions about job duties". Ariel comments, "I will say that I do appreciate it when paraprofessionals will offer to help me and will assist me with clerical tasks like, helping with a project, passing out materials, or filling the students' mailboxes". Karla explains, "If the students they work with are doing well and I'm handling the classroom, I would much rather have them assist me with clerical tasks so that the students learn that when they're in the classroom, I am their support system—after all, they are my students and my responsibility".

#### *Professional training and education*

Paraprofessionals were asked what could help them to do their job better; specifically what they needed to help them feel professionally supported. Lucy replies, "I think the training piece is a huge component, we need more of it specific to our position and would like everyone else with student contact to have the same training".

In terms of professional development or training, both paraprofessionals share they were initially given little or no formal instruction. Most of their skills are learned on the job, working with students and handling situations as they arose or by modeling the special education teacher.



Neither felt there are many opportunities available to them to attend workshops or learn more specifically about EBD. Most of the trainings available dealt more specifically with spectrum disorders and sensory stimulation and not emotional or behavioral disorders. When examining training of paraprofessionals, Lucy shares:

One thing I find interesting with the EBD program is that, before I was an SSA (Student Support Aide) with Autism and they gave us lots of training specific to Autism and I feel really comfortable with that, but with an EBD kid I don't feel we've gotten much skills or instructional training. We may have physical training with how to do restraints and what to do if they bite us or kick us, but as far as working with their personalities, the district hasn't offered a lot of initial or ongoing training opportunities.

In the interview with educators, Ariel asks, "What kind of training do paraprofessionals receive? I don't think it's very much". This leads Karla to question, "How can they not have disability specific training when they're in that demanding of a job"? The educators discuss further the mandatory training special education teachers and paraprofessionals take in nonviolent crisis interventions (restraints), however, they wonder why it is not a requirement for them as general educators, administrators, or all other staff members with student contact. Ariel admits, "I don't feel like I'm trained. I wouldn't know what to do or I wouldn't know how to restrain if I had a crisis situation. It all goes back to what we talked about before; nobody really talks about what a job description for a paraprofessional is. I never know if what I'm asking her to do is okay or not". Karla continues, "It just blows me away that there is not more training available to all of us at the same time so we can get similar information, especially paraprofessionals. I mean paraprofessionals sometimes have the majority of student contact, yet they are the ones with probably the least amount of education background and training".

Paraprofessionals also feel that general education teachers might have negative feelings toward working with students in EBD because they have a fear or lack of understanding of the disability. Sandy shares a story that highlighted the need for more training and understanding:

I was walking in the hallway with one of our second grade students and we were looking at the student artwork. A third grade teacher approached us and had a pleasant conversation with our student. She asked him what grade he was in and shared with him that she was a third grade teacher and that perhaps next year, when he was in third grade, she would be his teacher. The student left the conversation feeling very positive. Later, I was approached by this same teacher who asked if the student was a part of the EBD program, when I replied, 'Yes' she seemed shocked and asked if he has behavioral problems, to which I replied, 'Yes, many'. Puzzled, she then went on to say, 'But he seemed so nice?' and I told her, 'Well, they all are'. She then told me, 'Well, maybe I wouldn't be the right teacher for him; maybe I shouldn't have said that. I know my shortcomings, and that's probably one of them (dealing with behavior).

Both women share that teachers sometimes show a lack of self-confidence in how to handle anything outside of calm. Lucy shares, "There is a stigma attached to a label like EBD and sometimes people underestimate themselves and view us (paraprofessionals) as more the behavioral expert". There is a general feeling that more school-based training would be beneficial to helping everyone feel more confident in instructing special education students, so that the team could take ownership of the student rather than one person being thought of to have all the tools.

When discussing a related topic, Karla and Ariel both state they have not received any formal training on how to direct the work of a paraprofessional, so most of what they have learned has

been from on-the-job experience. The women also share that sometimes directing paraprofessionals is difficult because of the age difference. Ariel comments, "A lot of times the paraprofessionals are older than the teachers, so it can feel a little awkward at first when you need to delegate".

When examining training and qualifications of paraprofessionals, Ariel shares, "I think the current members of our team are strong and highly qualified for the job they perform". However, when reflecting on past experiences of working with paraprofessionals, educators feel there were sometimes large gaps in professionalism and how people in the position performed. Furthermore, educators do not always feel comfortable assigning paraprofessionals duties when the people in those positions are not self-initiating. Karla shares an example of a paraprofessional who worked in her classroom as a substitute who read a recreational book instead of having any student contact. "At that point, I would rather not have any support and handle all of the students issues myself. In fact, I requested that she help somewhere else in the building, because it wasn't working in my classroom and was not helpful to the students".

The women discuss the need for more practical training for everyone working with special education students labeled EBD. Lucy comments, "I think special education teachers, general education teachers, and paraprofessionals could all benefit from continuous training, especially if they could attend the training together". They feel that more group training would enhance collaboration among team members because everyone would receive the same information and have a similar background or base of knowledge. They continue to say that it would be beneficial to have scheduled time for team collaboration and planning, as well as an opportunity to have a question and answer type workshop to ask student or situation specific questions. Lucy goes on to say:

With Autism training it seems like the trainers and specialists are able to give you specific student scenarios such as, 'Johnny holds his ears every time the loudspeaker goes on. He seems to be having too much auditory stimulation. Try preparing him ahead of time with a picture cue before the loudspeaker turns on and provide him with headphones to minimize the sound'. This seems to be practical information with realistic interventions. I wish similar training could be developed for working with our population of students.

Sandy nods in agreement and further states:

I think as far as strategies, we could use more practical training. It would be nice to be given pinpointed strategies to use with EBD students or students with mental illness. We need to be presented with case studies or real life examples that we can then bring back to the classroom. Right now, all we have to rely on is our knowledge of students last year and what worked or didn't work with them".

Lucy explains, "Sometimes I feel really at a loss, as I am sure educators do, to understand what the best things to do are and it would help if we all had the same tools and could all approach students with confidence".

#### *Collaboration and communication*

Paraprofessionals think communication between themselves and the special education team is excellent, they feel included. Lucy says, "our voices are heard when we have a concern or when we want to share a positive". Both women feel it would be nice to share a common preparatory time, preferably in the morning, with the special education teacher and general education teacher they are working under in order to discuss students and share concerns, schedules, and any other pertinent information for the day. In terms of their communication with

the general education team, paraprofessionals think, for the most part, it has been very good and that teachers are approachable and easy to talk with in regards to students. According to Sandy:

With the mainstream teachers where the kids are involved in the classroom, I think that's an easy line of communication and it's easy between us (paraprofessionals) and them (general education teachers), you (special education teachers) and them (general education teachers) and us (paraprofessional) and you (special education teachers). Where there is disconnect, it's a little less comfortable such as with specialists or in situations where the students don't spend much time in the mainstream.

Overall, paraprofessionals believe communication with all members of the K-2 team is positive. Lucy states, "I feel like each team member is flexible enough that components of the program can be adjusted to best serve the students. When you have that kind of open relationship and high level of communication, everyone feels supported".

Similar to the feeling of paraprofessionals, both general educators feel the bridge was strong between educators and paraprofessionals. They feel that everyone on the team was respected and worked collaboratively to make school a success for students both academically and emotionally. However, Ariel shares that one tough aspect is, "Because I don't know what the model is for paraprofessionals or EBD students in center-base, I don't always know who is technically responsible for aspects of their education, specifically reporting". The women then discuss the fact that some people in the building feel they are not as responsible for a student once they enter special education. Karla comments, "Maybe we need to have staff development at the beginning of the year for the whole school and say, 'Listen, this is your student, you don't leave them off your rosters or not include them on holiday parties. You are equally responsible for their academic year, you are their teacher".

Karla and Ariel talk more about communication. Karla shares, "I think it would be nice if we had some early-release time scheduled throughout the year to meet as a team, general educators, special educators, and paraprofessionals and discuss student and program needs". They also agree that the K-2 team should all meet the week prior to school beginning (workshop week) to talk about the upcoming school year, general education time, paraprofessional responsibilities, and share any other necessary student information. The educators conclude with Ariel saying, "the collaboration needed for students in special education is similar to team teaching, it takes a lot of work and communication among professionals, but the students are well supported and thrive with the appropriate accommodations".

Lucy states, "It would be nice if we could have time set aside each week so that we (paraprofessionals) could get together with the classroom teachers and you (special education teacher) and talk about student issues, schedules, and clarify any concerns." Sally agrees and further states, "What would be ideal was if there were workshops that were mandatory for all educators and paraprofessionals in the district to attend that explained what everyone's role is when working with each other. I think there are so many misconceptions and everyone needs to hear the same information, at the same time—if we could all get on the same page and administration could enforce the same guidelines across the district, I think that programs and education as a whole would be more successful."

Sandy goes on to say, "I think that a connection with the rest of the EBD staff throughout the district would also be helpful. It would be nice for all of us paraprofessionals from the center-based EBD programs to get together to have 'what if' type of conversations". Both paraprofessionals feel that collaboration should be integrated within the building and throughout

the district, as well as across educational settings so that all team members could become more uniform.

Communication among team members and time to collaborate are important components for both educators and paraprofessionals. Although educators and paraprofessionals think communication was strong and effective on the K-2 team, they also express concerns for not having scheduled time for collaboration or a set of guidelines for team planning and program implementation.

### *Feelings of isolation*

Paraprofessionals were asked what some difficult aspects of their job were, specifically what they found to be most challenging. Lucy shares that her transition to working in the center-base program has been very different from her previous position of working one-on-one with a student who was fully mainstreamed. Lucy further comments:

The hardest part was getting used to being in just the EBD room. Before, I was an SSA working one-on-one and in the mainstream classroom all day. I got to know, at least at that grade level, all the teachers. The student I was with needed lots of breaks, so we were always walking around the school or going outside and I ran into people all the time and people remembered me. You know, you get to know people and you can talk. Now, everyone says, 'I never, ever see you', you know, like they don't even know if I still work at school.

Sandy empathizes, "You feel less a part of the overall community". She went on to explain how it was difficult for her to get to know the school, staff, and general education students when she first came to the school because she primarily worked only in the EBD room. According to Sandy, "When they (students) have more exposure in the mainstream, then we, obviously, have more contact too with the mainstream classroom". Lucy adds, "When the students are not able

to be in the mainstream classroom very much, we spend almost all of our day back in the EBD classroom helping to support them; where we work depends upon the students' progression, and sometime their regression, we experience both sides of the world, so to speak". Both paraprofessionals go on to discuss how their daily working schedule is modified throughout the school year as the needs of the students change and as students gain more skills and independence and are with their mainstream classroom more.

While examining the blend between special education and general education staff, Sandy says, "I think we're looked at as outsiders a lot, it's us and them". Lucy agrees, "I think so too, however, I think less with the general education teachers we work directly with, then we're able to develop a relationship. Once we're in working with them and the students, I don't think we're treated differently, we're treated with respect and treated well". Sandy continues, "I think even within the team that we spend a lot of time in, the team even gains a comfort level with us and our students. You know, I think early on, we're looked at as the outsiders, and so are our kids. And certainly outside of their mainstream teachers, I don't think any other teacher will take ownership of them (students)".

Paraprofessionals on the team both feel that they identify more with the special education staff and students. They think that throughout the building, they are treated as a special education staff member. Lucy says, "I think it's okay to identify with special education staff, after all, that is what we are, however, our job roles cross both settings, so it is nice to feel included on both sides of education".

Since students and classroom placements change each year, paraprofessionals were asked if the connections they make with general education teachers remains even when students move on.



Lucy and Sandy together say, "Oh, I think so, yes--in a friendly sort of way, once the connection is made it's pretty strong".

*Student connections*

As the focus group interview came to a close, paraprofessionals were asked what the least difficult part of their job was. Sandy shares, "Connecting to the kids, making a personal connection with kids. We're lucky to see our kids in situations where the mainstream teachers or others might not. We see the sweet side of our kids, we see them when they're calm and able to be successful in a small setting". Lucy goes on to say, "Our job is easy and rewarding when you get those warm moments from the kids or from watching the kids do well. It makes all of our days when we see the sweet side of the kids. When you see that glimmer of progress or when you see them as a part of a community at school, those are the moments that make it a great job".

In general, members of the collaborative K-2 team felt that communication was successful; specifically that each of their opinions were valued and they felt as though they were contributing members of the educational team. However, challenges remain that make collaboration among team members a difficult task. There are many perceptions, and often misconceptions, regarding the role of paraprofessionals, including, their job description, duties they perform, instructional role, and whom they work for and with in the classroom setting.

Another challenge includes having quality and continuous professional training and education available to educators and paraprofessionals in order to enhance and promote team collaboration. Without quality resources, collaboration among team members is often weakened. Although there are many professional development opportunities available to educators and paraprofessionals independently, there are no programs available for educator-paraprofessional teams to attend together and work on team specific issues.

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In developing this action research project, several indirect themes about the work of paraprofessionals emerged. First, paraprofessionals are often neighbors familiar with the local culture that shapes children's life in the community as well as with the world of formal schooling; for this reason they can play a unique and important role in students' education. Second, paraprofessionals value job-related education, whether it is offered as an in-service program or outside coursework, and they worry when they are given assignments for which they are ill-prepared. They know that good intentions are no substitute for skill. Third, the extent of paraprofessionals' contribution is influenced by the overall effectiveness of the organization and program in which they work. Sound programs operated by well-run organizations enable all members of educational teams to make their utmost contribution. If the program does not match the needs of the students or if the school fails to take advantage of its human resources, paraprofessionals, among others, will be prevented from doing their best work.

Schools and districts are in need of improving the substance and effectiveness of paraprofessionals' work by providing them with appropriate training, instructional team support, and supervision. In a range of innovations, school improvement teams have found myriad organizational roles for paraprofessionals to play. For example, many schools employ individuals as paraprofessionals, who help individual students during teacher-led lessons or related tutorials, gather and prepare lesson materials, and guide reinforcement and enrichment activities. In some schools, paraprofessionals facilitate communication among teachers, parents, and other community partners. Educating parents and stimulating community involvement may be important parts of their work. Some use their bilingual skills and bicultural knowledge to promote the educational development of students with limited proficiency in English. Others

track absenteeism and work with families to promote regular student attendance. Specially trained paraprofessionals work in school libraries, college counseling centers, computer labs, nursing stations, and work experience programs. Many contribute to a safe, courteous, and productive school climate by supervising students in the lunchroom, in hallways, and on playgrounds. Before and after school hours, some paraprofessionals help students with homework, lead them in special interest clubs, and coach informal sports teams.

Paraprofessionals nurture the emerging social and cognitive competence of preschoolers and engage parents in thoughtful discussions about raising healthy and academically successful children. In programs for at-risk adolescents, paraprofessionals mentor, persuade, and help young students learn to say no to destructive impulses and yes to educational opportunity.

Paraprofessionals also contribute to adult education or family literacy programs associated with parent involvement initiatives. Despite their specific duties in the school system, paraprofessionals are an important asset to education. Strong initiatives should be developed to help better incorporate their professional roles.

By employing paraprofessionals; educational and other services for persons with disabilities are able to expand and improve the quality of assistance they provide. According to a review of the related literature and field research, some of the benefits paraprofessionals offer schools, agencies, and individuals with disabilities are the following:

- Expanded learning opportunities for persons with disabilities.
- More individualized instruction.
- Increased planning time for educators, supervisors, and others.
- Better monitoring and evaluation of persons with disabilities.

- Greater consistency in services.
- Improved parent-school relationships.
- Greater involvement of persons with disabilities in education and other settings in the community at large.
- Increased transportation assistance for individuals with disabilities.
- Expanded vocational skill development for individuals with disabilities.

There are many conditions under which paraprofessionals can contribute to children's school success. However, interviews with paraprofessionals and educators reveal that limited or shortsighted program planning and implementation often compromise this contribution. Leaders in the professional associations for paraprofessionals cite examples of poor screening, assignment, and supervision that place paraprofessionals in situations for which they are not adequately trained or supported. In order to avoid these common pitfalls, the following elements are suggested as guidelines for improving paraprofessionals' work, as well as benefiting educational teams.

#### *Supportive elements for paraprofessionals*

Roles designed for paraprofessionals are to be performed under the supportive direction of a certified teacher or other licensed staff, this is mandated by law. Schools should provide the conditions that enable paraprofessionals to learn the duties required of them, receive evaluation that helps them excel in their positions, and become more aware of the important role they play on the instructional team. Review of the literature, comments from participants and others closely connected with paraprofessionals' work suggest that these conditions are seldom found in most schools. The following organizational supports can help develop positive conditions.

*Written job descriptions.* Written job descriptions provide paraprofessionals and their supervisors with an explicit understanding of the paraprofessional's responsibilities. Even in cases where the duties of paraprofessionals are well defined, however, discrepancies are sometimes noted between what the job description states and what paraprofessionals actually do. Other discrepancies have been observed between the job description and the professional development offered to carry it out. New ideas about how to support students' attainment of high academic standards involve many staff members in shifts of roles and responsibilities. Adjusting formal job descriptions in writing creates a record to which all affected staff members can refer when determining how well a role has been filled and whether training might be helpful.

*Evaluation.* In productive work environments, performance assessments are conducted regularly, based on job descriptions, and linked with professional development opportunities. Such supervisors as principals or program administrators typically evaluate paraprofessionals, sometimes with input from the teachers who direct (and observe) the paraprofessionals' daily work. According to those who work extensively with teachers and paraprofessionals, this arrangement reinforces teamwork and preserves collegiality among teachers and support staff. Effective schools and districts evaluate staff on how well they perform their assigned duties, and, if improvement is needed, they provide access to the appropriate in-service programs and professional development opportunities.

*Team building activities with certified personnel.* Two reasons are often given for including classroom teachers in the planning and delivery of the paraprofessionals' in-service training: avoiding disparities between paraprofessionals' training and their actual experience with teachers, and enlightening teachers who have never worked with other adults in their classrooms.

Ideally, to ensure compatibility, teachers should participate in hiring the paraprofessionals who will work on their teams. However, this is not always possible, and, according to specialists in this area, the next best alternative is building the foundation for instructional team collaboration in an orientation meeting held before the paraprofessional starts work in the classroom. The U.S Department of Education (2007) recommends that at this meeting teachers should share information on their instructional strengths and weaknesses, pointing out areas where the paraprofessional can be of special service. As part of this meeting, or at a subsequent one, paraprofessionals should assess their own strengths and weaknesses and develop their personal expectations and goals.

In addition, some districts allow paraprofessionals to serve on school improvement and site-based management teams. Building such representation into teams generates a more cohesive and collaborative climate for shared decision-making.

*Training for the directing teachers.* Another common theme that emerged in the data was that teachers felt they have not received appropriate training on how to direct the work of paraprofessionals and consequently, paraprofessionals do not feel that their job description is clear, making it difficult to collaborate and best support students. These concerns led to further research on what resources are available to schools in order to help better prepare professionals and increase collaboration.

The state of Minnesota, in accordance with the Minnesota Department of Education, has a resource website, Preparing Teachers to Direct the Work of Paraprofessionals, that is designed for personnel development specialists and higher education teacher educators. The purpose of this site is to provide staff development specialists, faculty and staff from teacher preparation

programs, and others with information and resources to prepare training for teachers who are or will be directing the work of paraprofessionals. The site information is organized around the competency areas identified through research that took place in Minnesota.

According to Minnesota Department of Education, "supervision" is referred to as "directing the work" of paraprofessionals since teachers do not hire, terminate and are not responsible for performance evaluations. These functions are the responsibility of administrators. However, teachers are critical in directing the work of paraprofessionals and their work with students. Increasingly legislation has strengthened the role of teachers in providing this type of "instructional supervision" to paraprofessionals to ensure paraprofessionals are assisting and supporting the teacher in facilitating student learning.

Directing the work of paraprofessionals is an important component of an effectively run classroom. As the role of teachers has changed and policy and practices have evolved, the role of paraprofessionals has also changed. Paraprofessionals were once responsible for preparing materials, monitoring the lunchroom and playground, and taking attendance. Now, paraprofessionals are members of instructional teams assisting teachers in ensuring students are receiving the support they need to learn.

Most teacher education programs do not train teachers to direct the work of another adult in the classroom, nor do most school districts provide in-service training in this area. Thus, some teachers may feel uncertain about working with a paraprofessional.

According to the U.S Department of Education (2007):

At first glance, a paraprofessional in the classroom might appear to be more trouble than help. The addition of another adult in the classroom who needs supervision, support, guidance, and a positive role may seem overwhelming. And if the paraprofessional is new to education, then she or her may appear to be just one more burden for an already

busy teacher.

Several professional education programs offer teacher candidates modules or courses that focus on this dimension of classroom life. However, these courses most often target special education majors because so many states mandate the use of paraprofessionals on special education teams. Regular elementary and secondary education majors are seldom taught the relevant collaboration skills.

Future research should focus on developing a school-based planning process to assist educational teams in their collaboration, specifically in a context that clarifies agreed-upon roles for paraprofessionals to assist, rather than replace, the work of qualified teachers, special educators, and related service personnel.

Educational paraprofessionals can provide strong, multidimensional support for students' academic success. Research clearly identifies that collaboration among professionals, special educators, general educators, and paraprofessionals is beneficial to the professionals themselves, as well as the students they serve. In order to improve overall school effectiveness, schools need to create appropriate roles for paraprofessionals, choose qualified candidates to fill those roles, and provide adequate organizational and professional development to ensure solid performance.



needs has far exceeded any expectations. My students and I could not ask for two more caring and professional individuals. Working with the paraprofessionals in my classroom was the motivation behind this action research project.

In our district and specifically within our school building, there is a great need to clearly identify the role of paraprofessionals. I believe that all team members could benefit from learning what a paraprofessional is (and is not), what their role is in the classroom (special education and general education), the preparation for their job, and the impact they have on students with special needs. Due to the fact that my special education students general education into general education classrooms, it is essential that there is a collaborative relationship between the paraprofessionals, the general educators, and myself. In my program, we work as a team with the student's best interest at the center. To best support the students, there needs to be a mutual understanding and respect of each team member's role. Success means that we need to maintain effective communication, feel that we can talk openly, and share ideas with one another.

Each of my students requires a great deal of individual time. It is physically impossible for me to support all of them simultaneously, especially when one of them is having a difficult day emotionally or behaviorally. For this reason, the paraprofessionals in my room need to be able to take on a great deal of "teacher tasks" and have the ability to self-initiate and interact with the students. Many times they are my direct line of communication between my special education classroom and the general education classroom setting. I need to trust them to implement interventions I have put in place for my students and hold similar authority as I do as the special education teacher. Their job is difficult, and it can be made even more difficult when there are miscommunications among team members. Working on a collaborative team, requires ongoing

### SELF-REFLECTION

As an educator in the field of special education, I am encountered with rewards and challenges of the profession each day. Working with students with special needs requires patience, understanding, and a creative mind. I enjoy being an advocate for my students and helping them find the resources they need to be successful in the classroom, as well as outside of the classroom. I take pride in the fact that my students are not only learning academic material, but also learning how to interact with others in a positive way. My hope for each of them is that they are given the tools they need now in order to grow up and be happy and successful adults in the future.

I currently work as a center-based special education teacher for students in grades K-2. I teach students with primary disabilities of Emotional or Behavioral Disorders (EBD) in a federal setting III program. Other disability areas and related services of my student population include: Learning Disabilities (LD), Autism spectrum Disorders (ASD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Speech and Language Disorders, Occupational Therapy, and Adaptive Physical Education (DAPE). The amount of time students spend in my classroom each day varies greatly and is adjusted according to the level of success students are exhibiting in the center-based program. Some students in my program spend their whole academic day with myself as their primary teacher; some spend the majority of their day in their general education classroom; and others split their day between my classroom and their general education classroom with various accommodations.

In addition to a classroom of students, I am also in charge of supervising and supporting two full-time program assistants (PSA), or paraprofessionals. Without these two wonderful women, my job would be much more difficult. Their enthusiasm and passion for students with special

adapting as the needs of the students change and ensuring that everyone is supportive, as well as feels supported.

Researching in the area of paraprofessionals and educators on a collaborative K-2 team helped me to learn more about paraprofessionals and how to best work with them in my EBD program. In addition, this study allowed members of the center-based K-2 team to learn more about themselves and their working relationships with their team members. There was also the indirect benefit of increasing collaborative relationships among professionals and learning more about how to build successful team relationships. While conducting research I was surprised to learn how isolated paraprofessionals feel in their position and that they do not always feel connected to the greater school community. Until talking with them, I had never acknowledged that I had similar feelings as them in regards to identifying my role as an educator. I was also surprised at the overlap of information paraprofessionals and educators shared. Although they both work in different positions, many of their concerns and insecurities are one and the same. This gives me hope that a collaborative educational team can be effectively developed and reinforced by commonalities between all groups.

If given the opportunity, I would like to present my findings to groups of interested team members in my building. I believe that sharing the information I gathered would be beneficial for everyone, both special education and general education. I strongly feel it is important to get individuals who work with students in our school together in order to hear the same information at the same time, especially with center-based programs like ours in the building.

There are a number of misconceptions that surround special education, as well as a stigma that is unfairly attached to a disability label like EBD. I have found that in the two years I have been teaching EBD, general education teachers often expect that when they have a student with

EBD in their classroom, that they will also have an individual paraprofessional at all times to support that student. Unfortunately, with many students in my program, there is not enough support available; not to mention that individual support is more restrictive to the students. I believe that if everyone has a clear idea of what a paraprofessional is and what their responsibilities are, there will be less confusion and more reasonable expectations.

The purpose of my study was to learn more about paraprofessionals in special education and general education settings and how collaborative educator-paraprofessional relationships can be developed on a K-2 team. I have had the opportunity to work as both a general educator and a special educator in my professional career. I feel that working on both sides has given me insight and a better understanding of my working relationships with both students and colleagues. However, as an educator, I feel that I am continually learning and growing with my students and staff. I believe it is just as important for me to learn more about paraprofessionals as it is for others in my building. I have learned a great deal from this research project and I am hopeful that everyone on my team will benefit somehow from this research as well. Armed with information, we can build a stronger and more collaborative K-2 team to best service our students across settings and support one another as professionals in the process.

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Appendix A

## Paraprofessional Survey

Name (Optional) ..... Subject Area .....  
 Date ..... District/School ..... Grade(s) .....

**Directions:** Please check (✓) the box for the number that best reflects your experiences with special education students, staff and administrators during the past year. A rating of 4 means you *Strongly Agree* with the statement. A rating of 1 means you *Strongly Disagree* with the statement.

	Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	Strongly Agree 4
1. Communication between the <i>special education</i> staff and myself is effective in helping the students I serve.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Communication between the <i>general education</i> staff and myself is effective in helping the students I serve.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I have received necessary training, in-service, or other information needed for working with my students in special education.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Special education staff provides me with needed support and services to help the students I serve.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Building administrators provide me with the needed support and services to help the students I serve.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I encourage students to function as independently as possible, given the nature of their disabilities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. On at least a weekly basis, I meet with the special education teacher who directs my work.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I have had training in emergency procedures, building orientation, roles and responsibilities, confidentiality and vulnerability.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. The results of special education evaluations have been shared with me in ways that are meaningful and provide me with insight into students' needs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Information from IEPs is shared with me in a way that is useful.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Students in special education that I work with have equal access to extracurricular and non-academic activities compared to general education students.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. I feel that paraprofessionals, special educators, and general educators work collaboratively as a team to help students and each other be successful.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Do you have any recommendations that would help to improve collaboration in the K-2 team with educators and paraprofessionals?

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Thank you for completing this survey.

Appendix B

## Special Educator Survey

Name (Optional) ..... Subject Area .....

Date ..... District/School ..... Grade(s) .....

**Directions:** Please check (✓) the box for the number that best reflects your experiences with special education students, staff and administrators during the past year. A rating of 4 means you *Strongly Agree* with the statement. A rating of 1 means you *Strongly Disagree* with the statement.

	Strongly Disagree			Strongly Agree
	1	2	3	4
1. Communication between the <i>general education</i> staff and myself is effective in helping the students I serve.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Communication between the <i>paraprofessional</i> staff and myself is effective in helping the students I serve.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I have received necessary training, in-service, or other information needed for working with my special education students.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
4. General education staff provides me with needed support and services to help the special education students I serve.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Building administrators provide me with the needed support and services to help the special education students I serve.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
6. I encourage students to function as independently as possible, given the nature of their disabilities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. On at least a weekly basis, I meet with the general education teachers and paraprofessionals who work with the special education students I serve.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
8. I have had training in emergency procedures, building orientation, roles and responsibilities, confidentiality and vulnerability.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. I share the results of special education evaluations with the general education teachers and paraprofessionals in ways that are meaningful and provide them with insight into students' needs.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
10. I share information from the IEPs with the general education teachers and paraprofessionals in a way that is useful.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Students in special education that I work with have equal access to extracurricular and non-academic activities compared to general education students.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
12. I feel that paraprofessionals, special educators, and general educators work collaboratively as a team to help students and each other be successful.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Do you have any recommendations that would help to improve collaboration in the K-2 team with educators and paraprofessionals?

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Appendix C

## General Educator Survey

Name (Optional) ..... Subject Area .....

Date ..... District/School..... Grade(s) .....

**Directions:** Please check (✓) the box for the number that best reflects your experiences with special education students, staff and administrators during the past year. A rating of 4 means you *Strongly Agree* with the statement. A rating of 1 means you *Strongly Disagree* with the statement.

	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
	1	2	3	4	
1. Communication between the <i>special education</i> staff and myself is effective in helping the students I serve.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Communication between the <i>paraprofessional</i> staff and myself is effective in helping the students I serve.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
3. I have received necessary training, in-service, or other information needed for working with my special education students.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
4. Special education staff provides me with needed support and services to help the special education students I serve.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
5. Building administrators provide me with the needed support and services to help the special education students I serve.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
6. I encourage students to function as independently as possible, given the nature of their disabilities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
7. On at least a weekly basis, I meet with the special education teacher who is the case manager of the special education students I serve.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
8. I have had training in emergency procedures, building orientation, roles and responsibilities, confidentiality and vulnerability.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
9. The results of special education evaluations have been shared with me in ways that are meaningful and provide me with insight into students' needs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
10. Information from IEPs is shared with me in a way that is useful.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
11. Students in special education that I work with have equal access to extracurricular and non-academic activities compared to general education students.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
12. I feel that paraprofessionals, special educators, and general educators work collaboratively as a team to help students and each other be successful.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Do you have any recommendations that would help to improve collaboration in the K-2 team with educators and paraprofessionals?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for completing this survey.



Appendix D

## Interview Guide Paraprofessionals

Name (Optional) ..... Subject Area .....

Date ..... District/School..... Grade(s) .....

**Note:** These questions are initial/tentative questions, which may lend themselves to evolving questions during the interview.

**Questions:**

1. Describe what you do during a typical day at school.
  - Instructional and non-instructional times, preparation activities, interactions, locations, comfort level and appropriateness
2. Describe what you do if/when you encounter difficulties working with a student.
  - How procedures were developed, level of effectiveness, steps taken if more support is needed
3. Describe your interactions with special educators and general educators in relations to your student(s).
  - People, type of interactions, instructional and non-instructional times, team meetings/collaboration (participation, input valued), comfort level and appropriateness
4. Describe any training you *initially* had related to your position.
  - Appropriateness, relevancy, sufficiency
5. Describe any training you received *after* working in your position for a while.
  - Appropriateness, relevancy, sufficiency, additional training needed
6. Describe the skills and personal characteristics needed for your position
7. Describe the most difficult and least difficult aspects of your job, and why they are the most and least difficult
8. Describe what would help you to do your job better
9. Describe anything that interferes with you doing your job well
10. Describe the communication between you and the special educators and you and the general educators.
11. Describe the collaboration of members of the K-2 team, including paraprofessionals, special educators, and general educators.
12. Describe any recommendations you would have to help improve collaboration in the K-2 team with educators and paraprofessionals.

Do you have any additional comments regarding collaboration in the K-2 team with educators and paraprofessionals?

Thank you for completing this interview.

Appendix E

**Interview Guide**  
Paraprofessionals  
Special Educators  
General Educators

Name (Optional) ..... Subject Area .....  
Date ..... District/School ..... Grade(s) .....

Note: These questions are initial/tentative questions, which may lend themselves to evolving questions during the interview.

**Questions:**

1. I feel that the main reason for having a paraprofessional is... a paraprofessional does...
2. I think the role of the paraprofessional should be to...
3. I think that the most important thing my paraprofessional(s) does is...
4. I think that the least important thing my paraprofessional(s) does is...
5. If I had additional paraprofessional time I would use it to...
6. I think the majority of my paraprofessional's time is spent in... because...
7. The tasks that I assign to my paraprofessional(s) are primarily of the following types...
8. The reason(s) I have him or her do those particular tasks is (are)...
9. I feel that paraprofessionals are prepared to perform their assigned duties in the following ways...
10. Describe the communication between you and the paraprofessionals that work in your classroom.
11. Describe the collaboration of members of the K-2 team, including paraprofessionals, special educators, and general educators.
12. Describe any recommendations you would have to help improve collaboration in the K-2 team with educators and paraprofessionals.

Do you have any additional comments regarding collaboration in the K-2 team with educators and paraprofessionals?

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Appendix F

**PARKVIEW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

6795 GARDINE PATH  
ROSEMOUNT, MINNESOTA 55068-1947  
PHONE: (952) 431-8350 FAX: (952) 431-8346

■ PAMELA HALDEMAN, PRINCIPAL

District Website: [www.district196.org](http://www.district196.org)

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter is to inform you that Kristin Buckner, center-based special education teacher, has permission to conduct research on the topic of perceptions of educators and paraprofessionals in a collaborative K-2 team. She is approved to conduct surveys, interview team members, and collect other necessary data on-campus at Parkview Elementary School during the 2006-2007 school year. If you have any questions and/or concerns, please contact me directly at Parkview, phone number: 952-431-8350.

Sincerely,



Pamela Haldeman, Supervising Principal



**INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT 196**  
*Educating our students to reach their full potential*  
SERVING APPLE VALLEY, BURNSVILLE, COATES, EAGAN, INVER GROVE HEIGHTS,  
LAKEVILLE, ROSEMOUNT, AND EMPIRE AND VERMILION TOWNSHIPS

Appendix G

**CONSENT FORM**

**Perceptions of Educators and Paraprofessionals in a Collaborative K-2 Team**

You are invited to be in a research study of perceptions of educators and paraprofessionals. You were selected as a possible participant because you are either an educator or paraprofessional working in a collaborative K-2 team. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Kristin Buckner as a part of my master's project in Special Education at Augsburg College. My advisor is Susan O'Connor, Associate Professor of Special Education at Augsburg College.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to learn more about paraprofessionals in special education and general education settings and how collaborative educator-paraprofessional relationships can be developed on a K-2 team. This study will attempt to clarify educators' perceptions of paraprofessionals' roles, preparation, performance, and to compare those perceptions to self-reports of paraprofessionals. It also intends to examine the nature and characteristics of educator-paraprofessional relationships.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following: complete surveys regarding paraprofessionals' job role, preparation, and performance and complete in-depth interviews with the principal investigator, in which you share your views and experiences regarding the topic of paraprofessionals. All tasks will be completed individually by participants and/or with the principal investigator. Information will be gathered during the 2006/2007 school year.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

Participating in this study includes the risk of probing for personal or sensitive information in surveys and/or interviews. The likelihood of these risks is minimal, considering that participants have the option to not answer questions and/or provide information they do not wish to and they may withdraw from the study at any time.

The direct benefits to participation are that members of the K-2 Emotional or Behavioral Disorders (EBD) team will learn more about themselves and their working relationships with their team members. There is the potential for the indirect benefit of increasing collaborative relationships among professionals and learning more about how to build successful team relationships.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. If I publish any type of report, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. All data will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my home office; only my advisor, Susan O'Connor, and I will have access to the data and any audio tape recordings. If the research is terminated for any reason, all data and recordings will be destroyed. While I will make every effort to ensure confidentiality, anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

Raw data will be destroyed by 9/1/2010.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Augsburg College, Parkview Elementary School and/or with Independent School District 196. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Kristin Buckner. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at Parkview Elementary School. Phone: 952-431-8350. E-mail address: [kbuckner99@mac.com](mailto:kbuckner99@mac.com). My advisor is Susan O'Connor, Associate Professor of Special Education. Phone: 612-330-1494. E-mail address: [oconnors@augsb.org](mailto:oconnors@augsb.org).

Appendix G (continued)

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information or have had it read to me. I have received answers to questions asked. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of investigator \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

I consent to be audio taped:

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

I consent to allow use of my direct quotations in the published thesis document.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

