

**ONE EDUCATION LANDSCAPE:
A STUDY OF THE ROLES AND PERCEPTIONS OF PARAEDUCATORS**

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Dedication

To my father, who lived life to its fullest. His jovial spirit and lovable nature made him so much fun to be with. To my mother, whose accomplishments throughout life are not only amazing, but also plentiful. Beyond being an excellent role model and caregiver, her encouragement was invaluable. To my loving husband Darcy and my wonderful daughters Tia and Terri, who believed in me and who were so supportive and patient. To my loving grandson Jesse, who made me smile when times were tough.

Abstract

This study was designed to assess paraeducators' duties, roles, and responsibilities and to develop a greater understanding of how they perceive their jobs and what support they would consider important for job improvement. The sample population was comprised of both elementary and junior high school paraeducators, from four individual schools within one school division in southwest Canada. Three separate focus groups were completed, with fourteen participants in total. The study was undertaken using the methodology of focus groups. Responses from the groups were transcribed and coded in order to pull out the major themes found in the discussions of the duties and perceptions by paraeducators. The results, when compared to the contemporary literature findings on the roles of paraeducators, show many points of convergence.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Introduction to the Study

As a teacher, I have become aware over the past several years that there has been an increase in paraeducators (teaching assistants) employed within our schools. I have had many opportunities to work with paraeducators throughout my teaching experience. From working with these employees, I have developed an appreciation for them and for how they view their roles. It is their stories that have piqued my interest.

Working in small rural schools for the past twelve years has left me with more positive than negative experiences from which to draw. However, a few years ago I was assigned six full-time and a few part-time paraeducators at once, and because I had never had any paraeducators under my supervision before, I was left feeling unsure about what my responsibilities were, as well as what theirs would be.

While pursuing my undergraduate degree, I did not receive any training regarding working with paraeducators in Alberta schools and, because not much direction was given to me, not enough was given from me either. I was under the impression that these paraeducators were trained and knew what their roles were and how to go about their job. I soon realized that this wasn't always the case. My students were paying the price of a classroom culture that was less than ideal for optimum learning experiences to occur. Thus, I began to struggle with how to make this situation more positive.

Limited school budgets leave few options for administrators when timetabling. Because of this, far too often paraeducators are put into positions for which they are not trained, and with which they often are not comfortable. This problem was something that

I could not change; thus, I knew I had to find ways to help these paraeducators within the framework that was provided for us.

It became clear that first I needed to become more knowledgeable about the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators. Secondly, I needed to understand how these paraeducators perceived their own roles. This would prove to be no easy task, as I soon found myself writing over 250 plans per week, and still the challenges that presented themselves seemed plentiful. Finally, I knew that I needed to provide these paraeducators with the support they required to feel confident in their roles. I needed to develop a much deeper level of understanding. This became the driving force for my thesis.

Significance and Purpose of the Study

Times are changing, as are our schools. These changes have contributed to the restructuring of our classrooms, and yet very little direction has been given to assist with this process. When changes are combined with the lack of support available for teachers and paraeducators to access, educational leaders can no longer ignore this problem. Teachers have reported that when they chose their careers, they did so because they wanted to work with children, not because they wanted to manage adults (French, 2001). On the other side, paraeducators have reported that they feel unappreciated and undervalued for the work they do that so often leaves them isolated and with very little direction (Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay & Stahl, 2001). Paraeducators are an important part of our educational system. Thus, we need to find ways to render their support effective. Everyone who works within our schools, including the students, deserves to encounter positive experiences.

Studies indicate that some students with disabilities spend the greater part of the school day with paraeducators. Although the paraeducator may often feel alone, this feeling of isolation is also not ideal for the student with exceptional needs. Citing Giangreco and colleagues (1997), Winzer (2005) reported:

Excessive proximity resulted in a series of problems such as interference with teacher ownership and responsibility; separation from classmates; dependence on adults; interference with peer interactions; loss of personal control; limitations on receiving competent instruction; and interference with the instruction of other students. (p. 112)

With no firm policy in place in Alberta regarding the qualifications of paraeducators, decisions about employment and deployment are left up to the individual jurisdictions (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2004). Referring to paraeducators in Alberta, Moody (1999) reported that the "qualifications for positions vary widely" (p. 53). In some jurisdictions a high school diploma may not even be a requirement for obtaining a position as a paraeducator. Although there is now a push for school jurisdictions to implement a set of standards, very few have fully taken on this initiative, and the confusion of different standards for different jurisdictions is apparent.

A significant number of untrained paraeducators are working within Alberta schools. The research undertaken for this thesis to date has led me to conclude that rural schools have a greater number of untrained paraeducators than do urban schools. The reasons for this probably include such things as place of residence, the amount of pay versus travel expenses, and paraeducators wanting to work in the same schools that their children are attending. As well, in the past, teachers have not been trained to work with

assistants in their classrooms. This combination of untrained paraeducators and unprepared teachers has the potential to create major difficulties. Clearly, it would not be considered the best way to meet students' needs.

The potential of classroom support to improve student learning is considerable. However, educational leaders must look at ways to render that assistance more effective. Many questions remain in regard to paraeducators. Some of the most pressing are these: How do paraeducators feel, if they have never received any training at all? How effective is the education that students are receiving from paraeducators? Are they comfortable performing their assigned duties? Do paraeducators feel they are valued members of the team? Do they experience any frustrations? What things are working well for them? Are paraeducators receiving the support they need? Is there any additional support they would like to see in place that might help to improve their jobs? What are the standards required for paraeducators in Alberta classrooms? Are these standards being met? Do paraeducators perceive they have been given enough direction to carry out their duties in a meaningful manner? Do they feel they have received sufficient training to perform their duties so that the students will benefit? Are they truly assisting qualified personnel, or are they functioning as the primary instructors and decision makers for some students with disabilities? It is questions like these that educational leaders need to address if they are going to create more effective assistance throughout our schools.

Ongoing research needs to explore and address each of these questions. This thesis sets out to investigate one strand. The overarching purpose of this study is to gain insight into the roles of paraeducators in schools from a single school jurisdiction and to explore their perceptions about these duties. The development of the research instrument,

the data collection, and the data analysis were driven by the following research question:
How do paraeducators perceive their roles and responsibilities, their training for these roles, and the challenges that confront them while they perform their duties?

The study was undertaken using the methodology of focus groups. Responses from the groups were transcribed and coded in order to pull out the major themes found in the discussions of paraeducators' duties and their perceptions of these duties. The results, when compared to the contemporary literature findings on the roles of paraeducators, show many points of convergence.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Introduction

For individuals hired to assist children with special needs, the title “paraeducator” is widely used today. In the past, terms such as “teacher assistant,” “classroom aide,” or “paraprofessional” were more common. As for “paraeducator,” Pickett (1989) explained that the prefix “para” infers “beside.” It also relates to other groups of support staff, which are commonly referred to as “paralegals” or “paramedics.” In this study, the term “paraeducator” is used, although when referencing other literature, other names are used interchangeably.

For the purpose of this study, the term “paraeducator” will not distinguish between the paraeducator who is hired to assist one or more students with special needs, and the paraeducator who is hired strictly as a classroom aide because of large numbers of students within one classroom.

Numbers of Paraeducators

A rising number of untrained paraeducators are working within Alberta schools; however, neither they nor many teachers understand the assistants’ roles and responsibilities for working with children. Studies that provide a direct comparison of the exact numbers of trained and untrained paraeducators who work within school systems are simply not available.

For the purposes of this study, the following data can help to indicate the overall trend of paraeducators who have entered Canadian schools throughout the past three decades. The Canadian Education Association (1975) reported that there were approximately 1,000 paraeducators in Canada in 1967 and that this number had increased

to nearly 6,000 by 1974. In 1998, according to Human Resources Development Canada (2000), there were approximately 58,000 paraeducators working in Canadian schools. These numbers show a fifty-eight percent increase over the past 31 years. As another example, there has been a rise in the numbers of paraeducators entering Alberta's educational system throughout the past several years. An example of this can be seen by observing the hiring patterns of paraeducators over an eight-year period, obtained from one small jurisdiction in Southern Alberta (see Figure 1). With more current data available, it would be safe to assume that we would continue to see a steady rise.

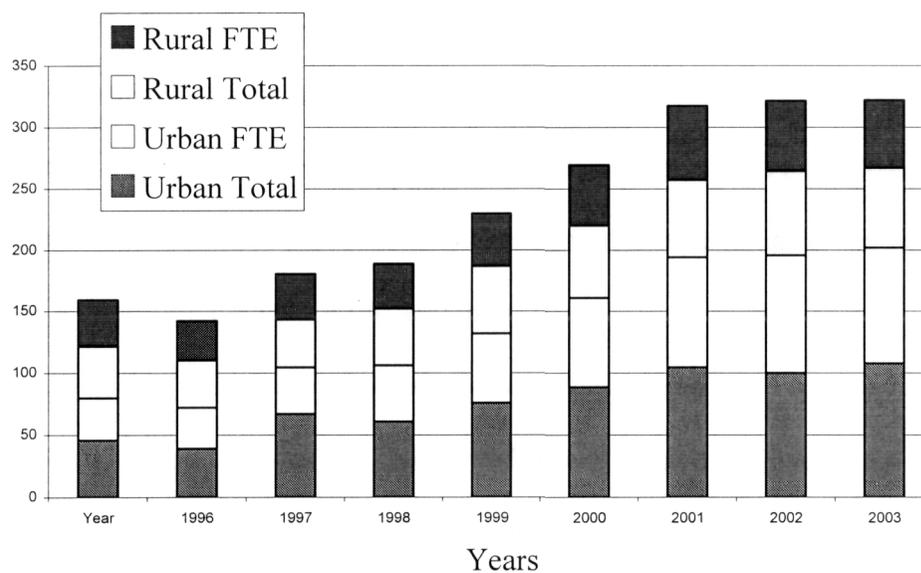


Figure 1. Alberta school division paraeducators.

The results in a study completed in the United States by Drecktrah (2000) depicted dramatic increases in the hiring trends of paraeducators in the US schools. Citing Pickett (1986) and the “Improper Use of Paraeducators” (1997), Drecktrah reported:

There were fewer than 10,000 paraeducators employed in public schools in 1965, approximately 150,000 in the mid-1980s, and it is currently estimated that between 250,000 and 280,000 paraeducators work in special education, with about 500,000 providing instructional or direct service to students in public schools. (p. 157)

In a one-time study of one Alberta school division (Winzer, Altieri, Jacobs, & Mellor, 2003), so many paraeducators with varying degrees of training and experience had been hired that there was nearly a 2 to 1 ratio of paraeducators to teachers. As well, one school from the jurisdiction used in this study did have a 2 to 1 ratio. Teachers do not always respond favourably to the high ratio of support staff. In a report by the Alberta Teachers' Association, one teacher stated that a paraeducator is merely one more person in an already overcrowded classroom to plan for and supervise (ATA, 2002b). Another teacher working with three paraeducators commented that he felt as if "he was the ring leader of a three-ring circus" (ATA, 2002b, p. 10).

Why Schools Employ Paraeducators

Giangreco and Doyle (2002) observed recently that definitive, data-based reasons for the increasing numbers of paraeducators are not available, and there does not seem to be a strong rationale for their presence in contemporary classrooms. Responses to personnel shortages and to the increasing demands for services have contributed to the need for paraeducators, but the mainstreaming movement of the 1970s and the later expansion of inclusive schooling are likely the largest contributing factors.

The idea of hiring paraeducators to assist teachers inside their classrooms is not a new one. In fact, Bay City Michigan schools were the first to utilize paraeducators in

1953 (Thorlaciuss, 1969). Although their duties were much different from those expected today, people could easily see the potential that these employees had to offer the teaching profession. Hymes (1968) pointed this out years ago: “Every teacher, no matter what the grade level, should have an aide, a helper, a co-worker with her in the classroom” (p. 3).

During the 1950s and the 1960s in the United States, personnel came into classrooms to work in bilingual situations, although they tended to be teacher aides rather than assigned to individual children. The mainstreaming movement of the 1970s, encapsulated in the US enabling legislation, *Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975*, provided every child, regardless of the type and degree of disability, with a free and appropriate public education. For the first time, this legislation brought children with significant disabilities within the orbit of the public schools.

Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, and Doyle (2001) write that paraeducators were hired as the type of personnel to teach these children with severe disabilities. As they point out, this situation occurred, in part, because some individuals believed that such children could not be educated. Children with significant disabilities only required someone to provide them with custodial care. By hiring an employee who was not a skilled educator, school districts would not have to pay as much as they would for a trained teacher.

At first in the 1960s, paraeducators performed clerical tasks, monitored students, and completed routine administrative jobs (Hennicke & Taylor, 1973). In contemporary classrooms the tasks are more varied, as paraeducators undertake dramatically different roles from the attendance-taking role of the past. Today, paraeducators may perform functional assistant activities, observe and document data on learner performance and

behaviour, implement behavioural management programs, instruct individuals and small groups, and assist teachers with modifying programs to meet the needs of individual students (see Doyle, 1997; Killoran, Templeman, Peters, & Udell, 2001; Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl, 2001). It is further reported that in today's classrooms the roles filled by paraeducators include providing instruction in academic subjects; teaching functional life skills; teaching vocational skills at community-based work sites; collecting and managing data; supporting students who exhibit challenging behaviours; facilitating interactions with peers who do not have disabilities; providing personal care (for example, feeding, bathroom assistance); and engaging in clerical tasks (Doyle, 1997; French, 1999a, 1999b; Hammeken, 1996; Rogan & Held, 1999).

As mentioned, some teachers find the extra numbers of adults in the classroom disconcerting. However, Tillery, Werts, Roark, and Harris (2003) cite research where teachers have detailed the benefits of having paraeducators in the classroom. Reported benefits include having someone with whom to share ideas, assistance with supervising and monitoring students, assistance with instructing individuals or small groups, assistance in emergencies and with other safety/health issues, and a social contact during the school day.

Teachers tend to support the idea of having a paraeducator in the classroom. In fact, many consider it an essential support to have paraeducators to accompany students with disabilities in general education classes (Wolery, Werts, Caldwell, Snyder, & Liskowski, 1995). In an Alberta study (Winzer, et al., 2003), most teachers saw the need for competent paraeducators. A few teachers suggested that such personnel were the pivotal element of a successful inclusive program, and many spoke to the respect they

had for the insight that aides provided. Other researchers (Marks, Schrader, & Levine, 1999) have reported that teachers value paraeducators as experts regarding particular students.

Not only do many teachers applaud the addition of a paraeducator, but parents tend to be relieved that their child is receiving extra assistance as well. The various stakeholders associated with a student's educational team usually welcome the hiring of paraeducators. As mentioned earlier, many teachers consider paraeducators an essential support (Wolery et al., 1995). Parents sometimes view paraeducator support as concrete evidence that their child is receiving programming and services (Winzer, 2005).

Policy in Alberta: General Duties

The Alberta Teachers' Association documents *Teachers and Teachers' Assistants: Roles and Responsibilities* (2005a) and *Teachers' Assistants* (2005b) provide some details on the roles of paraeducators. These documents not only comment on which duties paraeducators should and should not be performing, but also offer supportive recommendations for teachers to utilize while supervising these employees. Some of the duties that the documents discuss include diagnosing, prescribing, planning, disciplining, teaching, evaluating, reporting, staying current, and evaluating programs. All of the information regarding the eight duties listed below and the supportive recommendations are paraphrased from *Teachers and Teachers' Assistants: Roles and Responsibilities* and supplemented by other research literature.

Diagnosing

The teacher is responsible for diagnosing a child's learning needs, whereas the paraeducator's duties are to observe the student's behaviour and to provide information to

the teacher. Paraeducators and teachers should discuss the student's abilities together and schedule time for program-planning meetings.

Paraeducators may collect data for use in student evaluations, and they may mark objective tests for the teacher to review. Neither teachers nor paraeducators should administer any test that requires special training beforehand. Any types of testing or assessment activities that are subjective in nature are the responsibility of the teacher.

Prescribing

It is the teacher's responsibility to prescribe solutions and to choose available alternatives. He or she must prepare and maintain IPPs (Individual Program Plans) and current student profiles. As well, the teacher must discuss with the paraeducator the desired outcomes for a student. The paraeducator, within the scope of his or her own professional qualifications, may suggest possible courses of action for the teacher to follow and provide direct services such as speech therapy. Together, the teacher and paraeducator should discuss the educational and emotional goals of their students.

Planning

Planning lesson activities and choosing resources are also the teacher's responsibility. In addition, the teacher should choose appropriate modifications to meet IPP specifications, as well as establish priorities. The paraeducator is responsible for assistance with preparing materials, creating displays, and undertaking other supportive activities. Both teacher and paraeducator can prepare materials, including modifications to the curriculum, and they can provide advice on available resources. What typically happens is that the teacher prepares the lesson plans and chooses the resources that will

be used, and the paraeducator may be responsible for gathering materials, setting up for the lessons, and for carrying out those plans.

The development of any learning activity must be constructed for a purpose. This purpose must be closely related to the intended outcomes of a learner expectation, and as such, the activity must be carefully planned beforehand. To develop an appropriate educational activity, one must be skilled in curriculum development. Since teachers are clearly responsible for choosing appropriate resources, if they create something new, they are ultimately responsible for making sure that the activity follows the intent of the curriculum. As well, the ATA's position is also very clear that the paraeducator's role is to assist in preparing materials. Never should paraeducators develop learning activities on their own, with no direction from the teacher.

Teachers are accountable for the learning of their students. Adapting and modifying curriculum is no easy task and should not be taken lightly. Every time a decision is made about what parts of the curriculum will be used on any given day, and every time a modification to the curriculum occurs, the potential for lessening the likelihood of meeting the intentions of a learning objective can become a reality. Teachers train for many years and have completed extensive work in the area of curriculum. The Alberta Teachers' Association (2005a) describes high standards for teachers, stating that, "Quality teaching occurs when the teacher's ongoing analysis of the context, and the teacher's decisions about which pedagogical knowledge and abilities to apply result in optimum learning by students" (pp. 2-3). The ATA considers adaptation and modification of curriculum to be a teaching duty and prohibits the assigning of such duties to non-teachers.

Disciplining

The teacher is responsible for establishing a clearly understood classroom management structure, and for establishing the classroom rules and expectations for students. The paraeducator is expected to work within this established structure, including classroom management organization, behavioural rules, and IPP expectations. The paraeducator and the teacher should meet regularly to discuss student progress and to discuss and clarify expectations for student discipline and classroom rules.

Teaching

Implementation of lesson plans and the direct teaching related to those lesson plans are the teacher's responsibility. He or she must supervise and facilitate student learning, model techniques and appropriate language, and provide resources for the assistants. Paraeducators need to clarify the elements of the lesson for the students who are having trouble and supervise reinforcement activities. They should implement specific techniques, strategies and language as directed by the teacher, and they should document, monitor, and report student progress to the teacher. Both teacher and paraeducator can clarify and share outcomes and experiences, as well as discuss specific strategies, activities and outcomes, and workplace location.

Given the many demands on classroom teachers and the lack of training and/or understanding a teacher may have in one particular special needs area, it may be understandable that a teacher may assign paraeducators control of a student with exceptional needs, or even the learning of an entire group of students. However, successful teaching and learning may be compromised when paraeducators are no longer teacher assistants but self-directed personnel. In fact, Davern et al. (1997) suggest that

scenarios in which students with disabilities are placed in general education classes without appropriately trained support personnel, or when the classroom teacher has minimal involvement, represent fragmented efforts that are labeled inaccurately as inclusive education.

This issue of who takes primary responsibility has been much discussed. For example, Marlowe (2001) writes, "All too often, the most highly trained special educators wallow in a sea of paperwork while well meaning, but under-trained (and underpaid) paraprofessionals, volunteer grandmothers, and special education aides provide direct service to the nation's neediest students" (p. 14). Yet students with the most complex challenges to learning are "in dire need of continuous exposure to the most ingenious, creative, powerful, competent, interpersonally effective, and informed professionals" (Brown, Farrington, Ziegler, Knight, & Ross, 1999, p. 252). As one Alberta teacher said, "The students deserve a qualified teacher who can plan a program, deliver it and make modifications when required before evaluating the learning in a professional manner" (ATA, 2002a, p. 15). The Alberta Teachers' Association (2005a) also states:

School Boards that assign teachers' assistants to tasks for which they are not adequately trained or unqualified not only place students in danger but risk being sued for malpractice on the grounds that students are being denied the right to be taught by qualified personnel. (p. 4)

Evaluating

Teachers are responsible for evaluating student progress, and for ensuring that students are adhering to the IPP. The paraeducator may collect data for use in student

evaluation and may mark objective tests for the teacher to review. Together they can discuss their observations and exchange information.

Reporting

Reporting both formally and informally to parents is also the responsibility of the teacher. The paraeducator must report to the teacher about a student's strengths, achievements, and needs. He or she must also report to the teacher on observed student behaviours and outcomes. The paraeducator and teacher may discuss appropriate student information, but they must maintain confidentiality.

The Alberta Teachers' Association states that, when meeting formally with parents and family members for such things as Parent-Teacher Conferences and/or Student Program Conferences, only the people directly responsible for determining an individual student's program should attend. As a result, attendance is usually restricted to the parents, the teacher(s), a school administrator, or other professionals who provide direct professional services to that student. The ATA further states that people who provide service to the student under the direction of another person generally do not attend these types of meetings; if they do, they need to understand that the teacher is the final decision-maker and spokesperson: "Teachers' assistants should never comment on a teacher's professional expertise" (ATA, 2005a, p. 10). Even when the parent asks for his or her advice, the paraeducator should respond by saying that it is not his or her role to make such a judgment. The ATA (2005a) is specific: "Reporting to the parent is a teaching responsibility" (p. 10).

Paraeducators should offer their input for discussion to the teacher before the meeting takes place. Even when talking informally to a parent, the paraeducator should

direct all progress reports regarding a student back to the teacher in charge. However, when a meeting becomes a program planning conference to discuss specific learning activities and strategies and how they are to be implemented, then the people who are carrying out these services should be present. This includes the paraeducator.

Staying Current

Both the teacher and the paraeducator are responsible for keeping up to date on school, district, and provincial policies. They are also expected to follow these policies and guidelines.

Evaluating Programs

The teacher is responsible for evaluating programs and for completing documentation on them, as well as for sharing any concerns that he or she may have with regards to these programs. The paraeducator can advise teachers about the degree to which the program structure promotes or inhibits the best use of the paraeducator's skills. Together they may clarify the program's needs.

Supportive Recommendations

The Alberta Teachers' Association reports five recommendations for possible means of support from a teacher to a paraeducator. First, a teacher should ensure that time is set aside for paraeducators to meet on a regular basis. Second, teachers must establish effective lines of communication with the paraeducator. Third, teachers should make sure that paraeducators are informed about school directives and activities. Fourth, teachers need to teach paraeducators how to collect data effectively, since paraeducators are often expected to recognize when students are achieving the desired outcomes, and how to report their observations to the teacher. Last, the ATA recommends that teachers

model basic behaviour-management strategies such as remaining close to students when interacting to them, using low-key responses, and urging students to communicate rather than engage in conflict.

In summary, the nature of the characteristics of students with disabilities requires skilled educators to design individualized curriculum and instruction. As Giangreco and Broer (2003) point out, “Neither research nor common sense supports assigning the least trained with the most significant learning and behavioral challenges” (p. 13). The literature is saturated with statements suggesting that paraeducators should work under the direction and supervision of qualified professional educators, special educators, or related services providers (Doyle, 2002; French, 1999a, 2003; Gerlach, 2001; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997; Salzberg & Morgan, 1995; Wallace et al., 2001). As suggested by Pickett (1989), paraeducators “work alongside their teacher provider colleagues and carry out tasks that support the different teacher/provider functions” (p. 14). The Alberta Teachers’ Association (2005a) is specific in stating that a paraeducator’s duties should not include tasks such as diagnosing learning needs, prescribing educational programs, and evaluating student progress; these are the professional responsibilities of the teacher. In other words, paraeducators are not to replace educational decision-making, or to make plans, or to take away the authority of the teacher. They are to support the teacher and to assist in enacting plans (Winzer, 2005).

Teachers’ and Principals’ Views

Teacher overload is overwhelming for many. When a paraeducator is assigned to a classroom, a teacher assumes new roles – delegator, planner, mentor, director, coach, and program manager (French, 1999a). While teachers are generally grateful for the

additional support, this new supervisory role brings increased responsibility to the teacher. French investigated 26 pairs of resource room teachers and paraeducators and found that nearly all the teachers expressed reluctance to supervise (Pickett & Gerlach, 1997). This reluctance is most likely associated with the additional planning needed in order to develop programs that the paraeducator can implement.

Teachers must be careful to assign only those duties that are acceptable, and they must be able to monitor the paraeducator's work with the children. The teachers must also ensure that paraeducators are adhering to the same behaviour management techniques (Morgan & Ashbaker, 2001), since these students need consistency, and these techniques must be professional in nature. Causton-Theoharis and Malmgren (2005) stated that, "It is important to acknowledge that paraprofessionals do not carry out their duties without supervision. General and specific education teachers play an important role in directing and sharing information and feedback with paraprofessionals" (p. 20). The goals and communication for the paraeducator must not only be carefully planned, but also carried out effectively for the benefit of both the paraeducator and for the child.

The teacher is expected to plan for paraeducators and to be accountable for their undertakings, yet extra time is generally not allocated for this purpose. An increase of responsibility has been added on top of what would seem as an already very heavy teacher workload. The workload that teachers are struggling to deal with also leaves the paraeducator with even less time for consulting with the teacher. Giangreco, Broer, and Edelman (1999) suggest that one sign that too much responsibility has been delegated to paraprofessionals occurs when "experienced, skilled classroom teachers and special

educators defer important curricular, instructional, and management decisions about a student with disabilities to the paraprofessional” (p. 283).

In the United States, Drecktrah (2000) surveyed 212 participants about what types of training they had regarding working with paraeducators while completing their special education teaching degree. Drecktrah reported, “Of the 157 (74 percent) special education teachers that felt preservice teachers should be able to educate a paraeducator, the specific topics include behavior management, tutoring, communication skills, disabilities, observing and recording behavior, computer skills, and record keeping” (p. 160).

Conflict With Paraeducators

In order for teacher-paraeducator relationships to be successful, Hymes (1968) stressed that the paraeducators must be well matched with the teachers, so that there are no personality clashes. Coombs (1999) pointed out that any relationship begins with expectations regarding how people feel, act, and are treated. When people clearly understand the expectations of a relationship, and these expectations have been discussed, then the likelihood of encountering a positive relationship with another person is more likely to occur. However, if the two people engaging in a relationship are vague with each other, then they discover that their unspoken expectations don't quite match those of the other. The resulting conflict is usually a source of problems. Both the teacher and the paraeducator need to be observant, reflective, and open, since “This will increase the chances of successfully adjusting to, and meeting, the needs of the environment” (p. 1). Communication is key.

Paraeducators' Perceptions

The perceptions of paraeducators about their own roles and status have not been widely explored in the literature. However, two particular studies investigated the perceptions that paraeducators hold towards their jobs.

Bassett, Blatchford, Brown, Martin, and Russell (2005) undertook a study in the UK, where 340 paraeducators responded to questionnaires. In the second study, performed in the United States by Riggs (2004), 35 paraeducators responded to questions regarding what paraeducators wanted teachers to know about their job perceptions. The results of these studies pointed to four areas for discussion: general job satisfaction, roles and confusion about roles, respect and equality in the schools, and professional development and salary.

General Job Satisfaction

Some literature suggests that it is becoming increasingly difficult to attract and retain paraeducators because “[too many] have been, and continue to be, inadequately appreciated, compensated, oriented, trained, and supervised” (Giangreco & Doyle, 2002, p. 1).

In the study by Bassett et al. (2005), 340 paraeducators from the UK responded to a questionnaire. Of these, 87 percent reported having derived satisfaction from their work. The two most significant reasons given for this, in approximately 30 percent of the responses, were having a good relationship with the teacher and having received pleasure from progress made with students. In the first category, the paraeducators used such terms as “respect,” “valued,” and “appreciated,” and expressed feelings of being part of a

team. The researchers concluded that, “Clearly, where teachers are able to engender such feelings, the TAs’ level of job satisfaction rises” (p. 182).

In Bassett et al.’s (2005) study, paid planning time with teachers was noted as something that paraeducators appreciated; however, only a small minority (25 percent) of the participants reported having this luxury. Those who did were pleased about the benefits it produced, both for themselves and for their pupils. As well, approximately the same number of paraeducators reported being happy with the feedback time that was provided. These participants “realized that their own work with pupils was enhanced when they were able to share the difficulties and successes with the teacher, who planned the tasks and must choose how to build upon their outcomes” (p. 185).

When Bassett et al. (2005) asked if there was anything that would help improve job satisfaction, four common categories of answers were given. The first, with about 25 percent of the responses, included references to changes in pay and conditions of employment. Sub-categories included “a salary to match their qualifications, experience and responsibilities”; job security and the offer of permanent contracts; and “being valued by the government, LEA and school” (p. 184). The second answer, with about 20 percent of the responses, had to do with changes in deployment. Some examples of this were “being involved in planning, working in only one class or year group, being more involved with school activities, having better communication in the schools such as meetings of LSAs, and having more work with pupils” (p. 184). Third, with 17 percent of the responses, was being able to have time with the teacher for planning and feedback. The final most frequent suggestion as to why paraeducators felt their job satisfaction had been damaged was concern for the lack of training to which they had access. In spite of

any dissatisfaction that these paraeducators may have had, they reported that they were enthusiastic and committed to their jobs. Bassett et al. felt that this reaction was a credit to these paraeducators.

As stated earlier, 35 paraeducators responded to a study completed in the United States by Riggs (2004). The paraeducators discussed what they wanted teachers to know concerning their perceptions about their work. Citing Mueller (1999), Riggs stated that “The job satisfaction and retention of paraeducators are clearly linked to the presence or absence of mutual respect and recognition for their contributions to the educational community” (p. 11). These paraeducators wanted to feel valued and appreciated for their efforts and contributions.

Roles and Confusion About Roles

Bassett et al. (2005) stated, “A number of studies have identified difficulties concerning the boundaries between teaching and non-teaching roles and the existence of grey areas where there is uncertainty” (p. 176). Discussing the recent increase in Scottish paraeducators, they noted that the boundaries between the teacher’s role and the paraeducator’s role were sometimes unclear and that some paraeducators were judged to have overstepped the line into teaching.

Citing French and Pickett (1997), Riggs (2004) suggests that, “Although paraeducators and teachers may often assume similar roles, schools and districts should clearly articulate the differences between paraeducator and teacher responsibilities” (p. 10). Many teachers are unsure about the limits of paraeducators’ responsibilities. However, Riggs suggests that teachers may also be unfamiliar with paraeducator contractual agreements concerning supervision, working hours, and breaks. In order to

avoid unnecessary conflicts, teachers and paraeducators both need to be clear about the district policies up front.

Citing Lamont and Hill (1991) and Pickett (1999), Riggs (2004) reported that “A lack of agreement on appropriate tasks for paraeducators makes it difficult for teachers and paraeducators to know exactly where the individual responsibilities lie” (p. 10). This confusion about the paraeducator’s role, particularly in instruction, can increase classroom uncertainty. This, combined with the fact that some paraeducators do not know or do not fully understand what is expected of them, is sure to blur the line between teachers’ and paraeducators’ roles even further. Paraeducators can be more effective in their work if they have a clear understanding of what is expected of them. Riggs sums it up best when she references Pickett (1999) and Pickett, Vasa, and Steckelberg (1993), stating, “Both paraeducators and teachers will benefit if the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators are clearly defined and reflected in job descriptions that include duties and responsibilities, orientation and training requirements, and procedures for supervision and evaluation” (p. 10).

Now that all students with special needs are fully integrated into our regular classrooms, their diverse and often complicated needs fall solely on the classroom teacher, who generally has not received any training to know how to meet these needs. Few teachers enter the profession with the expectation of having to direct adults, and certified teachers have little training in supervising paraeducators. Citing Decktrals (2000), French (2001), and French and Pickett (1997), Winzer (2005) reported that “Preservice teacher training regarding the supervision of paraeducators is, and always has been, conspicuously absent in special and general education certification programs (p.

108). Edmunds (1999) pointed out that many teachers “feel that the required training and support mechanisms are not being provided” (p. 29). Similarly, another report regarding this same issue stated that many teachers disagree with the lack of available professional training (Winzer et al., 2003).

The educational system therefore often puts the responsibility for the children with the most complex challenges to learning upon the least qualified employees. Because most teachers do not have the skills and training to deliver appropriate instruction for severely disabled students, they are more likely to relinquish programming to the paraeducator, while giving little direction about how to work with such students.

Winzer (2006) stated:

If teachers feel they cannot address the needs of such students, then they may not feel that they should orient their time toward them. Whether willingly or reluctantly, classroom teachers may relinquish primary responsibility for the education of students with disabilities to paraeducators whom they allow then to make daily curriculum and instructional decisions. (p. 17)

When this occurs, the paraeducator takes on the role of the teacher, a role for which paraeducators are not trained and in which they are likely not comfortable. Not only is this too much responsibility to put onto a paraeducator, which generally results in frustration, but also the students’ learning needs are in danger of not being adequately met.

Winzer (2005) reported that teachers may assign primary responsibility to a paraeducator because they may feel inadequate in dealing with children with special needs. Teachers’ beliefs and comfort levels with the characteristics of the children they

serve can influence their perceptions about the potential for successful inclusion.

Research (Buysse, Wesley, Keyes, & Bailey, 1996) has indicated that teachers' comfort levels decrease as the severity of a child's disability increases.

Citing Giangreco and associates (1997), Winzer (2005) stated, "The proximity and availability of aides can create a readily accessible opportunity for teachers to avoid assuming responsibility and ownership for the education of children with disabilities placed in their classes" (p. 114). Winzer reported:

Paraeducators often operate in isolation, take full responsibility for a child's daily academic needs, and are given relative autonomy to make critical curricular and instructional decisions. Such approaches to providing instructional assistant support might be counter-productive, and over-reliance on paraeducators might be a disservice to students. (p. 117)

When the paraeducator is acting as the primary instructor for a child or a group of students, many students are forced to learn in inadequate classroom environments where the paraeducator in charge may not fully comprehend the material content or know how to meet the students' needs. Ultimately, it is the students who suffer.

A study completed on parental perceptions of children with Down syndrome and autism in Southern Ontario explains how this problem is compounded. Starr and Foy (2001) found that almost 40 percent of the parents felt that the paraeducator, not the teacher, assumed primary responsibility for the child.

Studies have also reported that some paraeducators believe they are wholly responsible for meeting the instructional needs of their students with special needs, including the responsibility of planning lessons, supervising students, and evaluating their

performance (Stahl & Lorenz, 1996). According to the Alberta Teachers' Association (2005), teachers should be responsible for assigning duties to the paraeducators and cannot assign them any duty for which the teacher is legally responsible.

Respect and Equality in the Schools

The majority of people need attention, consideration, and respect. People generally want to be treated with the same respect that others receive; thus, they want to be treated as equals. Bassett et al. (2005) stated:

There is a strong feeling among TAs that though their role as supporters of pupils' learning has increased dramatically, their standing and status with the education system -- reflected in such things as admission to staffrooms and meetings, rates of pay and inclusion in lesson planning and feedback -- is lagging far behind. (p. 188)

If paraeducators do not feel as if they are a welcomed part of the team, then naturally they will not feel that their services and presence in the school are respected. One paraeducator who participated in the survey by Bassett et al. (2005) reported that she believed that TAs are looked down on by teachers. A second paraeducator commented that she willingly gives her own time to performing extra duties after her paid hours, but that she really gets annoyed when some teachers just expect her to donate that unpaid time.

Paraprofessionals want to be treated with respect. While some feel that they are respected, others feel they are not. One teaching assistant in London stated, "How degrading it is to be called non-teaching staff, like cleaners and caretakers, while we

teach all day long” (Bassett et al., 2005, p. 184). Paraeducators need to know they are important members of the educational team.

From Riggs’ (2004) study regarding what paraeducators want teachers to know, four of the top ten major themes dealt with paraeducators’ wanting to be treated with respect and with equality. The number one top item that paraeducators wanted teachers to know was that teachers need to take the time to get to know their paraeducator’s name, background, and interests. These participants commented on how they often feel overlooked in the school community: “Knowing the paraeducators in the school by name (not merely as ‘Joey’s helper,’ or ‘the playground lady,’ or ‘the office aide’), is the first step toward welcoming paraeducators into the school and classroom” (p. 9). From this, it can be inferred that something as simple as exchanging information about hobbies and interests can lead to a happier and more productive team.

Paraeducators also wanted teachers to know that they need both parties to view their relationship as a team. As Riggs (2004) points out, “The paraeducators who participated in this project were adamant about their wish to be treated as fully participating team members” (p. 10). Riggs notes that, when this was not the case, it was a lot like two parents who are not working as a team on important family decisions. If the adults don’t provide a unified approach, the child may sense a weakness. Thus, attempts to manage this child and his or her expectations toward the parents may soon be met with less respect.

These same participants wanted teachers to recognize that paraeducators have experience and knowledge to share (Riggs, 2004). It bothered these participants that, “Paraeducators often report that staff relationships are not characterized by mutual

respect, and that they are not asked for their opinions on student issues” (p. 11).

Paraeducators are in a position where they observe students in a variety of settings and, as such, they have a great deal of information that could be useful in making educational decisions. However, it would seem that many teachers do not ask their paraeducator’s opinion, or they just don’t have the time to listen. Whatever the case, a sense of disrespect grows.

Last, paraeducators want teachers to take ownership of all students. Whether it is due to “the result of the teacher’s lack of familiarity with children with disabilities, lack of support for inclusion, level of discomfort with the paraeducator or the child, or simply an oversight in a busy classroom,” paraeducators view some teachers as not taking an active interest in all students. They feel that some teachers unintentionally exclude some children from participation.

Riggs (2004) also mentioned that, while attending conferences, meetings and the like, presenters need to recognize the efforts of paraeducators, which will in turn foster an ongoing climate of respect.

Professional Development and Salary

After conducting a long-term job satisfaction study in the UK with 340 paraeducators, Bassett et al. (2005) found that there was a high turnover rate due to job dissatisfaction over paraeducators’ lack of career development opportunities. This perception was intensified by the fact that any gain in experience was not reflected in their pay status.

Winzer (2005) also pointed out that training considerations lead inevitably to another dilemma:

On the one hand, there are untrained paraeducators who are poorly paid and unable to work adequately with many students. On the other, there are trained support personnel who can engage in teacher-type roles but without the salary or the status. This then begs the question: How can schools compensate such people for their skills within current fiscal restraints? (p. 116)

If all schools could have trained paraeducators, meeting our students' needs would be more attainable. However, a potential problem could develop in the cost of training for ill-paid paraeducators. This could be troublesome for many. Incentives such as pay increases for additional training and perhaps reimbursement for some courses would help to address this issue.

Items 42 to 46 of the *Report and Recommendations* document by Alberta's Commission on Learning (2003) addressed the need for appropriate training for paraeducators and teachers so that the needs of all children can be adequately met. Winzer (2005) made an excellent point when she reported that effective training must be ongoing so that participants can move from mere awareness and acquisition of knowledge and skills, to the transfer of those concepts to the work setting. Rather than the one-shot workshop approach, Winzer believes that what is needed is sustained training on working with paraeducators.

Paraeducators' dissatisfaction concerning their lack of pay resounds throughout the literature. Bassett et al. (2005) reported that, "While the great majority had high levels of job satisfaction, many referred to the dramatic changes in the role of the TA, which have not been matched with changes in status, pay, conditions of service and contracts" (p. 175). Bassett et al. reported those findings as the most common category of answer,

with 25 percent of the participants' responses. They also heard from some paraeducators that there was "some resentment at the pay differentials across the staff of the school, where some of those who have no pedagogical role at all, are paid more per hour than TAs, who support pupils all or most of the time" (p. 184). These participants noted this issue as the area most in need of improvement to increase their job satisfaction. One reported:

I would like to see an end to the two-tier system of support staff. Qualified and unqualified both doing the same job but with a huge difference in salary! I am responsible for the 'teaching' of the groups I work with. Although I do not expect to be paid as a teacher, I do expect to be paid more than the cleaner! (p. 185)

As Bassett et al. (2005) concluded, "The great majority have not been specifically prepared for the main task of the TA role, and almost half have no qualifications that they judge as relevant" (p. 187). It should be noted, however, that many of these same paraeducators reported themselves dissatisfied with their lack of career development opportunities.

Conclusion

Increasing numbers of paraeducators are expected to enter the school system; therefore, educational leaders need to develop clear plans that are research based and collaborative in the making. Schools need effective leaders to obtain the support necessary to overcome these concerns. This leadership must include teachers who work with paraeducators, paraeducators themselves, and administrators. With the support of administrators, teachers are more likely to maximize their efforts to develop successful working relationships with paraeducators; in return, these assistants are likely to perform

their duties more effectively. With this support, not only should many frustrations be eliminated, but more importantly, our students should reap the rewards through their learning experiences. Paraeducators must also be on board with the plan.

With the current changes in the way that schools are being structured, teachers have to be willing to operate under a new paradigm. They must redesign curriculum, be innovative with instruction, and be collaborative with colleagues. To perform supervisory roles effectively, teachers will require a range of skills in supervision, evaluation, and collaboration. They need to be effective leaders at the top of their games. Training in these areas for their teachers would benefit our students greatly.

Issues surrounding the lack of training provided for paraeducators are discussed throughout the literature, and reports about their desire for further learning are prevalent. However, paraeducators feel that increased levels of training should coincide with increased levels of pay, and if our school boards have to pay more for this type of employee, then one of the main reasons for hiring paraeducators begins to disappear.

Chapter 3. Methodology

Design of Study

This study was undertaken in order to gain insight into the roles of paraeducators in schools from a single school jurisdiction and to explore their perceptions concerning these duties. Two carefully planned, open-ended research questions were presented to the participants: What are the actual job duties you perform all day at work? How could teachers and/or schools help you to do your job better?

One school jurisdiction was selected from which to obtain data. There are 13 public schools within this jurisdiction, of which 6 are located in towns and 7 in rural communities. These schools are not in close proximity. In fact, this jurisdiction covers an area of over 2500 square miles.

Sample

This study uses a sample of paraeducators from within this jurisdiction who are currently working in an elementary or junior high setting. One hundred percent of those who volunteered to participate in this study were female. This has largely to do with the overwhelming numbers of women, as compared to men, who are employed within this profession. Of the 14 participants, 46 percent work with K-3 classrooms, 25 percent with grades 4-6, and the remaining 29 percent with grades 7-9. Forty-three percent take on the role of a Special Needs Assistant, 50 percent perform Classroom Assistant duties, and the remaining 7 percent work as Speech Assistants. Of those 43 percent who work as Special Needs Assistants, 58 percent are assigned to one student only, and the other 42 percent work with more than one student. Seventy-nine percent of these paraeducators are employed full-time; 21 percent have part-time employment.

Data Collection

Focus Groups

Data were collected primarily from three separate focus group discussions.

Anderson and Arsenault (2001) noted:

A focus group is a carefully planned and moderated informal discussion where one person's ideas bounce off another's creating a chain reaction of informative dialogue. Its purpose is to address a specific topic, in depth, in a comfortable environment to illicit a wide range of opinions, attitudes, feelings, or perceptions from a group of individuals who share some common experience relative to the dimension under study. (p. 200)

Because this study addresses an area where to date very little research has been developed, it seemed logical to take the grounded theory approach. The grounded theory approach is a qualitative method of inquiry, and focus group studies complement this theory very well. Citing Strauss and Corbin (1990), Anderson and Arsenault (1998) reported that "Grounded theory is a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed" (p. 273). Much data was obtained from three separate focus groups discussions; the major findings from this data are systematically tabled within the results chapter.

All of the elementary and junior high school paraeducators from the jurisdiction received an e-mail inviting them to take part in these focus group discussions. The administrators from this school district were also sent an e-mail asking them to extend an invitation to all of their paraeducators on the researcher's behalf (see Appendix A). These invitations informed the potential paraeducator participants as to why the primary

researcher was interested in their opinions, encouraged their participation, and ensured their anonymity. The invitation included the researcher's e-mail address and telephone number for response purposes. Two separate dates were chosen in order to accommodate as many participants as possible.

Before these focus group discussions took place, the researcher gained consent from both the jurisdiction and the non-participant observer, stating their approval for participation and for the researcher to conduct her study within this school district. Four to five paraeducators participated in each group, a total of 14 paraeducators in all. It was felt that this was enough people to achieve synergy and to facilitate good dynamics in each group. Two open-ended key questions were developed beforehand, and the discussions in response to these questions provided many individual viewpoints.

Ten paraeducators attended the first round of focus group discussions on May 26, 2006, at a central location within this jurisdiction. The researcher chose a central location for this meeting in order to make it as convenient as possible for the majority of the paraeducators who volunteered their time to participate. Five paraeducators sat at each table and they were encouraged to sit with people who they did not know, although this was not always possible, given the small communities in which they work.

The second focus group session was held on May 30, 2006. This time the researcher and the non-participant observer traveled to a rural school to make participation as easy as possible for the four rural paraeducators who offered to participate in the study.

For the convenience of the paraeducators, both sessions took place at the end of the school day following the dismissal of students. First, the paraeducators were informed

as to why the researcher was conducting this study, and each was given a copy of the required consent form (see Appendix B). While reading over this consent form, the participants were offered a healthy snack and a refreshing drink so as to create a relaxing and comfortable atmosphere for the discussions. After reading, signing, and returning the consent forms to the researcher, the participants were again told the reasoning and intentions of this study and reassured that their identities would remain confidential. At this point, the non-participant observer was introduced and her role explained. The researcher then asked if any of the participants had questions or concerns. Next the researcher presented the two key questions to each group and briefly explained their intent. The researcher suggested a time limit of fifteen minutes to answer each question. When the paraeducators said they felt ready to begin, two tape recorders were turned on at each table. The participants were instructed to begin by introducing themselves and then to provide feedback with regards to the first question.

Tapes recorded the exact conversations that occurred within each group and were later transcribed word for word. As well, a non-participant observer produced a written record of the events that took place throughout the meeting. She also assisted with coding and with pulling out themes.

Data Analysis

Following Anderson and Arsenault's (1998) tips for data analysis, all of the commentaries from the tape recordings were typed up verbatim and notes were made regarding the participants' seating arrangements. Each transcribed note was individually taken and put into a theme. Each time a paraeducator made a comment or supported a statement that was previously discussed, a tally mark was put beside that comment. The

comments were then put in order, from the reports that received the most tally marks to those that received the least, within each theme grouping. If any comments were very closely related, they were edited into one to eliminate redundancy. If a comment was only made by one person and not supported by the group, very little emphasis was placed on it. The accurate reflection from what the group reported was assigned the most importance. Throughout all of this reporting, the participants' identities remained concealed.

Immediately following the focus group discussions, the non-participant observer and the researcher went over the notes and perceptions. Next, transcriptions were made of all of the conversations that occurred from the three separate groups. A copy of the transcribed notes was given to the non-participant observer so that she could go through the conversations, code the responses, and pull out themes. The primary researcher also completed these data analysis procedures, thus increasing the validity of this data. All of these steps were completed with very little time lapsing between them so that everything remained fresh.

Recurring themes were drawn out from the discussions surrounding the way in which these paraeducators actually envisioned their roles and responsibilities within their schools. After the preliminary analysis, these themes were broken down into categories and subcategories. Here such things as the context that gave rise to the words used, whether people changed their views or held them constant throughout the session, and the intensity of those responses were taken into account (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998). The major themes and sub-themes are detailed in the next chapter.

Chapter 4. Results

This chapter presents the results concerning the perceptions of the paraeducators who participated in this study. Their perceptions relate to their roles, duties, and responsibilities as paraeducators, and the supports they deem necessary for job improvement.

Themes and Sub-Themes

Several themes and sub-themes emerged from the three focus group discussions, as listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes	Sub-Themes
1. Support and Positive Perceptions	From teachers
	From schools
	From jurisdictions
	From paraeducators
2. Roles and Responsibilities	Secretarial duties
	Classroom duties
	Supervising and planning duties
3. Roles and Responsibilities for Working with Behavioural Students	Adhering to child's needs
	Threat assessment duties
	Record keeping and testing
4. Lack of Communication	From teachers
	At the school level

5. Education	Opportunities
	Lack of opportunities
	Education and pay
6. Lack of Support	With students
	From teachers
	From administration
	From parents
	Within the school culture
	Lack of breaks
7. Frustrations and Complaints	Too much responsibility
	Unfair treatment

Support and Positive Perceptions

The paraeducators provided a total of 17 comments with regards to the theme of support and positive perceptions. These comments accounted for 13 percent of the statements that were recorded. This category then coded into four smaller sub- themes. Each sub-theme pertains to the positive perceptions and support that paraeducators have received from schools, from teachers, from jurisdictions, and from themselves.

From schools. Forty-one percent of the comments reported under this sub-theme described schools as providing paraeducators with positive support. Based on these comments, 36 percent of the paraeducators felt that their schools treat them respectfully and as equals. Another 36 percent appreciated being allowed to work with the same teacher for an extended period of time, because then everyone knows what to expect and

there is flexibility. Twenty-nine percent were pleased that any time spent participating at PLC (Professional Learning Community) meetings could be credited for time off.

Another 29 percent appreciated being invited to attend staff and PLC meetings. Twenty-one percent enjoyed the camaraderie between teachers and paraeducators and reported that this camaraderie could be felt throughout the school. Fourteen percent felt that they were fortunate because their school schedules TAC (Teacher Assistant Communication) time so that teachers and their paraeducators can meet outside of class time.

From teachers. Thirty-five percent of the comments addressed the support that paraeducators receive from teachers, and teachers' positive perceptions about their efforts. Based on these comments, 43 percent of participants believed that good teachers trusted them to use common sense. Twenty-nine percent reported that they do not have to do any planning; rather, they carry out the pre-planned lessons provided for them by the teacher. Fourteen percent agreed that teachers support them when talking with parents; another 14 percent felt that they had the freedom to interpret the needs of the students as opposed to following the instructions provided for them. Seven percent stated that they receive support from the teacher when dealing with a behavioural student, and the last 7 percent were pleased that their teacher worked one on one with the lower level students while the paraeducator stayed with the rest of the class.

From jurisdictions. Twelve percent of the comments reported within this sub-theme related to the positive support that paraeducators received from their school jurisdiction. Based on these, 36 percent of the participants were delighted that they could now take their pay over a twelve-month period as opposed to the ten-month period that

until recently they had to take. Fourteen percent of the paraeducators also felt that their jurisdiction's board members and administrators genuinely appreciate paraeducators.

From paraeducators. Twelve percent of the comments recorded under this sub-theme mentioned the positive perceptions that paraeducators had about their own roles. Fifty percent of the participants reported loving their job. Fourteen percent agreed that being treated with respect often results in happiness and willingness to do more.

Table 2 summarizes the sub-themes of the category of Support and Positive Perceptions, illustrating the factors that these paraeducators credit as providing positive support for their roles, duties, and responsibilities.

Table 2. Major Findings From Support and Positive Perceptions

% Paraeducators	Responses
50	Love their job
43	Trusted to use common sense
36	Treated with respect
36	Work with same teachers
36	Get paid over 12 months
29	Time off for PLC meetings
29	Invited to staff/PLC meetings
29	Planning provided for them

Roles and Responsibilities

The theme of Roles and Responsibilities coded into two sections. Given the large number of responses that specifically addressed the duties that paraeducators perform

when working strictly with behavioural students, the researcher felt that this area provided a separate theme.

Thirty-one comments had to do with roles and responsibilities, excluding those duties that relate to working with behavioural students. These comments accounted for 24 percent of the responses, the most for any theme. This category coded into three sub-themes: classroom duties, supervising and planning duties, and secretarial duties.

Classroom duties. Sixty-one percent of the comments centered on the types of classroom duties that paraeducators perform. Of these, 71 percent reported working with behavioral students, 64 percent working with small groups of students, and 50 percent working one-on-one with students. Forty-three percent noted performing such duties as running errands for the teacher. Thirty-six percent reported carrying out cleaning duties as needed. Another 36 percent said that they do whatever is needed to make the teacher's job as easy as possible.

Twenty-nine percent commented on five separate duties: helping whoever needs help in the classroom; completing whatever task the teacher asks them to do; organizing and preparing for assignments; organizing and preparing for centres; and checking students' homework. Twenty-one percent mentioned four separate duties: maintaining classroom control, going on field trips, reading to students, and testing students under the teacher's direction. Three separate groups, with 21 percent reporting from each group, mentioned marking on a daily basis, being in charge of a centre group, playing games and entertaining students. Fourteen percent reported preparing lunches and/or snacks for students. Seven percent reported being responsible for taking daily attendance.

Supervising and planning duties. Twenty-nine percent of the comments regarding the paraeducators' roles and responsibilities were recorded into this sub-theme. Of these, 86 percent reported performing playground supervision duties. Fifty percent reported lunchtime supervision duties. Fifty percent stated that they supervise classes under the teacher's direction. Twenty-one percent said that they have completed planning duties without any direction from the teacher, such as being responsible for writing IPPs (Individual Program Plans). Fourteen percent reported having to prepare snacks and/or lunches for students, and the final 7 percent commented on having to perform such duties as supervising the canteen, the homework room, the after-school program, and the bus.

Secretarial duties. Ten percent of the comments were recorded under this sub-theme. Based on these, 7 percent mentioned three separate duties: performing various types of computer work, such as writing and preparing reports; helping to develop the yearbook; and assisting with the school newsletter.

Table 3 summarizes the sub-themes within the category of Roles and Responsibilities, showing the most reported duties that these paraeducators perform.

Table 3. Major Findings From Roles and Responsibilities

% Paraeducators	Responses
86	Playground supervision
71	Work with behavioural student
69	Work with small groups
57	Lunchtime supervision
50	Work one-on-one
50	Supervise classes under direction of teacher

Working With Behavioural Students

Twenty-one comments were coded into this theme, accounting for 16 percent of the total responses. This theme was ranked number two. Within the category Roles and Responsibilities for Working With Behavioural Students, three sub-themes were coded: record keeping and testing, adhering to a child's needs, and threat assessment duties.

Record keeping and testing. Forty-three percent of all comments from this theme related to record keeping and testing. Of these, 64 percent of the paraeducators stated that they were responsible for either maintaining existing records or personally creating anecdotal records. Seven percent reported being responsible for student progress charts and/or reports; another 7 percent stated that they were responsible for Brigance testing.

Adhering to child's needs. Thirty-eight percent of the comments reported under the theme Behavioural Issues related to having to adhere to students' needs. Based on these, 57 percent commented on having worked with a student whose ability was at a lower level than his or her peers. Twenty-one percent reported having been required to remove a frustrated student from the classroom, and another 21 percent reported having to deal with a student's toiletry needs. Fourteen percent reported feeling uncomfortable with having to administer medication to students. Another 14 percent stated that they had performed as a scribe for students. Seven percent commented on having to attempt to enrich students' lives through various activities. This same percentage reported having to administer daily feedings to a student with exceptional needs. The final 7 percent reported performing a daily exercise routine with a student with exceptional needs.

Threat assessment duties. Nineteen percent of the comments regarding behavioural issues were coded into the category of threat assessment duties. Of these, 14

percent reported that it was the paraeducator's responsibility to determine if a student was acting in a threatening manner. Another 14 percent stated that it was their duty to perform daily threat-prevention tasks such as backpack searches.

Conclusion. Table 4 illustrates the major findings regarding the most reported responsibilities and duties that these participants performed while working with behavioural students. These comments were coded into three sub-categories under the theme Roles and Responsibilities for Working With Behavioural Students.

Table 4. Major Findings From Working With Behavioural Students

% Paraeducators	Responses
64	Maintain anecdotal records
57	Work with lower lever students
21	Remove child from classroom
21	Attend to student's toiletry needs
14	Administer child's medications (uncomfortable doing)
14	Scribe for students
14	Determine if act is threatening
14	Perform daily threat assessment tasks

Lack of Communication

Eleven comments were recorded under this theme, accounting for 8 percent of the total responses and ranking Lack of Communication number six. It then coded into two smaller sub-themes regarding paraeducators' perceptions of a lack of communication at the school level and from the teacher.

Schools. Fifty-five percent of the participants reported having had communication frustrations at the school level. Based on these comments, 79 percent reported feeling an overall lack of communication throughout the school. Thirty-six percent felt they were unable to obtain general school information such as staff meeting and PLC reports; they also expressed the desire that new employees receive a school information package at the beginning of the school year. Twenty-nine percent felt that they do not receive enough information about the coded children they work with, including permission to access student cumulative files. This same percentage saw a need for team meetings and felt that these meetings would be beneficial for the staff and students who would be involved. Fourteen percent stated that, either because of unusual school dynamics or a lack of invitation, they were often excluded from participating in important school information sessions such as staff meetings.

Teachers. Forty-five percent of the comments related to the paraeducators' frustrations about communication with and from teachers. Of these comments, 79 percent mentioned that the lack of communication from the teacher often left them feeling as if they had to be mind readers. Thirty-six percent commented on the desire for feedback from the teacher and for performance evaluations. Twenty-nine percent reported a desire for goal-setting and follow-up discussions regarding whether or not their goals were met. Another 29 percent addressed the need for discussion time with the teacher. Finally, 21 percent reported experiencing a lack of direction from the teacher.

Conclusion. Table 5 illustrates the most frequently discussed comments concerning the participants' frustrations about a lack of communication. These results were taken from the sub-themes under the category Lack of Communication.

Table 5. Major Findings From Lack of Communication

% Paraeducators	Responses
79	Felt throughout entire school
79	Felt from teachers (left feeling as mind readers)
36	Unable to obtain general school information
36	Desire for feedback & performance evaluations
29	Denied access to information regarding coded students
29	Desire for goal setting & follow up sessions
29	Need for discussion time with teacher

Education

Fourteen comments were recorded from the focus group discussions regarding education. They accounted for 11 percent of the total number, ranking the Education theme fifth. This category coded into three sub-themes: opportunities for further learning, lack of understanding about education, and education and pay.

Opportunities for further learning. Fifty percent of the paraeducators commented about their opportunities for further learning. Based on these comments, 50 percent of the participants wanted schools to supply the training they require, rather than expecting them to train themselves. Forty-three percent felt they were inadequately trained to work with special needs and behavioural students. Another 43 percent commented that they felt they had to train themselves in order to plan adequately and provide resources for students. Twenty-nine percent felt that it is important to take advantage of available professional development funding; however, this same number also reported previously being denied permission to attend conferences because their presence was required at

school. Twenty-one percent felt that local training and conferences were scarce and lacked meaningful content. Seven percent would like to see “lunch and learn” sessions made available at the school.

Lack of understanding about education. Twenty-nine percent of the paraeducators commented on a lack of understanding regarding education. Based on these, 29 percent felt that teachers were not educated enough to work with students with special needs. Twenty-one percent felt that they themselves didn’t always understand the curriculum that they were instructed to teach. Fourteen percent experienced feelings of frustration because they were not permitted to implement their own conference training ideas. Seven percent felt that teachers should attend paraeducator workshops in order to increase their understanding of the paraeducators’ work.

Education and pay. Twenty-one percent of the participants commented on issues related to education and pay. Of these, 64 percent stated that they enjoyed attending paraeducator conferences but would rather be given the opportunity to participate in courses where credit was awarded. Thirty-six percent felt that the amount of education should be in direct correlation with the rate of pay. Fourteen percent suggested that after completing a required number of years of experience within a particular jurisdiction, school divisions should offer funding to these paraeducators for further education opportunities.

Conclusion. Table 6 illustrates the numbers of responses addressing each issue related to education and pay. These comments were taken from the sub-themes of Education and Pay.

Table 6. Major Findings From Education

% Paraeducators	Responses
64	Opportunities for credited courses
50	Training provided by schools
43	Inadequately trained to meet students' needs
36	Level of education should determine pay
29	Important to use PD funding (but often denied)
29	Teachers not educated to work with students with special needs

Lack of Support

Eighteen comments were recorded under this theme. These comments accounted for 14 percent of the total responses, ranking this theme number three. The paraeducators perceived lack of support as coming from six sources: teachers, students, parents, administration, school culture, and time allowed for breaks.

Teachers. Thirty-three percent of the comments regarding lack of support were recorded under this sub-theme. Based on these, forty-three percent of the paraeducators felt that teachers were either too busy or did not care enough to offer or provide help when the paraeducator was seeking resources. Thirty-six percent reported that teachers seemed unwilling to understand or explain. Twenty-nine percent felt that the teacher's lack of respect for the paraeducator resulted in an unhealthy classroom and school environment. Twenty-one percent stated that, when feeling at risk from a student, they received no support from the teacher and were rarely taken seriously. Fourteen percent reported being solely responsible for programs while receiving little to no direction from

teachers. Another 14 percent attributed this lack of direction to minimal organization on the part of the teacher.

Students. Seventeen percent of the comments from this theme related to the lack of support from the students in the school. Twenty-one percent of the participants reported feeling at risk from a student, and another 21 percent felt that they were inadequately trained to respond properly to threatening behaviours and situations involving these students. Fourteen percent felt that they did not receive the same level of respect from students that teachers do.

Parents. Seventeen percent of the comments regarding lack of support related to students' parents. Forty-three percent of the participants reported feeling frustrated at being unable to communicate with the parents of students for whom they reported being the primary caregiver. Two separate groups reported lack of support and respect from parents towards paraeducators, with 14 percent of the participants providing comments.

Administration. Eleven percent of responses regarding lack of support of paraeducators targeted administration. Twenty-nine percent of the participants reported having been denied personal days due to administration's unwillingness to provide personnel coverage for paraeducators. Seven percent noted the need for Kindergarten classes to be provided consistently with paraeducator support, regardless of enrollment.

School culture. Eleven percent of the comments regarding lack of support referred to school culture. Fifty-seven percent of the paraeducators reported that they felt "left in the dark" and would benefit from a job description that stated their rights, roles, and responsibilities. Twenty-nine percent reported experiencing difficulty when they attempted to seek answers regarding the behaviours of students with special needs.

Lack of breaks. Eleven percent of comments from this theme related to a lack of breaks. Sixty-four percent of the participants stated that they are rarely given the scheduled paid breaks to which they are entitled. Twenty-one percent mentioned needing regular breaks from work with the same behavioural child for an extended period of time.

Conclusion. Table 7 illustrates the major findings regarding the participants' greatest concerns about lack of support.

Table 7. Major Findings From Lack of Support

% Paraeducators	Responses
64	Not given breaks
57	Desire job description of rights, roles, responsibilities
43	Teachers too busy to provide resources
43	May not communicate with parents (primary caregiver of child)
36	Teachers unwilling to provide understanding
29	Lack of respect from teacher
29	Denied personal days
29	Do not understand how to work with student behaviours

Frustrations and Complaints

Eighteen comments related to the paraeducators' frustrations and complaints about their jobs. These responses accounted for 14 percent of the comments, ranking this theme third. Frustrations and Complaints coded into two sub-themes: unfair treatment and too much responsibility.

Unfair treatment. Fifty-six percent of the comments within this theme related to unfair treatment or demands placed on paraeducators. Based on these, 100 percent of the

participants expressed a general feeling of frustration about their employment. Ninety-three percent described their daily roles and responsibilities as stressful, busy, and hectic. Fifty-seven percent mentioned feeling guilty when unable to meet a student's goals, because they were solely responsible for that student's program. Thirty-six percent believed that teachers are unaware of paraeducators' legal roles and responsibilities. The participants often felt compelled to perform duties beyond their role expectations. Thirty-six percent reported feeling underappreciated for their daily tasks and overall efforts. Twenty-one percent stated that they felt they could not meet their students' needs because they were directed to perform other duties and tasks, such as marking and photocopying. Another 21 percent stated that students with special needs deserve and should receive the attention of the teacher, as much as is given to the general student population. Yet another 21 percent reported feeling frustrated with teachers, due to teachers' differing expectations. Fourteen percent reported feeling uncomfortable when directed to administer medication to a student. Finally, 7 percent felt that they were expected to comply with a teacher's directives and unable to express their own thoughts and feelings.

Too much responsibility. Forty-four percent of the comments reported within this theme related to a sense that too much responsibility is placed on paraeducators. Of the participants, 71 percent suggested that teachers should be more flexible. Sixty-four percent felt underpaid, considering the expectations and demands placed upon them. Thirty-six percent felt they were not treated as equals by the staff. Another 36 percent believed that paraeducators require more credited training, which would yield an increase in earnings. Twenty-nine percent felt frustrated when administrators questioned their reasoning for requesting a personal day, then denied their request. Fourteen percent felt

that others perceive them as someone who could not make it as a teacher, although they themselves feel their position is highly important. Another 14 percent believed that some teachers hold unrealistic expectations regarding the performance of students with special needs. And finally, 7 percent felt that they should be provided with a pension plan.

Conclusion. Table 8 illustrates the comments made regarding paraeducators' feelings of frustrations and complaints. These comments came from the sub-themes of the larger theme, Frustrations and Complaints.

Table 8. Major Findings From Frustrations and Complaints

% Paraeducators	Responses
100	Overall frustration towards job
93	Stressful, busy, & hectic
71	Desire more flexibility from teachers
64	Underpaid
57	Feel guilty because unable to meet student's goals
36	Teachers unaware of paraeducator's roles and responsibilities
36	Underappreciated for overall efforts
36	Not treated as equals from staff
36	Require more credited training

In summary, many of the paraeducators reported a love for their job. However, other major responses concerned lack of communication from all areas within the school. Problems ranging from little to no direction or discussion time given from the teacher, to inability to receive general school information contributed to this frustration. As well, many paraeducators saw a need for training to be provided. They suggested that they felt

guilty because they were unable to meet some students' needs adequately, and they did not know how to deal with the difficult behaviours exhibited by others. Perceptions that they are underpaid and that levels of training should coincide with rates of pay were also frequently reported. These participants also commented on their desire for all school employees to develop a deeper understanding of the roles, responsibilities, and duties of paraeducators.

These paraeducators also discussed their feelings of not being treated with respect or as equals by the staff. Also, many report frustration at not being allowed to communicate with parents and teachers, who are too busy to provide resources and unwilling to explain. Several participants also reported feeling that teachers are not proficient enough to work with many of the children with special needs.

Chapter 5. Discussion

Introduction

As continually increasing numbers of paraeducators enter our Alberta schools, it becomes evident that, although most see their presence as positive, their addition to the school team also presents some dilemmas. The roles and responsibilities of these employees are often blurred with those of teachers. The researcher undertook this study in order to begin to understand this dilemma. The research was driven by the following question: How do paraeducators in southern Alberta schools perceive their roles and responsibilities, as well as their training and the challenges that confront them while they are performing their duties? The question was developed to gain insight into the roles of paraeducators in schools from a single school jurisdiction and to explore their perceptions about these duties.

Paraeducators' Roles

For the purpose of this study, a role is considered to be something to which a paraeducator is assigned. Most participants reported being assigned to work with behavioural students, with small groups, working one-on-one with students, supervising classes under the direction of the teacher, and working with lower level students.

Paraeducators' Duties

Paraeducators' duties are the tasks and services that arise from their position and which they are expected to perform under the supervision of the teacher. The most frequently discussed were playground and lunch supervision, administering a child's medication, scribing for students, and performing daily threat assessments tasks such as backpack searches.

Paraeducators' Responsibilities

Responsibilities of paraeducators, under the supervision of the teacher, are required duties for which they are accountable. These duties are usually performed more independently; the paraeducators are often put in a position where they must distinguish what is right from what is wrong.

The participants in this study gave the highest number of responses for four responsibilities that they have been required to perform: maintaining anecdotal records, removing a child from the classroom, attending to a child's toiletry needs, and determining whether the manner in which a child acts would be considered a threatening behaviour or not.

The literature reports similar findings regarding the roles, duties, and responsibilities of paraeducators today. It has been reported that paraeducators may perform functional assistant activities, observe and document data on learner performance and behaviour, implement behavioural management programs, instruct individuals and small groups, and assist teachers with modifying programs to meet the needs of individual students (see Doyle, 1997; Killoran, Templeman, Petere, & Udell, 2001; Wallace, Shin, Bartholoway, & Stahl, 2001). Other literature states that the roles filled by paraeducators today may include providing instruction in academic subjects, teaching functional life skills, teaching vocational skills at community-based work sites, collecting and managing data, supporting students who exhibit challenging behaviors, facilitating interactions with peers who do not have disabilities, providing personal care (for example, feeding, bathroom assistance), and engaging in clerical tasks (Doyle, 1997; French, 1999a, 1999b; Hammeken, 1996; Rogan & Held, 1999). As well, Tillery et al.

(2003) cite cases where paraeducators have assisted with supervising and monitoring students, and assisted with instructing individuals or small groups. All of the roles, duties, and responsibilities reported by the participants in this study are supported by the literature, with the exception of administering a child's medication. This duty is likely rarely asked of paraeducators.

Paraeducators' Perceptions of Their Jobs

The participants in this study reported many perceptions about their jobs. One hundred percent of these paraeducators reported feeling an overall sense of frustration about their job. Because this statement was so general and not directed at any specific reason for this feeling, the existing literature does not directly address this problem. However, it does suggest particular reasons for frustration.

Ninety-three percent of the participants reported perceiving their jobs to be stressful, busy, and hectic. Although I believe that most paraeducators today would feel this way, the literature does not directly refer to this perception.

Referring to a need for better communication, 79 percent of the participants sensed this type of frustration throughout the school. The perceptions of these paraeducators are echoed throughout the literature. In a study by Bassett et al. (2005), 20 percent of the participants felt that being more involved in school activities and having better communication in the schools would improve their job satisfaction.

Another 79 percent of the paraeducators in the present study commented that lack of communication from teachers left them feeling as if they had to be mind readers. This feeling is widely reported throughout the literature. Riggs (2004) suggests that when the paraeducator's roles and responsibilities are clearly defined by the teacher, both will

benefit. Discussing effective working relationships, Coombs (1999) reported that both parties have to clearly understand and discuss the expectations of a relationship. If these two people are vague with each other, they will discover that their unspoken expectations don't match those of others; the resulting conflict is usually a source of problems. Both the teacher and the paraeducator need to be observant, reflective, and open with each other. Drecktrah (2000) suggested that teachers should be able to educate the paraeducator on specific topics, such as behaviour management, tutoring, communication skills, disabilities, observing and recording behaviour, computer skills, and record keeping. These types of communication skills on the part of teachers, combined with good planning, delegating, and supervision abilities, can help paraeducators to be clear about their roles.

Of the paraeducators who participated in this survey, 64 percent were dissatisfied because they perceived they are underpaid. This same feeling among paraeducators is widely reported throughout the literature. Giangreco and Doyle (2002) attribute the difficulties of hiring and retaining paraeducators today partially to paraeducators being inadequately compensated for the work they do. Bassett et al. (2005) also suggest that the status and standing of paraeducators in the education system, which are reflected in such things as rates of pay when compared to an increase in responsibilities, are lagging far behind. This same study reported a unique perspective from some respondents when they found that there was "some resentment at the pay differentials across the staff of the school, where some of those who have no pedagogical role at all, are paid more per hour than TAs, who support pupils all or most of the time" (p. 184). In the present study, another 64 percent reported being unhappy because they rarely receive any of the paid

breaks to which they are entitled. Riggs (2004) suggests that this may have to do with teachers being unfamiliar with paraeducators' contractual agreements concerning supervision, working hours, and breaks.

Fifty-seven percent of the participants reported feeling guilty because they were unable to meet their students' goals. They attributed this inability largely to reasons such as teachers' lack of understanding or unwillingness to plan and supervise a program for a student with exceptional needs. This dilemma would not be supported by the ATA, as teachers who do not provide the necessary planning, resources, and direction clearly do not understand their role and responsibility for working with paraeducators. The ATA (2005a) clearly states that both the teacher and the paraeducator are responsible for keeping up-to-date on and following school, district, and provincial policies. Davern et al. (1997) suggested that scenarios in which students with disabilities are placed in general education classes without appropriately trained support personnel represent fragmented efforts. Scenarios such as these leave paraeducators feeling guilty because they are unable to meet their students' needs adequately.

Fifty percent commented on the love they had for their position. This result is not unlike the findings by Bassett et al. (2005) in the UK, where 87 percent of 340 participants mentioned having derived satisfaction from their work. Even after the many dissatisfactions that the UK paraeducators voiced, the participants claimed they were enthusiastic and committed to their jobs.

Forty-three percent of the respondents in this study reported appreciating having good teachers who trusted the paraeducators to use common sense. To date the literature has not addressed this point. However, it may coincide with other factors such as the

paraeducator's years of experience and training levels, as well as the numbers of years spent working with the same teacher. As Carroll (2001) reported, "Paraeducators working independently with students will undoubtedly encounter situations for which they are not prepared, and will have to use their best judgment and skills to assist students in these situations" (p. 62). Although paraeducators may have to make on-the-spot decisions about many situations, they need to seek guidance from the teacher when they feel unsure.

Another 43 percent believed that they were not adequately trained to meet their students' needs. This perception has been reported throughout the literature. For example, Winzer (2005) pointed out that there are untrained paraeducators who unable to work adequately with many students. As well, items number 42 to 46 of Alberta's Commission on Learning's *Report and Recommendations* document (2003) address the need for appropriate training for paraeducators and teachers so that the needs of all children are adequately met.

Forty-three percent of the participants reported perceptions of teachers being too busy to provide resources for them. The ATA (2005a) clearly states that it is the teacher's responsibility to provide resources for paraeducators, regardless of workload. Some teaching staff may need to prioritize their teaching duties. Giangreco and Doyle (2002) report that it is becoming increasingly difficult to attract and retain paraeducators because too many "have been, and continue to be, inadequately appreciated, compensated, oriented, trained, and supervised" (p. 1).

Wallace et al. (2001) reported that paraeducators often feel they are provided with very little direction. Thirty-six percent of the paraeducators in this study reported that

teachers are unwilling to provide understanding. As Winzer (2005) stated, “Paraeducators often operate in isolation, take on full responsibility for a child’s daily academic needs, and are given relative autonomy to make curricular and instructional decisions” (p. 117). When a paraeducator works in this situation and experiences a lack of communication from the teacher, frustration and inadequate programming are likely to result.

Thirty-six percent reported feeling that their level of education should determine the amount of pay. Paraeducators’ perceptions about this issue have been reported throughout the literature. In a study by Bassett et al. (2005), 25 percent of the paraeducators believed that their salary should match their qualifications, experience, and responsibilities. One participant in the study reported, “I would like to see an end to the two-tier system of support staff. Qualified and unqualified both doing the same job but with a huge difference in salary!” (p. 185). Giangreco et al. (2001) pointed out that this problem is not easily overcome, because school districts hiring a paraeducator who was not a skilled educator would not have to pay as much as they would for a teacher. While sympathizing with the paraeducators’ pay versus qualifications dilemma, Winzer (2005) asks, “How can schools compensate such people for their skills within current fiscal restraints?” (p. 116).

Another 36 percent of these paraeducators reported that teachers treat them with respect. This statement is also supported by the literature. In a study from Alberta (Winzer et al., 2003), many teachers mentioned the respect they had for the insights their paraeducators had to offer. As well, Bassett et al. (2005) reported that, when giving credit to having a good relationship with the teacher, 30 percent of the paraeducators used such terms as “being treated with respect,” “being valued,” and “being appreciated” for the

their work. In a study by Riggs (2004), the number one item that paraeducators wanted teachers to know was that teachers must take the time to get to know their paraeducator's name, background, and interests. Clearly this would foster a feeling of respect on the part of the paraeducator.

Thirty-six percent reported that teachers are unaware of paraeducators' roles and responsibilities. The literature supports this perception. Discussing the recent increase in Scottish paraeducators, Bassett et al. (2005) noted that the boundaries between the teacher's role and the paraeducator's role were sometimes unclear, and some paraeducators were judged to have overstepped the line into teaching. Also, citing French and Pickett (1997), Riggs (2004) suggested, "Although paraeducators and teachers may often assume similar roles, schools and districts should clearly articulate the differences between paraeducator and teacher responsibilities" (p. 10). As mentioned earlier, the ATA (2005a) clearly supports this point, stating that both the paraeducator and the teacher are responsible for keeping up-to-date on all school, district, and provincial policies, as well as being accountable for adhering to them.

Being finally able to receive their pay over a 12-month distribution period, as opposed to the former 10-month period, was seen as positive by 36 percent of the participants. Since this issue is not addressed anywhere in the literature, it may be perceived as an issue only by the paraeducators who volunteered their time for this study.

Thirty-six percent of the participants reported feeling underappreciated for their overall efforts and feeling as though they are not treated as equals from the staff. Support for both perceptions is extensive throughout the current literature. Paraeducators have reported feeling unappreciated and undervalued for the work they do that so often leaves

them isolated and with very little direction (Wallace et al., 2001). Isolation and lack of direction are bound to leave some paraeducators feeling unsure of themselves, their efforts, and their standing amongst the staff. Sometimes it is simply the unknown that can create these feelings. As stated earlier, Coombs (1999) reported that if two people who are engaged in a relationship together are vague with each other, they will discover that their unspoken expectations don't match those of others and the resulting conflict is usually a source of problems. Giangreco and Doyle (2002) also noted that it is becoming increasingly difficult to attract and retain paraeducators because too many "have been, and continue to be, inadequately appreciated, compensated, oriented, trained, and supervised" (p. 1). Furthermore, citing Mueller (1999), Riggs (2004) also agreed with this statement: "The job satisfaction and retention of paraeducators are clearly linked to the presence or absence of mutual respect and recognition for their contributions to the educational community" (p. 11). From this same study regarding what paraeducators want teachers to know (Riggs, 2004), four out of the top ten major themes dealt with paraeducators wanting to be treated with respect and with equality. These paraeducators also commented that they feel overlooked in the school community and that staff relationships are not characterized by mutual respect.

Of the participants who participated in this study, 29 percent appreciated being invited to staff and Professional Learning Communities (PLC) meetings. Not only did this help to keep them informed as to what was happening throughout the school, but it also made them feel as if they were part of the team. Much support for this position can be found throughout the literature. When discussing reasons for feeling happy with their job, in Bassett et al. (2005), paraeducators expressed how being included in school

activities made them feel as if they were part of the team. This same study suggested that the standing and status of paraeducators are reflected in such customs as admission to staffrooms and meetings; however, this is one area in which our education system is lagging far behind.

Twenty-nine percent of the respondents appreciated that all of their planning was provided for them every day. This helped to eliminate many possible frustrations. Although current research does not reference other paraeducators' views regarding this issue, the Alberta Teachers' Association (2005a) clearly states that planning is a teacher's responsibility.

Twenty-nine percent of the participants reported feeling that teachers are not educated enough to work with students with exceptional needs. Edmunds (1999) also pointed out that teachers felt this way when having to meet the complex needs of some children. He commented that many teachers "feel that the required training and support mechanisms are not being provided" (p. 29). Similarly, Winzer et al. (2003) stated that many teachers disagree with the lack of professional training available. Regarding meeting the complex needs of some students, Winzer (2006) reported, "If teachers feel they cannot address the needs of such students, then they may not feel that they should orient their time toward them" (p. 17). In addition, items 42 to 46 of the *Report and Recommendations* document by Alberta's Commission on Learning (2003) address the need for appropriate training for paraeducators and teachers so that the needs of all children can be adequately met. It would seem that this perception is widespread. One Alberta teacher underscored the importance surrounding this issue: "Students deserve a

qualified teacher who can plan a program, deliver it and make modifications when required before evaluating the learning in a professional manner” (ATA, 2002a, p. 15).

Another 29 percent of the respondents in this study believe that teachers show a lack of respect for paraeducators. The literature supports this finding. Riggs (2004), citing Mueller (1999), agreed: “The job satisfaction and retention of paraeducators are clearly linked to the presence or absence of mutual respect and recognition for their contributions to the educational community” (p. 11). One paraeducator who participated in a survey by Bassett et al. (2005) reported that she believed that teachers look down on TAs (Teaching Assistants). A second paraeducator commented that, while she willingly gives her own time to performing extra duties after her paid hours, she really gets annoyed when some teachers just expect her to donate that unpaid time. Another paraeducator in London stated, “How degrading it is to be called non-teaching staff, like cleaners and caretakers, while we teach all day long” (p. 184). And in the study by Riggs (2004), four out of the top ten major themes dealt with paraeducators wanting to be treated with respect and with equality. Riggs also noted that these employees’ relationships with teachers were not characterized by mutual respect.

Finally, 29 percent of the participants reported that they do not understand how to work with the behaviours of some students. Marlowe (2001) writes, “All too often, the most highly trained special educators wallow in a sea of paperwork while well meaning, but under-trained (and underpaid) paraprofessionals, volunteer grandmothers, and special education aides provide direct service to the nation's neediest students” (p. 14). The Alberta Teachers’ Association (2005a) states the following:

School Boards that assign teachers' assistants to tasks for which they are not adequately trained or unqualified not only place students in danger but risk being sued for malpractice on the grounds that students are being denied the right to be taught by qualified personnel. (p. 4)

If teachers and school boards are going to continue to put paraeducators in roles where they are working with one or more behaviour students, then they need to equip these paraeducators with the skills and knowledge they require to feel comfortable and capable to handle students' often difficult behaviours. Morgan and Ashbaker (2001) argued that the teacher must ensure that paraeducators are adhering to the same behaviour management techniques as the teacher, because these students need consistency. Clearly too the techniques must be professional in nature.

Recommendations for Improved Support and Implications for Practice

The second question presented to the paraeducators was this: How could teachers and/or schools help you to do your job better? The majority of the participants' responses to this question are discussed below, along with implications for practice.

Not addressed by the literature, although 71 percent of these participants agreed with it, was paraeducators' desire for teachers to be more flexible. This may only be considered an issue by the paraeducators who took part in this study. Since they did not explain what they mean by "flexible," it is difficult to comment on any implications for practice.

Sixty-four percent of the participants wanted the opportunity to receive training through credited courses. Although the issue of level of training versus rate of pay is discussed throughout the literature, this issue specifically has not been explored. Nor has

the issue surrounding paraeducators' desire (50 percent) to receive training provided by schools. A large number of paraeducators reported on needing more training, but they did not discuss what that training would look like. For a paraeducator to receive credit for completed course work would indirectly benefit all those affected by his or her efforts; however, the problem is not easily overcome that this type of training should qualify the paraeducator for increased pay. School budgets are extremely limited, and hiring paraeducators is seen as way to offer an inexpensive means of support. It would seem less costly for school boards to offer in-school training for these employees, but training that would not result in pay increases. If paraeducators were allowed input about what types of training they want, then they would likely see the provision of such training as positive support on the part of the schools.

Fifty-seven percent of these participants commented on their desire for a job description stating their rights, roles, and responsibilities. Although this form of support has not been directly addressed in the current literature, there have been many reports of paraeducators' lack of understanding about their jobs. Most paraeducators would likely welcome being provided with this description of their jobs. The ATA has created documents that would support this need, and some schools have placed these documents in staffrooms for paraeducators and teachers to access; however, this is not enough. Most staff members would likely report that they did not even know they were there. These documents need to be discussed thoroughly with all staff members. If the rights, roles, and responsibilities of paraeducators were explained to all staff in this manner, then everyone would be clear regarding the job descriptions of paraeducators. Clarity could eliminate many problems.

When taking on the role of the primary caregiver of a child, 43 percent of these participants believed that they should be able to communicate with parents regarding the performance of that child. The ATA (2005a) stated that reporting both formally and informally to the parents of a child is the teacher's responsibility. Although some paraeducators may feel the need to communicate with parents, this cannot be permitted. If teachers solicited regular feedback regarding a child's performance from the paraeducator, perhaps this feeling would begin to diminish.

Thirty-six percent of respondents commented on the benefits of being assigned to work with the same teacher over an extended period of time. Assuming that this was a good working relationship, then the literature would also support this finding. Bassett et al.'s (2005) asked paraeducators what support could be offered that would help to improve their job satisfaction; the second most popular answer, with about 20 percent of the responses, addressed the desire to work in only one single class. The implications for this practice seem beneficial for both the teacher and the paraeducator. Their understanding of the way each other operates would likely eliminate many uncertainties that might otherwise exist. However, the effectiveness of this relationship in terms of meeting the needs of the students would have to be monitored. Due to school dynamics, this could not always be possible.

Thirty-six percent reported their desire to receive feedback and to have performance evaluations. This perception is supported in the current literature. Causton-Theoharis and Malmgren (2005) stated, "It is important to acknowledge that paraprofessionals do not carry out their duties without supervision. General and specific education teachers play an important role in directing and sharing information and

feedback with paraprofessionals” (p. 20). When Bassett et al. (2005) asked paraeducators if there was anything that would help improve their job satisfaction, 17 percent reported the need for planning and feedback time with the teacher. Ongoing feedback would be beneficial for the students with whom the paraeducator works, so that the teacher and the paraeducator can both be certain that the child’s programming is meeting his or her needs. If not, then modifications can be made. This would also help to eliminate many uncertainties concerning whether the paraeducator is implementing the teacher’s plans in the expected manner. Students would benefit from this feedback as well, because their programming would be closely monitored and assessed, and thus would also be more likely to meet their needs. Ongoing performance evaluations of paraeducators would also be of benefit. The paraeducators would not only receive the feedback they desire with regards to how the teachers view their performance on the job, but also it would provide them with suggestions for ways to improve that performance. Both would be seen as positive support.

Thirty-six percent reported having difficulties receiving general school information. Because of this, they suggested that an information package regarding school matters be distributed to new paraeducators. As well, they suggested that new paraeducators be assigned to a mentor, an idea not suggested by other paraeducators in the literature. The implications of such support would be many. Obviously, new employees who receive this information package would not be left feeling in the dark with regards to the many school matters that long-time employees may take for granted. Assigning a new paraeducator to a mentoring paraeducator who has been working within that school for several years would not only help to develop another relationship with a

staff member that he or she may not directly work with, but could also offer support that might not otherwise occur due to busy schedules and the like.

Closely related to the issue regarding the need for feedback and performance evaluations, and yet not directly supported by the literature, was the paraeducators' desire, expressed by 29 percent, for goal setting and follow-up sessions. Nothing negative can come from setting goals and following up on those goals; however, in a classroom where time is already limited, this is one more area that would require time, however beneficial.

In addition, 29 percent believed it would be beneficial to them to receive time off for attending Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). One participant had been granted this time trade, and the others saw this as a potential benefit. In Bassett et al. (2005), paraeducators reported that at times they were not allowed admission into meetings. Otherwise, nothing in the literature supports this finding; consequently, this desire for support would seem of importance only to the paraeducators in this study. This 'time in lieu' concept has implications. Allowing paraeducators to participate in school PLC meetings may be a means of providing necessary support to these employees; using time off as an incentive for participation makes attendance more attractive for many. Issues related to covering these paraeducators for the time they would be granted off would have to be addressed.

Twenty-nine percent of the participants in this study commented that having access to the coded students' records would be helpful in order to obtain information that would assist them in working closely with these students on a regular basis. The teacher

should access these sources ahead of time and pass on the relevant information for the paraeducator's use, as this is clearly an area where privacy issues prevail.

Largely supported by the literature was paraeducators' need for discussion time with the teacher. Twenty-nine percent of the paraeducators commented on this issue. The ATA (2005a) agrees that this is an essential part of the teacher/paraeducator relationship when it states that both should schedule time for program-planning meetings to discuss student abilities as well as educational and emotional goals, and to clarify expectations for student discipline and classroom rules. Of the ATA's five recommendations, number one is that teachers should ensure that time is set aside to meet with paraeducators on a regular basis. Numbers two and three have to do with teachers being able to establish effective lines of communication with their paraeducators and keeping them informed about school directives and activities. All of these require scheduled meeting time. This is essential support for schools to provide, for the benefit of not only the paraeducators and teachers, but also the students. Such time needs to be timetabled and hence managed by administration. Put in place, such scheduled time would be considered enormous support on the part of the schools.

Another 29 percent reported the importance of using Professional Development funding that is available to paraeducators. They also stated that they are often denied leave and are thus unable to attend this type of training. Bassett et al. (2005) noted that there was a high turnover rate for paraeducators, due to job dissatisfaction over their lack of career development opportunities. Having access to funding for training is good; being denied leave to attend this training is unacceptable.

Finally, 20 percent of the participants commented that granting of personal days is necessary. They reported not only being asked why they needed these personal days, but also being denied the right to take them due to the unwillingness of administration to provide coverage for them. This problem is not addressed in the literature and may only be relevant to the participants in this study. However, this is a moral issue. The one or two personal days that a paraeducator may require in the course of the year should not be questioned or denied. Administrators need to understand this problem.

Limitations of the Study

The greatest limitation of this study may be the fact that this area has only recently begun to be studied; thus the research available is limited. However, it was for this reason that the researcher chose to use focus groups, in order to obtain perspectives from the paraeducators who work in our schools every day. Therefore, much of the research is newly created and provides a snapshot of the present time rather than a historical account.

Due to the difficulty in getting paraeducators to volunteer their time for this study, a limited number of participants were involved. More participants would have provided more responses; however, as Anderson and Arsenault (1998) point out that, “In most situations, the first two groups give considerable new information. Thereafter, the new insights rapidly diminish” (p. 202). Three focus groups were interviewed; however, it is impossible to know whether the responses from these participants were exhaustive.

One other limitation is that the sample of paraeducators was taken from only one Alberta school division. Several Alberta school jurisdictions should be represented in order for the study to yield more reliable data. As well, this study was limited to

paraeducators' views and opinions. If teachers' perceptions of paraeducators' roles were included, a more complete picture could be developed.

Using focus groups as the method for obtaining data for this study resulted in a unique picture of the current perceptions of the paraeducators who participated in this study. However, it did not portray how all participants felt about each issue. Direct and specific questioning of these paraeducators would provide a more detailed description of how they feel in terms of each question. The focus group method meant that the discussions commented only on particular issues; however, it also allowed the participants to discuss certain topics that the researcher might not have addressed.

Finally, having more people take part in the data analysis would bring increased validity to this study. Although one non-participant observer helped to analyze the data, it would have been better if another one or two people could have performed this task.

In conclusion, many of the perceptions reported by these paraeducators were supported in the literature. However, some comments were also unique to the jurisdiction studied. Although there are positive implications in these data for modifying the way in which teachers work alongside their paraeducators, some suggestions cannot be implemented in the best interests of our education system. At the very least, schools should discuss the roles, rights, and responsibilities of paraeducators openly and often, and they should celebrate the contributions that these employees make.

Chapter 6. Recommendations

After analyzing the commonalities and differences between the perceptions of the paraeducators in this study about their roles, rights, and responsibilities and those discussed in the literature, this chapter offers the researcher's recommendations for the conditions that need to be met to provide paraeducators in Alberta schools with the greatest opportunities to experience success and happiness on the job. These recommendations revolve around what is best for students, classrooms, and all personnel.

The most important recommendation is that schools provide scheduled time for teachers and paraeducators to attend team meetings. During this time, they should discuss such matters as a child's programming needs, progress reports, and instructions for implementing plans. The teachers should provide the paraeducators with feedback, encouragement and support. Many of the paraeducators' frustrations are closely linked to a lack of communication; part of the reason for this is the busy, hectic schedules of school employees. In addition, team meetings should also be held each month so that everyone at the school who is involved with the programming for a particular student can meet and discuss that child's progress. The support of administration in providing time for these meetings would be invaluable for not only the teacher/paraeducator relationship, but also for the students, whose lives would be directly affected by the interactions between certain teachers and their paraeducators.

It would also be helpful for the paraeducator and the teacher to have an agenda or white-board spot where they can write down information that cannot be discussed until later, due to the demands of work. If this is done, important issues will be remembered and attended to.

Daily, friendly conversations should take place between the teachers and their paraeducators. When people take an interest in each other's life, respect begins to develop. While some times may require an empathic or sympathetic response, other times will call for celebration. Paraeducators want to be respected by their colleagues and to be supported for their efforts. In order for them to feel this way, teachers must develop a relationship built around understanding, patience, and tolerance.

Paraeducator support should also involve professional development, although educators must be careful here. Professional development needs to be ongoing, rather than the one-shot workshop, so that participants can move from mere awareness to acquisition of knowledge and skills. Also, time must be given for employees to take part in this type of training. Internal and/or external coverage could be offered, or if these paraeducators are assigned to one student, the child's parents could be asked to keep the child at home on that day. Few parents are likely to see a problem with doing so, when they realize that the training will help the paraeducator to work with their child.

While the desire to receive credited training is prevalent among the paraeducators in this study, the literature warns that, under current fiscal restraints, using such instruction as a route to pay increases is not really an option. Although the researcher realizes that this is a contractual issue between the board and its paraeducators, two suggestions come to mind. First, we need trained paraeducators in our schools; not many people would argue this point. Thus, a slight increase in pay should be offered to paraeducators as an incentive to acquire a certain level of credited course work (perhaps one year); however, anything beyond this level would not result in an increase in pay. Secondly, money should be budgeted for in-school training for paraeducators. Although

this instruction would not be for credit or affect pay scales, if the paraeducators themselves perceived a need for a particular type of training, then instruction should be offered. If the training is something that could also benefit teachers, it could be paid for with the school professional development money that is allotted for teachers.

One type of training that many of the paraeducators from this study reported needing was knowledge about working with the difficult behaviours of some students. Training in this jurisdiction should address this need as soon as possible. If they were to inquire, this jurisdiction may find that this is also an area in which teachers also perceive a need for additional support.

In addition, attendance at school professional development activities that take place during unpaid time should be offered to these employees as “time-in-lieu”; paraeducators should be able to take off this time spent in the meeting during their regular paid time. Once again, with the support of administration, coverage for these paraeducators could be managed in various ways.

Many paraeducators have addressed the need for general school information and for a document that describes their roles, rights, and responsibilities. Consequently, I believe that schools should have a “new employee” package that details the school’s directives, policies, and activities. Not only should every school employee have a copy of the document *Teachers and Teachers’ Assistants: Roles and Responsibilities*, published by the ATA (2005), but this document should be discussed at school meetings and its directives closely followed. It isn’t enough for schools merely to provide a copy on the back shelf in the staffroom.

Each new paraeducator should also be assigned to a mentoring paraeducator on staff, to whom the new employee can turn to at any time, for any reason. This would allow these employees ongoing access to the information they need, however important or unimportant. The mentoring paraeducator should be someone who has worked within that individual school for a significant length of time and who is seen as an approachable, helpful person.

In addition, Alberta should develop a standard set of qualifications for hiring paraeducators within its schools. This would help to eliminate any existing inequalities that can currently be found from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, as well as any confusion that results because of these inequalities.

If Alberta can achieve these goals, the prospects at the classroom level for teachers and particularly students will improve. As vital supports in contemporary schools, paraeducators deserve as much support as possible. Supporting paraeducators is a matter of necessity, but also of common sense.

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Appendix A. Participant (School Division) Consent Form

One Education Landscape: A Study of the Roles and Perceptions of Paraeducators

Your school division is being invited to participate in a study entitled One Education Landscape: A study of the roles and perceptions of Paraeducators that is being conducted by me, Darlene Grahn. I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge and I may be contacted, if any questions arise, at my home at 378-3526, or via e-mail at darlene.grahn@uleth.ca.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a Master's degree in Education. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Margret Winzer. She may be contacted at anytime by phoning (403) 329-2461.

The purpose of this research project is to obtain data regarding the actual roles and responsibilities of paraeducators in southern Alberta schools, and to develop a deeper understanding for their concerns with regards to training and challenges. After analyzing the commonalities and differences between the actual duties and those stated by the Alberta Teachers' Association and Alberta Learning, I intend to put forth my recommendations of what conditions need to be met to provide paraeducators in southern Alberta schools with the greatest opportunities to experience success and happiness on the job. These recommendations will revolve around what is best for the students.

Very little research exists in this area, and even less pertaining directly to Alberta schools. Due to the increasing numbers of paraeducators working within our schools, it is imperative that we develop a deeper understanding of their roles and responsibilities, and to make sure that there are effective support systems in place. The Ontario Council for Exceptional Children (1997) recommended that all school boards develop clear, written role descriptions for educational assistants that recognize their functions as professional members of the school team. I applaud their efforts but would challenge Alberta to go one step further. The province needs to enact legislation that all Alberta schools operate under the same guidelines with regards to paraeducators. We need to have the same protocol for all jurisdictions to eliminate confusion and inequities. Our children deserve the best education system that we can offer; thus, all of our efforts are important because each of us can make a difference. This is why it is imperative that we understand the role of our paraeducators in much greater depth.

Your school division is being asked to participate in this study because I have worked within this same school jurisdiction throughout my teaching career. My experiences have inspired my passion for this topic.

If your school division agrees to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include consent for the researcher to obtain records with regards to the names and job locations of your current paraeducators, as well as, the numbers of paraeducators working within both the rural and urban school settings over the past several years, and the levels of training and experience these paraeducators have had, as this information

may have some influence on the findings. Twenty paraeducators will be selected and divided into five groups, and each group will meet only once to partake in our focus group discussions. They will be expected to respond to two key questions and to discuss each question for approximately fifteen minutes within each small group setting. All participants must sign a similar consent form to participate in the study.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to school division staff as they will have to be contacted to access school personnel records. Be assured that this inconvenience will be kept to an absolute minimum. As well, getting paraeducators to volunteer their travel and meeting time for my study may be considered by some as an inconvenience. By letting each participant know in the invitation letter that this discussion will take no longer than forty-five minutes in length, I am hoping their interest within this area will outweigh the time and travel factors. Also, in case anyone feels that if their identity becomes known by their administration their job security may become at risk, or if the school division sees this as negative portrayal of them, both will be assured that the tape recordings from our discussions will be destroyed. Furthermore, all participants and the school division will be given pseudonyms and will only be referred to by this name, and the stories they provide will be retold so that their true identities remain concealed. All names, locations, and any other identifying information will not be included in any discussions of the results. And finally, both will also be informed that they have the right to withdraw from this study at any time without pressure or prejudice.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include an opportunity for paraeducators to reflect on their own profession and to see the benefits of their employment. I will explain to my participants that by informing me about how they perceive their job duties and their responsibilities, I hope to put forth recommendations that will help our educational system better comprehend what challenges paraeducators deal with, and to find better ways to offer support to these employees. In doing this, our school system as a whole should benefit as we could function more efficiently and be more focused on overcoming potential problems that exist; thus, making a better working environment for all, and more importantly, a better learning environment for the children.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If your school division decides to participate, it may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If it does withdraw from this study, your data will not be used unless your school division gives me additional permission to do so.

The researcher may have a relationship to potential participants as she is a teacher. To help prevent this relationship from influencing your decision to participate, the following steps to prevent coercion have been taken. I am using paraeducators as the participants in my study and I am a teacher, but no paraeducator that works with me at any time throughout this process, will be used as a participant in my study. I have a sentence on the consent form for the paraeducators that participate in my study that reads, 'I do not work as a paraeducator for Darlene Grahn at the present, and nor do I expect to be working with her for the duration of this school year.' Each participant will have to agree with this statement before he/she signs the consent form.

The data collected will be retained, analyzed, and published in my thesis. Thus, the data collected will be retained forever, with the exception of the tape recordings, which will be destroyed after being transcribed. The participants' anonymity in completing the focus group discussions will be preserved and nobody will have a record of any individual's responses. The data may also be shared with the public, including the school division. Also, this data will be made available for publication should anyone be interested in this research paper.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others. Specifically, the final thesis will include my findings. Once completed and approved, the thesis will be published. The findings may also be presented at scholarly meetings, published in journals, and published on the internet. The final document and the agreement to participate will also mean an agreement to disseminate the findings to the various sources indicated. A copy of this thesis will be available at the University of Lethbridge library and at the National Library in Ottawa.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and the supervisor at the above phone numbers, your school division may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns that it may have, by contacting the Chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee, Dr. Rick Mrazek, at the University of Lethbridge (403) 329-2425.

One other individual that may be contacted regarding this study is Kelli Christensen. Kelli is also a teacher in this same school division and has volunteered to transcribe the focus group meeting discussions. I will train Kelli how to transcribe the interactions of the group. Such things as group dynamics, voice levels, and whether or not participants are being led by others or answering for themselves will be observed and recorded. As well, after I transcribe the taped conversations from each group, I will teach Kelli how to pull out themes and how to code specific responses, so as to increase the validity of this study. We will each complete the analyzing of this data separately, and then I will compare both at a later date. Kelli will also sign a consent form ensuring her confidentiality. She can be reached through her e-mail address, at kelli.christensen@grasslands.ab.ca.

Your signature below indicates that your school division understands the above conditions of participation in this study and that it has had the opportunity to have its questions answered by the researchers.

Name of Participant	Signature	Date

A copy of this consent will be left with your school division, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Appendix B. Participant (Paraeducator) Consent Form

One Education Landscape: A Study of the Roles and Perceptions of Paraeducators

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As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a Master's degree in Education. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Margret Winzer. You may contact my supervisor at (403) 329-2461.

The purpose of this research project is to obtain data regarding the actual roles and responsibilities of paraeducators in southern Alberta schools, and to develop a deeper understanding for their concerns with regards to training and challenges. After analyzing the commonalities and differences between the actual duties and those stated by the Alberta Teachers' Association and Alberta Learning, I intend to put forth my recommendations of what conditions need to be met to provide paraeducators in southern Alberta schools with the greatest opportunities to experience success and happiness on the job. These recommendations will revolve around what is best for the students.

Very little research exists in this area, and even less pertaining directly to Alberta schools. Due to the increasing numbers of paraeducators working within our schools, it is imperative that we develop a deeper understanding of their roles and responsibilities, and to make sure that there are effective support systems in place. The Ontario Council for Exceptional Children (1997) recommended that all school boards develop clear, written role descriptions for educational assistants that recognize their functions as professional members of the school team. I applaud their efforts but would challenge Alberta to go one step further. The province needs to enact legislation that all Alberta schools operate under the same guidelines with regards to paraeducators. We need to have the same protocol for all jurisdictions to eliminate confusion and inequities. Our children deserve the best education system that we can offer; thus, all of our efforts are important because each of us can make a difference. This is why it is imperative that we understand the role of our paraeducators in much greater depth.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a paraeducator working within the Division One setting of this school division. By selecting an equal balance of paraeducators from both rural and urban schools, I hope to develop a deeper understanding of how you perceive your job to be. By developing a clearer understanding of what types of challenges confront you, I hope to be able to recommend some solutions that would help overcome these obstacles.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include consent for the researcher to involve you in one focus group discussion. You will be

expected to respond to two key questions and to discuss each question for approximately fifteen minutes within each small group setting. There will be five focus groups with four paraeducators in each group. All participants must sign a consent form to participate in the study.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you in that you will have to volunteer about forty-five minutes of your time for my study, and that we will have to meet at a central location in Brooks. I am hoping your interest within this area will outweigh the time and travel factors. Also, in case you feel that if your identity becomes known by your administration your job security may become at risk, be assured that the tape recordings from our discussions will be destroyed. Furthermore, you will be given a pseudonym and will only be referred to by this name, and the stories you provide will be retold so that their true identities remain concealed. All names, locations, and any other identifying information will not be included in any discussions of the results. And finally, both will also be informed that they have the right to withdraw from this study at any time without pressure or prejudice.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include an opportunity for you to reflect upon your own profession and to see the benefits of your employment. By informing me about your job perceptions, I hope to put forth recommendations that will help our educational system better comprehend what challenges paraeducators deal with, and to find better ways to offer support to these employees. In doing this, our school system as a whole should benefit as we could function more efficiently and be more focused on overcoming potential problems that exist; thus, making a better working environment for all, and more importantly, a better learning environment for the children.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will not be used unless you give me additional permission to do so.

The researcher may have a relationship to potential participants as she is a teacher of one of these schools. By consenting to be a part of this study, you must also be in agreement that you do not work as a paraeducator for Darlene Grahn at the present, and nor do you expect to be working with her for the duration of this school year.

The data collected will be retained, analyzed, and published in my thesis. Thus, the data collected will be retained forever, with the exception of the tape recordings, which will be destroyed after being transcribed. The participants' anonymity in completing the focus group discussions will be preserved and nobody will have a record of any individual's responses. The data may also be shared with the public including the school division. Also, this data will be made available for publication should anyone be interested in this research paper.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others. Specifically, the final thesis will include my findings from the focus group discussions. Once completed

and approved, the thesis will be published. The findings may also be presented at scholarly meetings, published in journals, and published on the internet. The final document and the agreement to participate will also mean an agreement to disseminate the findings to the various sources indicated. A copy of this thesis will be available at the University of Lethbridge library and at the National Library in Ottawa.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and the supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee, Dr. Rick Mrazek, at the University of Lethbridge (403) 329-2425.

One other individual that may be contacted regarding this study is Kelli Christensen. Kelli is also a teacher in this same school division and has volunteered to transcribe the focus group meeting discussions. Kelli can be reached through her e-mail address, at kelli.christensen@grasslands.ab.ca.

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

Name of Participant	Signature	Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Appendix C. Participant (Transcriber) Consent Form

One Education Landscape: A study of the roles and perceptions of Paraeducators

You have been invited to participate in a study entitled One Education Landscape: A study of the roles and perceptions of Paraeducators that is being conducted by me, Darlene Grahn. I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge and I may be contacted, if any questions arise, at my home at 378-3526, or via e-mail at darlene.grahn@uleth.ca.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a Master's degree in Education. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Margret Winzer. She may be contacted at anytime by phoning (403) 329-2461.

The purpose of this research project is to obtain data regarding the actual roles and responsibilities of paraeducators in southern Alberta schools, and to develop a deeper understanding for their concerns with regards to training and challenges. After analyzing the commonalities and differences between the actual duties and those stated by the Alberta Teachers' Association and Alberta Learning, I intend to put forth my recommendations of what conditions need to be met to provide paraeducators in southern Alberta schools with the greatest opportunities to experience success and happiness on the job. These recommendations will revolve around what is best for the students.

Very little research exists in this area, and even less pertaining directly to Alberta schools. Due to the increasing numbers of paraeducators working within our schools, it is imperative that we develop a deeper understanding of their roles and responsibilities, and to make sure that there are effective support systems in place. The Ontario Council for Exceptional Children (1997) recommended that all school boards develop clear, written role descriptions for educational assistants that recognize their functions as professional members of the school team. I applaud their efforts but would challenge Alberta to go one step further. The province needs to enact legislation that all Alberta schools operate under the same guidelines with regards to paraeducators. We need to have the same protocol for all jurisdictions to eliminate confusion and inequities. Our children deserve the best education system that we can offer; thus, all of our efforts are important because each of us can make a difference. This is why it is imperative that we understand the role of our paraeducators in much greater depth.

You have been asked to participate in this study, so that I can benefit by having an additional transcriber present during the focus group discussions. Your purpose will be to write down your observations. Such things as group dynamics, voice levels, conversational direction, and the like will be noted. Immediately following these discussions, we will meet to discuss our findings in greater depth. Later, in order to increase the validity of this study, I will consult you again to further clarify and/ or discuss your observations and understandings of this meeting, as well as, to assist me by pulling out themes and by coding specific responses.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you as you will be volunteering your time, but be assured that this inconvenience will be kept to an absolute minimum. In addition to the time given from you to transcribe this meeting and for further discussions with me, your travel time for my study may also be an inconvenience.

Twenty paraeducators will be selected and divided into five groups, and each group will meet only once to partake in our focus group discussions. They will be expected to respond to two key questions and to discuss each question for approximately fifteen minutes within each small group setting. All participants must sign a similar consent form to participate in the study.

Each participant will be informed in their invitation letter that this discussion will take no longer than forty-five minutes in length. Also, in case anyone feels that if their identity becomes known by their administration their job security may become at risk, or if the school division sees this as negative portrayal of them, both will be assured that the tape recordings from our discussions will be destroyed. Furthermore, all participants and the school division will be given pseudonyms and will only be referred to by this name, and the stories they provide will be retold so that their true identities remain concealed. All names, locations, and any other identifying information will not be included in any discussions of the results. And finally, both will also be informed that they have the right to withdraw from this study at any time without pressure or prejudice.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include an opportunity for paraeducators to reflect on their own profession and to see the benefits of their employment. I will explain to my participants that by informing me about how they perceive their job duties and their responsibilities, I hope to put forth recommendations that will help our educational system better comprehend what challenges paraeducators deal with, and to find better ways to offer support to these employees. In doing this, our school system as a whole should benefit as we could function more efficiently and be more focused on overcoming potential problems that exist; thus, making a better working environment for all, and more importantly, a better learning environment for the children.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from this study, your data will not be used unless you give me additional permission to do so. By giving your consent to participate, you must also agree to keep all of the information that comes from these discussions confidential, and you may never discuss the names of the people who participated with anyone other than me. All of the participants' identities must remain concealed, and their stories must be unidentifiable.

The data collected will be retained, analyzed, and published in my thesis. Thus, the data collected will be retained forever, with the exception of the tape recordings, which will be destroyed after being transcribed. The participants' anonymity in completing the focus group discussions will be preserved and nobody will have a record of any individual's responses. The data may also be shared with the public, including the school division.

Also, this data will be made available for publication should anyone be interested in this research paper. If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include consent for the researcher to include your name as another researcher in this thesis.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others. Specifically, the final thesis will include my findings. Once completed and approved, the thesis will be published. The findings may also be presented at scholarly meetings, published in journals, and published on the internet. The final document and the agreement to participate will also mean an agreement to disseminate the findings to the various sources indicated. A copy of this thesis will be available at the University of Lethbridge library and at the National Library in Ottawa.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and the supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns that it may have, by contacting the Chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee, Dr. Rick Mrazek, at the University of Lethbridge (403) 329-2425.

I will train you how to transcribe the interactions of the group. Such things as group dynamics, voice levels, and whether or not participants are being led by others or answering for themselves will be observed and recorded. As well, after I transcribe the taped conversations from each group, I will teach you how to pull out themes and how to code specific responses, so as to increase the validity of this study. We will each complete the analyzing of this data separately, and then I will compare both at a later date. Again, signing this consent form will ensure your confidentiality.

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

Name of Participant	Signature	Date
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A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Paraeducator's Focus Questions:

#1: Describe the duties, responsibilities and activities that you perform at work?

#2: How could teachers and/or schools help you to do your job better?