PARAEDUCATORS: BUILDING AGENCY, CAPACITY, AND SKILL THROUGH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

by

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For anything worth having one must pay the price; and the price is always work, patience, love, self-sacrifice – no paper currency, no promises to pay, but the gold of real service.
John Burroughs

DEDICATION

This work is in honor of my family for myriad sacrifices made on my behalf, and friends and classmates in appreciation for their support and camaraderie. I am especially thankful for my husband Larry, daughter and son-in-law Andrea and Alex, and son Eric.

In family life, love is the oil that eases friction, the cement that binds closer together, and the music that brings harmony.
Eva Burrows

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Educational opportunities and services for students with high needs have steadily improved as a result of the legislative and court-ordered mandates that followed the initial passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975 (Walsh, Kemerer, & Maniotis, 2010). Since that time, students have generally benefitted from receiving instruction in a least restrictive environment, enabling those with differing needs to join their peers in inclusive classrooms. Additional mandates resulting from the 2001 passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) put in place standardized testing requirements for all but those considered as most severely disabled, which could not exceed one percent of a school's population (Walsh et al.). As a result, the accountability ratings for public schools measure the academic performance of virtually all students, including those receiving special services.

School leaders often find themselves forced to consider ways to enhance academic programs with limited financial resources due to the unfunded mandates associated with NCLB and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) measures. Yet, funding the programs and services necessary for students with high needs to achieve performance gains poses significant obstacles. Many school leaders have opted to increase the utilization of paraeducators (educational aides, instructional aides, or paraprofessionals) as a cost-efficient means of addressing and supporting students with high needs (Breton, 2010). The role of paraeducators historically involved supportive capacities associated with student supervision and clerical assistance. Research is showing that a steady shift in the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators (Cobb, 2007; Fisher

& Pleasants, 2012; Giangreco, 2012; Giangreco, Broer, & Suter, 2010; Jones, Ratcliff, Sheehan, & Hunt, 2012; Russell, Webster, & Blatchford, 2013) is occuring, with nearly 80 percent of paraeducators surveyed reporting that they provided small group instruction to students with high needs (Malian, 2011).

The Texas Education Agency's (TEA) State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC) requirements for paraeducators are minimal, with three levels of aide certification available (19 Tex. Admin. Code §7.230(e), 2012). Eligibility requirements for the Level I certificate is limited to a high school diploma or GED, along with a vague description of experience in working with children. Somewhat more stringent are the NCLB requirements for paraeducators to be highly qualified, which are applicable to schools receiving Title I funding. These mandates added the provision that paraeducators complete at least 30 college credit hours, with coursework including some emphasis in child growth and development. States have the option to create alternative programming for paraeducators who do not possess the requisite 30 hours of college credit, as long as the programs include specific training components and some form of assessment deemed as appropriate by the state (TEA, 2008). In Texas, paraeducators who lack the 30 hours of college credit can meet alternative training requirements by either attending a three-day training presented by a regional educational service center or enrolling in a series of low-cost, online training modules. The amount of time paraeducators typically spend when completing the alternative online NCLB preparation program is 13 clock hours (Region X Educational Service Center, 2013).

Another function of SBEC is to oversee the renewal of credentials for teachers and professional staff in Texas, who must complete a set number of professional development hours

prior to renewal. The content of the professional development programming must be reflective of the type of certificate(s) held. For example, standard classroom teachers must complete 150 clock hours every five years (19 Tex. Admin. Code §7.232.13(h), 2012). Similar requirements for paraeducators are not included in the SBEC mandates. Instead, each school district has discretion in providing for the ongoing learning needs of the paraeducators they employ. Paraeducators do not need to receive continuing professional education credits in order to maintain, retain, or renew any of the three levels of educational aide certificates (19 Tex. Admin. Code §7.232.13(i), 2012). Numerous rule changes to the Texas Administrative Code were proposed and enacted in 2012 for those holding other forms of educator certification within the state, but the only directive aimed at paraeducators involved English language proficiency levels. Officials downgraded the proposed change to the status of *under consideration* (TEA, 2012) rather than enacting the more rigorous English language standards originally planned. Professional development is not included in any of the NCLB mandates for paraeducators to retain or maintain highly qualified status (TEA, 2008). The need to ensure that paraeducators receive appropriate amounts of ongoing professional guidance, training, and support remains lacking.

Statement of the Problem

An increasingly important issue to consider involves the quality of instructional supports provided by paraeducators, especially for students with high needs and those receiving special services. Paraeducators often possess the least amount of education and training of any school staff members assigned to work with children, while simultaneously providing important academic and behavioral supports to students with the greatest learning needs. In fact, the very

students who are likely to present the greatest instructional challenges to highly qualified and experienced teachers are instead being paired with those possessing the least amount of pedagogical knowledge within the learning community (Blatchford et al., 2011; Blatchford, Webster, & Russell, 2012; Giangreco et al., 2010; Giangreco, 2012). Paraeducators often hold a limited degree of agency or voice in the educational system (Lewis, 2005; Rutherford, 2011) and may not feel comfortable or secure in their ability to ask teachers, professional staff, or members of the leadership team for guidance, assistance, and resources. Compounding the lack of agency is the absence of mandates for continuing or ongoing training, leaving few options to compensate for these deficits. Bandura's theory of social learning (Betz, 2008) encompasses four components considered as essential to the development and growth of confidence in one's abilities. These included performance accomplishments, vicarious learning, emotional arousal, and encouragement. Each element of Bandura's theory can influence the design of job-embedded professional development programming as it relates to paraeducators. For instance, student gains can result from effective instruction, skills can develop due to modeling in the form of demonstration lessons and team teaching, concerns for student learning can trigger emotional arousal, and positive outcomes and recognition of efforts can offer a sense of encouragement. Tramayne, Fan, and Brown (2008) explain the importance of acquiring mastery by stating, "Mastery experiences are the most effective way to develop a strong sense of efficacy because they offer the most authentic evidence that one can do what it takes to succeed. Success experiences help build self-efficacy, while failures undermine it" (p. 853).

Lewis (2005) found that the roles of paraeducators often lacked clear boundaries, and that they commonly performed duties outside of their job descriptions. "Most of the instructional

aides felt they had to take on multiple responsibilities. Many of them realized that if they did not step into certain situations, the students would not receive any services" (p. 138).

Prior studies have shown that an overreliance on instructional aides can influence, impede, or even hinder the academic progress of the students they intend to help (Giangreco et al., 2010; Russell et al., 2013). Without skilled teaching, it seems unreasonable to expect children with high needs to attain gains equivalent to their peers.

The literature justifies concerns relating to the types of academic instruction paraeducators generally provide. During the course of this study, questions arose regarding the degree of guidance and oversight that the participating paraeducators received from teaching staff, confidence levels, and the ways in which deployment of paraeducators can potentially influence student learning.

Purpose of the Study

The key purpose of this study was to determine how job-embedded strategies could bridge some of the training gaps experienced by paraeducators who provide instructional supports to students who struggle. Also examined were the ways in which decisions made by school leaders may influence and enhance paraeducator effectiveness based on their roles and responsibilities. A secondary purpose sought to examine if guidance and professional development through participatory action research could provide an opportunity to empower a marginalized employee group. This study offers insights into the influence of instructional leadership and its impact on paraeducator practices, particularly those related to planning, collaborating, and scheduling. Paraprofessional training appears as an overlooked yet essential component for instructional leaders to consider when creating and implementing school

improvement initiatives and professional development programming. Equally important is the need for members of the leadership team to consider how their decisions regarding the roles and assignments of paraeducators can influence student learning and time on task.

Research Questions

Specifically, the present study seeks to address the following questions.

1. What are the identified professional development needs of paraeducators in this context based on information provided by a teacher, a paraeducator, and an administrator in the participating school?
2. How do job-embedded and personalized supports help paraeducators develop instructional skills?
3. In what ways may job-embedded guidance enhance paraeducator agency and voice?

When the study began, I hypothesized that paraeducators would report limited assistance in providing academic and behavioral guidance to students, and expected to find that the participants would perceive the individualized and collaborative professional development as enhancing their ability to develop and reinforce student learning. Also investigated were enhancements in the level of agency as part of this process. I anticipated differences between the educational and experience levels of aides employed within the district, inconsistent classroom practices when comparing the instruction between teachers and aides, and discrepancies between the expectations and responsibilities of instructional aides in comparison to educational level and training.

Preliminary Data

I conducted a pilot survey that [during a trial administration] supported the hypothesis that paraeducators experience a diminished status among their peers. In order to assess the interview tool and gauge its design, I asked a colleague employed as an instructional aide in a north Texas school district if teachers, administrators, and paraeducators at her school or district would be willing to pilot the questionnaire. Contributors had an opportunity to offer suggestions to enhance and improve the instrument as well. A total number of 16 surveys were completed and returned. Respondents included five administrators, six teachers, two professional staff members, and three paraeducators. While no comments involved suggestions to improve the tool itself, respondents did share some glimpses of their practices.

The input largely mirrored findings from the review of the literature, providing a window into the role of the paraeducators in that district. For example, the tool offered a checklist of potential paraeducator tasks with instructions indicating the placement of a checkmark by those duties currently performed by the aides at their school. This list was included to demonstrate how the different stakeholders perceived the role of aides, as well as to evidence if they were serving in primarily instructional capacities. Almost all agreed that aides support or reinforce the teacher's instruction and assist students with high needs. The majority also checked functions like redirecting off-task behaviors, managing disruptive behaviors, supervising students outside of class, and assisting with photocopying and grading. Divergent views appeared for the question regarding paraeducators' roles as they relate to the implementation of academic components of an Individual Education Plan (IEP). Only six participants indicated that paraeducators actually implement academic components of the IEP. Two of the three aides indicated that they did

indeed implement such components, whereas only two of the six teachers, two of the five administrators, and neither of the professional staff members reported IEP implementation as being part of the paraeducators' roles. Table 1 features the pilot study responses by role regarding the duties of paraeducators.

Neither the administrators nor professional staff members felt their paraeducators would benefit from training in social skill development, only one teacher indicated that this topic could be useful, yet two-thirds of the instructional aides agreed with the statement. These dissenting opinions could lead to questions regarding the likelihood that aides are more likely to be familiar with the interpersonal difficulties that students with various needs can encounter when interacting with their peers. In the professional development topics outlined in Table 2, the subjects selected topics they perceive as potentially beneficial to paraeducators.

Space was available for participants to enter written remarks. Some of the responses seem to contradict the answers to the following question: When asked if aides at the school had received enough training to do a very good job of supporting the students, 94 percent of the respondents checked that they somewhat agree, agree, or strongly agree. The majority of the participants also agree that their school's paraeducators would benefit from professional development in helping students develop higher-order thinking skills and promoting independence and transition. Broader themes emerge from the participants' written comments. These include concerns about the types of classroom supports paraeducators provide, as reflected in this assertion, "They try to do the students' work for them sometimes or give answers." Other statements involve the degree of reliance that students develop, as noted by one respondent, "The aides might benefit from learning more about how to get the kids to not count on them as much,"

Table 1

Reported Duties of Instructional Aides as a Percentage by Stakeholder Type

Duty	Administrators (n = 5)	Teachers (n = 6)	Professional Staff (n = 2)	Paraeducators (n = 3)
Assist all students	100.0	66.6	50.0	66.6
Assist students with learning disabilities	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Support and reinforce teacher's instruction	100.0	83.3	50.0	100.0
Implement academic components of IEP	40.0	33.3	0.0	66.6
Make copies, help with grading, paperwork	100.0	50.0	50.0	100.0
Redirect students' off task behaviors	80.0	33.3	50.0	100.0
Help manage disruptive behavior	40.0	33.3	50.0	100.0
Supervise students outside of class	60.0	66.6	100.0	100.0

Note: Responses to a pilot survey that was completed by volunteers from a rural north Texas school district when asked about the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators in their school.

Table 2

Professional Development Topics Selected as Beneficial for Instructional Aides as a Percentage by Stakeholder Type

Topic	Administrators (n = 5)	Teachers (n = 6)	Professional Staff (n = 2)	Paraeducators (n = 3)
Managing behavior	20.0	50.0	50.0	66.6
Reading instruction	40.0	50.0	0.0	33.3
Developing higher-order thinking skills	60.0	66.6	0.0	66.6
Promoting independence and transition	60.0	50.0	50.0	33.3
Differentiating or adapting instruction	40.0	50.0	50.0	33.3
Encouraging social skill development	0.0	16.6	0.0	66.6

Note: Responses to a pilot survey that was completed by volunteers from a rural north Texas school district when asked about potential professional development topics for paraeducators at their school.

and another who said, “Aides do almost everything a teacher does, just without the title.” Even though concerns exist, supportive comments offer words of praise and appreciation for the work the campus paraeducators perform. Several comments address the low salaries that aides receive, with remarks that include, “They do so much with very little salary.” Another participant said that, “A big concern is that, in part to salary, aides don’t do as thorough of a job as they should.” Finally, involvement in a collaborative and empowering process may help address some of the issues these statements highlight, “They would do better if they knew how their small part worked in the whole district,” and to, “Allow instructional aides the freedom of voicing their concerns without being relegated to a back seat.” Such statements support and reinforce the study’s aims.

Framework of the Participatory Action Research Study

The purpose in employing the use of participatory action research (PAR) as a means of facilitating this study was twofold. First, by utilizing the principles of adult learning during the intervention phase, individualized professional development strategies addressed some of the identified needs of the participants. Second, by building agency, I hoped to develop the participants’ capacity so that in the future, they would be more likely to voice concerns related to student learning, and seek added guidance and support from other staff members, school leaders, or through a review of the literature.

Dick, Stringer, and Huxham (2009) explain difficulties in aligning the action research process to theoretical frameworks, describing the complexity and consequences encountered when considering theoretical frameworks in action research by stating:

> Few [action researchers] explain the type of theory to which they refer. Few describe how theory becomes integrated into the action research process….Further, we believe there are researchers who are discouraged from using action research because they don't know how to develop relevant theory within an action research approach. The literature provides them with too little guidance. (p.7)

The principles of action research originated from the work of Kurt Lewin in the 1940s. This method of inquiry utilizes a practitioner-based approach as a means of addressing complex, real-world issues through collaboration with stakeholders (James, Milenkiewicz, & Bucknam, 2008; McIntyre, 2008). Moreover, PAR is rooted in the concept of empowerment through education, by privileging the voices of those considered as either disenfranchised members of society as a whole, or comprising a subgroup within a larger environment.

Eclectic qualities of PAR include the researcher's dual role as facilitator and participant, provisions embedded into the research design that allow adaptations and changes to be made as part of the study cycle, along with collaborative and reflective practices designed to inform the intervention and spur individual and collective learning and growth. One might consider action research's so called *rules of engagement* to be fluid and dependent upon the context, ideas, and experiences shared among the collaborators.

Establishing and maintaining equality between the researcher and participants is also a key differentiator to this approach. The traditional disinterested observer-researcher may be antithetical to action research, which instead necessitates the development of reciprocity and trust (Mills, 2011). Furthermore, promoting and guiding some form of change resides at the heart of action-based inquiry. Transformation ingrains the research experience in such a way that

participants should anticipate quandaries associated with the prevailing power structure. The action research cycle often triggers alteration to the status quo, thus compelling those involved in the process to begin to recognize and possibly address issues associated with or related to their political environment (Noffke, 2009).

Consideration of the distinct aspects associated with action research does not absolve the need to articulate the belief systems employed under the umbrella of educational theories. Instead, the perspectives outlined manifest a broader, richer context. Typology of the study features elements founded in andragogy, a theory of adult learning that is engaging and learner-centric (Henschke, 2011). Originally conceptualized by Knowles (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2009), the theory received criticism for its initial specificity in application to adults, rather than describing the nature of learning as more of a continuum of processes. However, andragogy's foundation and the ideas it encompasses seem well-connected to the intent of this study. For example, andragogy promotes self-directed learning, acknowledges prior learning and the importance of building on an already held basis of knowledge, encourages real-world application, and promotes immediate utilization of newly acquired understandings and skills (Glickman et al., 2009). Many of the disparities that tend to exist among those employed as paraeducators can influence classroom performance, such as skill level, educational background, and life experience (McKenzie, 2011), which reinforces the use of andragogy. The study's design focuses on extending, enhancing, and expanding on the capacity of the participants through a collaborative and meaningful means of classroom application.

Coexisting with andragogy, theoretical ideas shaping the study represent concepts associated with Aristotle's theory of praxis. Tierney and Sallee (2008) explain that praxis-based

designs clearly incorporate features to empower marginalized populations by including a mutually beneficial and collaborative scope. The ultimate goal of praxis is to work toward facilitating sufficient amounts of personal growth so that the participants may envision and then enact change. The reciprocal nature of praxis can facilitate a shift in the inequality of power often existing in traditional forms of research so that the basis of the relationships between the subject(s) and researcher(s) remain balanced and equal. Finley (2008) describes the idea of praxis-based research as follows:

> Research that is done for transformative purposes is praxis-based—that is, it involves a dynamic interplay between reflection and action, between knowing and doing. Its focus is the intertwining of research and practice. Thus, the transformative power of research resides in the potential for creative ideas and social constructions aimed to reform undesirable but common social practices. (p. 887)

Conceptualizing the use of praxis-based design in an educational context, Paulo Freire, a Brazilian teacher and activist, began investigating strategies to aid his impoverished brethren in the 1960s. Freire worked tirelessly to advance oppressed populations through literacy education and empowerment initiatives (Tierney & Sallee, 2008). The origins of PAR remain deeply rooted in theory, which can then require a broader lens than one that simply considers the approach as a research method in itself. Gadotti (1994) explains in *Reading Paulo Freire* that the connection of theory to practice was implicit in PAR by stating:

> [Freire] had a dialectic way of thinking, by not separating practice and theory as positivists do. Theory, method, and practice form a whole in his work, which is guided by

> the relationship between knowledge and the knower. This whole forms a theory of knowledge and an anthropology in which knowledge has an emancipating role. (p.51)

Freire further theorized that education and literacy directly influenced social change and felt that those bound by poverty and illiteracy were unable to envision or conceive of true social change to allow movement beyond their current state. Thus, it was Freire's conviction that such change is predicated upon the ability to read, reflect, dialogue, and consider issues in a broader context (Gadotti, 1994). Nayer (2008) explains, "Praxis is theory that serves the purpose of social transformation. The social transformation sought by practice is not only informed by critical reflection ('theory') but also by questions of justice and emancipation (social or collective action)" (p. 422).

Viewing paraeducators as a marginalized and low-wage population of school employees, the study's questions seek to expand beyond the provision of continuing education, in the hope that greater levels of confidence will guide the participants to seek independently resources and guidance as needs arise. The themes related to the theories of andragogy and praxis largely guide each level of the PAR study, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Overview of Methodology

Action research served as an appropriate methodology to employ when investigating the study's questions due in part to its allowance for adaptations as part of the study cycle. Multiple variations of the action research cycle exist (Cardno, 2006; Hendricks, 2013; Mills, 2011; Quebec-Fuentes, 2013) and each typically includes a review of the literature, identification of the problem, some form of action, and then an evaluation to determine whether the action taken was either effective or requires adaptations, with the cycle then repeating as needed.

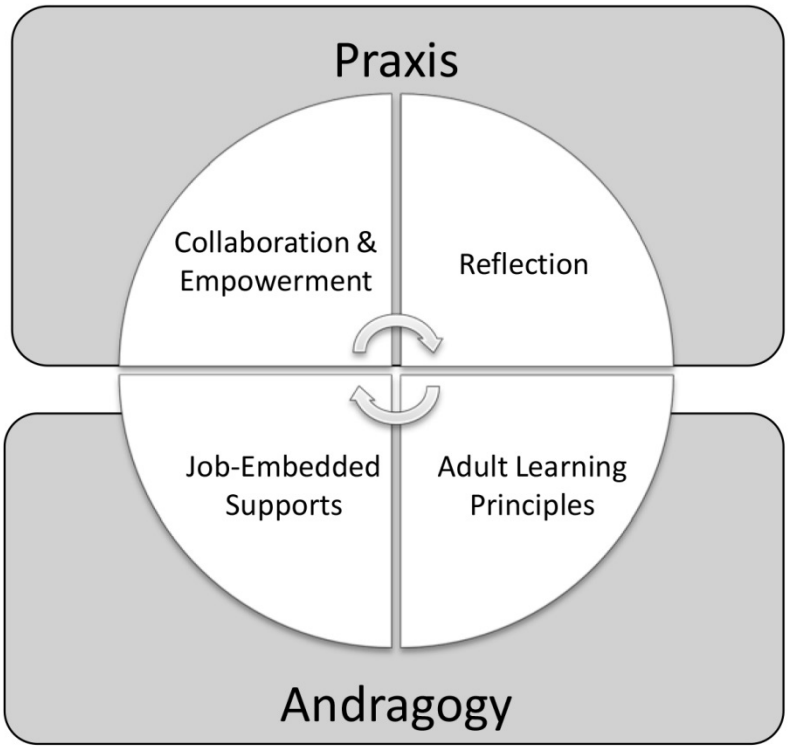


Figure 1. The connected nature of learning theories underpinning the elements of the participatory action research study include praxis and andragogy.

PAR's empowering nature allowed me to address specific concerns as identified by the participants and other staff members during the research program. Additionally, PAR provides opportunities for collaborative problem-solving, enables shared reflection as a means of gaining deeper degrees of insight into the issues faced, and embeds continuous improvement as a means of promoting ongoing growth and development.

Briefly, the study features a collaborative intervention to provide professional development designed specifically for paraeducators. An integral component of the action research process includes the collective identification of issues and concerns (Hendricks, 2013). In order to jointly identify the learning needs of the participants, the study's first phase involved

a series of classroom observations, curricular reviews, and foundational interviews with three key staff members. The intent of the early and formative interviews was to inform the context by seeking representative perspectives from a small group that included one administrator, one teacher, and one paraeducator. Subjects responding to the initial interview did elect to participate in the intervention phase of the study. Once the first stage was complete, I then utilized the data to inform specific goals and strategies when shaping the job-embedded professional development plan.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study rests in the value of offering marginalized school employees an opportunity to develop and build understanding that focuses on both the cultivation of skills and development of agency and voice. Based in part on the belief that the approach to fostering pedagogical awareness can begin with job-embedded collaborative inquiry, I expected to evidence improvements in perceived and observed classroom practices.

Initially, benefits to participants, educators, and researchers include gaining an enhanced level of understanding of the learning needs experienced by paraeducators, while carefully considering how existing resources can be adapted and utilized when providing learning supports in a paraeducator-led pullout session. The study offered personalized, job-embedded professional development, along with collaboratively designed resources to improve instruction for students with various learning needs, provided at no cost to the school or district. Adapting instruction within a dynamic classroom environment may augment and expand the existing body of knowledge held by participants (Yendol-Hoppey & Dana, 2010). The empowering nature of action research may have also enabled paraeducators to gain agency and voice regarding roles

and responsibilities. Site-based professional development can allow educators to experience meaningful learning that is both relevant and practical.

The information gathered promises to provide valuable insights into the level of instructional understanding possessed by paraeducators. Educational leaders may gain from reevaluating the actual duties of paraeducators within their schools. Other considerations include the ways in which scheduling, planning, and assigning paraeducators to appropriate roles can influence student learning. Educators, administrative staff, and professional development providers may benefit from data reflecting how this approach may have influenced classroom practices.

Assumptions

The primary assumption involves the willingness of the participants to elect involvement in the action research study. It seems necessary that paraeducators would perceive benefits at the outset and participate in good faith. Other assumptions included the belief that paraeducators play a vital role in supporting students and contributing to the overall successful learning environment of the school. Further, it was assumed that an appropriate level of commitment from the participating district's teaching staff and administrative team would allow sufficient time to be afforded to the district's paraeducators for professional development and growth.

Limitations and Delimitations

Several limiting factors were present during the course of the study. First involved the amount of time the participants had available to allocate to the action research project. Although practitioner research often occurs within a single school, the second limitation posed involves the sample size. The cyclical and collaborative nature of PAR often requires studies that encompass

much greater lengths of time. In this case, a third limitation was the six-month length of the study, which was initiated in August, 2013, and concluded in February, 2014. Lastly, an unexpected barrier was an unwillingness of some faculty members to join the process as study participants and collaborators. Delimitations included the need for the study participants to serve as paraeducators in an elementary school setting, and whose responsibilities included providing supports to students who struggle.

Generalizing the findings will not be possible given the individualized nature of action research, the study's focus on a collaborative identification of needs, and sample size. Yet, opportunities for application exist when considering other contexts. The researcher's dual role as an investigator and participant required diligence in order to avoid any potential conflicts of interest.

Definitions of Terms

To promote consistency and understanding, this section seeks to define and explain terminology related to the study's purpose. While this list is not exhaustive, it does include a brief explanation of the most frequently used terms, expressions, and jargon as they relate to describing the research process, intervention strategies, and analysis of data associated with answering the research questions.

Paraeducators

Various entities utilize analogous job titles for paraeducators when describing their roles and responsibilities, including the federal government, states, districts, schools, and researchers,. Descriptors include instructional aide, educational aide, teacher's aide, teaching assistant, assistant teacher, and paraprofessional. Texas Education Agency (TEA) guidelines have not

articulated distinctions between usage of these terms, but NCLB guidelines do distinguish between the titles, reserving the terms of paraprofessional and paraeducator to those who provide instructionally-based supports to students (TEA, 2008). Generally, their job responsibilities reflect a supportive nature, with the assumption that academic guidance is only to be delivered under the direct supervision of a certified teacher deemed as highly qualified. Often serving in a specialized capacity, schools assign aides to assist in supporting services funded by title programs, and in providing special education or vocational training. They may also encourage and facilitate parental involvement and engagement, help with translation, as well as offer clerical, administrative, and supervisory supports (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012).

Inclusion

Inclusion classrooms are those in which students both with and without learning differences or other needs are placed in the same classroom, with assistance provided by special educators or paraeducators as deemed necessary in a student's individual education plan. This strategy can help ensure that students with learning differences and related needs remain with their peers as much as possible and in a least restrictive environment.

Individual Education Plans

Students who qualify for special education services are required to have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) that outlines, among other things, recommendations of the Admissions, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) committee. Elements in the IEP include the following: learning goals and objectives established for the student, levels of mastery to be attained by the student, progress monitoring methods, as well as any accommodations or modifications to the curriculum, learning environment, and testing (Pierangelo, 2004).

Professional Development

Inservice training, continuing professional education, and continuing education units are some of the terms utilized when describing the various forms of professional development that are required by those employed in the education field. Depending on the type of certificate held, the State of Texas typically requires that educators possess documentation verifying receipt of a set number of clock hours of professional development prior to renewal of any certificate(s). Markedly absent from both Texas and NCLB mandates are professional development requirements for certified paraeducators (19 Tex. Admin. Code §7.232.13(i), 2012).

Collaborative Professional Development

Collaborative professional development is a personalized and job-based approach to professional learning that involves collaborative inquiry and is delivered by experienced teachers (Yendol-Hoppey & Dana, 2010). This hands-on training can feature numerous models that can be readily adapted to assess and then address the needs of personnel, thus creating opportunities to enhance student learning.

Texas Primary Reading Inventory

The Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI) is a skills inventory and assessment tool to satisfy early screening mandates for students in kindergarten through second grade, as established by the Texas Education Code (28 Tex. Admin. Code §28.006, 2009). State funding covers the expenses associated with the purchase of this particular instrument, meaning that districts finance the expense when electing to use other reading inventories to fulfill this requirement. As a result, 95 percent of Texas public schools utilize the TPRI when monitoring student progress in reading (Foorman, Santi, & Berger, 2006).

In addition to the assessment instrument, each grade level TPRI kit includes a copy of an *Intervention Activity Guide* (IAG). This resource includes remediation activities and curricular exercises to address student needs based on individual TPRI performance data.

Summary

Participatory action research features a collaborative approach for facilitating change and empowering marginalized populations. In this case, a research framework was employed for paraeducators that was designed to offer guidance, assistance, and support. Paraeducators comprise approximately 10 percent of the public school workforce in Texas, and hold a wide range of responsibilities that include clerical tasks, grading supports, supervision of students and progresses to the delivery of individualized and small group instruction to students with high needs.

While many researchers express concerns regarding the quality of supports provided by paraeducators, whose job requirements include minimal training and no professional development (Giangreco, 2012; Giangreco et al., 2010; Russell, et al., 2013), the fact remains that schools continue to face increasingly rigorous standards while simultaneously experiencing budget constraints. The reality of the situation presents a conundrum for school leaders. How can the needs of *all* students be met under the current system of accountability when coupled with funding limitations? These issues will be further explored in Chapter Two through a review of the literature.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

To enhance and build on the level of understanding regarding professional development for paraprofessionals, the literature review encompasses three primary areas of focus. The first area of review investigates regional, state, and nationally available information related to the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators. Next is the consideration of literature that focuses on the professional development needs of aides and within the context of improving practices. The third segment explores the principles of adult learning, particularly ideologies addressing characteristics noted among paraeducators. These qualities include differing educational levels and the expanse of background knowledge and life experiences. Especially important is providing adult learners with content that is relevant and applicable in a real-world context.

Paraeducators in Texas Public Schools

A review of public information regarding the employment of classroom aides at a suburban North Texas school district provides much archival data, including a job description with employment requirements, pay scale, the total number of aides employed by that particular district, along with the number of paraprofessionals employed by each of the districts' elementary campuses. Qualifications mirror those mandated by TEA. Salaries for paraeducators are less than one-third of the amount paid to a certified teacher for the same 187 days of service, with the starting pay of a first year teacher listed by this district as $45,600 compared to the starting salary of an aide at $14,657. One North Texas district's job description outlines the role and expectations of paraeducators and includes the following:

> Work with individual and small groups of students to reinforce the instruction provided by the general education teacher in an inclusive setting or by the special education teacher in the life skills or resource setting. Provide support to special education students to become as independent as possible. Assist classroom teachers in accommodating materials to meet the individualized needs of the student(s). Work with individual students or small groups to conduct instructional exercises assigned by the teacher. Keep teacher informed of special needs or problems of individual students. Help teacher prepare instructional materials and classroom displays. Help teacher keep administrative records and prepare required reports. Provide orientation and assistance to substitute teachers. (EMS-ISD, 2013)

Further, this district's Academic Excellence Indicator System data for 2011-2012 (TEA, 2013a), reveals that instructional aides comprise 8.4 percent of the district's total number of employees, slightly lower than the state average of 9.1 percent. Data from the State of Texas mirrors that of the regional district with instructional aides earning approximately one-third of the compensation of special educators (Texas Tribune, 2013).

Paraeducator Employment Figures

Texas employment figures confirm that paraeducators consistently outnumber special educators by a ratio of 2:1 and that this is not a new or recently developing phenomenon, as indicated by the data in Figure 2 (TEA, 2013a). While there existed slight fluctuations in annual employment figures during the 10-year period between 2002 – 2012, the average number of paraeducators to special educators was 60,980 to 30,521, respectively. Public schools in Texas did experience workforce reductions following decreased allotments of state funds by the

legislature during its 2011 session. The budget shortfalls felt by districts during this time can likely explain the employment drops displayed by both instructional aides and special educators during the 2011/2012 school year (Sanchez, 2011). Districts in Texas experienced steady student growth over the last decade; however, noteworthy to consider is the declining percentage of students identified for special education services, reported at 12.1 percent of total enrollment in 1999-2000 and declining to 8.6 percent by 2011-2012. Data charting this trend is included in Figure 3.

Procedures adopted in 2001 and amended in 2007 regarding the identification procedures in special education (89 Tex. Admin. Code §89.1040, 2010) may be related to the shrinking percentage of Texas students identified as learning disabled. The employment levels of paraeducators and special educators remains relatively constant (TEA, 2013a), although the percentage of students diagnosed with learning needs continues to wane. As a result, it seems unlikely that the widespread use of paraeducators is attributable to growth among the state's population of students diagnosed with learning disabilities.

Roles and Responsiblities of Paraeducators

The placement decisions made by many school leaders has, in effect, expanded the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators, although scant evidence exists to support their effectiveness in providing instructional supports and academic interventions. Researchers advocate that those holding positions as instructional aides should receive adequate levels of preparation that is coupled with guidance and supervision from teachers in order to propel achievement (Giangreco, 2012; Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Russell et al., 2013). Admittedly, paraeducators can offer a cost-efficient alternative of service delivery to students with learning

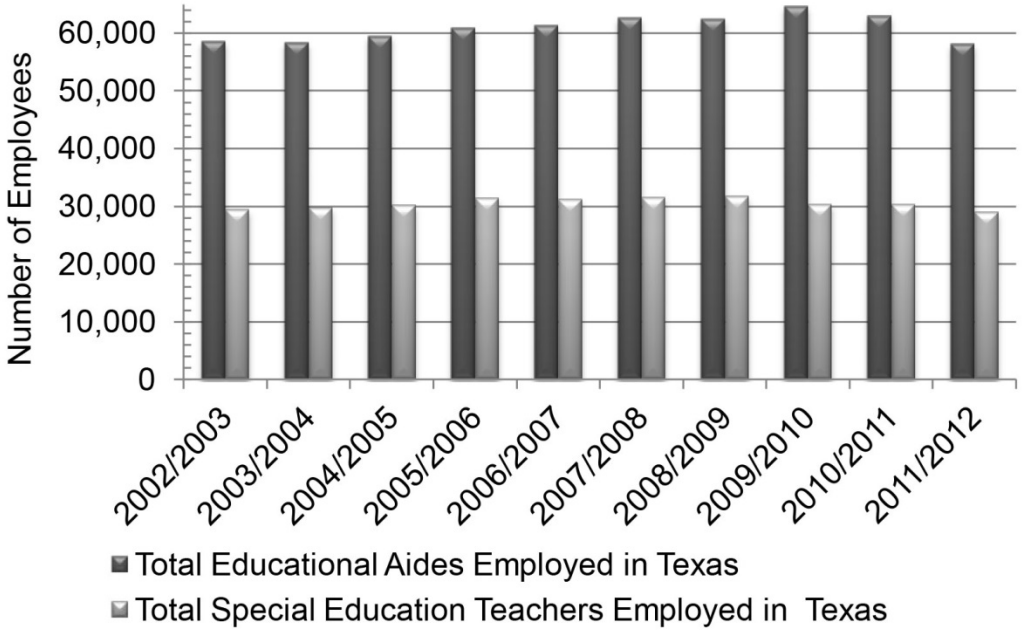


Figure 2. Comparison Between the Total Number of Educational Aides to Special Education Teachers who were Employed in Texas from 2002 – 2012. Source: Texas Education Agency, (2013).

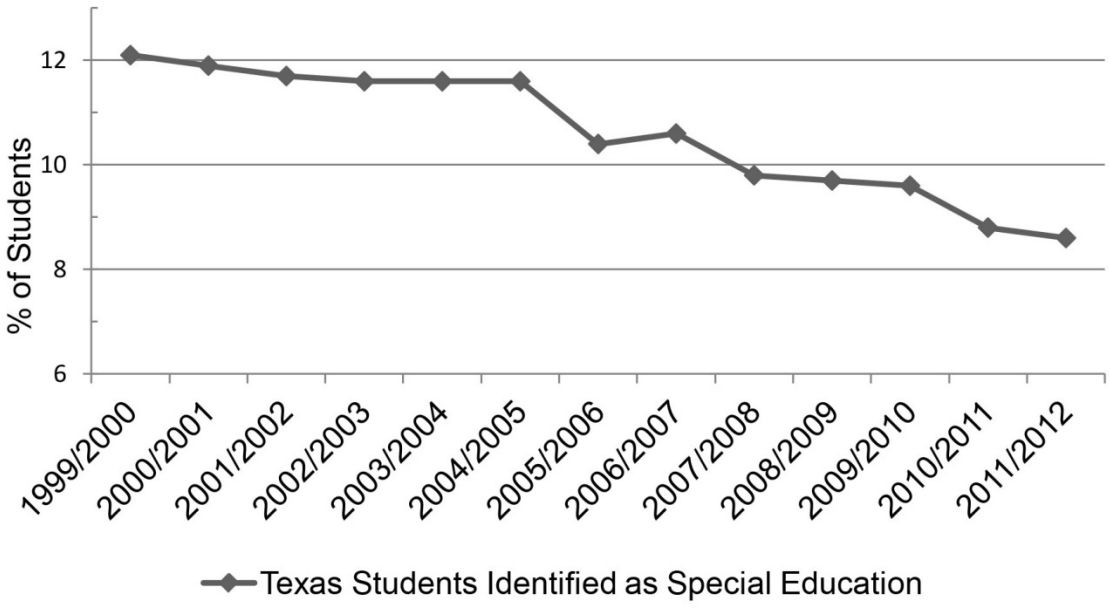


Figure 3. The percentage of Texas students identified as special education from 1999 – 2012. Texas Education Agency (2013).

needs; however, the question remains as to whether they possess sufficient skills to guide the learning of students possessing academic challenges.

A survey conducted by Fisher and Pleasants (2012) on the roles and duties of paraeducators offers a glimpse into the changes that have occurred with respect to the current responsibilities of educational aides. More than 1,800 paraeducators from a Midwestern state responded to this survey. Only 10 percent of the respondents classified clerical duties as being a primary responsibility. This study indicates that while aides hold a much greater degree of responsibility for providing academic and behavioral supports, along with student supervision, 42 percent of the participants report that it was not part of their role to attend either faculty meetings or planning meetings. When asking aides if they felt either a major or minor concern about possessing insufficient expertise for the roles required, their affirmative response rate was 24 percent and 46 percent, respectively. Regarding an increased focus on providing instruction to students with learning differences, aides themselves admit feeling that they lack the qualifications to perform the duties often assigned, while also demonstrating an insufficient level of understanding of the content they are supposed to teach (Giangreco, 2012). Studies have shown that paraeducators frequently experience a wide array of difficulties when providing academic supports to students with learning disabilties and other needs (Giangreco et al., 2010; Rubie-Davies, Blatchford, Webster, Koutsoubou, & Bassett, 2010).

Paraeducator Effectiveness in the Classroom

One may question why educational leaders have generally accepted the notion that additional classroom staff will benefit student learning when research is increasingly documenting that this is not necessarily the case. Illustrating this point, Russell et al. (2013)

describe two projects involving the role of paraeducators and offer school leaders a series of recommendations to address the issues their research unveils. The first study, a five-year worldwide examination of the use of paraeducators entitled the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project, reviews the widespread use of educational aides, highlights their instructional roles, and presents multiple forms of data regarding the impact of aides on student learning. Upon the DISS project's conclusion in 2008, the same team of researchers led the Effective Deployment of Teaching Assistants (EDTA) project to design and evaluate strategies and changes in practice that address the first study's findings.

Russell et al. (2013) identify three primary concerns associated with the instructional role of paraeducators when reporting on the DISS project. The authors first reveal observational findings that describe the way in which the aides' near exclusive work with special needs students creates a situation where teachers concentrate the majority of their attention on the other students in the class. This tendency for teachers to focus on the regular education students left those with high-needs receiving minimal academic guidance beyond the paraeducators' help. In a sense, this practice detaches students who possess greater degrees of need from the overall instructional environment of the classroom, and can seem to contradict or undermine the rationale for placement in inclusive classrooms in the first place.

> Teachers provided less support to these pupils than did TAs [teaching aides], and TAs hardly ever supported average or higher-attaining pupils. Crucially, we found that TA interaction with pupils increased, and teacher interaction decreased, with the severity of pupils' SEN [special education needs]. (Russell et al., 2013, p. 12)

Second, indicators show that factors compounding the problem involve paraeducators' propensity to utilize a reactive stance, along with an inclination toward focusing on task completion rather than learning for understanding. The DISS researchers explain that reactive stances entail unplanned responses to the student's needs at that very moment, rather than replies with a basis in learning the instructional objectives for understanding. Regarding the focus on task completion, the authors describe the following:

> Teachers generally *'open up'* pupil talk, whereas the TAs '*close down'* the talk, both linguistically and cognitively. TAs, therefore, do not tend to know how to make the best use of the extended, more frequent interactions they have with pupils. (Russell et al., 2013, p. 14)

Third, the researchers identify a lack of joint planning time and problems arising from limits in professional development as it relates to oversight and communication between supervising teachers and instructional aides. These factors combine to create a situation where lead teachers tender minimal degrees of guidance and supervision to paraeducators. Reinforcing the need to develop supervisory skills among teachers, Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, and Stahl (2001) report that limited empirical evidence exists to identify the competencies needed by teachers in order to evaluate the performance of the aides they supervise. Supporting the findings of Wallace et al., French (2001), reports on data gathered from the administration of a questionnaire to special education teachers on the subject of paraeducators and supervisory teachers. While two-thirds of the respondents indicate a responsibility to supervise paraeducators, 88 percent state that their knowledge of that process is experience-based. French's findings also note that potential gaps exist in lesson plans created by teachers for paraeducators.

More than half of the respondents admitted to including goals from individual education plans (IEPs) as part of their aides' lesson plans only sometimes or rarely.

Types of Interactions Between Paraeducators and Students

Another study further describes the interactions between students and teachers to students and instructional aides. Evidencing the focus on task completion rather than on developing higher-order thinking skills, (Rubie-Davies et al., 2010), researchers use a strategy to compare and contrast the types of prompts and use of language between teachers and aides. The authors evidence that teachers are more likely to help students think through the answer, whereas aides were more likely to reveal or give the answer. Unfortunately, they also document instances of teaching assistants creating more confusion among students by misteaching or providing incorrect information during a lesson.

> The finding that TAs at times did not understand the concepts that they were supposed to be assisting pupils to learn was particularly troubling, given that they often support the pupils most in need of learning support. A further point is that TAs did not to appear to have received sufficient training to understand how to develop pupil thinking, but were on frequent occasions providing pupils with answers to questions or tasks, meaning that pupils did not need to do the thinking for themselves. (Rubie-Davies et. al., 2010, p.444)

Data from French (2001) casts doubt on the amount of guidance paraeducators may receive from special education teachers as it relates to the quality of questions they pose. When the survey respondents were asked if the plans they prepare for educational aides include questions to ask students, replies list never/rarely and sometimes as 25 and 43 percent, respectively.

Measuring the amount of time that students spend interacting with support staff (Blatchford et al., 2011) indicates that an excessive reliance on aides can impede student progress. Organizing the types of help into categories, the researchers report that over time, students who receive the greatest degree of guidance, more than 50 percent of the time, also experience the least amount of academic progress. This remains the case even when the researchers control for factors like learning disabilities. Theorizing that the lack of growth may correlate with a state of dependence or overreliance on classroom staff, students working with aides for greater amounts of time may fail to attain sufficient degrees of autonomy in the learning process. This lack of autonomy may then contribute to under-developed problem-solving skills. The findings from this study can inform professional development for paraeducators by ensuring that training includes strategies on tapering and gradually reducing assistance levels. Greater degrees of self-reliance can foster and facilitate the development of independence, self-efficacy, and problem-solving skills among students who struggle.

Professional Development and Paraeducators

The National Paraeducator Survey found that 80 percent of the aides responding to their survey did express a need for additional training (Malian, 2011) while revealing that the majority of responding paraeducators also demonstrate an understanding of the importance of adapting instruction to meet the learning needs of students who struggle. A separate survey designed to assess the professional development needs of paraeducators, as well as investigate their roles and responsibilities, includes data compiled from 313 paraeducators assigned to 77 schools in a Midwestern state (Carter, O'Rourke, Sisco, & Pelsue, 2009). Gender data reveals that just over 90 percent of the responding paraeducators were women, nearly half report their years of

experience ranging from 0 – 5 years, and 82 percent work with students possessing learning disabilities. Using a five-point Likert scale, the instructional aides self-assess and self-report their own skill levels across three domains. Average ratings on all of the content-area questions demonstrate scores at or above the middle rating of three, showing that the paraeducators in this study did not necessarily perceive knowledge issues as a concern. Utilizing statistical analysis by comparing responses to years of experience, the aides with the greatest amounts of experience also self-report higher competency levels.

Paraeducator responses to this survey confirm that their duties are largely instructional in nature, with nearly half listing the primary mode of professional development as on-the-job training. The next highest number of 25.5 percent indicates those reporting attendance at an in-service function. A list of the instructional aides' training topics feature education-based terminology, behavioral management, policies and procedures, special education's purpose, disabilities' impact on students, and ethical practices. Of note are the paraeducators' varied duties and their range of responses. For example, 97 percent of the aides report that they provide one-on-one instruction, 85 percent offered small group assistance, and almost 80 percent manage routine tasks like photocopying and clerical work. On the other hand, about 20 percent of paraeducators state that they administer informal and formal assessments and write lesson plans. Less than five percent of the educational aides list involvement in IEP (or ARD) meetings. The duties and responsibilities listed by the aides in this study align with other research, illustrating and verifying how the role of paraeducators has shifted to one that is primarily instructional in nature.

Rural school districts may find it especially difficult to arrange and provide meaningful training to paraeducators due to limited access, cost, travel issues, and time constraints associated with travel from remote locations (Deardorff, Glasenapp, Schalock, & Udell, 2007). Technology-based programs may serve as a means of bridging some of the access limits those in less populated regions experience. Scant evidence exists regarding the way teachers may apply and utilize skills from online training, webinars, and related methods in comparison to collaborative and job-embedded processes.

Action Research and Professional Development

Existing research does demonstrate that action research processes in professional development can enhance learning outcomes and pedagogical practices. Hartnett (2012) reports on a two-year action research case study involving a professional development project in conjunction with two experienced, veteran teachers. This study analyzes the professed theoretical beliefs of the teachers and compares those beliefs to actual classroom practices. Following an action research cycle, Hartnett states that, "By the end of the study there had been a shift in the nature of teacher-teacher talk, from the shallow and mundane to a more thoughtful, analytical, and professional focus" (p. 380).

To facilitate professional learning and growth, Gordon (2004) advocates an approach focused on empowerment, contending that the most effective forms of professional development are those providing learning opportunities rooted in actual experience. Some of the characteristics of empowerment-based programs include a long-term focus, an understanding that skills develop and improve incrementally, address time constraints and flexibility issues, base content on the identified needs of the learner, and actively engage participants.

When examining a more personalized approach to professsional development, one study reports that paraeducators participating in an in-depth day-long training session that added follow-up components to include specific guidance, monthly follow-up sessions, and related readings, results in paraeducators performing their jobs with increased levels of professionalism and confidence (McKenzie, 2011). In addition to those noted improvements, McKenzie explains that an unexpected benefit of the strategy was that the program's retention of paraeducators improved, thereby reducing staff turnover. Attributing reductions in turnover to employing collaborative processes, the researcher speculated that a shared approach can expand a paraprofessionals' level of involvement in the decision-making process. This broadening of opportunities for instructional aides can enhance participation, allow feedback when forming individual education plans, as well as offer voice in problem-solving processes.

Adapting an established program can likely provide a structural framework for leaders to follow, while also allowing modifications to fulfill the differing needs of paraeducators. Gordon and Maxey (1991) recommend using an action research process in creating a Beginning Teacher Assistance Program (BTAP) to address issues that new to the profession teachers may encounter. Going beyond the typical assignment of a mentor along with the provision of a new faculty handbook, Gordon and Maxey advocate that school leaders develop the BTAP by utilizing a planned and thoughtful process. Such support systems would enable consideration of issues that may be unique to a particular school or student population while allowing the inclusion of strategies designed to address any unique characteristics or issues. An action research cycle and collaborative team approach informs each program phase, at the beginning of which the authors advocate a discussions to identify the problem and perform a needs assessment. The subsequent

steps involve identifying available resources, and then creating a comprehensive written plan based on the information gathered. Components they suggest to include in the plan are mentoring, journal reflections, observations of others, opportunities to co-teach, and participation in study groups. Following the plan's implementation, Gordon and Maxey suggest the use of a summative evaluation as a means of informing improvements. Consistent between the various models of action research is the cycle's repetition. Finally, the authors note the importance of continuing the new teacher assistance plan by explaining that novice teachers may require as many as three years of guidance before reaching a proficient level of performance.

Paraeducators Providing Literacy Supports

When considering professional development in literacy, Jones, Ratcliff, Sheehan, and Hunt (2012) report observations of paraeducators presenting phonics-based reading instruction with a scripted program and making content-based errors. Further, the aides were experiencing issues with time management, and as a result, the paraeducators resorted to skipping key components of the reading lesson plan. To address the situation, the school sent the instructional aides to a half-day reading workshop and following this training, the researchers held a subsequent observation session. During the second observation, the researchers noted that the only observed improvement following the attendance at the professional development session involved time management skills. The researchers did conclude that the professional development intervention was not effective in this particular context (Jones et al., 2012). Even though this study demonstrates an inherent weakness involving the use of scripted programs, of importance in this context is that it offers an example of less effective practices in continuing

education while evidencing cause for concern regarding the minimal training requirements of paraeducators.

Causton-Theoharis, Giangreco, Doyle, and Vadasy (2007) compare paraprofessionals to sous-chefs whose duties involve meal preparation in support of a restaurant's lead chef. The authors present guidelines on the successful use of paraeducators offering literacy-based supports. Suggestions include ensuring that paraeducators serve in supplemental capacities, receive training in the use of research-based approaches and behavioral management, and are monitored and offered feedback on a continual basis.

Adult Learning and Collaboration

School improvement research supports the creation of collaborative professional development processes for paraeducators. Educational reform includes strategies to build capacity among teachers by formation of professional learning communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Contending that the establishment of a professional learning community (PLC) can serve as a catalyst for shifting a school's overall culture and focus, Dufour and Eaker advocate the model as a means of transforming a school's culture and learning environment. School leaders embracing the PLC concept may find that students ultimately benefit from the process by experiencing performance gains and other forms of academic growth. For those working in such a climate, a school-wide commitment to collective forms of inquiry, empowering strategies, and use of research-based practices, can lead to proactive problem solving.

Joyce, Showers, and Rolheiser-Bennett (1987) assert that if teachers are to adapt their practices to improve student outcomes, then they must develop pedagogical skills employed in the classroom at a mastery level. The authors explain by stating the following:

> As we design and implement more substantial staff development systems, what will sustain us will be the shared vision of schools where the effects of teaching and curricular practices are pyramided to generate learning energy vastly above what has ever existed in this nation or any other. (p. 22)

Gordon (2004) outlines traits of adult learning that can be essential to consider when designing professional development programs. These qualities include a desire to learn content if it is germane and relevant to their personal context, practical by allowing swift application, respectful of the broad knowledge base and experience levels of adults, affirmative and positive, and actively engaging.

> For professional development, this means that lectures and other methods associated with passive learning must be kept to a minimum. Training programs need to include active learning strategies such as discussion groups, collaborative projects, brainstorming, role-playing, case studies, micro-teaching, problem-based learning, and simulations. Moreover, professional development needs to move beyond training sessions to field-based activities such as curriculum development, instructional design, team teaching, improvement of student assessment, action research, peer-coaching, and reflective writing. (Gordon, 2004, p. 19)

Professional Development and Coaching-Based Guidance

When considering the professional development strategy of coaching, Marzano and Sims (2013) furnish an important insight for those providing job-embedded supports by conveying the need to emphasize the step-by-step nature of learning experiences. Cautioning against coaches operating in an evaluative capacity, the authors stress the value of voluntary participation by

those who are both interested and motivated toward achieving school improvement goals. A recent survey indicates such a willingness by paraeducators to participate voluntarily in professional development. Even though Brown and Devecchi's (2013) research relates to the deployment and impact of paraeducators, their survey tool includes questions on professional development and motivation. Of the educational aides responding to this survey, 85.7 percent indicated that they felt it was very important to attend professional development in support of children in their learning. Nearly 82 percent of the respondents listed improving knowledge and skills as very important.

Glickman (2002) also advocates collaborative learning and professional development practices through peer coaching. Prior to the initiation of this type of program, Glickman recommends the inclusion of a training component like a workshop or facilitated discussion. This enables participants to work together to develop an understanding of the process, establishes the focus of program, and creates strategies to develop collaborative relationships.

When describing a professional development model utilizing an approach that combines action research with coteaching, Yendoll-Hoppey and Dana (2010) contend that this method builds understanding through scaffolding. Going as far as advocating the use of a coteaching model in lieu of the traditional student-teaching experience, the authors express a belief that the benefits attained from modeling, practice, support, and job-embedded guidance using a team teaching relationship builds capacity, knowledge, and confidence.

Establishing an environment in support of paraprofessionals, Capizzi and DaFonte (2012) promote the creation of a collaborative classroom support plan. Their four-part process encompasses a design to establish an environment in support of paraprofessionals. The authors

outline four components that include orientation, clarification of professional duties and responsibilities, communication, and professional development. Resources designed by the researchers can aid in facilitating the implementation of this type of collaborative approach. While the explicit details of this strategy may not necessarily meet the differing needs of all paraeducators, it does offer a programmatic framework that could serve to guide a more individualized approach to adult instruction.

Suggestions made by Cobb (2007) featured recommendations for administrators of reading programs and the training supports created for paraeducators. Mirroring an action research cycle and stressing the importance of first conducting a needs assessment, Cobb adds elements of planning that include training sessions to address the issues identified by the needs assessment, and then providing follow-up supports for implementation. Varying forms of feedback can then influence the improvements and changes.

Summary

The literature review details how the role of paraeducators has shifted to one that has become instructional in nature, and focuses on paraeducators who provide academic supports to students experiencing learning challenges. Limited educational requirements and no professional development mandates have led to a situation where many have questioned whether paraeducators possess the requisite skills to serve high-need populations. Reflecting these concerns in the literature, the data highlight how limited training coupled with less appropriate forms of paraeducator deployment can impede or hamper student academic gains. Important to acknowledge is the issue of effectiveness as it relates to professional development. Numerous teachers will readily attest that they do not necessarily view the professional development

programs utilized by schools and districts as beneficial. Rather, the more successful teacher training programs tend to consider the differing learning needs of teachers based on their experience and levels of development. This often requires including elements involving collaborative supports that are meaningful, in-depth, and readily applicable to classroom situations.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter features the various elements involved in the design of the participatory action research (PAR) study. This study was initiated in August, 2013, and concluded in February, 2014. The total number of participants included two elementary paraeducators, a teacher who supervised one of the paraeducators, the campus vice-principal, and district superintendent. All subjects volunteered to be involved in the process. Specifically, the study sought to address the following questions:

1. What are the identified professional development needs of paraeducators in this context based on information provided by a teacher, a paraeducator, and an administrator in the participating school?
2. How do job-embedded and personalized supports help paraeducators develop instructional skills?
3. In what ways may job-embedded guidance enhance paraeducator agency and voice?

This chapter will explain the components essential to answering the research questions, including the methodology employed, criteria for selecting the study site and participants, data collection strategies, data analysis processes, validity measures, and ethical considerations to protect study participants.

Methodology

Based on its alignment with the study's questions and objectives, PAR guided the provision of job-embedded professional development that was collaborative and supportive in nature, while also leading participants toward the development of agency and voice. Formed in

part through knowledge acquisition that utilizes conversations and thoughtful consideration of classroom practices, PAR designs include a reflective component that facilitates knowledge acquisition and influences adaptations made, thereby leading to ongoing improvement.

Brydon-Miller, Kral, Maguire, Noffke, and Sabhlok (2011) used the following description of PAR when explaining its collaborative nature:

> It is built upon the notion that knowledge generation is a collaboration process in which each participant's diverse experiences and skills are critical to the outcome of the work. PAR combines theory and practice in cycles of action and reflection that are aimed toward solving concrete community problems while deepening understanding of the broader social, economic, and political forces that shape these issues. And PAR is responsive to changing circumstances, adapting its methods, and drawing on the resources of all participants to address the needs of the community. (p. 387)

Offering on-site job-embedded supports to facilitate adult learning and professional development increases the likelihood that teachers will transfer the newly learned information to practices (Kretlow, Cooke, & Wood, 2012). Areas of focus include guidance in implementing best-practices in instruction and behavior management. Inquiry utilizing PAR can result in a learning process that is especially well suited toward facilitating positive change and growth in and among adult learners and within schools (James et al., 2008). PAR's alignment with the study's aims is perhaps best expressed by the following:

> It is the purpose of professional development to leave practitioners motivated and energized to create needed change by involving them in the study and improving their practice. Most educators agree that trainings frequently do not meet that intended aim….

> PAR studies leave the practitioners more motivated and energized about their work than when they began the project. (James et al., 2008, p. 11)

The cyclical processes common to all forms of action research methodology include a progression of phases beginning with a review of the literature, identification of a problem, collection and analysis of data, and the design of an action or intervention to address the identified issues, followed by reflection (Hendricks, 2013; James et al. 2008; Mills, 2011). Action researchers often make adaptations based on interim analysis of the data as it is gathered during the collaborative study. The ultimate goal of action research is to attain the desired result or solve the identified problem, with repetition of the cycle as necessary. Thus, action research often fuels a compelling drive toward continuous change and improvement.

I conceived the study's original action research cycle following a review of the various components represented by action research cycles in the literature (Cardno, 2006; Hendricks, 2013; Mills, 2011; Quebec-Fuentes, 2013). The first cycle was circular in shape and featured collaboration as being central to the process. Directional arrows connected each of the outer components of the circle, which included a review of the literature, identification of the problem, intervention, data review and analysis, evaluation, adaptations and modifications, and then returning to the literature review. Breakout sections illustrated the initial data collection stage and the intervention components. The planned intervention strategies included reflections, readings, observations and feedback, team teaching, and workshops. While the stages stood independently, the circular interconnectivity represented an associated, dependent, and bound system. As the study progressed, the research cycle began to evolve, whereas the role and

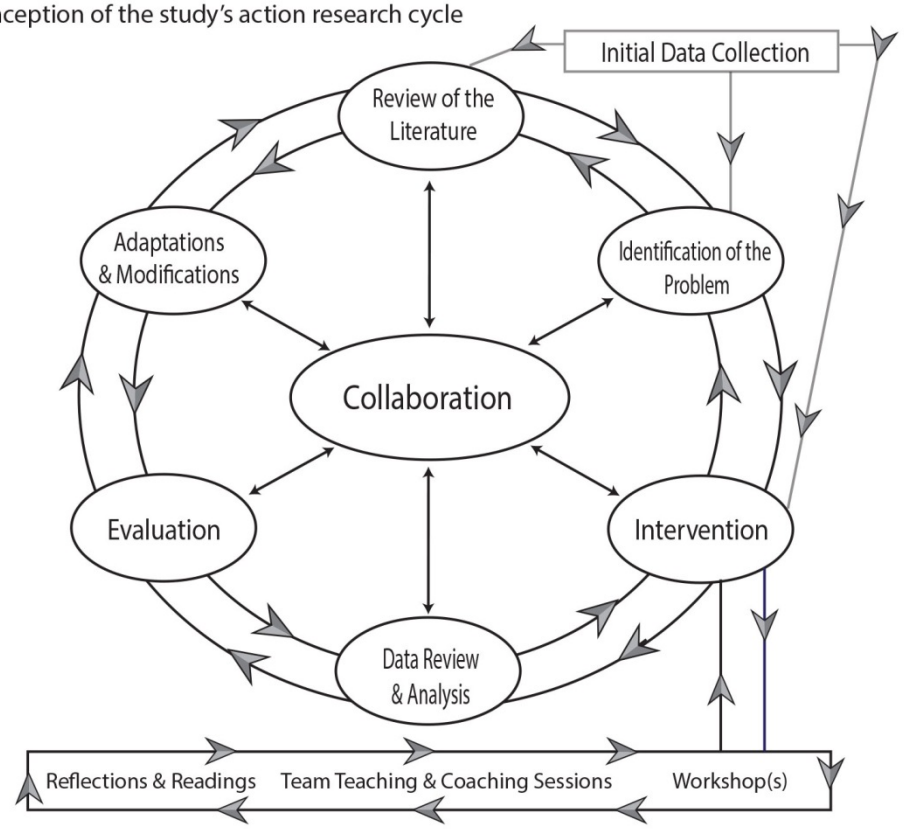
importance of the differing stages began to shift in terms of their importance to the study. Figure 4 illustrates the differences between the conceived and actual research cycle.

For example, revisiting the literature was not as significant as the frequency of contact and degree of effort involved in other stages, although they appeared as being equally important in the first cycle. Collaboration and reflection remained central throughout the research period; however, instead of writing a reflective journal, the primary participant expressed that she did not feel comfortable with writing, thus the adaptation to reflective conversations. Likewise, the importance of the intervention weighed heavily, with each component of this phase as being essentially vital to the study. The intervention was also adapted based on time constraints and participant availability. Time limitations did not afford an opportunity for the provision of a formal workshop, particularly when exploring the scheduling issues experienced by one paraeducator in particular, and described further in chapter four. The team teaching concept was likewise adapted to demonstration lessons at the primary participant's request. I originally had the assumption that the literacy paraeducator would have at her disposal a greater degree of instructional resources than actually existed. Similarities between the cycles include collaboration as being central to the process. The revised cycle largely reflects a process influenced and driven by the collaborative nature of action research.

Context

The study site is a public school district located in the North Texas region of the United States. Demographic data collected from the United States Census (2010) regarding the community that is central to the participating district lists the total population as 430, and a racial and ethnic composition of 90 percent Caucasian, 8.1 percent Hispanic, and 1.9 percent other.

Original conception of the study's action research cycle



Actual action research cycle as it evolved during the course of the study

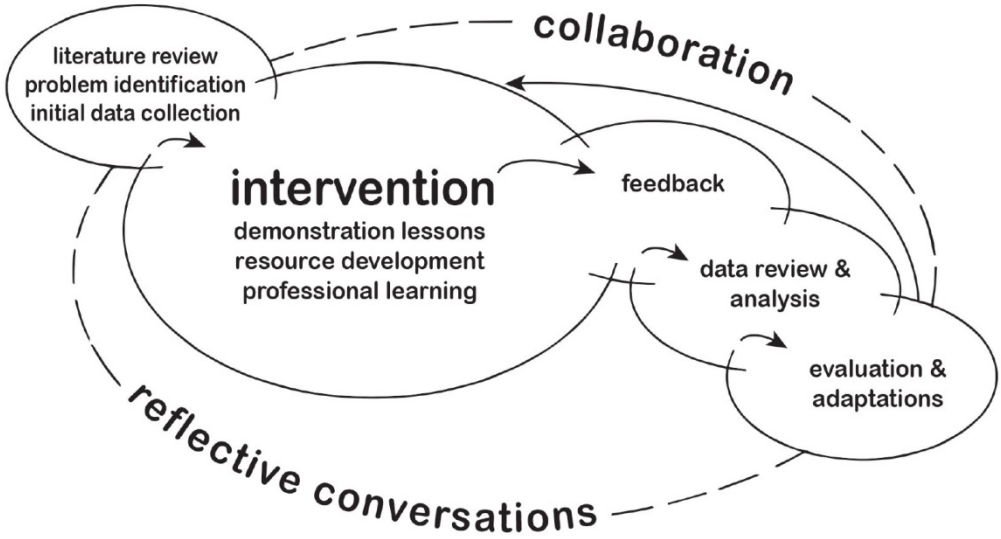


Figure 4. A comparison between the original action research concept to the actual study cycle that occured. Both processes initiate with a review of the literature, problem identification, and early data collection strategies. In the revised version, collaboration and reflective conversations were central to the study cycle. The intervention phase was of primary importance, while informing adaptations, data review and analysis, and evaluation, with optional repitition as needed. The primary differentiator between the cycles is the degree of influence of the key components, as illustrated in the latter version.

District boundaries encompass an area larger than the town itself, with the number of enrolled students in the district listed as 301 for the 2011-2012 school year and the percentage of students deemed economically disadvantaged as 44.9 percent (TEA, 2013b). Ratings for 2012-2013 school year list that the district met accountability standards in all four areas measured, including student achievement, student progress, closing performance gaps, and post-secondary readiness (TEA, 2013b).

Situated approximately 60 miles southwest of a major metropolitan area, many of the residents commute to work, and as a result, the district has several programs in place to accommodate for the childcare needs experienced by families and caregivers. For instance, the district provides a portable building, playground, and related space for a fully certified and independently operated childcare program. All children residing in the district qualify for Pre-K enrollment and teachers from the district and childcare program supervise and assist the transition of the students who are dual-enrolled. Beginning in kindergarten and extending through high school, students have the option of enrolling in the district's free before and after school program, the costs of which are covered in-full from a federal grant program. Employing the district's teachers and other staff members, the grant provides the necessary supplemental pay to those employees who elect to work added hours. Between the hours of 3:30 – 5:45 p.m., the after school schedule includes a snack, a teacher-supervised homework period, and various activities.

Texas Education Agency (2013b) figures show that during the 2011-2012 school year, the district employed a total number of 22 teachers. District officials confirm employing a total of three paraeducators during the 2013-2014 school year, with two assigned to the elementary

and one to the high school. Practical considerations and scheduling issues influenced the decision to limit the study to involve the two elementary paraeducators, both of whom elected to participate.

Sample

The identification and selection of the participating district involved their fulfillment of a series of predetermined attributes. Using a convenience sample, the participating district is located in the North Texas region and employs paraeducators who work in a capacity involving direct contact with students. The paraeducators' roles include offering instructional or behavioral supports delivered under the direction of teachers. Participant descriptions follow, with their identities protected using pseudonyms:

- Laura – An elementary paraeducator who provides pullout supports for students with high needs. Laura was the primary study subject and participated in the initial interview.
- Susan – An elementary paraeducator who provides behavioral supports in an inclusive classroom.
- Jamie – A teacher in an inclusive elementary classroom who works in conjunction with Susan. Jamie was also an initial interview participant.
- Audrey – A part-time elementary vice-principal and high school teacher.
- Sharon – The district's superintendent who also participated in the initial interview.

Essential to the sample selection process was the cooperation of the administrative, teaching, and support staff, along with a willingness to allocate a sufficient amount of time to professional development for the school's paraeducators.

Procedure

The qualitative methods employed using PAR included two phases. The first phase involved structured and unstructured observations and an initial semi-structured interview, the purpose of which were to provide an environmental scan by gaining a panoptic understanding of the district, school, and context. The second phase encompassed provision of an intervention using practitioner-based processes combined with case study analysis. All study participants signed consent documents.

The initial segment of the study facilitated dialogue and collaborative processes while investigating the learning needs of the district's paraeducators. Several on-site observation sessions allowed gathering baseline data, documenting current school practices, and reviewing the actual roles of the paraeducators on campus. Other information gathered included noting and recording current strategies employed by the paraeducators, and observing how the teachers collaborated and oversaw the supplemental instruction offered to their students. Data were recorded during the observations using structured observation tools and copious field notes. In addition to field notes, a digital audio device proved beneficial as a secondary means of capturing a personal verbal recounting of the experience immediately after site visits. No audio recordings were made during interviews or while working with paraeducators. Transcribing both forms of data facilitated the interim and final data analysis.

I conducted a one-hour, semi-structured interview with three of the five study participants, who were representative of the subjects involved and could help lay the groundwork by providing valuable insights into the needs of the district's paraeducators. Interview subjects included the district's superintendent, one teacher who supervised a paraeducator, and one

paraeducator. When performing qualitative interviews, Merriam (2009) explains that the advantages of a semi-structured format is that it allows gathering some specific information while also enabling flexibility based on the responses made by participants. Using an interview protocol (see Appendix A), questions included types of training the paraeducators have received in the past, support provided by teachers to guide their work with students, clarification of their roles and responsibilities, and discussion of the improvements that each viewed as holding potential benefits. Upon the completion of the interviews, a careful analysis of the data served to aid in the identification of the professional development needs of the school's paraeducators. Interim data analysis of the information gathered during the first phase of the study served to inform the second phase of the study, which was the intervention.

The intervention encompassed a job-embedded, collaborative, and reflective professional development program designed to provide guidance in instruction and modeling of differentiated teaching methods. Originally, the study's second phase was to include a half-day workshop, on-site team teaching and coaching sessions, independent study of resources, and shared reflective conversations and written journal entries. Adaptations resulted from the data gathered during the first phase, which aligns with the purpose and intent of practitioner-based inquiry. Thus, components envisioned for the professional development program shifted and later encompassed informal dialogue, demonstration lessons, discussion and collaborative development of resources and materials, and reflective conversations. Figure 5 illustrates and compares the primary components of the initial plan for the intervention to the actual intervention that unfolded during the course of the PAR study.

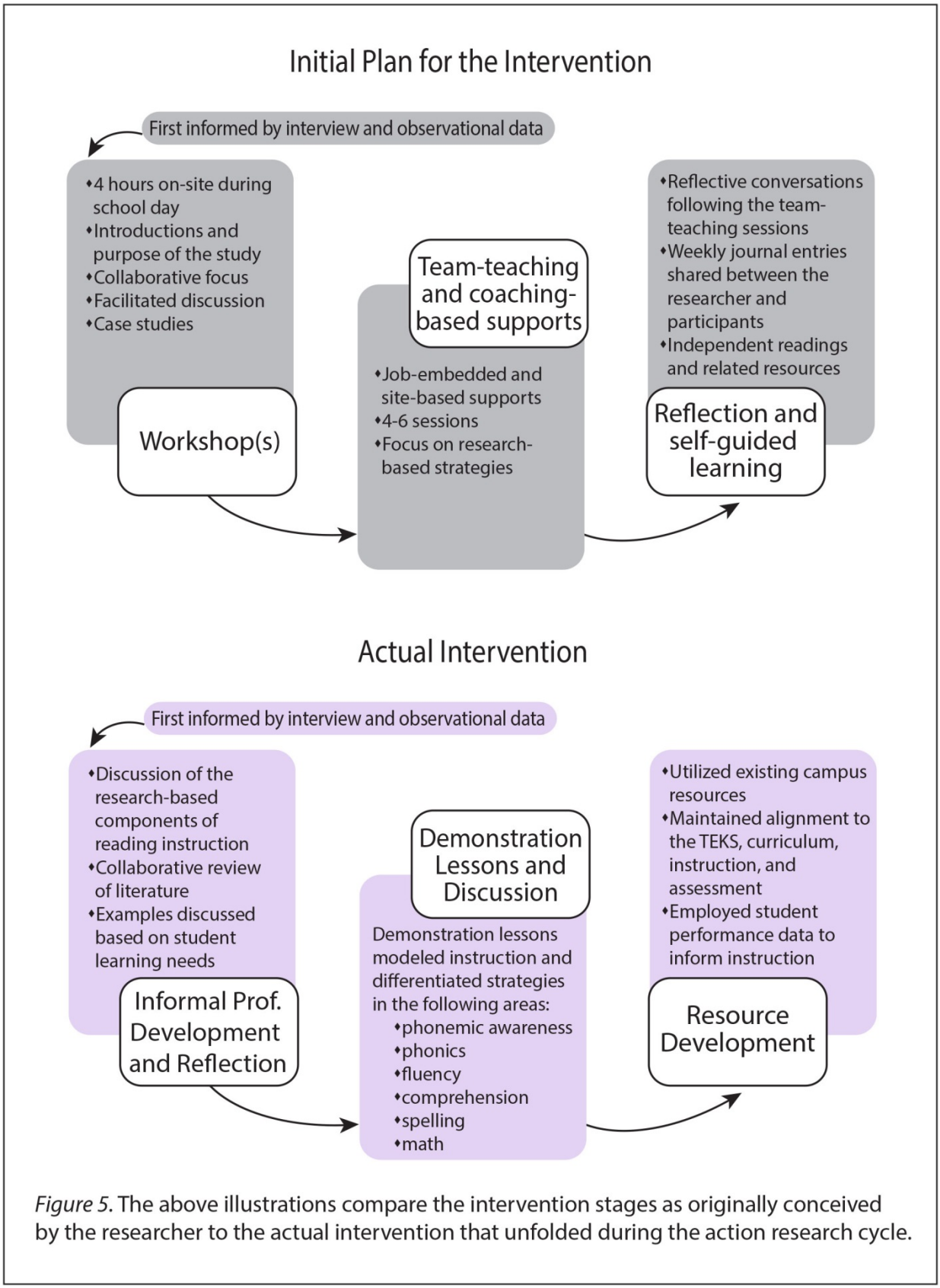


Figure 5. The above illustrations compare the intervention stages as originally conceived by the researcher to the actual intervention that unfolded during the action research cycle.

Workshop(s) to informal professional development and reflection. Glickman (2002) recommends the inclusion of training components in an action-based professional development plan. The original intent to offer a school-based session shifted primarily due to time constraints. The half-day workshop was to include a review of the study's participatory action plan, consent procedures, answer questions, establish rapport, and facilitate discussion on differentiated strategies. Still, I was able to meet the goals in a less formal manner in terms of answering questions and establishing rapport with the study participants. For example, following an observation, we would discuss various strategies to assist the students who were served, and build understanding that took into consideration the prior knowledge and experience held. Data gathered during this time included field notes that detailed the ideas and concerns shared by the participants, information on their classroom experiences, details of issues encountered, informal assessment of content-area knowledge (strengths and weaknesses), and remarks related to their roles and responsibilities.

Team teaching and job-embedded supports to demonstration lessons. Paramount to this process was working on-site, collaboratively, and in such a manner as to minimize potential disruptions to student learning. Job-embedded supports alleviated the inconvenience of participating in a research project, while simultaneously rendering positive and supportive guidance. The original plan was to organize six to eight team teaching and job-embedded support sessions with the participants. Instead, Laura, the study's primary participant, asked me to conduct demonstration lessons in lieu of engaging in team teaching. This alteration to the original plan still allowed modeling instruction, demonstrating techniques, and providing encouragement. Integral to the process was the collaborative sharing of ideas and reflection as it

related to the students' individual learning needs, with discussion of the rationale behind each of the methods employed. Numerous opportunities to differentiate instruction existed and our conversations focused on problem-solving, answering questions, and discussing content-related points.

As noted earlier, in-depth field notes were augmented by a verbal recount at the conclusion of each site visit. Field notes focused on recording as much information as possible relating to the overall experience, knowing that themes might emerge from unexpected details. Notations also documented any changes in student performance, responses and behaviors, and whether instructional practices evolved that reflected guidance or resources related to the study.

Reflection and self-guided learning to resource development. Initially, reflection was largely a separate component of the planned action research process; however, the reflective conversations were actually elemental to the entire study cycle. Professional development and self-guided learning also fell into close alignment with the issues associated with access, agency, and voice. Again, these features remained interconnected throughout each of the phases of the study cycle, thus rendering them as embedded in nature, not something that stood independently. Observations did indicate a need to aid in the development and creation of teaching and learning resources that Laura could implement within the systemic constraints she faced. Collaborative conversations with participants led to the creation of classroom activities using an intervention curriculum developed by the creators of the Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI), a widely used reading screening and assessment tool. Gathering data on the use of this resource comprised of interviews with TPRI staff members on its use along with a review of the training materials they provided. Other forms of data collection included detailed field notes, informal assessment

of the learning needs of the students, formal TPRI assessment data, and feedback from participants.

End-of-study questionnaire. Participants completed a structured end-of-study questionnaire (see Appendix B) that allowed the study subjects to share their perceptions regarding its content, perceived benefits and drawbacks using a Likert scale. Open-ended questions provided an opportunity for feedback about the process and their insights regarding involvement in the research project. Charting and coding of the questionnaire responses aided in identifying themes and assessing the participant's impressions of the study's impact. One participant's suggestions impacted the action research cycle through the late addition of a demonstration lesson using a specific teaching method.

Data Analysis

The action research study combined qualitative methodology that included semi-structured interviews and structured and unstructured observations during the study's first phase. Foundational data gathered during the initial phase then served to inform the second phase, which included intervention activities focused on job-embedded professional development, along with collaborative development of resources, and reflective conversations. Findings encompass both qualitative analytical methods as well as descriptions of the primary study participants' experiences through case study analysis. An embedded subcase analysis involved observations regarding the role and significance of instructional leadership decisions, which can potentially enhance academic services to students, especially those with learning needs, by defining and clarifying the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators. According to Hendricks (2013), interim data analysis enables an ongoing review of the progress of the action research cycle. Such

interim forms of investigation shaped the adaptations and modifications made throughout the PAR cycle.

When conducting qualitative research, Merriam (2009) explains that the advantages of conducting semi-structured observations are that they allow gathering of specific information while enabling flexibility based on the situations presented. Structured observations were completed using standardized tools including one originally designed by Madeline Hunter and known as the *Hunter Model Performance Indicators* (as cited by Glickman, et al. 2009), which is typically used when conducting teacher performance appraisals and evaluations (see Appendix C). Russell, et al. (2013) designed a paraeducator observation tool developed for the Effective Deployment of Teaching Assistants Project (EDTA). The intent of this particular schedule (see Appendix D) is for evaluating paraeducators working alongside teachers in the same classroom. When describing the tool, Russell et al. explain,

> The lesson observation schedule is designed to help you not only derive a clear systematic picture of how TAs [paraeducators] are deployed in classrooms and what roles they undertake, but further, to obtain an understanding of how teachers make use of TAs (especially with regard to meeting the needs of lower-attaining pupils with SEN [special education needs]) and how their own pedagogical practice is affected by the presence and deployment of a TA. (p. 28)

An advantage of multiple forms of observational data gathering was described by James, et al. (2008), saying "…a high degree of structure also means that observers will be less likely to capture new or unexpected events" (p. 76). Copious field-notes allowed documentation of data during the interviews, observations, reflective conversations, and collaborative sessions. In

addition to field-notes, a digital audio device provided a secondary means of recording a verbal recount at the conclusion of each on-site experience. Transcribing both forms of data aided in the interim and final data analysis.

Many consider reflection as central to the action research process (Hendricks, 2013; James et al., 2008; Mills, 2011) by offering a vital source of information and data. When asked about writing and sharing reflection journal entries, Laura said that she was uncomfortable with the concept. As a result, added time on-site with Laura allowed informal reflective conversations to accomplish this goal during every visit.

Yin (2006) explains that the advantages of conducting case study analysis include allowing researchers to answer questions through studies that are either descriptive or explanatory. Descriptive studies simply portray or depict the observations and experiences of participants as a means of gaining insights and fostering understanding about the question studied. Explanatory case studies both illustrate and then seek answers to questions in terms of how or why something that was observed or studied may have happened. The overall holistic nature of the case study involves examining the paraeducators roles overall, as well as the ways in which they assist students by supporting academic growth and development. The study's findings are consistent with paraeducator deployment theories developed and explored by other researchers, most notably Russell, Webster, and Blatchford (2013).

Following the commencement of the intervention, an in-depth data analytical process began, facilitated by the use of ATLAS.ti qualitative analytical software (see Appendix E). Themes quickly began emerging while largely supporting the ideas formulated during the interim data review. Merriam (2009) recommends a structured approach to data analysis by utilizing a

sequential and planned process that includes a construction and naming of categories, sorting data into themes, examining relationships and expanding categories and sub-categories, and then forming a narrative explanation of the findings. Accomplishing this structured approach was largely due to both the interim data analysis process as well as with the support of ATLAS.ti. Initially, more than 20 themes and 91 codes were identified when categorizing the data. Later, condensing the themes and codes enabled data structures that were much more manageable and ruminative in nature. Regardless of the organizational methods used to create meaning from data, Mills (2011) explains that,

> It is a process of digesting the contents of your qualitative data and finding related threads in it….To make the kinds of connections needed to analyze and interpret qualitative data, you must know your data – really know it, in your head, not just on paper. (p. 127)

Several disinterested peers reviewed the data and emerging themes to support intercoder reliability. To enhance consistency, comparative coding enabled an alignment during data interpretation. Integral to participatory action research is the ongoing evaluation of the study process. This occurs through conversations, interim data analysis, and mutual reflections, which allow all stakeholders in the study to contribute equally. The positionality of the researcher as an outsider conducting research within a closed and bounded system did influence the information shared by participants, as further explored in chapter four. Upon the study's conclusion, the data was thoroughly and comprehensively evaluated.

Validity

Ensuring the integrity of the research process within a PAR context seemed especially meaningful given the dual role of the researcher as participant. Herr and Anderson (2005) recommend the use of multiple forms of validity criteria that work in concert during the course of the inquiry process, and based on the format and design of the study. Achieving democratic validity through the initial interviews allowed participants to influence the intervention via collaboration, thereby privileging the voice of the other, and expanding capacity through reflective conversations and the collective development of resources. Realizing process validity included the triangulation of data sources that featured structured and unstructured observations, interviews, reflective conversations, document analysis, and review of archival data. Catalytic validity involves whether the action research served to sustain or facilitate ongoing change as it relates to the phenomena studied (Herr & Anderson, 2005). In this case, the positionality of being an outsider may have impacted the study's degree of catalytic validity in that the ongoing cycle of change and improvement was left to participants to continue independently. Potential academic bias regarding the focus of my professional training using multisensory structured language education made it necessary to seek references and resources that represented multiple forms of literacy instruction. Member checking with the study's participants ensured an accurate recounting of the research experience.

Ethical Considerations

Precautions to protect the research subjects and to minimize the possibility of undue influence or coercion included an explanation about voluntary consent and withdrawal procedures during initial meetings and conversations with participants. All of the study subjects

were adults and signed consent forms that included an explanation that volunteering to participate was not required by any school or district official. The choice to become or remain involved in the study was at each individual's sole discretion. Explanations included reassurances that any statements or responses would remain completely confidential, and that there would be no disclosure of either the names of the study participants or the name of the school or district.

Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed the components of practitioner-based research as they relate to the design of the PAR study. Included was a discussion of the methodology, along with strategies for collecting and analyzing data. Explanations included the criteria for selecting the study site and sample, validity, and ethical considerations and protections for those involved.

Also described were the progressive adaptations made to the study's early plan, as informed by collaborative inquiry. Initially, information gathered during observations and interviews provided foundational and contextual insights regarding the needs of the paraeducators employed by the participating school. As a result, adaptations then reflected the collectively identified professional development components and resources offered during the intervention phase of the study cycle.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This chapter explores the participatory action research (PAR) study designed to provide personalized and job-embedded professional development for paraeducators, with a presentation of the study's findings. Data were gathered during each field-based visit to the participating elementary campus over the six-month study length. Methods included a semi-structured initial interview along with observational data using both structured and unstructured procedures, which provided foundational data that informed the context and aided in identifying the needs to be addressed through the intervention. While providing job-embedded professional development, I modeled differentiated instruction by conducting a series of demonstration lessons. Data collected following those sessions included feedback, discussion of the rationale surrounding the modeled practices, and reflection of how these approaches could be employed in the pullout program. Finally, a questionnaire sought to gather additional information at the study's conclusion.

Case study narratives of the participants explore the central themes that emerged during the PAR cycle. Due to the substantial amount of information gathered during the study, this chapter focuses on the prevailing themes that emerged in alignment to the research questions. Reinforcing the evidence involves the use of triangulation from multiple sources. This includes interviews from participants, observations, document review, archival data, and supporting literature from other researchers. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

Initial Interview and Observational Data

The study initiated with an investigative stage to examine the context and develop a keen understanding of cultural and environmental factors within the study district. Accomplishing this objective involved collecting data through semi-structured interviews and observations. This foundational information provided insights and represented perspectives from the roles of a paraeducator, teacher, and an administrator. Each interview respondent had more than 10 years of experience working in public schools. Data gathered during the semi-structured interviews included the following:

- Types of inservice programming offered
- Allotment of planning time
- Assessment of students and progress measures employed
- Type(s) of reading curricula utilized
- Response-to-Intervention and dyslexia identification procedures
- Procedures for identifying students with learning differences and related needs
- Roles and responsibilities of paraeducators

The interview respondents indicated that the district's paraeducators attend the same inservice programming as the teachers, with sessions presented during workdays prior to the start of the school year. For example, one workshop featured information on suicide prevention and crisis intervention. When the study was initiated, there was no planning time allotted to the paraeducators individually or collectively with the teachers. Some of the identified needs in the area of professional development included learning about differentiated instruction, behavioral strategies, and supports in reading instruction, specifically fluency and reading comprehension.

Progress measures primarily involved the use of the TPRI, and the teachers often reviewed standardized testing strategies on Fridays. The elementary campus used reading curricula published by McGraw Hill, but the faculty had much latitude and could supplement resources at their discretion. Due to the district's small size, they were members of a regional collaborative of districts who pooled their resources to fund staff members to provide special education identification and related services on a scheduled basis. Education and training levels between paraeducators can vary greatly within a school and district (McKenzie, 2011). This was the case when examining the educational backgrounds of the paraeducators employed by the participating school. Of the two elementary paraeducators, one possessed a degree in sociology while the other had completed high school.

Comments made during the semi-structured interviews included, "It would be interesting to learn some of the different approaches, especially in behavior." Another stated that it would be helpful if the paraeducators could learn, "Strategies to help those students who would not be successful readers. If we can develop the love of reading in every student, the battle is halfway won."

Participant identities are protected through the use of pseudonyms. Once the initial interviews and observations were completed, the amount of time spent with the participants during the intervention phase differed. The greatest amount of time was devoted to working with Laura, the paraeducator who assisted groups of students through pullout supports. Lesser amounts of time were spent with Susan, the second elementary paraeducator who provided in-class behavioral supports in conjunction with her supervising teacher, Jamie, although in-class observations were conducted while Susan and Jamie worked together. Periodic conversations

were held with administrative staff including Sharon, the district superintendent, and Audrey, the part-time administrator of the elementary campus.

Site Visit Summary

Beginning in August, 2013, and concluding in February, 2014, a total number of 14 site visits were made. These sojourns lasted in length from a half-day to a full day and are summarized below:

- The initial site visit involved touring the participating elementary campus, introductions, an explanation of the research project to faculty and staff members, along with an opening conversation with the district's superintendent.
- Three subsequent site visits included gathering observational data, examining curricular resources, and developing relationships with the study's participants.
- One day was scheduled at the request of the administrative team and allowed me to provide specific guidance and technical support that was not related to the study questions. This visit did inform the context by providing additional information about the study site and offering observational data.
- Three visits involved meeting and collaborating on the intervention strategies, blindly reviewing student TPRI assessment data, informally discussing teaching strategies, and preparing a resources *toolbox*.
- During the final six site visits, a series of 15 demonstration lessons were conducted. These demonstration lessons allowed Laura to observe instruction provided to her students during the pullout sessions. Reflective conversations followed the demonstration lessons. The purpose of these conversations was to highlight specific

strategies including methods to build reading fluency, enhance phonemic awareness, develop word attack skills, and utilize differentiated forms of instruction when supporting struggling students in the reading pullout program. Strategies in developing and building math skills for students with difficulties in memory, retrieval, and rapid naming were added based on identified needs resulting from the action research cycle. The reflective conversations included components associated with the rationale behind the various approaches and differentiated strategies. A greater number of demonstration lessons were planned, but Laura's scheduling issues reduced the number of actual demonstration lessons that were ultimately conducted.

Supporting Evidence

When available, multiple sources of information enhanced the validity of the information gathered. Documents that were collected included the following:

- Paraeducator schedules
- Teacher-provided weekly lesson plan
- Data collection tool for documenting paraeducator services provided to students
- Blind performance data from the 2013 Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI) that was administered to students in grades K-3 at the beginning of the year
- State Board of Educator Certification records for each participant
- 2012-2013 Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR)
- 2012 State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) Report
- District manual and policies for Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act
- District letter to parents on disability policies

- District policies for the following:
    - Faculty and staff professional development
    - Employment procedures and required credentials for faculty and staff
    - Identification, assessment, and referral for special education
    - Student records, which includes a section on research initiatives

Narrative Description of Participants

The identities of the study's subjects are protected using pseudonyms. Laura was the primary study participant, an elementary paraeducator who worked with students in a small classroom, under the direction of 10 elementary teachers. Laura's observed duties included the following:

- Providing supplemental literacy and math supports in a pullout format
- Supervising students before and after school and during elementary lunch
- Covering the office during the school secretary's lunch period or when absent
- Supporting the in-class behavior of one early childhood student for 90 minutes per day
- Serving as a partial-day substitute

Several reasons influenced the decision to spend the greatest amount of time with Laura, the paraeducator offering pullout supports. Her role most closely complemented my teaching and leadership background. Moreover, a few pockets of time existed during Laura's schedule where I was able to work with her in a job-embedded capacity with the least amount of disruption to the students. Susan, the second paraeducator, was stationed full-time in a single classroom to afford behavioral supports for a particular student and worked side-by-side with Jamie, her supervising

teacher. Other study participants included Audrey, who was the elementary school's part-time vice-principal, and Sharon, who was the district's superintendent.

What follows is a description of the participants, their observed roles and responsibilities, and their involvement in terms of answering the questions posed by the study. The participants' perspectives offer differing glimpses into daily practices, while also connecting emerging themes to their experiences.

Laura

Perhaps the best way to describe Laura is through a handmade poster she taped on the wall of her small classroom, which displays an adapted quote attributed to Theodore Roosevelt. It reads, "They don't care what you know, until they know that you care." Laura possessed a nurturing disposition, willingness to adjust to almost daily scheduling changes, and an encouraging attitude toward the students with whom she worked. I observed Laura's supportive and caring traits during the entire study cycle.

One instance illustrates Laura's nurturing spirit when she was monitoring a child with special needs while the other students in his class walked several blocks in a book-related parade. The child's impulsive behaviors and the parade route's proximity to the street created safety concerns. All of the other children from the class were wearing special hats, construction paper wristbands, costumes, and related accoutrements while this student was not wearing anything associated with the book's theme. Laura sought to offer an inclusive experience for this particular child while waiting for the others to return from the parade. In so doing, she walked the student to the teachers' workroom and, using the supplies available, created similar festive

garb for him to wear when rejoining his classmates at the end of the parade route. She remarked to the student, "See, now you look like everyone else."

Laura has spent a total of 16 years working as a paraeducator. Her career as a paraeducator began during 8 years of employment at a large, suburban district in North Texas. During this time, Laura spent her first five years with that district by working as an adaptive physical education aide. She then spent another three years as an in-class paraeducator supporting a special education teacher and speech-language pathologist. Laura had relatives living in her current district's boundaries, which prompted her family's relocation to this community. Following their move, Laura was hired by the study district and has spent eight years working and providing the elementary school's literacy-based supports to students who struggle, as well as fulfilling other duties. When asked about her job, Laura expressed, "I love it so much."

Laura described her own professional development needs by stating that it would be helpful to be able to recognize and present instruction using differentiated approaches. Laura also expressed frustration when the students were not progressing and had a few instances where she felt students lacked the motivation to learn. During reflective conversations, Laura explained that her daughter was the special education teacher at the district's high school, and that she would brainstorm with her daughter on ideas to help the students. Laura said that she would appreciate learning new strategies for providing reading and math supports and added, "Anything I can see to make it more effective." There were multiple instances when Laura expressed concerns about meeting the learning needs of the students by stating, "I stay awake at night and worry about the students and what to do to help them." During another site visit, Laura

repeated that sentiment by saying, “I stay awake at night wondering what to do. Sometimes the kids just need a different way of approaching the same thing.”

Observational data helped identify the types of job-embedded supports that may have enhanced Laura’s instructional and behavioral management skills. Two issues seemed central to the difficulties that I observed, and later personally experienced when conducting demonstration lessons. First was the absence of planning and collaboration between Laura and the teachers. For example, of the ten elementary teachers who sent students to work with Laura, only one teacher provided a weekly lesson plan during the study period. The one lesson plan that Laura did receive, while devoid of instructional objectives, consisted of three lines of instructions for her to follow for the entire week. An in-depth exploration of these issues will encompass discussion of the prevailing themes later in this chapter. Second were Laura’s constant and ongoing scheduling changes. Observations noted inconsistencies and changes to Laura’s schedule during every visit made to the school. Reasons for the unexpected scheduling changes ranged from Laura providing office coverage and substitute teaching for some faculty prioritizing non-academic activities over instructional supports.

During the onset of the study, the *Hunter Model Performance Indicators* (as cited by Glickman, et al., 2009), a structured observational tool, recorded data regarding the instruction provided by Laura during the pullout sessions. During observations, several pedagogical elements measured by the *Hunter Model* were not included in lessons, such as an anticipatory set, statement of objective and purpose, and input. Instructional modeling, checking for understanding, and guided practice were observed during most of the lessons, with independent practice and response comments occurring sporadically. The design of the *Hunter Model* and

other standardized observational tools posed limitations when recording the actual classroom practices. For this reason, a transition to unstructured observations allowed a greater degree of flexibility. McKechnie (2008) explains that, "Unstructured observation is not constrained by checklists and coding schemes; rather, the researcher reports in narrative style about observations that are relevant to the research questions" (pp. 907-908).

The primary instructional component during all of the early observations involved drilling sight word flashcards. When drilling the cards, if students struggled with a word, Laura would offer a prompt that included an initial sound. After about 10 seconds, Laura would then say the word for the child, have the child repeat the word, and then replace the card in the deck and review it again at the end of the drill. Words that were included in the drill pack included the following:

do	has	this	here	was	little	like	he	of	were
my	and	with	where	me	I	a	is	that	see
go	have	the	she	said	look	for	to	are	what

Laura explained to me that the students in first grade were having difficulty forming sentences and so she would either select a word out of the drill pack, or have each student select a drill card, and then ask him or her to form a sentence using that word. For example, Laura was one-on-one with a first grader for an eight minute session. After the drilling the sight word cards, she asked the child to draw one of the cards, which listed the word, *what*. She then asked the student to, "Use *what* in a sentence." The child was unable to respond, so Laura then said, "*What* is a question word, so think about a question." After more prompting without a reply from the student, Laura continued by asking, "What about a question with PE time? How could you find

out about when you have PE?" At that point, the child could still not answer the question, to which Laura finally said, "What time is…" and at that point, the child responded by repeating, "What time is PE?" Rather than offering leading questions, it seemed as though a more beneficial approach would have included remedial instruction in word usage and sentence structure.

A second observation illustrates some of the difficulties Laura experienced due again, in part, to a lack of collaboration with the teachers. Paramount in this instance was what appeared to be the need to remediate instruction. Laura had a group of three students for 19 minutes during one of the pullout sessions. When Laura retrieved the students, the teacher wanted her to help them complete a worksheet on analogies in U.S. history. Prior to working with the students, Laura had neither seen the lesson plan and learning objectives nor been introduced to any of the content.

Laura began the session by asking the third grade students, "What are you doing on this page? Read it to me." One student haltingly read through the directions and they discussed the meaning of an analogy and completed several of the analogies as a group. Based on the difficulties the students were experiencing, it seemed as though they lacked sufficient understanding of the content itself and would have likely benefitted from a review of their prior learning with reteaching. For example, one of the analogies was *Monarch is to King as President is to [two choices]*. Laura repeated the two answer choices by asking, "Could it be George Washington or could it be John Hancock?" The students did not respond. "Who can tell me what a monarch is?" Laura added. One student replied, "It is an American butterfly." The other students agreed. At that point, Laura retrieved dictionaries to have the students locate and

review the meaning of the word, monarch. Unfortunately, the students also lacked dictionary skills, thus the remaining time was spent looking for the definition of monarch. It seemed futile to focus on task completion of an analogy worksheet when the students were unable to comprehend the content or make connections through the analogies. Despite her best efforts, it seemed unreasonable to expect Laura to support student learning in this capacity, especially in the absence of any materials and resources related to the original lesson or the learning objective.

Both examples did highlight a need to assist Laura by providing professional development and strategies to aid in remediating instruction. Incorporating examples of remediation through modeling instruction in the demonstration lessons aided in addressing this need, as did informal conversations, and explanations involving scaffolding. During the informal conversations, I was able to cite observational examples and explain how students can have gaps in their knowledge bases and how we sometimes have to backtrack, remediate, and then build and expand the students' level of understanding.

Laura was drilling the sight word cards during a third observation of first grade students. In this instance, a student asked about the voiced /~~th~~/ sound when shown a card with the word, *that*. Laura responded by saying, "What sound does <u>th</u> make? Stick out your tongue," and she had the student make the unvoiced /th/ sound as in the word, *thimble*. This common phonetic error signaled a need to review the symbol/sound relationships, which was accomplished on multiple fronts. First, the symbol/sound relationships were reviewed as part of the demonstration lessons with students, when alphabet and digraph sounds were modeled and then repeated in quick succession. Second, while creating consonant and vowel digraph manipulatives for Laura to have available as a classroom resource, we discussed each of their sounds during a reflective

conversation. I was able to demonstrate the use of the manipulatives with Laura during one of her scheduling changes, during which time she was providing phone coverage in the school office. Lastly, placement of a keyword and sound list in the activity's packet would provide future review if needed. The nature of PAR enabled this concern to be addressed through a research process that facilitated point of need adaptations.

The next consideration involved collaborating and exchanging ideas, planning instructional supports, and offering job-embedded professional development. Russell, et al. (2013) recommend that teachers and school leaders provide on-site training opportunities for paraeducators, which could include sessions focused on their specific content area assignments. Recommendations made by Russell, et al. include having lead content teachers facilitate and cooperatively build subject-based knowledge while also fostering the development of instructional techniques.

The limited curricular resources available for Laura to utilize when students came to sessions without work were of concern, yet the development of instructional supplements would need to remain in alignment with the district's existing model of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Developing intervention strategies and instructional supports occurred through the action research cycle with reflective conversations influencing adaptations. Mindful that the supplemental resources created for Laura would need to take into consideration the lack of planning and preparation time, as well as the unpredictability of whether teachers would provide work, an instructional resource designed to complement the Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI) seemed viable (Children's Learning Institute at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, 2010). The TPRI is a screening and assessment tool utilized by 95 percent of

public schools in the state of Texas and establishes reading skill levels for children in grades kindergarten through three (Foorman, Santi, & Berger, 2006). TPRI data is collected during each of its administration periods held at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year. Schools have the option of administering some or all of the components of the TPRI assessment, which then classifies students as performing at the levels of *developed* or *still developing* in each area tested. Instructional leaders and teachers can then analyze the performance data to adapt instruction, through either remediation or acceleration, depending on the learning needs of the students.

Jamie, one of the school's teachers and a study participant, first suggested the Instructional Activities Guide (IAG) as a potential resource. The IAG encompasses the areas assessed by the TPRI and the primary components of reading instruction, with sections designed to develop skills in phonemic awareness, phonics, comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary development, along with activities to build and develop writing skills. Especially helpful is the leveling of the IAG activities to align with student test performance data from the TPRI, allowing educators to pinpoint the activities in the IAG designed to address the learning deficits experienced by the students. A single version of the IAG is included in every TPRI test kit and its content does not vary from grade-to-grade (Children's Learning Institute at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, 2010).

The IAG became a supplemental resource from which to build activities for Laura to have available as needed. Administrative staff aided in the process by allowing a blind review of student TPRI performance data. Trends in areas of need served as a means of informing instructional strategies and the selection of lessons. A plastic crate became an activity *toolbox*

(see Appendix F) which eased organization and storage of the lessons during the creative process. During the course of the study, Laura and I collaboratively developed approximately 30 lessons and activities for her use with students. In addition to the IAG, modeling of other resources included those used in language therapy. Almost all of the assembly of completion of the toolbox items occurred on the school's campus. Laura and I worked together on them as time allowed, yet there were many instances where she was providing in-class behavioral supports, leaving me to complete the activities in the workroom. We did meet for reflective conversations during the times when Laura was covering the school office and discussed ways to use the activities to enhance student learning. The conversational nature of this informal form of professional development seemed to promote the formation of a positive relationship, and eased a potential power imbalance between us. Such dialogue allowed explanations of the rationale behind the varying components of instruction, especially those involving phonics and fluency instruction. By embedding these details into the review of resources as they were collaboratively prepared, theories became connected to curriculum and classroom practice. This allowed an opportunity for describing and relating the remedial strategies to the observed learning needs of specific students attending the pullout sessions.

Following the series of observations, interviews, and the collaborative development of instructional resources, I asked Laura if she was willing to try team teaching so we could collaborate while modeling and practicing instructional methods to teach phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and reading comprehension during some of the pullout sessions. A conversation ensued during which time Laura asked about my own teaching and instructional leadership experiences. I explained the training received as a Licensed Dyslexia Therapist, as

well as the administrative and academic roles that involved mentoring newly trained language therapists, new-to-profession teachers, and paraeducators serving students with language-based learning disabilities and related issues. Laura then asked if she could observe me performing demonstration lessons involving reading and other forms of instruction, rather than participating in team teaching sessions. Based on this conversation, Laura observed a series of demonstration lessons during the remainder of the study period. Table 3 features examples of the modeled content by reflecting PAR's collaborative and responsive processes.

During the first series of demonstration lessons, many of the strategies incorporated into the proposed lesson plan were unused because I experienced the same struggles noted during observations of Laura. This included a lack of communication and collaboration between the teachers and Laura and advance knowledge regarding the need to plan activities or if the teachers were sending work. One advantage of this exiguous degree of collaboration during the demonstration lessons was the opportunity to model inserting remedial components when possible. For instance, teachers sent students with a three-page section of the reading workbook to complete during a pullout session. I noticed that these first grade students were continuing to experience difficulties naming the alphabet and retrieving vowel sounds and that remediating these skills may likely enhance their ability to employ sound/symbol connections to decode the words from the workbook.

Modeling of the TouchMath technique featured a multisensory means of instruction for students having difficulty with memory and rapid naming of math facts. TouchMath involves the placement of counting points on the digits one through nine. Students then use the point marks when counting-up or down to solve addition and subtraction problems.

Table 3

Examples of Model Lessons and Adaptations Developed at the Point of Need

	Instructional Component(s)	Grade and Session Length	Actions Reflective of the Research Cycle in Response to Paraeducator Needs
A.	Reviewed the letters and sounds assigned by the teacher using multisensory methods. The researcher provided individual alphabet strips for each student. After touching and reciting the 26 letters of the alphabet, the students were then asked to mark the designated letters with Post-it flags and echo the corresponding sounds. The researcher designed and provided a kinesthetic and tactile sight word set (using sheets of foam stock and puff paint) for each student. In very quick succession, the pupils were asked to take turns flipping their cards and reading the words, which were then echoed by the other students. The resources modeled were left in the paraeducator's *toolbox* for future use.	K 10 mins.	One teacher provided the paraeducator with a list of concepts (labeled a lesson plan) to be covered for the week and followed for both kindergarten groups. Multisensory forms of instruction were interjected to promote active engagement and encourage use of differentiated strategies. The researcher had the list of frequent words recorded in observation field notes. Remaining components of the kindergarten lessons were adapted at the point of need as the lesson progressed. The reflective conversation later reviewed ways to identify learning deficits and modify content to address those deficits during instruction.
B.	The researcher demonstrated the use of choral reading by having the students use this method while reading the three page section of the student workbook. Several students from different groups were experiencing difficulty with letter-sound correspondence. Interjecting an activity allowed the students to orally review the alphabet letters and sounds while using the letter strips developed for another student group. Students were unable to identify several digraph sounds in the reading. This need was addressed by reviewing the digraphs using a multisensory trace-erase method.	1 15 mins.	The first grade team wanted the students to review a three page section of a workbook that the students brought to the pull-out session. The teachers asked that the students complete a worksheet during the session. Although prior planning was not possible, the researcher modeled adaptations that could be made during instruction to respond to the learning needs exhibited by the students. Following the demonstration, the advantages of using choral reading to help develop prosody and build fluency were discussed during the reflective conversation.

	Instructional Components	Grade and Session Length	Actions Reflective of the Research Cycle in Response to Paraeducator Needs
C.	Fluency instruction was modeled in one-on-one sessions. Strategies included the following: • Skimming of the text • Asking the student to complete an initial practice reading • Noting (by the paraeducator) the concepts presenting difficulties for the student • Providing strategies to address the difficulties identified • Asking the student to reread the text using chunking • Offering ample praise and encouragement • Challenging the student to see how quickly he or she could then complete a timed reading of the text	3 20 mins.	The initial interviews identified a need to model fluency instruction, which was confirmed by observational data. Fluency modeling first utilized remedial reading curricula. As instruction progressed, classroom resources were then employed as a means of building fluency. Reflective conversations allowed connections between reading fluency and comprehension to be discussed and explained. The Intervention Activities Guide that was included as part of the Texas Primary Reading Initiative (TPRI) kit contained few exercises in reading fluency. As a result, some of the fluency exercises developed for the *toolbox* were similar to those used in language therapy private practice.
D.	TouchMath (TM) was modeled in both one-on-one and small group sessions. The strategy was demonstrated using the following techniques: • Explaining the placement and use of the TM touch points for each digit by displaying a TM number line and having the student(s) create and count the touch points on their own number line from a model provided by the researcher • Repeating the above process by asking each student to recreate the TM number line on a white board • Modeling the use of the touch points for solving addition and then subtraction problems on the whiteboard • Transitioning to solving problems on a math worksheet • Expanding the method to multiplication and division, based on the age group	Various 20 mins.	The intervention plans were initially focused on assisting with literacy-based supports. TouchMath strategies were added to the professional development program as a result of reflective conversations that identified a need for strategies to aid students having difficulty mastering basic math facts. This was confirmed during observations. Added support and guidance in using this methodology was provided at the end of the study cycle, upon the request of one participant. Students expressed enthusiasm about the strategy and both the students and paraeducator self-reported performance improvements.

The same point marks can also ease skip counting for multiplication and division. Laura expressed enthusiasm for this method and self-reported using the approach when working with the lower elementary students on addition and subtraction. In fact, Laura said that after learning the strategy, "[Student] went from not getting any of his math problems right to telling me that he thought he might get a 100."

Laura did not work with any of the older elementary students during the majority of the site visits because either the teachers did not send the students or there was some form of scheduling conflict. For example, multiple instances were noted when a county Sheriff's deputy was on campus conducting Drug and Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) programming, preventing the older elementary students from being sent for intervention or support. As a result, the demonstration of TouchMath for multiplication and division was delayed until the end of the study cycle.

When the study began in September, Laura had a total number of eight groups, with as many as four students each, for sessions that lasted approximately 20 minutes. Some of the teachers sent work with their students to complete during the pullout session, while others relied on Laura to provide work. Laura corroborated this at the time by offering examples. For instance, the first grade team wanted their students orally reading the weekly story from the class reading text on Mondays, and then Laura selected the activities for the remainder of the week to go with the frequent word flashcards. As the study evolved, the first grade teachers had shifted the work they were sending with the students by having them orally re-read the weekly story during every single pullout session. Other teachers likewise began sending classwork. Scheduling changes later in the study resulted in Laura having the original eight groups of four students condense

into five larger groups, some with up to eight students, for 30 minutes of pullout instruction. The larger groups resulted in students with wider ranges of ability, presenting even greater instructional challenges.

One factor limiting the effort to observe changes in practice involved the difficulties associated with Laura's constant scheduling changes. During the study's final series of site visits, Laura did not work with students for differing reasons. On several occasions and during reflective conversations, Laura did report that she had utilized some of the resources in the toolbox if the students were not sent with work; however, in most cases, the students were now coming to her primarily for task completion. Some noted changes focused on methods used to build reading fluency like chunking of text and employing choral reading. Following a demonstration lesson modeling the use of choral reading, Laura responded by saying, "I have never seen that done before." One of the IAG activities had been adapted to add a multisensory component by creating vowel flags for the students to select and raise based on the vowel sound heard. Laura said, "The kids love those flags and race each other to raise them when they hear the sound." Laura reported benefits throughout the course of the study and expressed appreciation on multiple occasions. She especially liked using the chunking of text, choral reading, TouchMath, and hands-on activities to adapt instruction. "I have learned so much from this. Sometimes the kids just need a different approach," Laura said.

The literature describes limited degrees of agency and voice among paraeducators (Rutherford, 2011; Rutherford, 2012), and a general lack of regard and consideration of both Laura's time and role was evident during the study. When asking Laura about the constant scheduling changes, she replied, "That is just the way it is around here." Although Laura never

voiced any concerns about the shifts, it seemed as though there existed a tacit recognition of her marginalized status. Examples included instances where Laura planned working with students who did not arrive, yet she received no notice or explanation. Instead of working with students, Laura was reassigned to provide coverage for the school office or served as a substitute when a teacher was temporarily absent for an appointment, but not told in advance the time of day when she would be providing coverage. Another instance involved rearranging Laura's schedule so that she could assist with in-class monitoring of a particular child in an early-childhood class. This resulted in a reduced amount of time available to assist the other students assigned to the pullout program.

Late in the study, Laura asked me to develop a resource that could help the students who were re-reading their class text with her every day, yet continued struggling with the content. The challenges posed by this request included considering how a differentiated strategy could be employed during the brief amount of time available, utilized by the larger combined group of eight students, required no planning, and yet continued fulfilling the teachers' directives of re-reading the weekly text during the pullout session. I asked for a copy of the student textbook to have time to independently review the content and consider any multisensory approaches that might be viable given the circumstances. During the curricular review, I noted that each of the weekly stories contained six to eight highlighted words, also featured in other segments of the students' weekly work. Additionally, while conducting a demonstration lesson with this group, I noticed that many of them were also experiencing issues with writing. Creating the resource involved making hand-written copies of the highlighted words from each weekly story on student handwriting paper, labeling each lesson with the story title, reproducing 10 copies of

each of the handwriting pages on different colors of paper to ease organization, and laminating each of the sheets. Students could then use dry erase markers to trace the letters while repeating the words, thus combining reading, writing, and spelling review into a single multisensory activity that Laura could easily implement while remaining in curricular alignment. During a subsequent site visit, Laura reported that the students benefitted from the word writing activity and that they could correctly read and write the highlighted words afterwards. This adaptation not only reflects Laura's willingness to voice a need for a resource, but also illustrates how the collaboration and reflective components integral to PAR influenced the intervention.

Laura made many positive comments about how much she was learning throughout the study and expressed gratitude for involvement in the process. She reported that the most helpful things she learned included, "The understanding that there are many different reasons that children struggle and you have to keep trying different approaches." When asked what she would like to continue studying, Laura replied, "Ways to motivate children to want to learn." Laura completed a closing questionnaire and strongly agreed to a question asking if she had used the information learned during the study when teaching students. Other questions about things learned during the program, to which she strongly agreed, included a better understanding of how to teach children to read, the resources offered were helpful, she felt more motivated about working with students, and felt she could do a better job with students.

Susan and Jamie

Susan is the second paraeducator at the participating elementary campus and provides full-time behavioral supports for a specific student in a second grade inclusive classroom. For privacy purposes, I did not seek permission to review this student's IEP or inquire about his

specific diagnoses regarding the services he received. Susan is partnered this year with Jamie, who serves as her supervising teacher, and they were observed working together in the classroom on three separate occasions. Each year, Susan moves with this student to the next grade level and as a result, her partner-teacher changes annually.

Regarding the study question associated with identification of professional development needs, Jamie had expressed a desire for both she and Susan to attain a better understanding of various approaches of behavioral management, but added, "It is so hard to find anything." As a result of this sentiment, a professional development day with release time was requested and granted for both of the elementary paraeducators. The goal was to help build the paraeducators' current capacity while developing a greater degree of exposure to a variety of approaches. Plans included a visit to the laboratory schools operated by a university College of Education. One of the laboratory schools provides significant early childhood behavioral supports for students with disabilities, and their staff members possess much expertise in this topic. The lab school staff had agreed to conduct a tour and then spend time discussing and explaining the strategies they employ when helping children develop self-control while reinforcing positive forms of conduct. Unfortunately, the workshop was cancelled due to inclement weather. While I extended an offer to reschedule the personalized day of professional development at a later date, the opportunity did not materialize. Jamie also received behavioral management resources for future reference and independent review with Susan.

While conducting a formal observation of Susan and Jamie, the data was recorded with the EDTA structured observational tool (Russell et al., 2013). Two other observations were unplanned, less formal, and unstructured, with data recorded in field notes. The EDTA tool

allowed me to track Susan's predominant activities during two-minute intervals for a total of 45 minutes. Notations included information on the learning needs of the assigned pupil, forms of differentiation that Susan employed and remarks she made to students, and features of Jamie's synchronous role. Although Susan primarily assists one child, she guided and supported the behavior and learning of others in the class during each observational period. In one instance, Jamie presented math instruction for 27 minutes and modeled the use of base 10 manipulatives. During the instructional component, Susan was primarily listening and roving the classroom. When a student would give Jamie a correct response to a question, Susan would walk to the child's desk and place a token in that child's collection box. Susan's designated student did start coughing to the point that he was disrupting the class so she walked him out of the room to get a drink of water, returning six minutes later. Once Jamie concluded the instructional component, the students started completing their math assignment. During this point of the observation, Jamie began working with a small group of four children who required added guidance, while Susan monitored her student and roved around the classroom assisting others as needed. Examples of remarks that Susan made to the students included a statement to refocus a child's attention such as, "I can give you another mark if you stay on task." Susan told a different child, "I don't want to take away your manipulatives," as a means of preventing potential off-task behavior. When a student asked how to write a specific number, Susan encouraged self-reliance by responding, "Look at the chart on the wall. Can you find it?" and, "Think about it." During the observations, Susan was actively engaged in the classroom processes and able to seamlessly reinforce and support the instruction that was provided by Jamie.

The literature cites instances of paraeducators left to work primarily with students who possess various learning needs and how that can become detrimental to student academic progress (Blatchford, et al., 2012; Giangreco, 2012; Rubie-Davies et al., 2010; Russell et al., 2013). While observing Jamie and Susan, the students needing added support were not left working primarily with the paraeducator. Rather, this pair operated with the paraeducator aiding the typically achieving students while the teacher focused on offering added guidance to the students who struggled. At one point, I asked Jamie about her work with the students who appeared to need assistance while Susan monitored the rest of the class and whether she had read the literature regarding effective practices with paraeducators. Jamie replied, "No, this just seems to work out for us and lets me spend some extra time with them [the students with high needs]."

Regarding agency and voice, Susan benefitted from Jamie's position as a teacher and advocate. For example, early in the study cycle, Jamie and Susan did not have any joint planning time available and Jamie said,

> We don't have time to go over different strategies or to really talk. A lot of what we communicate is through non-verbal cues. It would not take much time, even one day a week would be good to problem-solve. We could consider new strategies to try and share ideas. Everything is so fast-paced and rushed that we really only talk in passing.

As the study progressed, Jamie approached Sharon, the district's superintendent, and requested that she and Susan receive one joint planning period per week. Susan's schedule was then reorganized so that they were allotted a 45-minute joint planning period on Fridays. Jamie reported that,

> After discussion, it made me realize that the teachers and aides need to try to dedicate more time to plan together. This would allow us to discuss and focus on individual student needs. I feel the planning time has helped, but wish we had more. You know it is never enough. During meetings, we discuss students' behavior, what is working (or not), and things we might need to do differently with behavior plans.

I met with Jamie during both her planning and lunch period nearly every time on campus, and frequently visited her classroom. While Susan did not experience the same scheduling irregularities as Laura, there were very few pockets of time available to work directly with her in a job-embedded capacity without disrupting or interfering with classroom instruction or the behavioral supports she was responsible for providing. Instead, vicarious forms of guidance were offered through Jamie, who sought much information and asked many questions about providing differentiated forms of instruction, utilizing remedial strategies, building and developing literacy skills, and assessing student learning needs. Ultimately, these revisions ultimately led to attaining the overall goal of facilitating instructional improvements. Concluding remarks made by Jamie included strong agreement and agreement to the questions or statements that included that she did find that the resources offered during the study were very helpful, her questions and concerns were answered or addressed, and the program met her expectations.

Sharon and Audrey

As the district superintendent, Sharon approved participation in the study and was engaged in reflective processes during the period of research. Audrey served as the part-time elementary vice-principal, and both leaders provided campus oversight. Their roles as they relate to the questions posed by the study are described here.

During the initial interviews, Sharon explained that the paraeducators had not received specialized training or individualized guidance. When asked if the paraeducators had received enough training to do a very good job of supporting the students, Sharon replied,

> Probably not. The skills are there but the support has not been above and beyond what they already knew. They [paraeducators] do attend our [teacher] trainings so they can gather information from that. There are so many different methods or strategies but we

> tend to do what we know. There is so much out there and it takes someone to walk them through that and help them put new strategies in their bag of tricks.

Audrey fulfilled two roles within the small district that included serving as the part-time elementary vice-principal as well as teaching biology and chemistry in the high school. She typically spent three hours in the elementary building during most mornings. Throughout the study, Audrey was never witnessed conducting walkthroughs, observing classes, or performing duties affiliated with the tasks of *instructional leadership*. It appeared that her role was primarily administrative in nature and her duties involved fulfilling state mandates, making announcements during the daily opening ritual, and disciplining students if the behavioral concern arose during the three hours she was scheduled to work in the elementary building. One afternoon, I observed an incident when a student was sent to the office for disciplinary purposes while Audrey was teaching in the high school. As a result, the issue was addressed by the school secretary, who verbally reprimanded the pupil, had him sit alone in the vice-principal's office for approximately five minutes, and then sent him back to class. Sharon was observed in the elementary building once during the course of the study, when she joined the teachers in the workroom during lunchtime. Like Audrey, Sharon was not seen serving in a supervisory capacity, observing classes, performing walkthroughs, or interacting with faculty beyond the single lunchroom visit.

Laura mentioned that when she was hired, the previous elementary principal said that she needed to record the work that she did with the students for documentation purposes. Neither the administrators nor faculty members provided any guidance or reporting procedures for Laura to follow. For this reason, Laura created her own data form although time constraints made it difficult for her to record the information consistently. To streamline and ease the documentation process, I examined the form that Laura had been utilizing and adapted it to a checklist format.

Audrey then reviewed the draft of the adapted form, and examined the checklist to ensure that it included the necessary compliance information. Audrey suggested that a category be inserted denoting when teachers provided work. When asked about monitoring, Laura explained that oversight occurred infrequently and if so, only due to parental inquiry. Figure 6 features the original and modified data recording forms. During the field visits, I never saw Audrey monitoring, supervising or checking on Laura in the pullout sessions, nor did Audrey ever inquire about the curricular resources created for the *toolbox*.

As the participatory action research study progressed, numerous modifications to the study process ensued. Each of the modifications and strategies addressed the identified needs at the point of delivery, representing a form of action research sub-cycle. These evolutionary sub-cycles allowed the fulfillment of the study's overall goals and objectives, as illustrated in Figure 7. This responsive and adaptive nature of practitioner-based research permits real-world needs and concerns to be addressed in the field, then evaluated, adapted, and reworked through a cycle of continuous improvement. Cochran-Smith and Donnell (2006) describe the distinctive nature of the process by stating:

> With practitioner inquiry, problems and issues arise from professional practice and from discrepancies between what is intended and what occurs are the focus of the investigation. In traditional research on teaching, questions come from study of literature and sometimes from negotiations with research participants. The questions of practitioner researchers, on the other hand may be highly reflexive, immediate, and referenced to particular students or situations. It is important to note here that most versions of practitioner inquiry do not assume that because the researcher concentrates on questions

Documentation form created by Laura to record student data and progress during pull-out sessions.

L) letters + sounds
N) numbers + counting
LS) listening skills
FD) following directions
(M) math
(R) reading
(ELA) english lang. arts
(S) spelling

Date	Student	Time	What we worked on	Progress
		-		
		-		
		-		
		-		
		-		
		-		
		-		
		-		
		-		
		-		

Revised documentation form created in collaboration with Laura to record student data and progress during pull-out sessions.

Week of	Classes/Students	Time-In Time-Out	Activities	Progress Notes
Monday	Group 1 – K Names		☐ Letters/sounds ☐ Frequent words ☐ Oral reading ☐ Reading fluency ☐ English/language arts ☐ Spelling ☐ Math ☐ Listening skills ☐ Following directions ☐ Teacher supplied work	
	Group 2 – K Names		☐ Letters/sounds ☐ Frequent words ☐ Oral reading ☐ Reading fluency ☐ English/language arts ☐ Spelling ☐ Math ☐ Listening skills ☐ Following directions ☐ Teacher supplied work	
	Group 1 – 1st Names		☐ Letters/sounds ☐ Frequent words ☐ Oral reading ☐ Reading fluency ☐ English/language arts ☐ Spelling ☐ Math ☐ Listening skills ☐ Following directions ☐ Teacher supplied work	

Figure 6. Comparison of documentation forms

> of practice, he or she is engaged in inquiry about only 'practical' things or that practice is a narrow construction referring only to behavior or actions. Rather, most practitioner inquiry turns on the assumption that practice is both practical and theoretical. Although questions of practice are the major focus of study, these have a great deal to do with how practitioners theorize their own work, the assumptions and decisions they make, and the interpretations they construct about students' learning. (p. 509)

Research Themes

Data were recorded through written field notes. Immediately after each site visits, I then privately recounted the experience using a digital recording device. Transcribing field notes and digital recordings occurred as soon as possible. The use of ATLAS.ti software facilitated the categorizing and coding of the interview responses, observational data, and later the data collected during the intervention phase by assigning 20 themes and 91 codes. The analytical process initiated with open coding, when transcripts and field notes were read, reread, and reviewed with several peers. Notes from these conversations were preserved to record the interpretations and ideas shared by others. The data analysis steadily progressed to analytical coding (Merriam, 2009) and the use of memos to aid in the creation of concept maps. These maps provided a practical format for clustering the data into themes, trends, and patterns. Use of the concept maps also facilitated the comparisons between the two paraeducators working within the same school (see Appendix H). In this instance, four predominant themes emerged and included instructional leadership, curricular resources, teaching and instructional methods, and scheduling and deployment. The concept maps also helped detect the point of saturation when the data became repetitive.

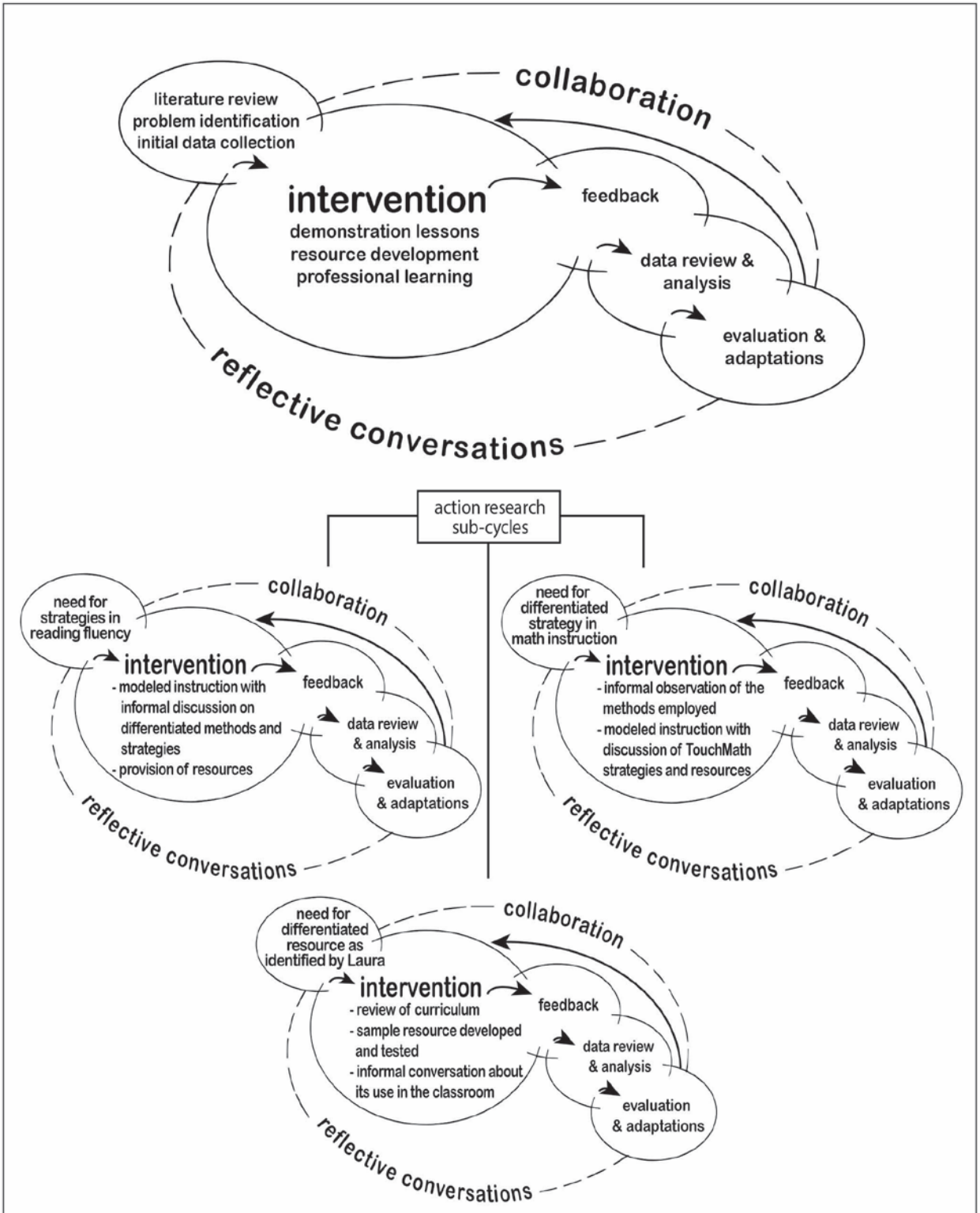


Figure 7. An illustration of the overall action research cycle and examples of the research sub-cycles as practiced during the point of delivery.

While the study originally sought to examine job-embedded professional development, the data indicated that the issues associated with assigning paraeducators to support students requiring added instructional time may encompass much broader concerns than can be addressed through on-site guidance. More important was the emergence of the role of leadership decision-making. Most intriguing and unexpected was the contrast that emerged between the roles of the two elementary paraeducators, Laura and Susan, and comparing the differing forms of deployment within the same small school. Examination of these contrasts will occur within each of the prevailing themes.

Instructional Leadership and Support

The study was initiated in August, 2013, and concluded in February, 2014. Laura was observed as being largely left to her own devices, and was never seen being observed or supervised by any of the 10 teachers who sent students or by the members of the administrative team. Laura had received no specific paraeducator-based training and minimal guidance by faculty and administrative staff. In fact, the services she did provide were only periodically recorded on a self-created documentation form that was not subject to administrative review unless parents inquired.

Down the hall (see Appendix G), Susan's instruction was observed by Jamie, her cooperating teacher, on a daily basis. Additionally, Susan and Jamie were able to plan and collaborate during a weekly joint planning period as requested during the study process. Jamie was also responsible for following procedures related to documenting and recording services provided to students. Like Laura, Susan and Jamie did not undergo walkthroughs or observations by members of the administrative team during the field visits.

Curricular Resources

Again, Laura managed with limited materials, resources, and supplies. One of the ten teachers provided a brief lesson plan, yet no joint planning time existed for Laura to work directly with faculty members. Further, Laura did not have the opportunity to review in advance the work students brought to the pullout sessions, she was not provided with any of the content that had been covered in class, was unfamiliar with the learning objectives, and could only review the information with the teacher during transition times.

In contrast, Susan worked in a setting where the teacher planned lessons and included supplies, materials, and resources. Susan was able to listen to the content and the context of the instruction, and then reinforce the learning objectives. Further, Susan benefitted from observing the instructions as they were provided to the students and understood the teacher's expectations.

Teaching and Instructional Methods

Laura was responsible for offering academic supports to students with high needs, yet received little to no instructional guidance from either the faculty or administrative staff and possessed minimal training. The amount of time on task was limited due to scheduling constraints, and then compounded by time spent in transition as students were picked-up and returned to class. The amount of time lost due to transitions averaged between three to five minutes per session. In some instances, the instructional time of a pullout session that was intended to last 20 minutes was recorded at actually eight minutes in length.

Contrasting this situation was Susan, where the teacher determined the amount of time on task and transitional time was not a factor due to her in-classroom placement. Susan did monitor and manage the behavior of her primary student, but was also available to guide the learning of

the typically performing students in the class, enabling Jamie to focus on providing added instruction to students who struggled.

Scheduling and Deployment

Laura's schedule was largely unpredictable, with changes noted during every site visit. She often provided short-term coverage for office staff and teachers, yet was given little to no advance notice regarding the scheduling changes. Laura's duties ranged from providing before and after school monitoring of students, overseeing the lunchroom, offering pullout supports, aiding in behavioral management, and assisting with office coverage. Later in the study, Laura began providing 90 minutes of daily behavioral supports to a student jointly placed in a half-day of morning kindergarten and a half-day of afternoon pre-kindergarten. In fact, Laura was even assigned to supervise this early childhood student while simultaneously covering the office during the school secretary's lunch period, accommodating for the time transition between his morning and afternoon class placements. The result of this challenging situation was that the child was given an iPad with game-based applications to keep him occupied, instead of remaining with his kindergarten classmates until the beginning of the afternoon pre-kindergarten session. The amount of time that Laura actually had available to offer the pullout supports was impacted by these and other scheduling shifts, with the overall amount of time to work with students reduced during the study period. At the very same time, Susan's schedule seemed predictable and consistent, with few changes noted during the study period.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the research questions examined during the course of this participatory action research study. Data gathered included formal and informal observations,

interviews, reflective conversations, and feedback. Additional sources of information included archival data, document review, and supporting literature. The professional development components included coupling informal explanations about teaching methods and best practices to modeling instruction during a series of demonstration lessons. Case study analysis allowed in-depth descriptions of the participants and their experiences as part of the evolving PAR process.

Paraeducators remain important contributors to successful student outcomes by offering much needed assistance to faculty, staff, students, and families. Chapter five will present conclusions and recommendations based on these findings. These include the ways in which school leaders can maximize the contributions of paraeducators so that their roles and responsibilities align with the training they have received while seeking expectations that are both reasonable and equitable. The primary themes that emerged from the research encompassed broader issues associated with instructional leadership and decision-making, which will be explored and discussed in the conclusions.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSIONS

Issues and concerns associated with the placement of paraeducators and their role in schools were described in earlier chapters. The training requirements for paraeducators to attain NCLB status of *highly qualified* are minimal. In particular, a situation often exists where paraeducators are responsible for providing academic and behavioral supports to students with high needs, while lacking the degree of expertise often required for educating such children. These training gaps can result in difficulties associated with providing meaningful forms of instruction and hinder the academic progress of students with high needs (Blatchford et al., 2011; Giangreco, 2012; Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Giangreco et al., 2011; Rubie-Davies et al., 2010; Russell et al., 2013).

Summary of the Study

In order to investigate the ways in which a personalized, job-embedded professional development program could bridge some of the training gaps often experienced by paraeducators, a university-district partnership was formed with a small, suburban district in the North Texas region. The participatory action research study was conducted at an elementary school from August, 2013 to February, 2014. Pseudonyms are used when describing study subjects. While the elementary school had two paraeducators who participated in the study (Laura and Susan), the primary study subject was Laura, the paraeducator who provided pullout supports. In addition to the paraeducators, others involved in the study process included one teacher (Jamie), the school's vice-principal (Audrey), and the district's superintendent (Sharon).

Theories informing and guiding the design and implementation of the professional development program featured an adult learning model representative of andragogy and collaborative empowerment through praxis. The study process initiated with a series of structured and unstructured observations, followed by semi-structured interviews with three of the participants and included a teacher, a paraeducator, and an administrator. The data gathered during these early phases then informed the job-embedded professional development process utilizing participatory action research (PAR). Elements of the study were adapted as a result of the PAR process and included the collaborative development of differentiated resources, informal reflective and professional development conversations, and provision of a series of demonstration lessons to model specific forms of remedial instruction. Data were collected during each of the site visits and included taking copious field notes, collecting artifacts, and followed by a private verbal recounting at the conclusion of each field visit with the use of a digital recording device. Written transcripts included the data recorded from field notes and the digital recorder. Other forms of information collected included district policies, certification records, and related forms of archival data. Lastly, participants completed a closing questionnaire and series of open-ended questions. As part of the action research cycle, interim analysis allowed early findings to influence and inform the adaptations made during the action research cycle. Following the conclusion of the study, an in depth examination of the data included the use of qualitative analytical software.

Discussion of Findings

When considering the broader implications and contextual concerns associated with action research, Cochran-Smith and Donnell (2006) explain:

> Each of the versions and variants of practitioner inquiry – action research, teacher research, self-study, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and using practice as a site for research – challenges the conventions of traditional formal research in certain ways. Either explicitly or implicitly, practitioner inquiry raises questions and interrupts expectations about the relations of inquiry, knowledge, and practice. This kind of research raises questions about who legitimately can do research and what kinds of relationships should exist between researchers and the people and processes they study. (p. 514)

As such, matters regarding the legitimacy of practitioner research remain well founded. Empowering educational leaders, teachers, and paraeducators to legitimately inform and enhance instructional practices through collaborative processes seems especially germane when reviewing the findings as they relate to the study's questions.

Although much guidance was provided as it related to the job-embedded professional development for Laura, who was the primary paraeducator who participated in the study, many of the issues observed, and later personally experienced, were beyond the scope of professional development designed to bridge training gaps by building pedagogical skills. Instead, the obstacles faced during the study seemed much more closely aligned to systemic perplexities associated with instructional leadership and decision-making, paraeducator assignments, and expectations regarding appropriate roles and responsibilities for those supporting students with high needs. The initial questions associated with providing paraeducators with individualized and job-embedded professional development seem pedantic when examined through a broad systemic context.

Research Question One

What are the identified professional development needs of paraeducators in this context based on information provided by a teacher, a paraeducator, and an administrator in the participating school?

Discerning the professional development needs of the participants was achieved through a combination of information gathered during semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and observational data. Respondents indicated that the paraeducators had attended the district's teacher inservices during preparation days at the start of the school year, and focused on strategies to support students experiencing emotional distress and crisis intervention.

When asked to identify the professional development needs of the district's paraeducators, one interview subject stated that, "…the skills are there but the support has not been above and beyond what they already know." A separate respondent stated that she was,

> …not sure of the amount of professional development that is required…and they are never out to attend professional development. Yes, [the paraeducators] do a good job, but could they benefit from professional development? Yes.

The interview data indicated that content-area needs included professional development in the use of differentiated methods, behavioral management, reading practices involving fluency and comprehension techniques, and motivational strategies. As the study progressed, reflective conversations signaled a need for assistance in remediating math, particularly basic skills involving numeracy, addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. Observational data confirmed the applicability of the professional development suggestions made during the semi-structured interviews, along with a reliance on few approaches including the constant use of

high-frequency words on flashcards. Also noted were the paraeducator's mispronunciation of speech sounds when reviewing sound/symbol correspondences with students, difficulties associated with remediating and scaffolding instruction, and issues involving the identification of the specific learning deficits experienced by the students who were sent for pullout support. Vadasy (2008) notes similar concerns by stating, "Without more extensive training, many tutors are not prepared to detect and adapt their instruction to address these [comprehension] deficits" (p.302).

The need for job-embedded professional development was articulated by participants during interviews, informal conversations, and noted during observations. Yet, professional development alone does not seem sufficient when considering the other issues observed during the study period. Obstacles noted throughout the study included the absence of a remedial curriculum. This was coupled with sporadic amounts and types of work sent by teachers, lesson plans that were provided by only one out of the ten teachers sending students to work with Laura, collaboration that consisted of conversations in the hallway during transitions, no communication of learning objectives, erratic scheduling, and limited time with students.

Vadasy (2008) reviewed multiple remedial reading pullout programs and contends that, "...the study demonstrated that instructional assistants – when provided with training – were able to implement these scripted reading programs effectively" (p. 310). When describing the components to be included as part of effective remedial reading programs designed for paraeducators or tutors, Vadasy continues by stating that, "Features of effective interventions include scripted lessons and tutor training in high-fidelity instructional delivery" (p.316).

Research Question Two

How do job-embedded and personalized supports help paraeducators develop instructional skills?

The job-embedded and personalized guidance was provided primarily to Laura, the paraeducator who assisted students by offering pullout supports. A series of demonstration lessons were conducted in order to model instruction, which were followed by informal conversations and reflections on the strategies employed and student responses. Laura self-reported that she had been adhibiting many of the teaching techniques that were modeled during the demonstration lessons, and found particularly helpful the chunking of text to aid in fluency and comprehension, choral reading, and TouchMath. She added that she had been utilizing the *toolbox* resources that included activities developed from the TPRI Intervention Activities Guide (IAG), and the differentiated lessons to supplement the first grade oral reading exercises, although neither were observed as being in use at the study's conclusion. During the initial research stage, Laura was not observed providing spelling supports. As a result, components related to providing guidance in the use of multisensory spelling methods were neither included in the job-embedded professional development nor modeled during demonstration lessons. During the final study session, one teacher asked Laura to assist a student by reviewing his spelling list and then readministering his weekly spelling test, on which he spelled 30 percent of the words correctly. I offered and conducted an impromptu demonstration of spelling instruction that focused on combining both the language concepts represented in the list, along with utilizing sound/symbol correspondence. Following 15 minutes of demonstrating remedial instruction with the pupil, Laura readministered the test and the student's score improved to 85 percent correct.

Had I noted earlier in the study cycle that Laura would be providing guidance in spelling instruction, a component would have been added to include more in-depth coverage of spelling concepts.

Numerous hurdles existed throughout the course of the research project that impeded the provision of guidance. Laura's constant and spontaneous scheduling changes made it difficult to plan site visits and collaborate, yet she responded to the obstacles by stating, "Welcome to the small district," and "I take it as it comes." Collaborative development of resources often occurred while Laura was covering the office phones, where we would manage to review options from the IAG that aligned with the learning needs indicated from the blind review of the students' TPRI assessment ratings, then create multisensory activities and prepare plans for the lessons selected. These sessions also allowed me to explain informally the rationale behind each activity's use, answer questions, and practice employing the strategy.

While Laura self-reported using the resources developed and strategies modeled, this was not witnessed during the final two site visits. Laura was not observed using any of the IAG activities or incorporating any changes in her teaching approach to include those elements that had been modeled during the research process. She remained reliant on using frequent word flashcards and a poster when asking a student to identify shapes and colors. While working one-on-one with a student to complete a math worksheet comprised of stated problems, Laura did have the student solve the equations by using an individual whiteboard from the *toolbox* resources, but none of the strategies to differentiate instruction. Instead, Laura simply asked him to read and then re-read each of the stated problems. Upon close inspection of a basket of instructional materials placed next to Laura's chair, the basket contained the very same resources

that were in use at the beginning of the study cycle, with none of the collaboratively developed materials included. Laura did state that, “The teachers want me to do the work they send,” and that, “There isn’t enough time to get to everything that I would like to do.”

An end of study questionnaire was administered and resulted in two of the participants responding to all of the statements, while one participant answered four and explained, “I only answered the questions that applied to me.” Illustrated in Figure 8, all three listed that they strongly agreed to statements indicating that the resources offered were very helpful, and that they would recommend the program to others. The three respondents strongly disagreed to the statement that read, “I felt that my time was wasted.” Two of the participants responded by disagreeing to the statement, “While the strategies we talked about were helpful, I haven’t really used them when working with students.”

Laura did indicate that she had perceived benefits from the study and provided much positive feedback throughout the research process, including one text message that read, “I just wanted to thank you for all you have done for our students. I already have been, and will continue to be, better able to help them because of you! Thank you so much.”

Research Question Three

In what ways may job-embedded guidance enhance paraeducator agency and voice?

Paraeducators are typically among the lowest paid members of a school or district’s workforce, while fulfilling many responsibilities associated with student learning and the provision of supportive services to students considered as high need. The limited degree of agency and voice among paraeducators was noted in the literature review, as was the supportive

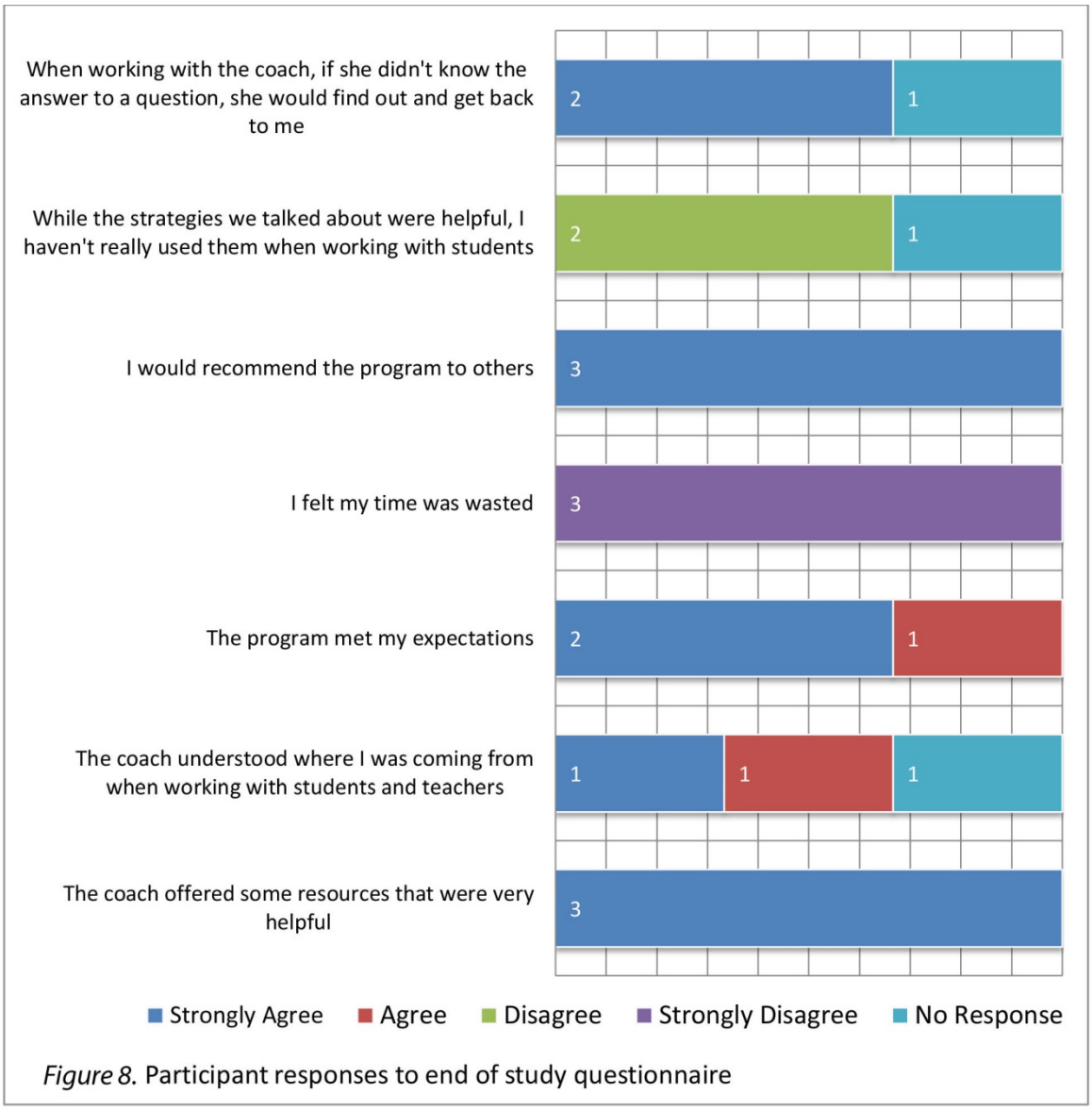


Figure 8. Participant responses to end of study questionnaire

relationships they often develop with the marginalized population of students they serve. Issues associated with agency were recorded during the study cycle. For instance, Laura's ongoing scheduling changes often occurred absent prior notice, which Laura readily accepted with her amiable disposition. While Laura did not have a faculty member to advocate on her behalf, nor did she have someone willing to intercede to prevent reassignment, Susan did receive support

from her supervising teacher, Jamie. In fact, Jamie requested and was granted a joint planning period to facilitate collaboration with Susan. During the course of the study cycle, Laura did voice discomfort with maintaining a reflection journal, asked that the initial strategy of team teaching change to demonstration lessons, and requested the development of some specific curricular resources.

When asking Laura if she had independently sought guidance or information regarding instructional and behavioral interventions, or if she had examined materials to complement or supplement some of the concepts modeled during the study, Laura said she tried making a list of resources, but had not investigated anything specific. Laura continued by explaining that she has sought information in the past, but did not have enough time to review any materials. Some modest gains in agency and voice were noted during the participatory action research project. To achieve much more meaningful gains, a greater amount of time would likely be necessary, along with supportive collaboration from key stakeholders.

Conclusions

Findings from this study remain consistent with those conducted by other researchers (Giangreco, 2012; Russell et al., 2013; Rutherford, 2011). The study district had minimal professional development and certification requirements for paraeducators who were assigned to serve students with academic and behavioral needs. While professional development needs were identified as part of the inquiry process, the research revealed that professional development alone may be insufficient to enable and promote meaningful levels of schoolwide improvements.

Observational field-notes reflected a consistent theme involving reliance on a select few resources and teaching strategies. Vadasy (2008) evaluates numerous supplemental reading

programs delivered by paraeducators and notes that the most effective programs involved training paraeducators to use scripted lessons. Explaining the rationale for a scripted approach, Vadasy contends that, "Without more extensive training, many tutors are not prepared to detect and adapt their instruction to address deficits" (p. 302). Supplemental reading interventions typically include activities focusing on alphabetics, phonological awareness, phonics, and fluency. Laura did not have scripted supplemental curricula available for her use and often worked with little to no prior planning. Any potential materials would need to take into consideration myriad limitations that Laura experienced on a regular basis, as well as the appropriateness of a paraeducator implementing those supports. When considering the numerous factors that exist when deploying paraeducators to provide supplemental instruction for students, it seems that programs combining professional development and a scripted curricular approach may best bridge the training gaps experienced by paraeducators, rather than the provision of professional development alone.

Addressing the issues identified during the course of this study would largely involve systemic change focused on school improvement efforts that involve a broader group of stakeholders. Appropriate roles and responsibilities for paraeducators are also worthy of consideration. Issues associated with instructional leadership and decision-making should be guided and monitored by members of the district's administrative team. Matthews and Crow (2003) describe the instructional leadership role of the vice-principal as involving a wider scope that encompasses the entire school, including students, by explaining, "Learning to be an assistant principal in this image necessitates developing skills to work with teachers in improving instructional effectiveness and to contribute to a professional learning community that

encourages inquiry and collaboration" (p.274). Accomplishing this objective may require members of the study district's leadership team to become visibly and actively engaged in the instructional program and includes walkthroughs and formative observations. When Laura was asked if Audrey, the part-time campus vice principal, ever conducted observations of her work or monitored her class, she said, "No she never does, but [Sharon] comes in every once in a while."

Largely of interest was the comparison between the way in which each paraeducator was deployed within the same building and how such discrepancies could influence instructional effectiveness and academic growth among students. This was especially apparent when comparing the responsibilities of the two elementary paraeducators in the study district. First was Laura, who provided pullout supports among other duties, and second was Susan, who was embedded in a single classroom in collaboration with a supervising teacher.

Reinforcing the concept of instructional leadership to promote student learning and school improvement, Beach and Reinhartz (2000) contend that, "Supervisors as well as other educational leaders have the responsibility for facilitating professional development, building teams of teachers or cohorts and empowering teachers to make decisions regarding their instructional performance" (p. 128). Expanding upon this concept, Beach and Reinhartz continue by advocating for the use of clinical supervision as a means of analyzing instructional performance and then addressing areas of growth through collaborative processes that are collegial, non-judgmental, and reflective.

Implications for Practice

Educational leaders are entrusted with providing the oversight and guidance necessary to ensure the academic programs offered to all students under their care are designed to effectively

meet learning needs. This includes meeting the learning needs of pupils through the responsible allocation of resources and appropriate placement of faculty and staff. As such, one possible solution to the issues observed during the study could involve the reassignment of the paraeducator responsible for providing myriad forms of support to that of a floating staff member. Such an assignment would allow the provision of coverage in the various capacities as needed, yet also enable periodic rotation between classrooms during otherwise available times. Advantages of embedding paraeducators within the classroom include minimal disruptions to the learning process and negating the loss of time-on-task due to transitions. For example, when monitoring and recording the time spent by Laura while transitioning students between classes and pullout sessions, the amount of time lost ranged from 27 to 45 total minutes per day. Other benefits include the ability for the paraeducator to briefly review the lesson plan and learning objectives prepared by the teacher, and then enable the highly qualified teacher to spend added time with the students who struggle while the paraeducator monitors and assists the typically achieving pupils (Russell, et al., 2013). When considering the limitations posed by Laura's constant scheduling shifts, this model would also provide a much greater degree of consistency for those students who are already struggling academically.

Observed concerns involving deployment were confirmed during interviews and reflective conversations, and included a lack of remedial and curricular resources, inconsistent scheduling, paraeducators serving as substitute teachers during faculty absences as well as providing office coverage while staff members were not available, and how this unpredictable role can impede student learning. In order to address such issues, Reinhartz and Beach (2004) advocate the use of action research processes as a means of facilitating collaborative problem-

solving strategies. The authors state that, “This investigative approach also serves to promote equity and an awareness of teaching and learning that can result in increased student achievement and a greater sense of teacher professionalism” (p. 101).

Should the study district persist in utilizing a pullout structure, then the students may be best served through collaboration between the campus leadership team, teachers, and paraeducators to establish the program’s purpose, goals, and objectives. Illustrating this point was the evolution of the types of work that the teachers began sending to Laura as the study cycle progressed. While lesson plans and the sharing of instructional objectives remained largely nonexistent, incongruities were noted as they related to the changing tasks that teachers were sending with their students for completion. Alterations involved the first grade team initially having students read from their class text one day a week with Laura preparing activities for the remainder of the week, which later shifted to assigning students to reread the same story from their class text during each pullout session for the week. Likewise, other elementary teachers went from sending students with no assignments or work and leaving the planning and instruction to Laura’s discretion, then later sending coursework involving everything from reading and spelling instruction, to math assignments and social studies worksheets. Describing the advantages of establishing such parameters, Carnahan, Williamson, Clarke, and Sorenson (2009) said,

> Developing a shared philosophy regarding teaching and learning in the classroom supports a consistent, coherent classroom environment. Regularly scheduled meetings allow for discussion of expectations and student performance, increase opportunities to

provide positive feedback, and most important, allow paraeducators to understand the reasons behind the work asked of them. (p. 42)

Recommendations for Further Research

The purpose of the PAR study was to determine the ways in which providing job-embedded professional development could enhance the academic supports offered to students by paraeducators. More important than the provision of professional development were the findings that largely indicated systemic issues regarding paraeducator placement, duties, and expectations that were beyond the scope of staff development. Paraeducator-led programs that augment student learning should define reasonable expectations and afford opportunities for stakeholder collaboration. Comparing and contrasting the roles and responsibilities of two paraeducators working in the same building revealed the influence of collaboration, communication, and leadership decisions on student services.

Future research could involve replicating the study in different contexts that include large suburban and urban districts to assess the placement and actual roles of paraeducators in a wider variety of settings, and how the assorted forms of deployment may influence academic growth among students who struggle. Examining the instructional leadership and decision-making processes at the campus and central office levels as they related to paraeducator assignments and duties may reveal much about the design of academic improvements for students. Another area of inquiry could involve comparing the academic performance of students receiving assistance in-class to those assigned to pullout supports, when both formats encompass the use of paraeducators.

Researcher's Reflection

Paraeducators serve a vital role in meeting the academic and social needs of students, particularly those who present various learning challenges. Conducting this participatory action research study has been both an honor and privilege. My feelings of admiration and respect for those who work as paraeducators has grown as a result of witnessing the compassion, effort, and commitment displayed by the paraeducators who participated in this research project.

As a novice in the field, I did not anticipate the difficulties that arose while transitioning from my previous role as an independent school administrator, instructional leader, and mentor to newly trained language therapists to that of an action researcher holding the position of an outsider. Especially difficult was maintaining an objective and supportive stance during moments of frustration when I believed that the learning and behavioral needs of students could have been, at times, considered as secondary to the beliefs and opinions held by some members of the instructional team. For instance, I had offered to assist with strategies for a student exhibiting disruptive and physically aggressive behavior in the classroom. Unfortunately, this guidance was not delivered due to an inability to attain the necessary permissions to conduct in-class behavioral observations and collaboratively implement and evaluate potential interventions. Creating personalized professional development programming is difficult to achieve in isolation or without school-wide collaboration and support from a broader scope stakeholders.

Equally daunting was the inability to spend a greater amount of undisrupted time for professional development with Laura. While scheduling issues were at times unavoidable, there were other instances where one could not help but question how the lack of diligence in adhering to scheduling could impact student learning. For example, demonstration lessons were cancelled

one afternoon without prior notice. Instead of sending students to the pullout session for supplemental reading instruction, some elected to have their classes attend a daytime basketball tournament sponsored by the district. Another group of students were not sent because the classes were having a "pajama day" and spent the afternoon watching videos.

Although obstacles did exist, a sense of flexibility and a willingness to adapt is necessary when working in environments that are fluid and ever changing like those seen in elementary schools. I felt that given the circumstances, as much professional development and support was offered as possible, and hope that the experience was truly positive for all involved. The study had a profound impact on my own academic and personal growth, enhancing the degree of esteem and appreciation felt for both paraeducators and the students they serve.

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APPENDIX A – INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL – INVESTIGATING THE LEARNING NEEDS OF PARAEDUCATORS

An Examination of the Perceived Effectiveness of a Collaborative Coaching Program for Instructional Aides

Please identify your role at your school or district:

☐ Principal
- ☐ Administrator of special programs
  - ☐ Campus level
  - ☐ District level
- ☐ Special-purpose faculty (includes diagnostician, speech-language pathologist, dyslexia therapist, counselor, etc.) Job title

  _____
- ☐ Teacher
  - ☐ Regular education – Grade _____
  - ☐ Special education – Grade(s) _____
- ☐ Instructional Aide (paraeducator)
- ☐ Other

What is your ethnicity?
- ☐ White
- ☐ African-American
- ☐ Hispanic
- ☐ Asian – Pacific Islander
- ☐ Other

What is your educational level?
- ☐ Graduate degree
- ☐ Bachelor's degree
- ☐ Some college
- ☐ High school diploma / GED
- ☐ Other specialized training

How many years have you worked in a school or educational environment?
- ☐ Less than 1 year
- ☐ 1 – 2 years
- ☐ 3 – 5 years
- ☐ 6 – 10 years
- ☐ Greater than 10 years

What Texas certifications do you hold?
- ☐ Principal / administrative
- ☐ Elementary education – list _____
- ☐ Secondary education – list _____
- ☐ Special education – list _____

☐ Instructional Aide
☐ Level I ☐ Level II ☐ Level III
☐ Other – list _____

Do you speak any languages other than English?

☐ Yes - List _____
☐ No

Have you personally worked with an instructional aide in a classroom in the last three years?

☐ Yes
☐ No

What tasks do instructional aides typically perform at your school?

What is the average amount time teachers work with instructional aides *each week* to plan activities, offer guidance, collaborate, and coordinate duties

What is the average amount of planning and preparation time that instructional aides have *each day*

What is the relationship between teachers and aides like? Please describe

Do you think the aides at your school have received enough training to do a very good job of supporting your students? Why or why not?

What kind of professional development workshops and seminars are offered to Instructional aides in your district? How were they delivered?

Do instructional aides attend the same professional development workshops and seminars as the school's teachers?

☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Not sure

What do you think your school's instructional aides would benefit from learning?

When it comes to reading instruction, on a scale of 1 to 4 (with one being the lowest and 4 being the highest) how would you rate the ability of aides to support instruction in each of the following components of reading:

Phonemic awareness	1	2	3	4
Phonics	1	2	3	4
Fluency	1	2	3	4
Reading comprehension	1	2	3	4
Writing	1	2	3	4

What reading curricula are your teachers using?

Are they supplementing it with other resources? If so, what?

In general, how would most of the teachers rate your school's reading curricula?

- ☐ **Love it**
- ☐ **Like it**
- ☐ **Neither Like nor Dislike**
- ☐ **Hate it**

What dyslexia program are you using in your school? Does it seem to help those enrolled?

What criteria do you follow for putting students in Tier 2 supports for reading?

What criteria do you follow for putting students in Tier 3 supports for reading?

What types of performance data do you gather for students in Tiers 2 and 3? How often?

What do you do with the reading data after it is gathered? How is the data used?

What role does the paraeducator play in providing reading instruction for students in Tiers 2 and 3?

What procedures do you follow for students to qualify for special education?

How do you decide if a student needs to be referred to a diagnostician for testing? Who weighs-in?

What do you do if you have a persistent non-responder to reading instruction?

What are some of the struggles your students are experiencing in reading that you wish the aides could better address?

What assessments are administered by your teachers that measure reading progress?

Do the aides in your district help the teachers administer reading assessments like the TPRI, benchmark measures, or other forms of assessment?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not sure

If Yes, on a scale of 1 to 4 (with one being the lowest and 4 being the highest) how would you rate their ability to administer reading assessments?

1 2 3 4

What are your biggest concerns about the role of instructional aides at your school?

If this research project could only accomplish <u>one objective</u> in support of paraeducators, what would you want it to be?

APPENDIX B – CLOSING QUESTIONNAIRE

I have used the information I learned during the coaching program when teaching students	4 Strongly Agree	3 Agree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
I have made changes in the ways that I work with students based on things I learned during the coaching sessions	4 Strongly Agree	3 Agree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
The information helped me better understand reading and phonics	4 Strongly Agree	3 Agree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
I am better at handling behavior problems now	4 Strongly Agree	3 Agree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
While the strategies we talked about were helpful, I haven't really used them when working with students	4 Strongly Agree	3 Agree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
I have gotten better at adapting instruction for students who are struggling	4 Strongly Agree	3 Agree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
This program met my expectations	4 Strongly Agree	3 Agree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
I can do a better job with students based on things I learned during this program	4 Strongly Agree	3 Agree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
The coach understood where I was coming from when working with students and teachers	4 Strongly Agree	3 Agree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
When working with the coach, she was able to answer my questions	4 Strongly Agree	3 Agree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
When working with the coach, if she didn't know the answer to a question, she would find out and get back to me	4 Strongly Agree	3 Agree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
The coach offered some resources that were very helpful	4 Strongly Agree	3 Agree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
I felt like my time was wasted	4 Strongly Agree	3 Agree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
I have developed a better understanding of students with learning differences	4 Strongly Agree	3 Agree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
I now feel more motivated about working with my students	4 Strongly Agree	3 Agree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
I would recommend this coaching program to others	4 Strongly Agree	3 Agree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree

The most helpful thing that I was able to take from the coaching program was…

One thing that I wish we spent more time working on was…

I still want to learn more about…

The least helpful thing from the coaching program was…

APPENDIX C – HUNTER MODEL PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Elements	***Response***			***Comments***
Anticipatory set	Yes	No	N/A	
Statement of objective and purpose	Yes	No	N/A	
Input	Yes	No	N/A	
Modeling	Yes	No	N/A	
Checking for understanding	Yes	No	N/A	
Guided practice	Yes	No	N/A	
Independent practice	Yes	No	N/A	
Response Comments	Yes	No	N/A	

Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2009, as cited from M. Hunter, 1984. "Knowing, Teaching, and Supervising." In P. L. Hosford (Ed.), Using What We Know about Teaching. Alexandria, VA:Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

APPENDIX D – EDTA OBSERVATION SCHEDULE

OBSERVATION SCHEDULE (Russell, Webster, & Blatchford, 2013, pp. 30-32)

Date: Class/Year: Teacher: TA:

Lesson details (topic/objectives):

Time (minutes)	Lesson part*	Predominant activity of TA						**TA-supported pupil(s)** (name attainment level, EDSP status)	**Task differentiation for TA-supported pupil(s)**	**Comments on teacher's role**	**Features of TA-to-pupil talk**
		With pupil 1:1	With group of pupils	Roving Classroom	Listening to teacher teach	Other tasks (clean-up, admin)					

*Key for lesson part: **I** = Teacher's main input **T** = Main learning task **P** = Plenary

APPENDIX E – ATLAS.ti LIST OF CODES

atlas.ti report

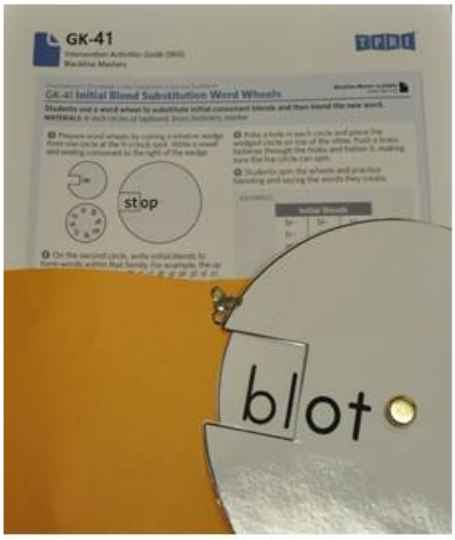
Families: List of Code Families and their Members

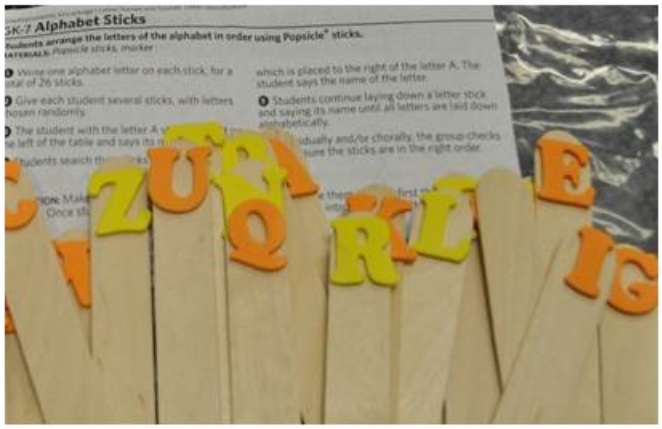
Code Family	Codes
Action Research Cycle	• Adaptations & Modifications • Data Review & Analysis • Evaluation • Identification of the Problem • Intervention • Observations & Feedback • Readings & Resources • Reflection • Review of the Literature
Agency-Voice	• Did not voice concerns • Inability - Unwilling to take action • Powerlessness • Voiced concerns
Behavioral Supports	• Provided by P-1 • Provided by P-2
Collaboration	• Between Para - Admin • Between Para - Researcher • Between Paras - Teachers • Between researcher - admin • Between researcher - teachers • Researcher encouraged collaboration with others
Curriculum	• Alphabet • Decisions based on data • Decisions based on research • Fluency • Intervention Activities Guide • Math • McGraw Hill • Other • Phonics & Decoding • Reading Comprehension • Reading in General • Touch Math
DARE Officer	• Conversation with Officer • Students did not work with P-1
Deployment Issues	
Instructional Leadership	• A-1 • A-2

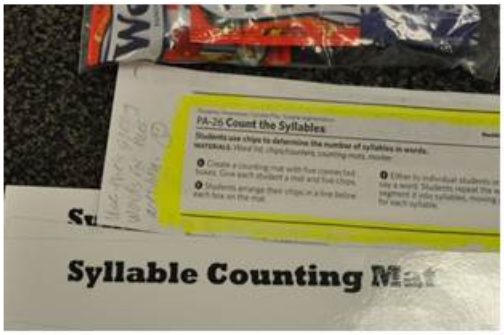
Instructional Supports	Differentiated instruction • Teaching strategies
L-5 After School Program	• L-5 purpose • Power Hour • Types of support offered
P-1 Duties	• Behavioral support • In-class aide • Office - phone • Pull-out program - academic • Substitute teaching • Supervision of students
P-2 Duties	• Behavioral support • In-class aide • Library aide • Substitute teaching • Supervision of students
Participant Descriptors	• A-1 • A-2 • P-1 • P-2 • T-2
Planning	• Cooperative planning • Impact of limited planning on instruction • Lack of time to plan • Lesson plan IS provided by teacher • Lesson plan not observed • Lesson plan NOT provided by teacher • Researcher - Para planning • Time spent planning
Professional Development	• Attended in last year • Informal professional dev conversations • Provided by researcher • Received after being hired by district • Received prior to being hired by district
Reflective Conversation	• Between A-1 - Researcher • Between A-2 - Researcher • Between P-1 - Researcher • Between P-2 - Researcher • Between T-2 - Researcher
Scheduling	• Impact of scheduling change • P-1 schedule • P-1 schedule change • P-2 schedule
TA-to-Pupil Talk	• direct quotes from P-1 • direct quotes from P-2
	• Limited time impacting instruction

Time	• Off task - time • On task - time • Time management • Walking students to class
TPRI	• Administration of TPRI • TPRI Intervention Activities Guide • Use of TPRI data • Use of TPRI resources

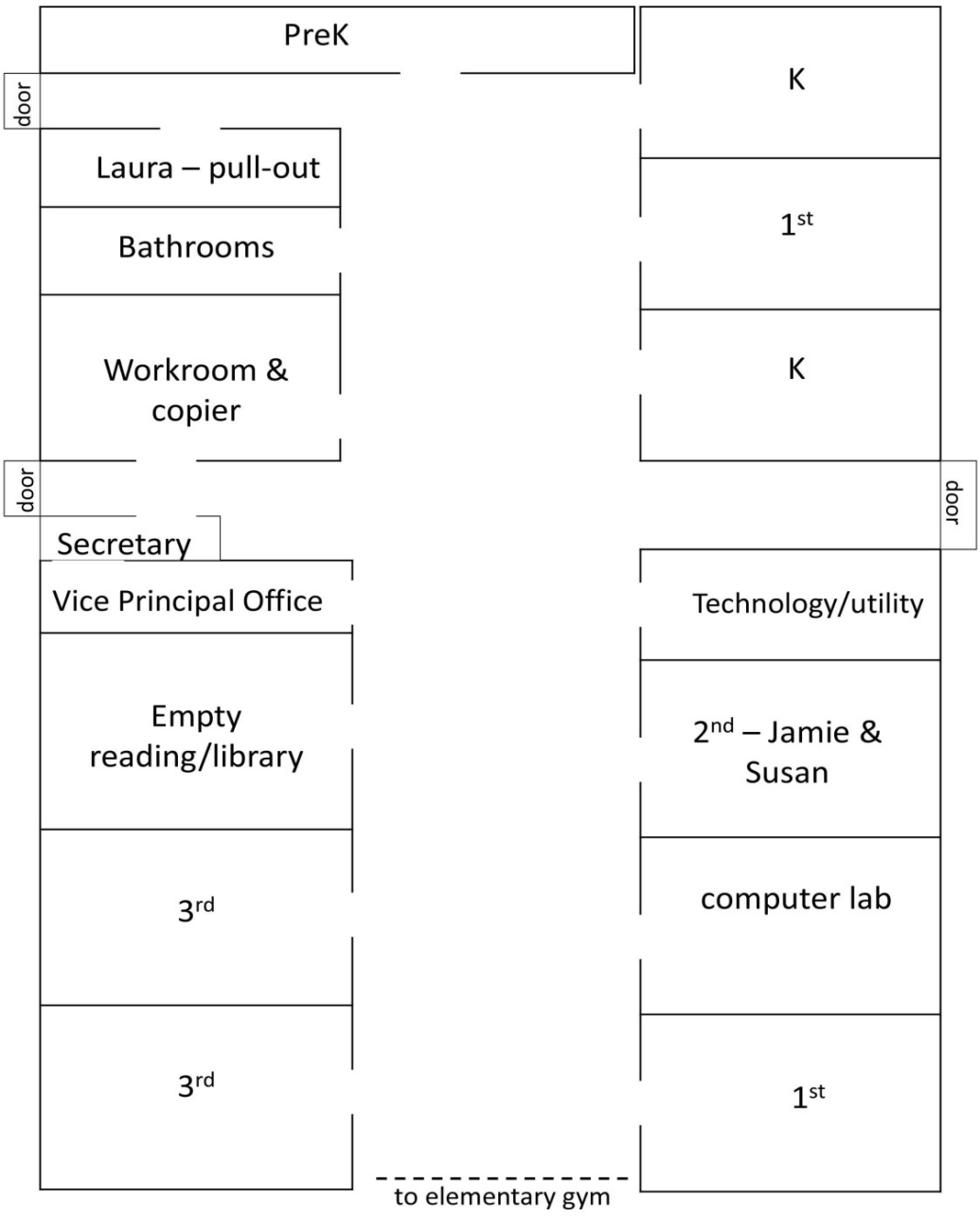
APPENDIX F – TOOLBOX IMAGES



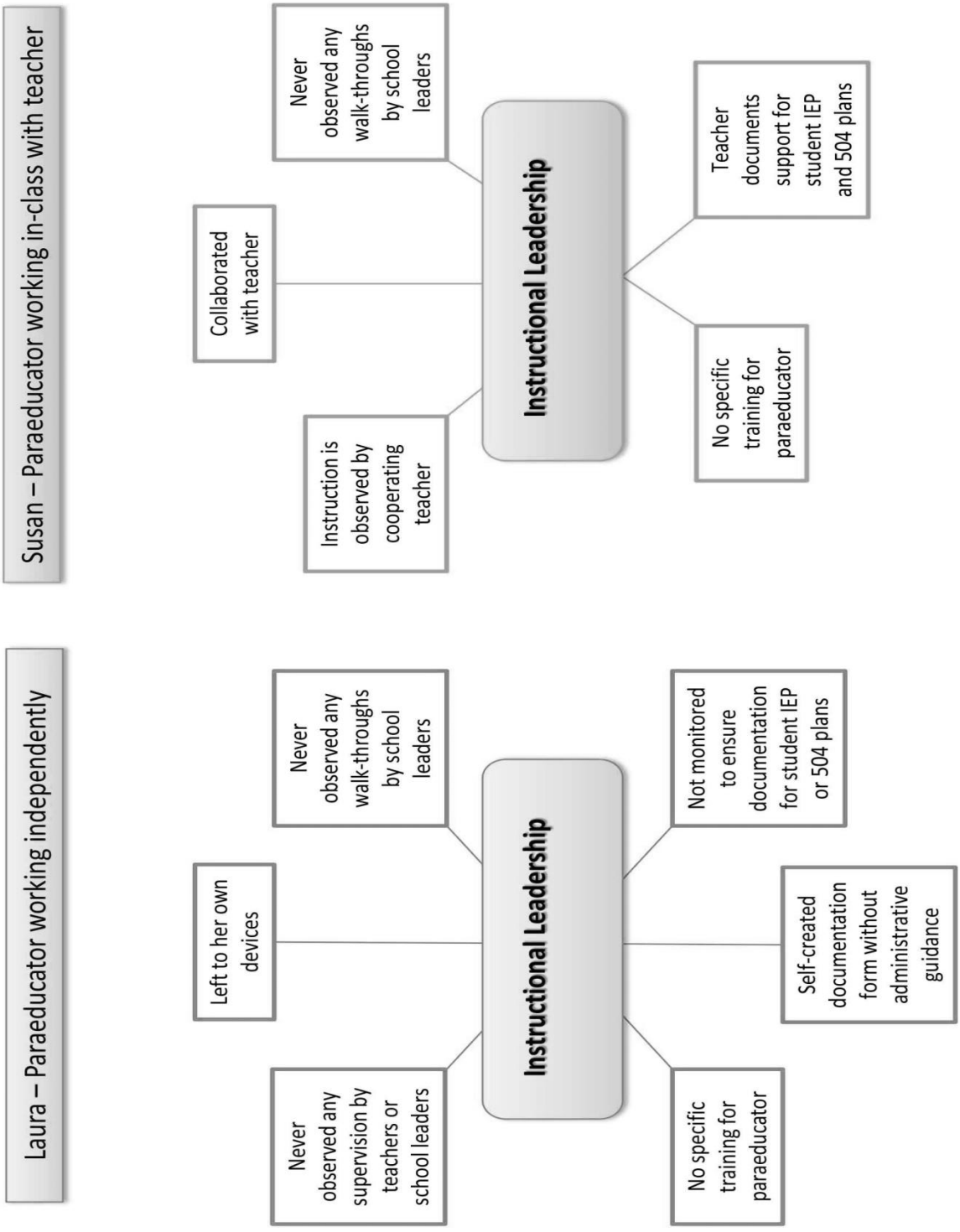


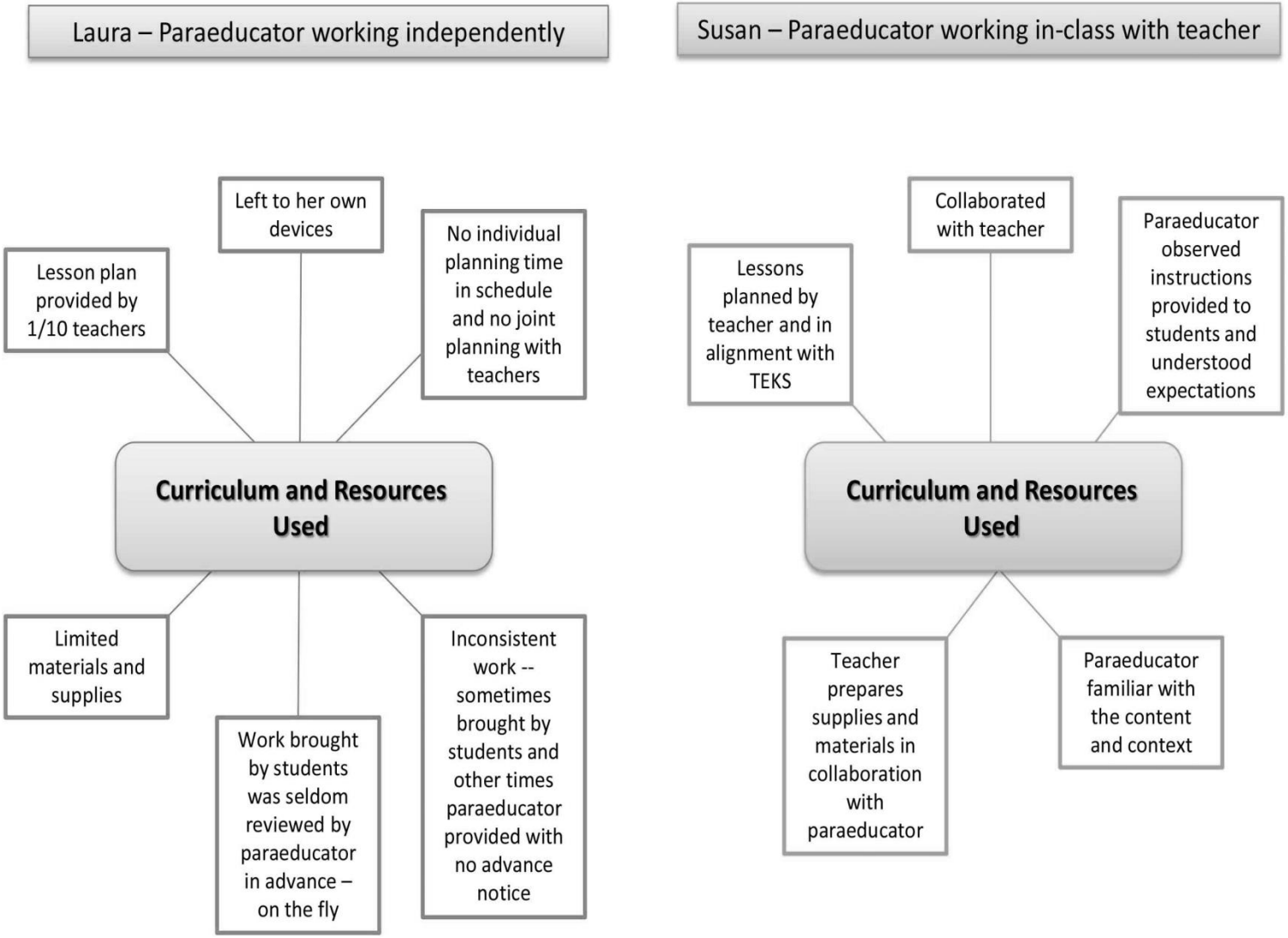


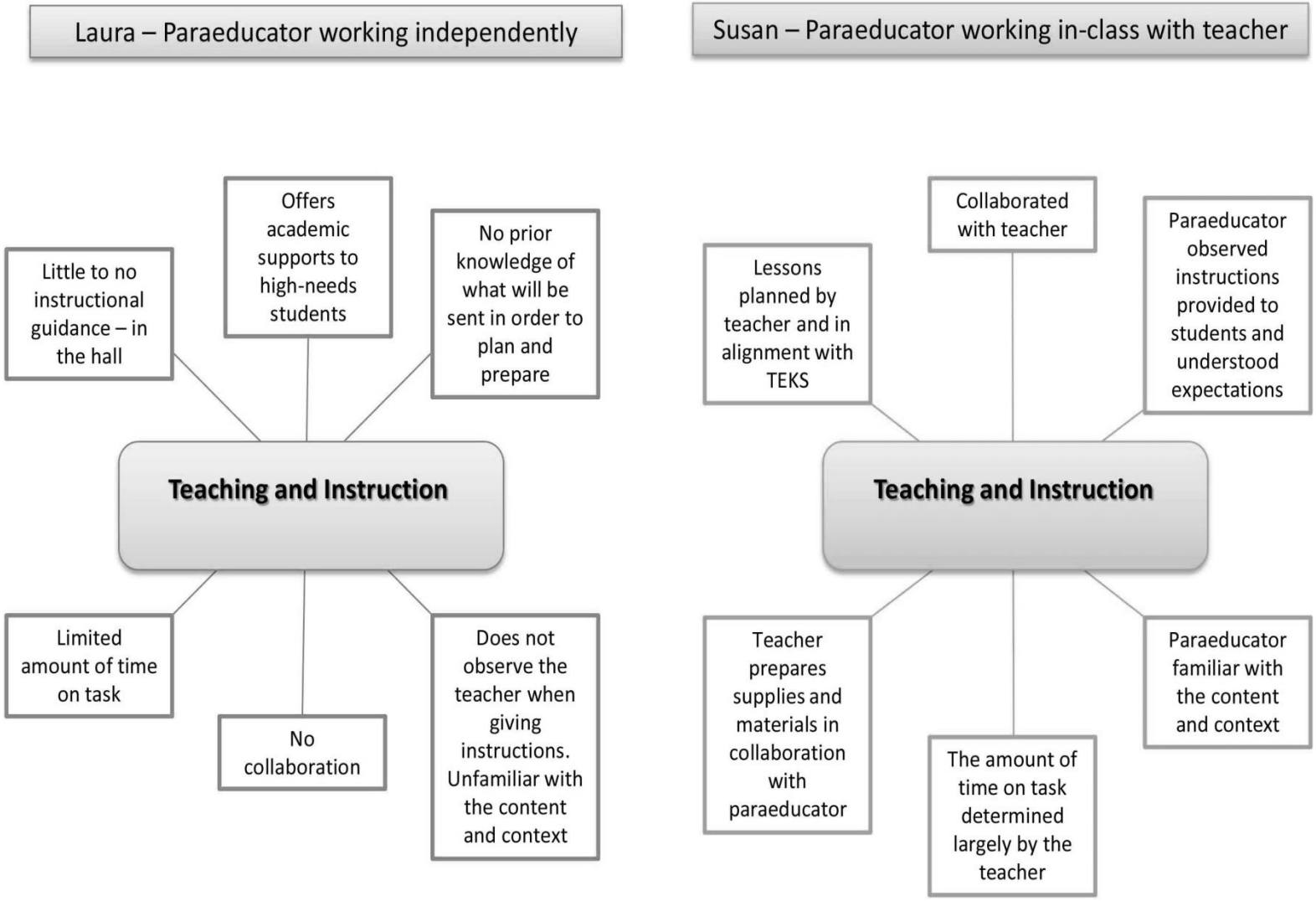
APPENDIX G – ELEMENTARY FLOORPLAN

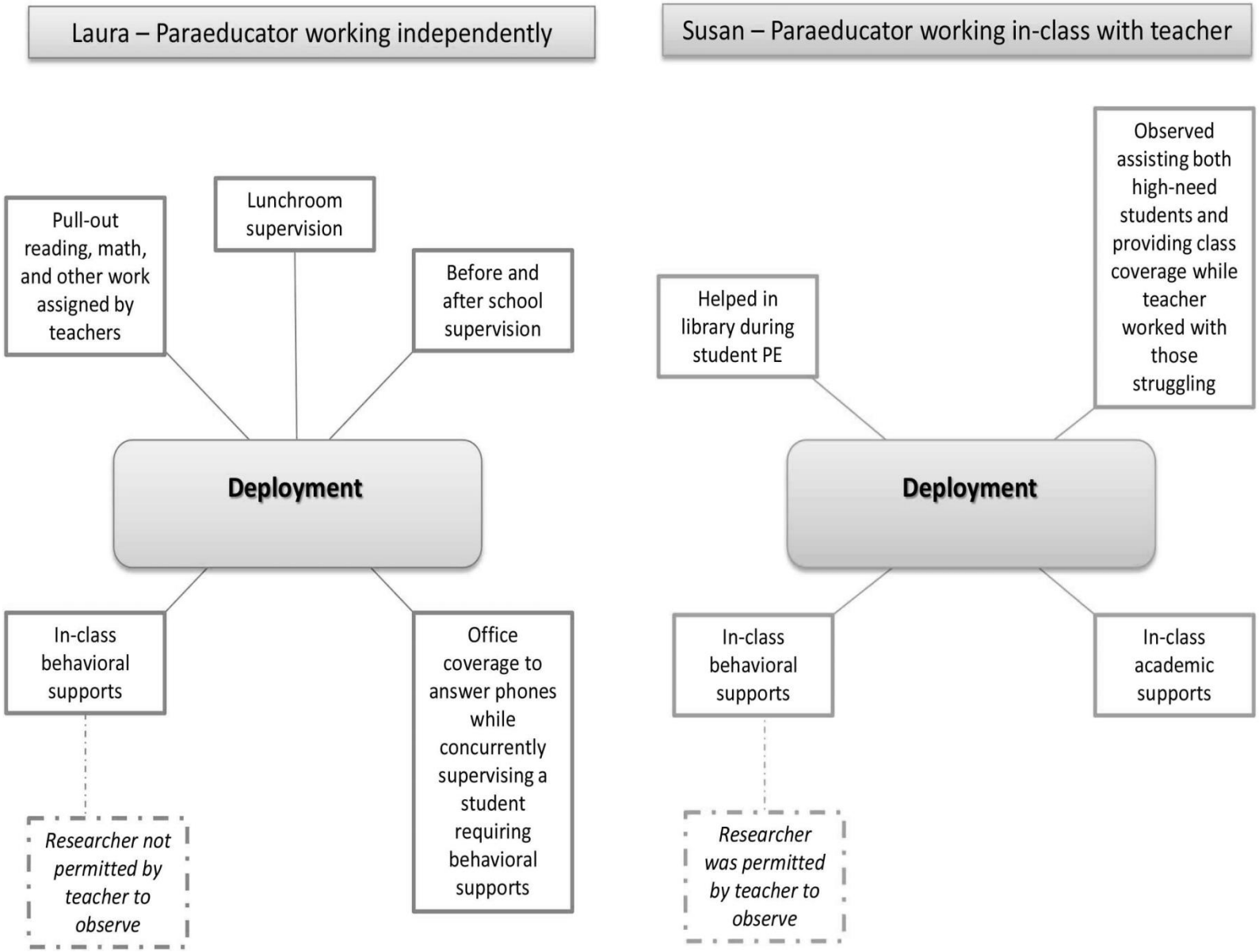


APPENDIX H – CONCEPT MAPPING

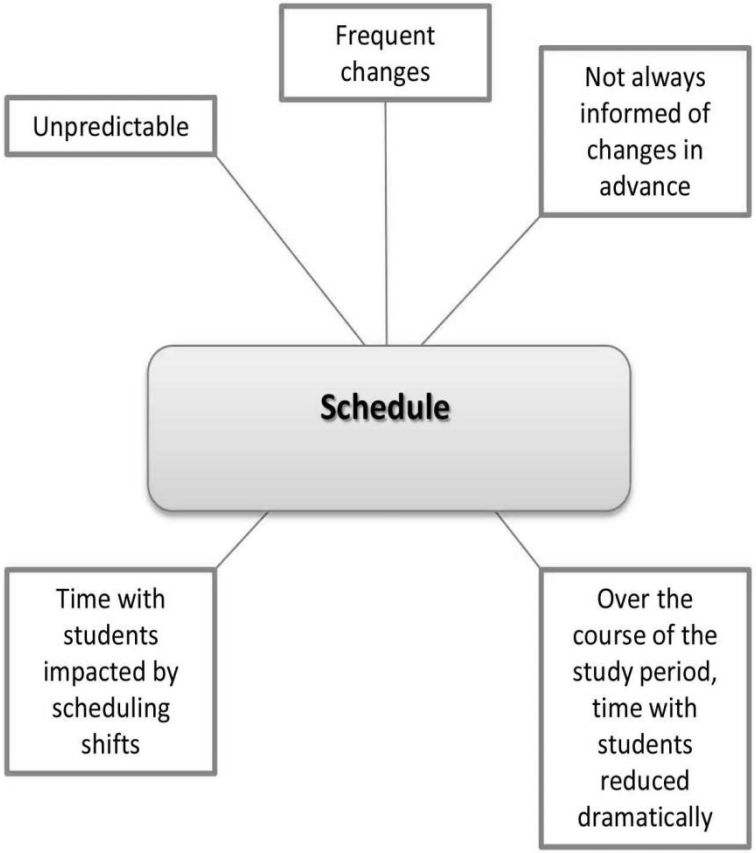



Laura – Paraeducator working independently
Left to her own devices
Lesson plan provided by 1/10 teachers
No individual planning time in schedule and no joint planning with teachers
Curriculum and Resources Used
Limited materials and supplies
Work brought by students was seldom reviewed by paraeducator in advance – on the fly
Inconsistent work -- sometimes brought by students and other times paraeducator provided with no advance notice
Susan – Paraeducator working in-class with teacher
Collaborated with teacher
Lessons planned by teacher and in alignment with TEKS
Paraeducator observed instructions provided to students and understood expectations
Curriculum and Resources Used
Teacher prepares supplies and materials in collaboration with paraeducator
Paraeducator familiar with the content and context


Laura – Paraeducator working independently
Offers academic supports to high-needs students
Little to no instructional guidance – in the hall
No prior knowledge of what will be sent in order to plan and prepare
Teaching and Instruction
Limited amount of time on task
No collaboration
Does not observe the teacher when giving instructions. Unfamiliar with the content and context
Susan – Paraeducator working in-class with teacher
Collaborated with teacher
Lessons planned by teacher and in alignment with TEKS
Paraeducator observed instructions provided to students and understood expectations
Teaching and Instruction
Teacher prepares supplies and materials in collaboration with paraeducator
The amount of time on task determined largely by the teacher
Paraeducator familiar with the content and context


Laura – Paraeducator working independently
Pull-out reading, math, and other work assigned by teachers
Lunchroom supervision
Before and after school supervision
Deployment
In-class behavioral supports
Office coverage to answer phones while concurrently supervising a student requiring behavioral supports
Researcher not permitted by teacher to observe
Susan – Paraeducator working in-class with teacher
Helped in library during student PE
Observed assisting both high-need students and providing class coverage while teacher worked with those struggling
Deployment
In-class behavioral supports
In-class academic supports
Researcher was permitted by teacher to observe

Laura – Paraeducator working independently



Susan – Paraeducator working in-class with teacher