"Developing That Balance": Preparing and Supporting Special Education Teachers to Work With Paraprofessionals

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Abstract

The prominence of paraprofessionals in the education of students with severe disabilities highlights the importance of ensuring special education teachers provide effective supervision and support. The authors conducted in-depth individual interviews with members of nine educational teams—a total of 22 teachers and paraprofessionals—to identify (a) the competencies they consider important for special education teachers to work effectively with paraprofessionals and (b) their recommendations for equipping teachers to develop these competencies. Participants identified 10 competencies addressing three areas contributing to balanced leadership: knowledge, skills, and dispositions. They also recommended eight avenues for leadership development spanning three broad pathways: university-based preparation, school/district support, and personal development. The authors' findings suggest the need to embed development of these competencies within existing training and support programs for teachers. The authors offer recommendations for future research and practice targeting teacher development in these areas.

Keywords

The number of paraprofessionals in public schools has grown exponentially over the last 50 years—from fewer than 10,000 in the 1960s to more than 400,000 presently (Pickett, 1986; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Among the most common roles of paraprofessionals is to provide support to students with severe disabilities, such as autism, intellectual disability, and multiple disabilities (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012). The quality of services students with severe disabilities receive may depend on having a positive dynamic between special education teachers and paraprofessionals. As most special education teachers are responsible for supervising one or more paraprofessionals (Carnahan, Williamson, Clarke, & Sorensen, 2009; French, 2001), these teachers must be effective both at

teaching students *and* collaborating with these staff. Indeed, the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA; 2004) mandates paraprofessionals to be supervised adequately by special education teachers. Although special education teachers regularly supervise paraprofessionals, most receive little training related to these responsibilities. Teacher education programs emphasize the work future teachers will do with students,

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sometimes at the neglect of addressing the skills also needed to lead adults (Carnahan et al., 2009; Drecktrah, 2000). Additionally, professional development provided by districts can be quite limited. As a result, many teachers feel poorly prepared to lead paraprofessionals and indicate they need more support in this area (Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, & Farmer, 2011; Mastropieri, 2001).

The growth in the number of paraprofessionals has been accompanied by increasing research attention. Most of this scholarship has addressed either the training of paraprofessionals or the appropriateness of their roles (Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010; Sharma & Salend, 2016). Less is known about the supervisory experiences of special education teachers. A few early studies identified the need for teachers to receive more training in this area. For example, Drecktrah (2000) surveyed more than 200 special educators about their work with paraprofessionals. Although 90% of respondents felt this should be a focus of teacher education programs, only approximately 10% actually received preservice training or district training related to supervision. Similarly, French (2001) found 88% of teachers depended on "real life experiences" rather than preservice training or district support to learn to work with paraprofessionals. A more recent survey by Berry et al. (2011) reported teachers identified working effectively with paraprofessionals as one of the topics they desired most for ongoing professional development.

Such studies demonstrate teachers' need for preparation and support, but little work has focused on the actual competencies teachers need. Professional standards established by national organizations do highlight some important considerations. In its initial preparation standards for special educators, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC; 2015) addresses the need to have the skills and knowledge to work well with other adults, including paraprofessionals, tutors, related-service providers, and others. Specifically, teachers are expected to "provide guidance and direction" (p. 7) and "serve as a collaborative resource"

(p. 9) to paraprofessionals; however, the standards lack specific description of what these expectations entail. Likewise, a report by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD, 1998) and training materials sponsored by the National Resource Center for Paraeducators (NRCP; Pickett, 2007) outline recommended competencies for teachers supervising paraprofessionals. These resources, however, do not address whether the identified competencies were empirically derived. In fact, few studies have given this issue empirical attention. Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, and Stahl (2001) surveyed nearly 600 administrators, teachers, and paraprofessionals about seven competency areas (i.e., communication, planning and scheduling, instructional support, modeling, public relations, training, and management). All stakeholders considered these areas to be important. Furthermore, special education teachers who reported they did not demonstrate specific competencies indicated they were not prepared adequately to do so. More recently, Lewis and McKenzie (2009) replicated this study, focusing on educators who work with students with visual impairments and affirmed the importance of these competencies.

These studies offer insight into areas that might be critical to working well with paraprofessionals, but they also indicate multiple needs for further research. First, current research has not focused on identifying pathways that might be used to equip teachers in these areas. Successfully developing training and support programs for teachers will depend not only on understanding *what* competencies teachers need, but also *how* they might be developed. Second, no studies have used interview methodology as a tool to identify competencies. Conducting in-depth, individual interviews—specifically with teachers and paraprofessionals both within and across different teams—might be especially well-suited to generating rich, detailed perspectives to identify and describe important competencies. The purpose of this study was to identify competencies teachers need to work effectively with paraprofessionals and address how they might be

prepared and supported in these areas. We invited the perspectives of special education teachers and paraprofessionals to answer the following research questions:

> **Research Question 1:** What competencies are important for special education teachers to demonstrate to work effectively with paraprofessionals?
>
> **Research Question 2:** How might teachers be prepared and supported to build these competencies to work effectively with paraprofessionals?

Method

Participants and Recruitment

We recruited participants from three diverse public-school districts serving urban, suburban, or rural communities. Using data from the school year prior to the start of the study, the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) special education paraprofessionals in each district ranged from 185 to 560 ($M = 409$). District student enrollment ranged from approximately 30,000 to 82,000. Average race/ethnicity of students ranged from 5.0% to 44.9% ($M = 22.6\%$) Black, 0.2% to 5.6% ($M = 3.3\%$) Asian American, 31.1% to 83.1% ($M = 60.2\%$) White, 5.1% to 19.6% ($M = 11.8\%$) Hispanic/Latino, and 0.4% to 4.6% ($M = 2.1\%$) Other. The percentage of students eligible for free/reduced-price meals ranged from 11.9% to 72.7% ($M = 42.3\%$). Participants worked at either public, integrated schools or community-based transition programs affiliated with public high schools.

We worked with special education coordinators to send an email to teachers and paraprofessionals with a brief description of the project, study inclusion criteria, and directions to contact the research team to learn more. As educators expressed interest in the study, we added their names to a database and encouraged them to share information about the project with other teachers or paraprofessionals. The database comprised 92 teachers and 89 paraprofessionals. We then used purposeful sampling (Maxwell, 2012) to select nine "teams" evenly distributed across the three districts and three school levels (i.e., elementary school, middle school, and high school/transition). For a team of educators to be selected, (a) the special education teacher and one or two of the paraprofessionals he or she supervised had to consent to participate, and (b) both the teacher and paraprofessionals had to work with students with severe disabilities (i.e., students who were eligible for the state's alternate assessment). We selected the first nine teams to meet these criteria; analyses indicated data saturation after these initial teams.

Twenty-two educators (i.e., nine teachers and 13 paraprofessionals) participated. Five teams consisted of a teacher and one paraprofessional; four consisted of a teacher and two paraprofessionals. Participants completed brief questionnaires addressing their demographic characteristics, professional experience, and responsibilities, with items drawn from prior studies (e.g., Carter, O'Rourke, Sisco, & Pelsue, 2009; Fisher & Pleasants, 2012). Of the 22 participants, 19 (86.4%) were female. One teacher and two paraprofessionals were male. Fifteen participants (68.2%) identified as White, and seven (31.8%) identified as Black. Among the nine teachers, five were between 18 and 29 years old, three were between 30 and 39 years old, and one was between 40 and 49 years old. Six had graduate degrees; three had bachelor's degrees. Teaching experience ranged from less than 1 year to 8 years ($M = 4.3$ years). Among the 13 paraprofessionals, five were between 30 and 39 years old, four were between 40 and 49 years old, and four were between 50 and 59 years old. Three had bachelor's degrees, five had associate's degrees, and five had high school diplomas. Classroom experience ranged from less than 1 year to 16 years ($M = 6.6$ years). All but one teacher supervised more than one paraprofessional. The responsibilities teachers reported most frequently assigning to paraprofessionals included one-to-one direct support and supporting instruction in special education settings.

Data Collection

We conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with each participant. All interviews were conducted and audio-recorded by one of two doctoral students with previous experience as special education teachers. Interviews ranged from 42 minutes to 78 minutes ($M = 60$ minutes), and participants received a US$50 gift card. We took efforts to reduce personal bias and maintain consistency by following written interview protocols, one for teachers and one for paraprofessionals (Biggs, Gilson, & Carter, 2016). We developed the interview protocols within the context of a larger project focused on paraprofessionals by reviewing existing literature, soliciting expert advice, and evaluating conceptual support for each topic. We piloted initial protocols with one teacher and one paraprofessional before recruiting participants. For both teachers and paraprofessionals, questions were organized in four sections: (a) understanding the working relationship; (b) roles and responsibilities; (c) benefits, challenges, and the perceived impact on students; and (d) ideas for increasing effectiveness. The teacher interview also included a section focused on their preparation to work with paraprofessionals. Participant responses relevant to the present article primarily came from sections on increasing effectiveness and teacher preparation to work with paraprofessionals, in which we asked teachers the following questions: (a) In what ways were you prepared to work with paraprofessionals? (b) Go back in time to when you first began working with paraprofessionals. How well prepared did you feel you were? (c) What are the most important things special education teachers need to know or skills they need to have to work effectively with paraprofessionals? (d) What do you think would be the best way to prepare preservice teachers for working with paraprofessionals? (e) What ongoing support or professional development would help you to be more effective working with paraprofessionals now? We asked paraprofessionals the following questions: (a) What are the most important things special education teachers need to know or skills they need to have to work effectively with paraprofessionals? (b) What are the teachers you work with currently doing to support you that makes you more effective? (c) What could they do to help make you more effective?

We used the protocols as a guide and employed a conversational approach that gave participants latitude to expand and comment on any topics they considered relevant. We also completed reflection sheets immediately after each interview, which involved (a) recording overall impressions from the interview, (b) noting salient themes, and (c) describing similarities and differences from interviews with other team members.

Data Analysis

We adopted a team-based approach to strengthen the trustworthiness of our analyses (Patton, 2002). The research team was comprised of the two interviewers who also served as primary coders as well as a third researcher who provided peer evaluation and critique but was not involved in the interviews. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, de-identified with pseudonyms, and imported into NVivo 10 (2012), a software program used to aid in coding and analyses. We used a constant comparison method of coding, in which existing codes were frequently compared with previous uses to ensure consistency (Strauss & Corbin, 2008).

Data analysis occurred in three stages during which we independently coded transcripts and then met for consensus. In the first stage, we scanned the full transcripts to isolate the sections of participant responses most directly relevant to our research questions. In the second stage, we independently read each transcript passage, using open coding to assign a code to a relevant participant response. Coded responses ranged from one or two sentences to several paragraphs. Whenever appropriate, we created *in vivo codes* using the participant's language. Next, we used axial coding strategies to identify themes and develop a set of code names and corresponding definitions addressing each of the two research questions. In the third stage, we revisited full transcripts

for each participant, using the framework developed in the second stage to assign a code to relevant responses both within and outside of our initially targeted interview sections. We also coded when participants explicitly linked competencies to possible avenues for teacher preparation or support and met as an entire team for peer debriefing.

We used several strategies to support the credibility and trustworthiness of the data (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Creswell, 2007). First, we analyzed data across teachers and paraprofessionals who worked with one another as well as across schools and districts. Second, we developed an audit trail to document raw data (i.e., interview dates and times, transcripts, field notes, interviewer reflection sheets) and memos from all steps of coding. Third, we reduced bias during analysis by using a team-based approach with consensus coding and by involving a third member for peer debriefing and critique.

Findings

Balanced Leadership: Teacher Competencies to Work With Paraprofessionals

We explored the competencies special education teachers and paraprofessionals identified as important for teachers to demonstrate to work effectively with paraprofessionals. Participants emphasized the importance of teachers' abilities to direct paraprofessionals by having the skill sets needed to manage effectively while demonstrating dispositions that foster collegial relationships. We selected the overarching term "balanced leadership" to describe this style of working with paraprofessionals in which teachers both (a) use supervisory knowledge and skills, and (b) have attitudes toward and interactions with paraprofessionals that build positive relationships. This term originated from participants' descriptions throughout interviews. For example, when asked what would be most useful as professional development related to working with paraprofessionals, one teacher

responded, "I think just learning how to collaborate effectively without being domineering, without being too authoritative . . . developing that balance." Participants described balanced leadership as involving three different types of competencies: (a) knowledge, (b) skills, and (c) dispositions (see Table 1).

Knowledge competencies. Teachers and paraprofessionals identified two competencies related to teachers' (a) knowledge of appropriate roles and (b) knowledge of paraprofessional backgrounds. Many participants ($n = 12$) discussed *knowledge of appropriate roles*, or understanding expectations of the roles of teachers and paraprofessionals. One teacher summarized how this knowledge helps her work in concert with her paraprofessionals, "So I think they're able to do their job well, and I'm able to do my job well, because they're doing *their* job. Their job is not to teach, my job is." When asked about the most important thing for teachers to know when working with paraprofessionals, another teacher responded, "Knowing what the school expects of the roles, or the district expects . . . What they expect the paraprofessional to do, how much they should do . . . and what we are required to do."

Several participants ($n = 7$) discussed *knowledge of paraprofessional backgrounds*, or understanding that paraprofessionals may have varied experiences and may receive little-to-no training related to supporting students with severe disabilities. For example, one paraprofessional emphasized, "To work with us, I guess you need patience, especially because we're learning and we didn't go to school for this." Participants also discussed age discrepancies between paraprofessionals and teachers, specifically when the paraprofessionals are older than the teachers. One teacher talked about the helpfulness of teachers anticipating this ahead of time.

Skill competencies. Participants identified five competencies related to teachers' abilities or skills—(a) assertive communication skills, (b) collaboration skills, (c) coaching skills, (d) organization skills, and (e) conflict

Table 1. Knowledge, Skill, and Dispositional Competencies Identified by Participating Teachers and Paraprofessionals.

Competency	Definition
Knowledge competencies	
Knowledge of appropriate roles	Understanding compliance expectations of the field, district, and school to differentiate appropriate roles for teachers and paraprofessionals
Knowledge of paraprofessional backgrounds	Understanding paraprofessionals may have varied experiences and may receive little training
Skill competencies	
Assertive communication skills	Using nonverbal and verbal communication explicitly, confidently, and respectfully
Collaboration skills	Developing cooperative relationships with paraprofessionals and incorporating their ideas in decisions and planning
Coaching skills	Mentoring paraprofessionals by recognizing individual strengths and needs, investing in them as professionals, using a personalized approach to interactions, and appreciating their efforts
Organization skills	Operating efficiently by being prepared for each day, creating appropriate schedules, establishing a clear vision, and planning steps to reach goals
Conflict management skills	Resolving conflict by making an effort to acknowledge each party's perspective and find resolution
Dispositional competencies	
Open-minded	Being willing to work cooperatively by adapting and being receptive to feedback and new ideas
Respectful	Valuing paraprofessionals and demonstrating that they are held in high regard
Personable	Being pleasant and congenial in interactions

management skills. Nearly all participants (*n* = 19) discussed the importance of teachers' *assertive communication skills*. This involved teachers using both verbal and nonverbal communication skills explicitly, confidently, and respectfully to articulate their expectations, delegate responsibilities, give constructive feedback, and share information. Participants described the need to demonstrate balance between being too passive and overly aggressive and dominant. For example, one teacher shared, "I think [teachers] need to be able to communicate clearly what they want and what they know is best for the student, without being passive when you make the communication." A paraprofessional shared a similar perspective:

> Now some of the teachers . . . they're not always clear on what they need, or what they want you to do, and then when you don't follow through

with what they assume that they've asked you to do, they become upset, when all it takes is a little bit of communication . . . making it clear that, this is my goal for the classroom, this is my plan.

Many participants (*n* = 14) discussed *collaboration skills*, which addressed the ways teachers developed cooperative relationships with paraprofessionals and involved their ideas in decisions and planning. Many paraprofessionals and teachers talked about the importance of teachers not acting solely as a "dictator," but instead including paraprofessionals in conversations about the classroom. For example, one paraprofessional shared,

> [Teachers need to] always listen to the people they work with and take their advice . . . Let that person know that they are a part of the learning of the child, that they're not, the teacher's not the only one that helps the kid, that you as the paraprofessional do too.

Half of the participants (*n* = 11) talked about *coaching skills* to mentor paraprofessionals and help them develop professionally. Participants described the importance of teachers being able to coach effectively by recognizing the individual strengths and needs of paraprofessionals, investing in them, using a personalized approach to interactions, and appreciating their efforts. For example, one paraprofessional shared,

> [A teacher] needs to be able to take advantage of the person's skills and abilities and aptitudes. I think that's what a good leader does, is surround themselves with people who have good strengths and that understand how to capitalize and put those strengths to work. They also need to understand they may have people working with them who lack some skills, and part of your job as a leader is to help those people develop those skills.

Several participants (*n* = 9) discussed *organization skills*, or teachers operating the classroom efficiently through creating appropriate schedules for students and staff, establishing a clear vision of classroom goals, and planning the steps needed to reach those goals. Several participants indicated the need for teachers to be prepared for each day to work effectively with paraprofessionals. One paraprofessional explained,

> Be prepared for your classroom. It's your classroom. Don't leave it up to me to do your lesson plans, or to come up with an activity or whatever. Suggestions, yes, but don't walk in every day and go, "Well, you all do whatever you want." That's not going to work.

Finally, several participants (*n* = 4) addressed *conflict management skills*. This involved navigating conflict with paraprofessionals by acknowledging each party's perspective and finding resolutions through compromise or creative solutions. For example, one teacher said they need "to have some kind of conflict resolution training . . . because you have so much drama and conflict that can happen. So you really need to be able to navigate that, and it's difficult."

Dispositional competencies. Participants identified three competencies related to teachers' attitudes or dispositions: (a) open-minded, (b) respectful, and (c) personable. Many teachers and paraprofessionals (*n* = 13) discussed being *open-minded*, or being willing to work cooperatively with paraprofessionals by adapting and being receptive to feedback and new ideas. For example, one paraprofessional described her teacher by saying, "I think she respects the experience that I do have, that I bring here . . . She's open to bouncing stuff off me, asks for my ideas about things." One teacher emphasized adaptability and the importance of being "laid back" in her role with paraprofessionals:

> I think that you have to take things with a grain of salt . . . If things don't go your way, you have to remember that you are in a special education classroom, you're not gonna change the world in one day.

Half of the participants (*n* = 11) discussed being *respectful* through valuing paraprofessionals as people and behaving in a way that shows teachers hold them in high regard. As one teacher advised, "Treat [paraprofessionals] with respect. Don't bite the hand that feeds you, because they are capable of doing so much." Similarly, a paraprofessional summarized,

> It goes back to respecting one another. I respect her as the teacher, and she needs to respect me as a paraprofessional and for what I do . . . Having mutual respect for one another really makes you genuinely want to come in every day and do your job, and help her be successful.

Finally, several participants (*n* = 8) talked about teachers being *personable*, or being pleasant and congenial in interactions with paraprofessionals. For example, one paraprofessional said, "They definitely need to be personable . . . You're with them every day, so they can't be stiff or standoffish, especially if you're working with somebody as much as we do together." Another paraprofessional emphasized the importance of humor in the relationship, "We joke a lot. I do like that, that

it's not so serious all the time, because we are together a lot. So I love that . . . and the kids love it too. We're like one big family."

Leadership Development: Means of Preparation and Support

We also asked how teachers might be prepared and supported to work effectively with paraprofessionals, particularly within the identified competencies. We used the term "leadership development" to refer to an overarching concept describing *how* special education teachers may develop the knowledge, skill, and dispositional competencies of balanced leadership through a combination of three avenues: (a) university-based preparation focused on working with paraprofessionals, (b) initial and ongoing training and support from their school and district, and (c) their own informal learning experiences. Table 2 displays the means of preparation and support identified within the pathways, and how these connected to specific competencies.

University-based preparation. Although participating teachers had varied university experiences, they shared the perspective that preparation to work effectively with paraprofessionals was largely overlooked in their university-based training. Participants proposed strengthening two components: focused coursework and field experience with paraprofessionals. Half of the participants ($n = 11$) discussed the importance of *focused coursework* explicitly addressing paraprofessionals. Many teachers emphasized the need for stronger instruction about paraprofessionals, sharing their own preparation was often limited and inadequate. One teacher proposed an idea of a "Paraprofessionals 101" course, saying this content is "sorely needed in curriculum for undergrad and grad students." Another teacher even used an analogy to the business world to describe the preparation teachers may need:

> I've never worked for an office company or anything like that, but I would assume that when you get promoted to assistant manager or

manager, you probably get some sort of [human resources] course on this is how you become a manager, these are the things you should do as a manager. And I think something like that would be helpful for teachers who are going to have [paraprofessionals] . . . Because I think there definitely are people who naturally don't delegate and supervise well. And so, it might be helpful to have a training on that to learn, this is how you can work with paraprofessionals in a way that's effective.

Participants proposed several instructional approaches to facilitate learning about paraprofessionals (e.g., class discussions, lecture, group work, real-life examples, practical resources, scenarios, or case studies), drawing connections with the development of each competency. For example, teachers discussed how mock scenarios or case studies could help develop skills in assertive communication, conflict management, coaching, and collaboration.

Several participants ($n = 7$) discussed how *field experiences with paraprofessionals* allow opportunities to observe and participate in a variety of interactions between teachers and paraprofessionals. Specifically, teachers highlighted the potential impact of learning to work with paraprofessionals during practica, internships, and student teaching. For example, one teacher shared,

> If you have a good cooperating teacher, then you can see how to interact with [paraprofessionals] . . . but, you know, emphasizing the focus when you go and observe . . . because people might not be thinking to do that.

Participants connected field experiences to developing seven competencies. For example, one teacher discussed how her field experiences helped her become personable and develop assertive communication skills because she observed a variety of interaction styles and identified those that best facilitated effective communication.

School and district support. Participants identified and proposed strengthening four means of initial and ongoing support provided by schools

Table 2. Means of Preparation and Support Identified by Participants Across Competencies.

Competency	University-based preparation		School/district support				Personal development	
	Field experience	Focused coursework	District training/ guidelines	Shared time	School-based administrative support	Formal mentor support	Personal life experiences	Advice from experienced teachers
Knowledge competencies								
Knowledge of appropriate roles	X	X	X				X	X
Knowledge of paraprofessional backgrounds	X	X	X					
Skill competencies								
Assertive communication skills	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Collaboration skills	X	X	X	X		X	X	
Coaching skills		X	X			X		X
Organization skills	X	X	X				X	
Conflict management skills	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Dispositional competencies								
Open-minded		X	X				X	
Respectful		X	X	X			X	
Personable	X	X					X	

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and districts (i.e., district training and guidelines, shared time, school-based administrative support, formal mentor support). Half of the participants (*n* = 11) addressed *district training and guidelines*, which included both initial and ongoing training focused on working effectively with paraprofessionals, as well as practical resources with guidelines outlining teacher and paraprofessional responsibilities. Several teachers emphasized the need for receiving more information about their district's expectations for appropriate utilization of paraprofessionals as well as teachers' responsibilities in supporting paraprofessionals. For example, one teacher shared, "There are not really set guidelines . . . I think it could come from our central office, you know. I think it would be great if they would just outline basic expectations." Participants drew connections between district training and guidelines and nearly every competency. For example, many participants discussed how initial and ongoing trainings offered jointly to both teachers and paraprofessionals could help develop collaboration skills. One teacher proposed a mandatory initial training for new teams of teachers and paraprofessionals addressing communication skills, especially constructive criticism and differences of opinion. She recommended the training would be required for the first year and optional for all other years, such as if a new person joined the team or if there was a challenge in the relationship.

Half of the participants (*n* = 11) discussed the provision of *shared time* as a means of support, specifically having dedicated time for teachers and paraprofessionals to meet to discuss how things are going, learn and apply strategies to strengthen their relationship, and attend meetings and trainings together. Teachers consistently wanted more time with their paraprofessionals and were looking to schools and districts to help them facilitate this time. For example, one teacher shared,

> See, we don't ever have time. There's very few times where the three of us are together alone . . . So if there were time in general . . . to go over what's going well, what's not going well, how can we fix this? Just that time alone is important.

Participants drew connections for how this dedicated time might support teachers' work with paraprofessionals across the four skill and dispositional competencies mentioned previously (i.e., assertive communication skills, collaborative skills, conflict management, respect).

Several participants (*n* = 9) addressed *school-based administrative support* and having principals or other school-level leaders recognize the importance of teacher–paraprofessional relationships, and actively support teachers in working effectively with paraprofessionals. Participants described how administrators might offer this type of support by checking in with teachers about relationships with paraprofessionals, including teachers in the paraprofessional hiring process, participating in team meetings, and addressing challenges or problems that arise. For example, one teacher proposed an idea of revising the teacher evaluation system to include an assessment of the effectiveness of a team, in which administrators would share feedback regarding how well teachers worked with their paraprofessionals. Participants drew connections between administrative support and two competencies (i.e., assertive communication and conflict management skills), particularly to address specific challenges or conflict.

Some participants (*n* = 3) discussed *formal mentor support*, or a structured program in which experienced colleagues who have worked in supervisory roles provide guidance about working with paraprofessionals. Teachers provided ideas of how instructional coaches or experienced teachers could serve as mentors. For example, one teacher shared her experience of being assigned a mentor who was a general educator and how she found this person could not adequately offer advice when it came to working with paraprofessionals. She wished she had this support and expressed her willingness to mentor new special educators, "A mentor, someone to be able to share some experiences with . . . It would have made life a lot simpler and have been really helpful." Another teacher reflected on the mentor program offered by her district,

If you have someone that has a really gregarious personality, that's really willing to help, that's really willing to sit down with the person and tell them things they don't want to hear in a gentle way, and help direct them in the right way, I think it can be effective.

Participants drew connections between formal mentor support and the development of several skill competencies, highlighting the potential to help beginning special educators "navigate things with paraprofessionals" and keep from "burning out."

Personal development. Participants also identified two means of informal personal development (i.e., personal life experiences, advice from experienced teachers). Several participants (*n* = 9) discussed *personal life experiences*, or how teachers might learn to navigate relationships with paraprofessionals by reflecting on previous and current experiences. For example, one teacher described her development as "trial and error, making mistakes, learning from those mistakes, and making sure you don't make them again." Participants drew many connections between personal life experiences and development of the 10 competencies. For example, one teacher shared how her previous experience as a restaurant manager helped her build assertive communication, collaboration, and organizational skills. Several participants (*n* = 6) discussed *advice from experienced teachers*, through having an informal network of experienced teachers and friends with whom they could openly ask questions and receive suggestions related to working effectively with paraprofessionals. Participants drew connections between this type of support and the development of three knowledge and skill competencies.

Discussion

Given the prominence of paraprofessionals in schools across the United States, addressing special education teachers' capacities to build and maintain effective working relationships is essential (Lewis & McKenzie, 2009; Wallace

et al., 2001). We sought to represent the voices of special education teachers and paraprofessionals and identify a set of teacher competencies related to successful work with paraprofessionals, as well as potential avenues to equip teachers to develop these competencies. Participants identified knowledge, skills, and dispositions comprising "balanced leadership" and ways to provide "leadership development" related to these competencies. Our findings extend the literature in several ways.

First, our findings deepen understanding of specific competencies teachers may need to work successfully with paraprofessionals by highlighting the multidimensional nature of balanced leadership. Rather than identifying any single area as most important, our participants recommended teachers have combined competence across different areas of knowledge, skills, and dispositions. This work both echoes and extends earlier research highlighting the importance of teachers' training and support in this area (e.g., Berry et al., 2011; Drecktrah, 2000; French, 2001). It also amplifies calls in the field to ensure special education teachers are competent in supervising paraprofessionals in the current classroom context (CEC, 2015; NJCLD, 1998; Pickett, 2007). The competencies identified by our participants highlight critical knowledge, skills, and dispositions that could be used as guidance for teacher preparation programs. Specifically, prior research and outlined competencies have focused only on teachers' *knowledge* and *skills* (e.g., Drecktrah, 2000; Lewis & McKenzie, 2009; NJCLD, 1998; Pickett, 2007; Wallace et al., 2001). Our findings highlight their *dispositions* as an equally vital area of development.

Second, our findings suggest teachers can develop these competencies over time and through multiple avenues—starting in preservice programs and continuing throughout their teaching. In addition to formal training, participants discussed the ways teachers might build these competencies through more informal, personal development. Although many people have emphasized the need for teachers to learn to work well with paraprofessionals (e.g., Jones, Ratcliff, Sheehan, &

Hunt, 2012; Wallace et al., 2001), very little research has addressed the question of *how* this might occur. Our findings call upon faculty in teacher preparation programs, leaders in school districts, and teachers themselves to prioritize building competence in this area.

Third, our findings reveal specific pathways through which these 10 competencies can be developed. At one level, these intersections are noteworthy because they suggest the competencies can be nurtured when given sufficient attention. Given personality-based characteristics are often considered fixed and enduring, it was of particular note participants proposed ways in which even dispositional competencies could be developed. At another level, the competency-pathway intersections are important because they call for the need to focus explicitly on teacher leadership with paraprofessionals within existing means of preparation and support. For example, although field experiences and coursework are common components across teacher preparation programs, participants voiced the need for these to include a focus on paraprofessionals. Similarly, participants recommended concentrating on these competencies within existing structures of district and school-based support. Given the prominence of teacher–paraprofessional relationships, it seems appropriate to consider this a mandatory focus within these different pathways comprising teachers' preservice training and ongoing support.

Implications for Practice

Our findings have implications for multiple stakeholder groups involved in preparing and supporting teachers throughout their education and career. First, college- or university-based personnel (e.g., faculty and instructors, mentor teachers, field supervisors) typically provide the entry point to special education for preservice teachers. Teachers need to be supported in developing these competencies to work with paraprofessionals before they take their first teaching position. Teachers in our study, regardless of their type of preparation program, noted either limited or lack of training in this area. They encouraged university-based

personnel to devote time and attention to helping future special educators build competence in working effectively with paraprofessionals. Faculty members, mentor teachers, and supervisors can use this set of knowledge, skill, and dispositional competencies as a guide for ways to address this important area of preparation in university coursework and field-based experiences.

Second, administrators at school and district levels serve as a more sustained source of support for teachers. Teachers suggested these leaders need to prioritize high-quality teacher–paraprofessional relationships and help them further develop competencies needed to work well with paraprofessionals. Given the complex, multidimensional nature of balanced leadership, school and district leaders cannot assume their teachers—whether novice or experienced—have fully developed the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to navigate relationships with paraprofessionals successfully. Schools and districts can improve the quality of supervision paraprofessionals receive by strengthening attention to this area of teacher development within existing supports (e.g., mentoring programs, district training, administrator involvement).

Third, the study has implications for teachers themselves. Aspiring and current special education teachers should recognize their ongoing work with paraprofessionals creates a need for continued personal growth and reflection on the development of these competencies. Furthermore, teachers can use this set of competencies as an ongoing self-reflection tool and identify areas of needed personal and professional support.

Limitations

Several limitations should be addressed in future research. First, although our sample combined the perspectives of both paraprofessionals and teachers, we did not seek input from other integral stakeholders such as administrators, district support staff, and university faculty. Future research including these perspectives could lend additional insight to understanding what competencies

are important and how to help teachers develop them. Second, although we stratified participant recruitment across nine schools within three districts, our sample was limited to a single region within a single state. Teachers and paraprofessionals worked with one another, were from the same region, and in some cases were prepared in the same programs. Their perspectives may not be reflective of educators and their experiences in other areas, and results might not be applicable across other regions of the country or world. Future research with a broader scope is needed to affirm the commonality of these findings across locales. Third, we did not conduct member checks with our participants. Future research including a continued dialogue with participants could strengthen the level of confidence that participants feel their views were accurately reflected in the findings.

Implications for Research

Our work suggests additional paths for researchers interested in teacher development. First, in this study we extend the limited empirical information available on training and supporting teachers to work effectively with paraprofessionals (e.g., Drecktrah, 2000; French, 2001; Lewis & McKenzie, 2009; Wallace et al., 2001). Future scholarship including other sources of data (e.g., observations or follow-up interviews) could evaluate the extent to which these perspectives continue over time. Although we focused on educators working with students with severe disabilities, future research might investigate the extent to which identified competencies are similar or different when focusing on teachers and paraprofessionals who work with students with mild and moderate disabilities, such as learning disabilities. Second, the competencies proposed in this study could be used to design interventions aimed at equipping aspiring and current teachers. Very little research has attempted to develop and evaluate models to prepare teachers to work effectively with paraprofessionals (e.g., Steckelberg et al., 2007). Future research might examine

the effectiveness of preparation and support offered through the identified pathways within universities, schools and districts, and personal opportunities for development. Third, our in-depth interview methodology may offer insights for the field regarding the utilization of practitioner perspectives in outlining competencies for special educators. Our approach to gathering and analyzing these perspectives may be relevant to other groups interested in incorporating practitioners' voices in defining the areas of competence needed to be an effective special educator.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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