EXPLORATORY STUDY OF PARAPROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE FROM THE
LENS OF CRITICAL THEORY AND SELF-EFFICACY

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DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of the
Educational Leadership Program
College of Arts, Sciences and Education
Texas A&M University - Texarkana
In Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

Spring 2020
Abstract

Research on the working experience and self-efficacy of educational paraprofessionals regarding their mission to meet the needs of public education's most vulnerable students, special education students, is largely non-existent. Therefore, the current exploratory study examines ways to gain access to paraprofessionals to study paraprofessional self-efficacy. Further, access to paraprofessionals was sought as not to limit their voice in the research describing perceived paraprofessional experience. Based on Bandura’s Theory of Self-Efficacy and Critical Theory, this research allows education leaders to become more aware of equity issues affecting paraprofessional efficacy and experience, thus better informing training for paraprofessionals and paraprofessional supervisors. Finally, this study gives voice to a virtually invisible, yet critical, population serving students within the United States.

Keywords: paraprofessionals, paraeducators, paraprofessional voice, paraprofessional supervision, paraprofessional training, paraprofessional self-efficacy
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CHAPTER 1

Several years ago, when I began my doctoral journey, I was working as a classroom teacher. During that time, I developed a close working relationship with a paraprofessional who supported a boy in a wheelchair assigned to my room. Within the first month of school, she confided in me almost tearfully that after 31 years in the district as a paraprofessional, this was the first time she felt treated as a person. I found myself intrigued that she had stayed for so long working in an environment in which she did not feel valued. Although I had no previous training in the supervision of a paraprofessional, as a classroom teacher I was assigned to keep her on task and to provide a formal evaluation of her performance at the end of the school year. I could not stop thinking about her statement. If feeling valued was an issue for this particular paraprofessional, how did other paraprofessionals perceive themselves within their roles in public schools? As I began to review the literature on self-efficacy, it became obvious that although there was much written about many roles in public education, there was little to no research about self-efficacy of paraprofessionals.

Educational paraprofessionals perform duties that are instructional in nature and deliver direct services to students or parents. Paraprofessionals have established an increasingly prominent role in the support of the instruction of individuals with exceptionalities at all ages and are in a position to provide strong, multidimensional support for enabling students' academic success (Leighton et al., 1997). A number of studies argue that paraprofessionals are increasingly becoming vital contributors to service delivery in special education programs (Carter et al., 2009; Breton, 2010; French, 1998, 2001, & 2003; Giangreco et al., 2012; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018).
According to the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018), elementary and secondary schools are considered the largest employers of paraprofessionals in the United States, with 12.4% of industry employment or 1,380,300 people employed as paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals earned a median annual wage of $26,970 as of May 2018.

Additionally, research indicates that classrooms often reflect divergent curricular, instructional, behavioral, social needs and expectations that necessitate paraprofessionals be equipped to support student achievement within diverse contexts (Carter et al., 2009; Lane et al., 2005; Stang et al., 2009). As such, paraprofessionals need to possess a sufficient level of knowledge to effectively serve such a heterogeneous group of students with diverse needs in a broad range of settings (Carter et al., 2009). To these ends, The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) among others have designated 13 knowledge standards as minimal requirements for all paraprofessionals to possess and implement (as cited in Cook et al., 2014). Carter et al. (2009) found considerable variability in the extent to which paraprofessionals report having sufficient knowledge of these minimum standards needed to execute their roles effectively.

In the research, concerns have been raised about assigning the least trained staff to students, those diagnosed with disabilities who exhibit the greatest need for support (Patterson, 2006). In addition, paraprofessionals often assume responsibilities more appropriate to certified teachers and are provided only limited direct training and guidance, usually from school staff (Breton, 2010; Carter et al., 2009). Further, paraprofessionals are widely relied upon by schools to assist special needs students in the classroom rather than relegating them to special education classes further supporting the need for sufficient training for paraprofessionals.
In 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was reauthorized and amended through Public Law 114-95, the Every Student Succeeds Act, in December 2015. This reauthorization highlighted the importance of paraprofessionals in the classroom (Herr, 1997). This was one of the first times that paraprofessionals were acknowledged in federal legislation as part of the team that provides educational services to students with disabilities. However, as research shows, schools do not prepare and develop paraprofessionals in a manner that best serves the students; this serves to negatively impact paraprofessional job satisfaction.

Giangreco et al. (2001) assert school-wide practices in public schools contribute to the inappropriate utilization of paraprofessionals in the classroom from the perspective of paraprofessionals, teachers, and parents. Paraprofessionals along with the teacher generally assume a wide range of responsibility ranging from personal care (e.g., feeding, toileting) to critical tasks (e.g., keeping attendance, grading papers) and sharing responsibilities (e.g., organizing classrooms) for activities for students (Carter et al., 2009). However, while Giangreco et al. (2001) mention important research to benefit paraprofessionals, they do not consider the paraprofessionals’ perspective regarding self-efficacy and job satisfaction. Indeed, the current research argues a gap in the literature exists regarding self-efficacy among paraprofessionals thereby establishing a need for exploratory research in this area. Therefore, the current exploratory research is interested in examining new or complex issues that have not been previously investigated (Butin, 2009). The current study explores the self-efficacy, access, and professional experiences of the paraprofessional. Without the perspective of paraprofessionals, research suggests
training opportunities are disconnected from or irrelevant to their needs (Carter et al., 2009; Wallace et al., 2001; Wigstrom, 2016).

**Background and Context of the Problem**

Paraprofessionals have varying perceptions of their responsibilities, roles, duties and expectations that differ even among individuals who work at the same school (Patterson, 2006). The challenge is to specifically identify the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals and to provide appropriate services to successfully meet student needs (Patterson, 2006). However, several inequities exist that impede the paraprofessional’s work. One is the lack of training for the paraprofessional and for supervisors (Biggs et al., 2016; Breton, 2010; Carter et al., 2009; Wigstrom, 2016). These authors suggest unclear roles and expectations along with untrained supervisors can contribute to low paraprofessional self-efficacy that, ultimately, negatively affects students served. Unfortunately, due to lack of current research, little is known about the paraprofessional’s experience from their perspective.

**Gaining Access to Paraprofessionals**

The current study assumes that a significant reason for the dearth of research on paraprofessional experience is due to lack of access to this population. For example, when trying to determine the number of paraprofessionals employed in a four states area to include Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana and Oklahoma, human resource offices within districts were contacted via email with little to no results. Educational cooperatives had no information, and contacting the Department of Education yielded no results. Therefore, this study explores effective ways to gain access to paraprofessionals so that their voice may be heard.
As stated, access to paraprofessionals for research can be difficult. For example, the paraprofessional assigned to one student all day has little access to computers and email. Email is a primary means of communication for educators. Vital information about the daily happenings of a school day may be missed. Paraprofessionals do not always attend regular faculty meetings that certified staff is required to attend. Further, the lack of ability to access basic information about paraprofessionals at the school and district level also makes studying this population difficult. For example, determining how many paraprofessionals are employed in a particular school district can be challenging as positions change frequently. Paraprofessional positions are often fluid due to the changing needs of special needs students, as determined by special education teams in Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings (Bonnie Casey, personal communication, April 15, 2019).

Even so, Patterson (2006) obtained access to paraprofessionals by interviewing participants employed by three different school districts in the state of Florida by telephone. Paraprofessionals were interviewed about the duties of their positions. In addition to phone interviews, letters with return postage paid envelopes were mailed to individual schools to the attention of the paraprofessionals on staff. Information regarding the study, a consent form, and a form indicating an appropriate time to call was included. The enclosed letter explained that the participants would receive school supplies for participating in the study. In total, 80 letters were mailed and 35 initial responses were received for a 44% response rate. 22 paraprofessionals participated in the study (Patterson, 2006).
More recently, Wigstrom (2016) successfully investigated the perception of paraprofessionals about their roles as educators in a single county of Alabama using a survey via school email. Of the over 400 paraprofessionals employed in the county, 52 study participants responded for a 13% response rate. Based on the response rates obtained by Patterson (2006) and Wigstrom (2016), it appears access to paraprofessional responses are higher via mail or by phone as opposed to email, possibly due to the lack of access to computers and email within schools. The current study sought ways to gain access to paraprofessionals in order to ascertain their levels of self-efficacy and better understand their daily experience.

*Self-Efficacy*

Although the above-mentioned studies investigated the roles and duties of paraprofessionals, an inquiry regarding self-efficacy is not included. In fact, no research was found regarding self-efficacy of paraprofessionals. Bandura (1994) asserts a strong sense of efficacy enhances human accomplishment and personal well-being in many ways. People with high confidence in their capabilities approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided. People with a strong sense of self-efficacy set complex goals and maintain a solid commitment to them. Efforts are increased and sustained in the face of failure. These individuals quickly recover their sense of efficacy after setbacks. Those with high self-efficacy attribute errors to lack of effort or knowledge and skills, which are acquirable (Bandura, 1994).
Purpose and Significance of the Study

The current exploratory study investigated and described the paraprofessional experience from the paraprofessional perspective to better understand and provide more relevant training for paraprofessionals and training for those who supervise them. Examining paraprofessional roles, relationships and performances leads to a greater understanding of the overall challenges this group faces. However, due to issues related to gaining access to paraprofessionals, the current study examined more effective methods in gaining access to paraprofessionals so that their perspectives may be included in research. With the increasingly critical role of the paraprofessional in today’s schools and over a million paraprofessionals serving nearly 51 million public school students in the United States, the importance of this study could potentially impact school leaders’ awareness of paraprofessional needs (Pickett et al., 2003).

Theoretical Framework

Two theories provide the theoretical framework for the study helping to explain the paraprofessional experience and guide the study, Critical Theory and Bandura’s Theory of Self-Efficacy. A theoretical framework provides a common worldview from which to support a particular way of thinking on the problem and analysis of data (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). A theoretical framework is a foundation for research that serves as the structure and support for: the rationale for the study, the problem statement, the purpose, the significance, and the research questions (Creswell, 2012).

Critical Theory

Critical theory is a social theory oriented toward examining culture and changing society as a whole, in contrast to traditional theory, which only seeks to understand or
explain it (Bohman, 2016). Critical theory seeks to explain what is wrong with a current social reality, identify the actors that will change it, and provide clear norms for criticism and achievable, yet practical goals for social transformation (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002). Critical theory provides descriptive and normative bases for social inquiry aimed at decreasing human oppression as well as increasing freedom in all forms. Therefore, the objective of critical theory is to raise the consciousness of disempowered and dispossessed people.

Critical theory makes certain assumptions about truth. Because truth is linked to power, the key question to ask is who benefits from being in power (Butin, 2009). The primary goal of critical theory is to examine, expose, and/or overturn hidden relations of power. Fundamental to critical theory is theoretical consistency and insight, an impetus for change (Butin, 2009).

Using the goal of critical theory in the context of the paraprofessional experience, Figure 1 shows how accessing the paraprofessional voice is necessary in revealing imbalances that affect the paraprofessional experience. Only by integrating the paraprofessional’s voice in considering and implementing campus and district practices (e.g. paraprofessional and teacher training) will lead to a sense of increased equity benefiting paraprofessionals. Critical theory asserts that only when inequities are understood and addressed by those in a position of power, will conditions for the “oppressed” improve. In the context of this study, this means that only when educational leaders understand inequities experienced by paraprofessionals will leadership be motivated to improve practices that include a greater sense of self-efficacy.
Within the current study, the campus power dynamic between administration, teachers, and paraprofessionals, affects perceptions of equity and self-efficacy. Issues related to equity can include financial compensation, inclusion of all employees (in communications and activities), transparency, and professional development. If better understood and considered, perhaps training for all campus staff especially administrators, teachers and paraprofessionals could include issues related to equity to support paraprofessional self-efficacy in a manner that ultimately impact services to students.

Figure1

Visual Description of Theoretical Framework

Paraprofessional Voice

Increased Equity

Increased Self-Efficacy


Bandura’s Self-Efficacy Theory

Self-efficacy is defined by psychologist Albert Bandura as a personal judgment of how well one can execute action that is required to deal with a prospective situation (Bandura, 1982). Self-efficacy determines whether one will be able to exhibit coping behaviors and how resilient the person is in the face of obstacles. Self-efficacy research has flourished in education in recent decades. Bandura’s strong theory is one reason; it
provides educators with a clean framework for research. Self-efficacy research provides a link to a variety of practical issues such as motivation, self-regulated learning and academic performance (Nie et al., 2012). There has been substantial research done on many specific populations in education. Self-efficacy has been extensively examined in principals, preservice teachers, practicing teachers, teacher burnout, students, race, and self-esteem but there are no available studies on self-efficacy and paraprofessionals (Barnes et al., 2018; Collins et al., 2009; Neuss, 2016; Nie et al., 2012; Senler & Sungur, 2010).

Based on Bandura’s theory, it can be assumed that if paraprofessionals report that they feel disempowered and have limited voice, self-efficacy is measurably lowered. However, strong self-efficacy needs to be present in paraprofessionals for optimum attitude and performance. Research shows self-efficacy is a malleable trait that can be taught and measured (Bandura, 1997). As Protheroe (2008) states, leaders within their schools such as principals, can help develop a culture of efficacy for an entire building. Protheroe continues that leadership could involve training, pep talks, or feedback that highlights effective behaviors, while also providing specific, constructive suggestions for improvement. Such social persuasion is likely to lose its positive impact if subsequent experiences are not positive (Protheroe, 2008).

Bandura (1994) identified four factors that create and build self-efficacy: 1) mastery experiences (performance outcomes), 2) social modeling (vicarious experiences), 3) social or verbal persuasion, and 4) states of physiology (emotional status). While the four factors for building self-efficacy are described more in Chapter 2, Bandura warns failure can undermine self-efficacy, especially if failures occur before a sense of efficacy
is firmly established. Experiencing success, such as mastering a task or controlling an environment, builds self-belief in that area whereas a failure will undermine that efficacy belief. A resilient sense of self-efficacy requires experience in overcoming obstacles and success through effort and perseverance. The key to mastery is for a person to take on tasks with dedicated effort while experimenting with realistic but challenging goals. Success that is too easily achieved can lead a person to constantly expect rapid results, creating discouragement. Failure is an important tool that helps build personal resilience. Treating failure as a learning opportunity and trying again with another approach builds resilience, problem-solving skills and self-confidence. The satisfaction of goals achieved is the key to mastery (Bandura, 1994).

Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy explains how core beliefs can be influenced and developed, and illustrates how it positively affects all facets of human experience (Bandura, 1977). Bandura (2012) asserts perceived self-efficacy is a judgment of one’s capability to execute particular types of work. Outcome expectations are judgments about the results that are likely to flow from such performances and take on three specific forms (Bandura, 1993). These forms include positive and negative physical, social, and self-evaluative outcomes. Within each form, the positive expectations serve as incentives and the negative ones as deterrents. The outcomes one anticipates are determined by one’s opinion of how well they will be able to perform in certain situations (Bandura, 2006).

Bandura’s self-efficacy theory states that the combination between the four factors that develop self-efficacy will in turn determine one’s degree of self-efficacy, which directly affects one’s performance outcomes. However, only when we understand the paraprofessional experience from the perspective of the paraprofessional, and
examine their experience using the lens of critical theory -- the conditions that create inequities in paraprofessional experience -- can we understand how to improve the paraprofessional experience to increase self-efficacy in their work experience.

**Research Questions**

Based on a framework from the lens of Bandura’s Theory of Self-Efficacy and Critical Theory, the questions focusing the current study include:

R1. What is the perceived level of self-efficacy experienced by paraprofessionals?

R2. What is the role *access* plays in obtaining the paraprofessionals voice?

**Overview of the Methodology**

The current study provides quantitative, descriptive data and additional interviews to explore paraprofessional experience. In Phase 1, research question #1 was addressed. I attempted to access a large number of paraprofessionals to collect data regarding paraprofessional self-efficacy by distributing an online survey to Council of Exceptional Children (CEC) online community. Phase 2 worked to answer research question #2 regarding paraprofessional access. The process and challenges in accessing individual paraprofessionals are reported and discussed. In addition, interviews were obtained to provide contextual information for discussion regarding data analysis.

**Definition of Terms**

*Collaboration*- The working relationship between a paraprofessional and their supervisory teacher.

*Diversity*- The condition or quality of being diverse, different, or varied; difference, unlikeness.

*Equity*- The quality of being treated fairly.
**Efficacy**- Personal power or capacity to produce effects; power to effect the object intended.

**Equally**- The quality of being treated in exactly the same way.

**Exploratory Study**- Research conducted to determine the nature of a problem when little or no previous research has been done. An exploratory study aims to better understand an issue and is not intended to provide conclusive evidence.

**General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE)** - was created to assess a general sense of perceived self-efficacy. The German version developed in 1979 by Jerusalem and Schwarzer, and later revised and adapted to 26 other languages by various co-authors.

**Human Emancipation**- When human beings are free from isolation and oppression.

**Inclusion Paraprofessional**- A paraprofessional that assists special needs students in a mainstreamed classroom setting to provide behavioral and academic supports.

**Paraprofessionals (Paraeducators)** - Noncertified (classified) staff of a public school that are educational assistants. This definition includes personal care providers who work in the special education setting and provide personal services for students that include, but are not limited to, feeding and toileting.

**Paraprofessional Experience**- The working experience of a paraprofessional in a public school setting.

**Personal Care Provider (Paraprofessional)** - A paraprofessional that typically takes care of personal needs that the student is unable to do for themselves, examples include feeding and toileting needs.

**Relationships**- The way in which two things are connected; a connection, an association.
Teacher Education- Refers to the policies, procedures, and instruction designed to equip (prospective) teachers with the knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and skills required to perform their tasks effectively in the classroom, school, and wider community.

Self-contained Paraprofessional- A paraprofessional that works specifically in a self-contained classroom setting and does not work in mainstreamed classroom settings.

Social Justice- Justice at the level of a state or society as it regards the possession of wealth, commodities, opportunities, and privileges (Simpson, Weiner, & Proffitt, 1993).

Assumptions

1. Respondents were assumed to provide truthful and accurate information to the best of their ability.
2. Inclusion criteria of the sample are assumed to be appropriate; survey participants have all experienced the same or similar phenomenon of the study.
3. It is assumed that participants have a sincere interest in participating in this research.
4. All data is assumed to be accurate.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations are defined as the threats to the validity of a study or things that cannot be controlled by an individual researcher. The following are limitations to the current study:

1. One of the difficulties of the exploration of paraprofessionals is the limited access to this population.
2. The sampled selection of paraprofessionals occurred via the CEC’s membership. Responses were low. This is a limitation because the survey did not reach as many paraprofessionals as needed for validity of responses. Although this research combines the perspectives of paraprofessionals and personal care
provider paraprofessionals, other input from administrators, district support staff, and other stakeholders could lend additional insight to understanding what competencies are needed for paraprofessionals and teachers. These stakeholders could potentially be an integral part of helping teachers develop those needed competencies.

3. There may have been unknown conditions or factors at the school where the survey and interview participants that could bias responses.

4. The number of participants may not have been enough from which to adequately draw conclusions.

5. All interview participants were white females. Therefore, research results show an underrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities.

Delimitations are specific choices made by the researcher that can possibly weaken the generalizability of the results of a study to the broader population:

1. The theoretical framework for this study may not accurately reflect the broader paraprofessional experience.

2. Bandura’s General Self-Efficacy survey used along with semi-structured interview questions narrows how the data gathered is analyzed.

3. Time frame in which data was gathered limited paraprofessional participation.

4. Interviews were done via telephone so I did not have direct contact with the participant. Limited communication could affect the ability to understand the interviewee’s perceptions (Creswell, 2012).
Summary

Numerous studies explore the training provided to special education teachers and its impact on self-efficacy as well as on students. There is less information available about paraprofessional training (Breton, 2010). Lack of training, supervision, and access to knowledge regarding roles and expectations for paraprofessionals has the potential to lower paraprofessional self-efficacy, thereby negatively affecting students served. Understanding the paraprofessional role and their sense of efficacy from paraprofessionals themselves through the lens of critical theory and Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy supports training and supervision that will better serve students with the greatest learning needs. The current exploratory study examines paraprofessional self-efficacy, access to paraprofessionals and gives voice the paraprofessionals, an otherwise seldom heard population.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Paraprofessional roles have evolved since their initial emergence into public schools during the mid-1900s. The evolution has occurred primarily due to parent advocacy and changing laws and guidelines (Pickett et al., 2003). Paraprofessionals entered into American’s classrooms initially performing general administrative tasks with very little student interaction. Today paraprofessional roles have grown to include managing some of the most challenging students within today’s school buildings (Patterson, 2006). Even with little to no training and low pay, today’s paraprofessionals show up day in and day out showing incredible dedication to children in need (Minondo et al., 2001; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). They do so with little clarity or sense of stability about what their responsibilities will be each day. A paraprofessional’s job duties appear to change by the week, day and hour. Sometimes paraprofessionals are used as substitutes that fill in for sick teachers, are pulled out to help when extreme behaviors occur and students need isolation, as well as but not limited to doing lunch duty for hours. I have observed paraprofessionals change diapers, calm raging children, and buy student toiletries, underwear, and prom dresses out of their own pockets. I have even watched as one paraprofessional took a special needs child into her own home when that student had nowhere else to go.

The grit and tenacity of this specific population of dedicated educators is inspiring. They are often overlooked and could plausibly be described as invisible. In addition to my high regard for these selfless heroes, my personal observations initially made me curious about paraprofessional self-efficacy. In reviewing the multitude of self-
efficacy research that has been presented, I was shocked to find no self-efficacy literature for paraprofessionals is available. Therefore, research on paraprofessional self-efficacy is not existent. In writing this chapter, I sought to explore the literature available regarding roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals. In doing so, the literature review seeks to support the exploratory nature for the current study and provide voice to those deeply committed to special needs students who are often overlooked in American school systems.

More specifically, the literature review discusses historical aspects of the role of paraprofessional including federal and state requirements advancing the development of the role. The review presents research on critical relationships including the teacher-paraprofessional relationship and student-paraprofessional relationship. Further, the review discusses aspects of the role that affect the paraprofessional’s job satisfaction, life satisfaction and general happiness, ultimately affecting their self-efficacy. These aspects of the role include: wages and employment rates, supervision and training. Lastly, reviewed are theories that provide the framework for the current study including Critical Theory and Bandura’s Theory of Self-Efficacy. Reviewed are aspects directly related to the current study while little history of each theory is also included to provide greater context. Due to lack of research on the role of the paraprofessional, older research is presented at times to provide perspective on relevant issues related to current issues experienced by paraprofessionals.

History of Paraprofessionals

During the latter half of the 20th century dramatic changes took place in the nation's schools. Work by Pickett et al. (2003) provides a thorough discussion on the
topic. The authors explain that schools began to employ “teacher aides” to address critical shortages of licensed teachers in the 1950s. This new group of school employees was hired to assist teachers with non-instructional tasks. Teacher aides enabled teachers to meet the educational needs of all students by performing clerical tasks, monitoring lunchrooms, playgrounds, and hallways, preparing bulletin boards, and other activities as needed.

During the 1950s, paraprofessionals were not working directly with special needs students. However, as Pickett et al. (2003) explain, soon parents and other advocates began working to gain access and services for children exhibiting more severe educational needs rather than having them participate in educational alternatives in state operated institutions. Early on, parent-operated schools employed teacher aides to work with teachers to provide personalized services for students who could benefit from additional support.

By the mid-1960s, Title I, Head Start, and other compensatory, federal programs were beginning to be implemented for students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds as well as students from diverse language and cultural heritages. These new federal programs required teacher aides to perform more complex responsibilities in addition to their non-instructional tasks (Pickett et al., 2003). For example, teacher aides continued to perform routine monitoring, clerical, and housekeeping duties as had been their responsibility in the past, but now are expected to perform more complex tasks such as reviewing and reinforcing lessons, and assisting students with learning activities initiated by teachers.
Over time, Pickett et al. (2003) state school districts adopted additional titles to more accurately describe teacher-aide contributions, roles, and responsibilities. In the 1960s, several educators suggested the term "Para", a Greek word meaning "alongside of". The term *paraprofessional* acknowledged the functions performed by those named as teacher aides. There are numerous titles for paraprofessionals including: instructional, educational, teacher assistant, occupational, physical therapy, speech-language aide, health care aide, job coach/transition trainer, and assistant for learners who are deaf-blind. In much of the research, *paraeducator* is a term used synonymously with *paraprofessional*. For consistency, this study uses the term *paraprofessional*.

Specifically, *paraprofessional* will refer to those who assist certified teachers in a self-contained and/or an inclusion classroom and personal care providers for students with special needs (see Definition of Terms).

To date, paraprofessionals have supported educators by providing important services to students with disabilities for over 50 years. Throughout the years, under the guidance and supervision of certified teachers, paraprofessionals have become an essential part of the special education team in delivering individualized services thereby playing an increasingly prominent role in the support of instruction of individuals with exceptionalities at all ages (Giangreco et al., 2012). For example, paraprofessionals who share common language and culture with students, are often asked to serve as liaisons between schools and homes as a way of helping to overcome boundaries between schools and families (Pickett et al., 2003).

As the role of the paraprofessional has expanded, so has confusion and lack of clarity as to what are the responsibilities of the role. At times, there is confusion
distinguishing the paraprofessional role from the role of the certified classroom instructor (Giangreco et al., 2012). In research, administrators, teachers, and paraprofessionals have reported questioning the roles of the paraprofessional in inclusive and self-contained settings providing further evidence for the need to clarify specific job duties that paraprofessionals provide in both the inclusive and the self-contained classroom (Breton, 2010; Fisher & Pleasants, 2011; French, 2001; Giangreco et al., 2011; Giangreco & Suter, 2015; Harris, 2012; Howley et al., 2017; Minondo et al., 2001; Wigstrom, 2016). As the literature review more deeply explores topics related to the roles and responsibilities of the paraprofessional, the reader will see a common thread throughout related to a lack of clarity regarding the paraprofessional’s role.

**State and Federal Requirements**

Clearly understanding the role, including paraprofessional qualifications, and responsibilities of paraprofessionals is important to ensure state and federal requirements are relevant and are being met by districts. Public school employees in the United States are considered classified, unlicensed, or licensed, certified, employees. Today’s paraprofessionals are part of the classified staff making them subject to state and federal requirements. For example, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, requires that Local Education Agencies (LEAs) ensure that paraprofessionals hired with Title I funds or working in a Title I school-wide program meet qualifications that were put in place before the date of the enactment of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (Plans, 2015). Schools must ensure that all paraprofessionals meet the qualifications as required in Section 1119 (i) of
the ESEA of 2015. For example, all paraprofessionals paid through Title I funds must have earned a high school diploma or its recognized equivalent.

Paraprofessional qualifications must be met prior to allowing paraprofessionals provide the following services: instructional support, work under the direct supervision of a teacher and work in a school wide building. Even though federal requirements allow today’s paraprofessionals provide instructional support, requirements state paraprofessionals should not provide planned direct instruction, introduce students to new skills, concepts, or academic content. Further, requirements must be met regardless of how much the position is funded with federal funds including those who work in a building targeted for specific special needs students and are paid, even partially, with Title I funds.

Even though federal laws are applicable to schools receiving federal funding, education is the responsibility of the state. The U.S. Secretary of Education is expressly prohibited from forcing or even encouraging specific implementation standards. Therefore, states are left to their own devices to determine how they will interpret federal mandates (Plans, 2015). As such, requirements for paraprofessional positions vary by state and district. For example, some states and districts require only a high school diploma and on-the-job training, while other states and districts require a minimum of an associate's degree from an accredited community college (State Board of Education, Arkansas, n.d). Figure 2 shows how Arkansas has chosen to interpret federal requirements for paraprofessionals. According to the Arkansas Department of Education, a paraprofessional is defined as an employee who provides instructional support and includes those who have met the stated standards. So, while federal requirements
establish a minimum of qualification for the role, interpretation among states serves to add to the lack of clarity and consistency regarding the role of the paraprofessional (Division of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.).

Figure 2

*Arkansas Paraprofessional Employment Requirements*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arkansas Employment Requirements for Paraprofessionals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Completed two years of study at an institution of higher education (60 semester credit hours at an accredited institution of higher education are required.) -or-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Obtained the minimum of an associate’s degree -or-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Pass a formal state or local academic assessment of rigorous standards that proves the paraprofessional demonstrates the knowledge to assist students in reading, writing, math, (readiness, if appropriate), and instructing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note*. Requirements from State Board of Education, Arkansas, based on federal requirements

It should be noted that the federal requirements for paraprofessionals do not apply to personal care providers, even though many personal care providers essentially *appear* to function in the educational setting in the same role as a paraprofessional. Personal care providers are typically assigned to one student and take care of needs that children would normally tend to themselves. Technically, personal care providers assist children with physical dependency needs that are related to the following activities of daily living: eating, bathing, dressing, personal hygiene, bathroom requirements, and/or taking medications. Tasks performed by a personal care provider are similar to those that a nurse’s aide would normally perform if the patient were in a hospital or a nursing facility.
Personal care services are expected to supplement, not to supplant, other resources available to the student. Medicaid funds personal care providers for children who are under the age of 21, and who have been pre-authorized for services (AFMC, n.d.). Personal care providers are typically not identified as anything different from a paraprofessional in a school setting. This adds to the lack of consistency and confusion in the terms used to describe paraprofessionals.

Attempts to Clarify the Role of the Paraprofessional

Special education paraprofessionals in inclusive and self-contained classrooms have expressed and demonstrated discrepancies in how they define their roles. Even though little research exists, Gerlach (2014) recently outlined specific roles for today’s paraprofessionals that include the following:

- implementing team-based assignments
- building and maintaining effective communication and relationships
- maintaining student-centered, supportive environments
- organizing learning experiences for students
- implementing lessons initiated by the teacher or related services personnel
- assessing student needs and progress under teacher direction
- maintaining a safe learning environment
- assisting in the instructional process and communicating with the teacher
- personal perceptions of student progress and needs
- participating in training to develop knowledge and skills

Paraprofessionals report a sense of responsibility that has resulted in the perception that it was entirely up to them to ensure that students in inclusive settings
received some educational benefits. Research shows paraprofessionals may feel, at times, they are the only ones who truly understood the needs of the included student (Wigstrom, 2016). Despite this perception, there are responsibilities that should not be carried out by paraprofessionals (See Figure 3). Information in Figure 3 was presented initially by the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) as policy in Title 1: Paraprofessionals (Non Regulatory Guidance) as part of No Child Left Behind (Policy - ED.gov, 2004). Since that time, there have been no further updates to this federal policy. Therefore, Figure 3 presents the Iowa Department of Education (2013) adaptation of information provided by the USDOE.

Figure 3

Federal policy for paraprofessional job duties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paraprofessionals CAN:</th>
<th>Paraprofessionals CANNOT:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Provide one-on-one tutoring.</td>
<td>1. Be used as a substitute for certified teachers unless the paraprofessional is a certified teacher or certified substitute.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Assist with classroom management.</td>
<td>2. Teach completely new concepts and skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Provide instructional assistance in a computer laboratory.</td>
<td>3. Be given the primary responsibility for the education of an individual student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Conduct parental involvement activities.</td>
<td>4. Be assigned to attend student meetings in lieu of the supervising teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Provide support in a library or media center.</td>
<td>5. Make accommodation decisions outside of a student’s IEP.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Act as a translator.</td>
<td>6. Take full responsibility for supervising assemblies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Provide instructional support services under the direct supervision of a teacher.</td>
<td>7. Take full responsibility for supervising students on outings to the community, recreation sites, and school related trips.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Accompany students on outings to the community, recreation sites, and school related trips or errands.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. As interpreted by the Iowa Department of Education (2013) as adapted from No Child Left Behind (2004).
Federal policy is important to support a common understanding of the paraprofessional role. However, variability of interpretation among the states and within states leads to confusion. Further, if confusion is present, it could possibly lead to uncoordinated efforts between the general education teacher, special education teacher, and special education paraprofessional supporting a student with a disability. When there is a difference in perception and understanding between a student's team members (general education teacher, special education teacher, and special education paraprofessional) regarding the roles and responsibilities of special education paraprofessionals in the general education classroom, the self-efficacy of paraprofessionals is impacted (Harris, 2012).

**Paraprofessional Wages and Employment Rates**

Even with greater responsibility and little training, wages for paraprofessionals have remained low. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018), the median annual wage for paraprofessionals and teaching assistants was $26,970 in May 2018. The lowest 10 percent earned less than $18,670 and the highest 10 percent earned more than $41,020. In the four states area of Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana and Oklahoma, the median paraprofessional wage was in the range of $19,120-$24,000 annually in 2018. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2018) reported that the poverty guideline for the 48 contiguous states for a family of four was $25,100 annually in 2018. Based on poverty guideline, paraprofessional pay could potentially place a family at or under the poverty threshold.

During the same 2018 timeframe, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported 1,331,560 employed as paraprofessionals. Further, employment of paraprofessionals is
projected to grow four percent from 2018 to 2028, which is considered about as fast as
the average growth rate for all occupations. Projections about rising student enrollment
along with state and federal funding for education programs are expected to affect growth
(U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). With increased responsibility and low wages,
one must wonder whether the position as a paraprofessional is worth it.

**Paraprofessional Perception**

With an increase in demand for paraprofessionals in the future, what is the
perception of the job by paraprofessionals? In an older study conducted by Minondo et al.
(2001), researchers investigated the perception of roles and responsibilities among
regular education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals. The study
surveyed the educational employees using a 15-question Likert scale survey that
measured the perception of job appropriateness for paraprofessionals within the inclusive
environment. These questions were divided into five factors. The five factors identified
were: Instructional Role, Liaison Role, Personal Support Role, One-to-One Support Role,
and School Support Role.

Minondo et al. (2001) determined that the factor analysis for the 15 items revealed
intercorrelations indicating all items from the survey consistently measured various
aspects of responsibilities. The results showed that paraprofessionals in both the inclusive
and self-contained settings agreed with the roles listed within most areas. However, the
results from the *Student Support Role* questions in the survey suggested there is a
significant difference in perception of job role between inclusion and self-contained
paraprofessionals in the subscale of school support role. The results suggest
paraprofessionals in the inclusive setting find it less appropriate to provide support in the
area of school support. It is worth investigating if this discrepancy still exists today. If so, it might be worth investigating what impact the discrepancy has on paraprofessional job satisfaction. Or, if the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals in self-contained and inclusion settings are distinct based on current needs of the students served, perhaps the distinction should be more clearly made in the field.

The area of school support encompasses a variety of services relevant to student academic needs (Minondo et al., 2001). The differences in settings related to student support could possibly play a part or adding to role confusion for paraprofessionals. Many times, paraprofessionals in self-contained settings perform tasks that include following students from place-to-place, running errands, and providing community-based instruction. However, paraprofessionals in inclusive placements are not tasked with these roles. Instead, they are assigned with more academic-based responsibilities such as behavior management, monitoring grades, testing students, and helping with academic work. The different tasks performed by paraprofessionals in different settings could possibly misinform the understanding of actual roles and responsibilities of special education paraprofessionals (Wigstrom, 2016).

**Paraprofessional-Teacher Dynamic**

A paraprofessional’s job is to support certified teachers, making the paraprofessional-teacher relationship a critical one. Studies investigating the paraprofessional-teacher relationship, including the “paraprofessional voice”, could offer insight into how well relationships are perceived by both parties. Teachers and paraprofessionals work together to improve student achievement. To do so, they must
work together to establish a learning culture for effective classrooms. It is important that they must have a collaborative relationship based on respect.

Highly successful teacher-paraprofessional partnerships are built on a strong foundation of the understanding of individual roles and responsibilities within the team (Rosales, 2017). Some roles are easily defined between teachers and paraprofessionals. However, there are also overlapping responsibilities shared by both the teacher and the paraprofessionals, such as in small group instruction. Rosales (2017) suggests problems can arise when roles are unclear or assumptions are made about who is supposed to do what. Work by Doyle (2008) concurs, asserting roles and responsibilities need to be clear among teachers, paraprofessionals, students, and parents. Clarifying roles and responsibilities, communication among members of the educational team improves and, as a result, individualized curricular and instructional support for each student improves.

**Paraprofessional-Student Dynamic**

Just as every child supported by a paraprofessional is different, so is every instructor supported by the presence of a paraprofessional. As previously mentioned, the placement of paraprofessionals in the inclusive or self-contained setting is often motivated by the desires of parents, teachers, and administrators where little regard is given to the opinions of the impacted students. Consequently, the need for educators to meet the demands of parents has led researchers to overlook the attitudes of the students with disabilities impacted by the placement of paraprofessionals (Wigstrom, 2016). Broer et al. (2005) researched perspectives of students about their experiences with paraprofessional support. Research findings describe an exclusivity that often exists between paraprofessionals and students that is characterized by four interrelated themes
regarding student perspectives of paraprofessionals. These themes are as follows: primary teacher, mother, friend, and protector. Study participants reported that when they were in general education classes, most often, it was the paraprofessional rather than the classroom teacher who interacted with them and performed as their primary teacher (Broer et al., 2005).

In another study, Chopra et al. (2004) revealed that paraprofessionals saw themselves as bridges among parents, students and other members of the school and community. This research notes that the relationships that exist between paraprofessionals and students and their families preceded the paraprofessional role as a connector. The study also revealed other factors, such as unclear roles, lack of respect, and insufficient training for paraprofessionals had a negative effect on this connector role. Further, teachers’ lack of understanding about what paraprofessionals can do, therefore, undervaluing their work, was another theme that emerged from the study. Specifically, one paraprofessional in the study talked about a teacher who did not want her assistance and who did not understand how to supervise (Chopra et al, 2004).

**Supervision of Paraprofessionals**

As the roles of paraprofessionals continue to change and their responsibilities increase, appropriate and adequate supervision of paraprofessionals is a necessity (Johnson Comly, 2017). In a study focused on the importance of the “paraeducator voice,” another name for paraprofessional, Fisher and Pleasants (2011) reported paraprofessionals received minimal supervision. Despite IDEA requirements, paraprofessionals generally receive minimal supervision (Breton, 2010; Downing et al., 2000; Etscheidt, 2005; Giangreco et al., 2002). As far back as 2001, French found
teachers reported little preservice and/or inservice training for supervising. Teachers revealed that they rarely participated in the selection or hiring of the paraprofessional they supervised. More than half of the respondents indicated that they held primary responsibility for the formal evaluation of the performance of paraprofessionals. Teachers did not provide written plans to paraprofessionals; instead oral instructions were the means of direction. The oral instructions consisted of behavior management and directions about guiding students' skills practice (French, 2001).

Biggs et al. (2018) studied how teachers and paraprofessionals must learn to develop a balance to create an effective classroom culture. These authors interviewed teachers about their supervisory experiences in three areas: 1) university-based preparation, 2) School and district support, and 3) personal development. The participating teachers had varied university experiences; they shared the perspective that preparation to work effectively with paraprofessionals was largely overlooked in their university-based training. Many teachers emphasized the need for stronger instruction about paraprofessionals, sharing their own preparation was often limited and inadequate. One teacher proposed an idea that curriculum should be added in the area paraprofessional supervision for undergrad and grad students because it was sorely needed (Biggs et al., 2018). Paraprofessionals often go into a position believing that they will be trained by the teacher on how to perform their job in efficient and effective ways. In many cases, clearly defined expectations are not presented to the paraprofessional in the inclusive and self-contained setting. This lack of clarity often creates confusion and animosity between the assigned paraprofessional and supervising teacher (Wigstrom, 2016).
The second area explored was school and district support in training for the supervision of paraprofessionals. Several teachers interviewed specifically emphasized a need to understand the school district’s expectations for appropriate utilization of paraprofessionals and teachers’ guidelines for supporting paraprofessionals (Biggs et. al., 2018). The third area teachers discussed in regard to supervising paraprofessionals was personal development. Several participants described personal life experiences and how teachers might learn to create positive relationships with paraprofessionals through reflection upon previous and current experiences. For example, one teacher explained her development as trial and error. The teacher explained that one must learn from past mistakes and make sure they are not repeated. Because teachers received little to no training at their universities and school districts, teachers expounded upon the fact that personal experience helped foster relationships with paraprofessionals (Biggs et. al., 2018).

In a recent dissertation, Johnson Comly (2017) investigated supervision of paraprofessionals in elementary schools primarily by focusing on perceptions of administrators, teachers, and paraprofessionals with regards to the nature and effects of supervision paraprofessionals received from classroom teachers and school administrators. Perceived barriers were examined to help determine if teachers were providing appropriate supervision to paraprofessionals, and what factors facilitate effective supervision of paraprofessionals at the elementary level. Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, teachers are required to provide adequate supervision to paraprofessionals, yet they are not prepared to provide the supervision required. Indications from the results
of this study were as follows: (a) teachers lack training for supervision of paraprofessionals and are not prepared to do so, (b) teachers are not aware of what consists of good supervisory practices, (c) teachers are not held accountable for the supervision they are expected to provide, (d) administrators do not provide clear expectations for teachers who supervise paraprofessionals, (e) the absence of a common planning period negatively impacts teachers and paraprofessionals (f) positive interpersonal relationships between principals, teachers, and paraprofessionals are vital to the supervisory process (Johnson Comly, 2017).

According to Austin (personal communication, February 18, 2014), paraprofessionals say they need teacher support, regular communication, orientation to specific roles and responsibilities, direct supervision, on-the-job training and for the teacher to facilitate conflict resolution for the team. Certified teachers who do not have the training to facilitate these paraprofessional needs may have difficulty collaborating. Training is essential for effective collaboration. If higher education and local school districts fail to train teachers to effectively train paraprofessionals, the quality of supervision teachers provide to paraprofessionals, and the services paraprofessionals provide to students will remain uncertain (Johnson Comly, 2017).

Effective professional relationships between special education teachers and paraprofessionals are critical to ensuring students with severe disabilities receive high-quality educational experiences. Giangreco et al. (2012) describe how paraprofessional use has steadily risen in an effort to meet the needs of students with disabilities in inclusion oriented classrooms and schools. To date, no widely accepted processes exist to assist schools in determining when the use of paraprofessional staff is warranted other
than student needs determined by the Individual Education Plan (IEP) committee (Giangreco & Suter, 2015). However, previous research has centered on understanding the complexity and creating guidelines surrounding paraprofessional utilization (Fisher & Pleasants, 2011; Giangreco et al., 2012; Giangreco & Suter, 2015), establishing guidelines for appropriate paraprofessional utilization, and searching for alternatives to the overuse and misuse of paraprofessional services (Carter et al., 2009).

**Teacher Training for Collaboration and Supervision of Paraprofessionals**

Today, teachers who work with paraprofessionals are often the ones responsible for their supervision. Yet, research shows because teachers do not have supervisory training, they do not hold regularly scheduled meetings with paraprofessionals leading to an overlapping of duties and tasks (French, 2001). In special education, professional collaboration is viewed as crucial for helping teachers serve students with disabilities (Giangreco et al., 2012). These authors published a review of research about special education paraprofessional issues and practices in U.S. schools from 2000-2007. The review revealed effective collaboration with paraprofessionals as a growing aspect of providing special education services in schools. Implications and future directions are offered within the research and include information for those focusing on clarifying the collaborative relationships among paraprofessionals and other educational team members. The criticality of collaboration is evident as a result of a push towards inclusion in recent years (Giangreco et al., 2012). As a result of more inclusive classrooms, general education teachers are playing an increasingly primary role in the education of students with disabilities; even though they often report feeling unprepared to undertake this role (Brownell et al., 2006).
Special education teachers often co-teach with general education teachers to provide support with students with greater needs (Bacharach et al., 2010). However, more often, paraprofessionals are assigned to support the general education teacher in the classroom. Many certified teachers, general education and special education, report receiving little to no training on how to collaborate with other teachers and supervise other adults, specifically paraprofessionals (Wallace et al., 2001). Further study shows paraprofessionals reported having the need for a written job description that directly relates to the position in the classroom to which they are assigned (Giangreco et al., 2002). Also, paraprofessionals reported a need for the certified teacher to provide a structured environment to help ensure their success. Lastly, in the same study, paraprofessionals reported needing supervision, encouragement, feedback, and structure in order to perform their jobs well.

Biggs et al. (2018) focused on the critical importance for strong collaborative relationships between paraprofessionals and supervisory teachers. In-depth interviews with 22 teachers and paraprofessionals from nine educational teams examined educator perspectives on what influences the quality of their professional relationships. Teachers and paraprofessionals identified five influences to the quality of their relationships: teacher influences, paraprofessional influences, shared influences of teachers and paraprofessionals, administrative influences related to school and district leaders, and underlying influences. Participants also identified five competencies related to teachers’ abilities: assertive communication skills, collaboration skills, coaching skills, organization skills, and conflict resolution skills. Findings highlight the complex nature of these working relationships and emphasize the importance of supporting teachers and
paraprofessionals as they work together to meet the needs of students with severe disabilities. Recommendations were offered for future research and practice aimed at strengthening the quality and impact of teacher-paraprofessional collaborations.

The importance of ensuring that teachers provide effective supervision and support to paraprofessionals is highlighted in another study conducted by Biggs et al. (2018). The authors conducted interviews with nine educational teams, totaling 22 teachers and paraprofessionals with the purpose of identifying competencies that are considered important for special education teachers to possess to work effectively with paraprofessionals. Participants addressed three areas including knowledge, skills, and dispositions that contribute to balanced leadership. The three pathways identified were personal development, school/district support, and university preparation. Findings suggest the need to embed these three competencies within existing training and support systems for teachers. The authors recommended future research and to target teacher development in these areas (Biggs et al., 2018).

In addition to an expressed need to provide for training general education and special education teachers in the field, research recommends universities need to take steps to prepare preservice teachers enrolled in education programs by allowing students in both the general and special education programs to interact so that they are comfortable collaborating and supervising paraprofessionals when they eventually work in the school system as peers (Rosenzweig, 2009). Rosenzweig asserts special education and general education programs at universities are mostly stand-alone certification programs making coursework and field experiences segregated and limited, providing
virtually no opportunity for general and special education teacher candidates to interact within their preparation programs.

When teacher preparation programs segregate special and general education majors, there are few opportunities for faculty to model collaboration for teacher candidates. University programs need to promote a relationship between general and special education teachers (Arthaud et al., 2007). There are some programs that participate in co-teaching within general and special education programs. This type of training is not widespread (Bacharach et al., 2010). It is the responsibility of all those involved in the education of children, whether directly or indirectly, to establish the best education system for all students. Teachers and paraprofessionals should not be neglected and should receive the support and preparation needed to fulfill assigned roles and responsibilities properly (Rosenzweig, 2009).

**Training for Paraprofessionals**

Demands for special education services have been driven by accountability factors and the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), lack of certified special education teachers, and emphasis on regular classroom placement via inclusion. (Breton, 2010; Downing et al., 2000; Giangreco et al., 2002; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). This has been especially evident in rural areas due to cost-effective service delivery models, as well as student/teacher ratios that occur with low incidence disabilities that are often unusually demanding (Breton, 2010). These demands may be academic, physical and/or behavioral. Many times paraprofessionals face physically challenging behaviors as well (Allen & Ashbaker, 2004). It stands to reason that concerns have emerged as paraprofessionals assume more responsibility for supporting students with disabilities in
general education classrooms and whether this increase in responsibility corresponds with increased training and supervision (Patterson, 2006).

The National Resource Center for Paraeducators (NRCP) is a non-profit organization that supports training and development of paraprofessionals, teachers, administrators, and policymakers, other education professionals, occupational, physical and speech-language therapists; early childhood specialists; personnel developers in colleges and universities, and other stakeholders (Pickett et al., 2003). The mission of NRCP addresses policy questions and other needs of the field, and recommends training models that enable administrators and staff-developers to improve the recruitment, deployment, supervision, and career development of paraprofessionals. Figure 4 provides recommendations from the NRCP that help to guide school leaders, certified teachers and paraprofessionals in regard to clarity and expectations of job and training expectations.

In a report entitled *State of the Art* (Pickett et al., 2003), the NRCP surveyed paraprofessionals nationally regarding training in effective classroom and behavior management strategies, as well as effective instructional practices as related to their assignment. In addition to providing policy and professional development as found in Figure 4, the NRCP conducted surveys for paraprofessional development.
Figure 4

Training Recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paraprofessionals</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Administrators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• clearly defined roles and responsibilities and job descriptions</td>
<td>• should receive pre- and in-Service training and other professional development on their roles of delegating</td>
<td>• should receive training on supporting effective teacher-paraprofessor teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• highly trained through targeted, ongoing professional development that is tied to standards, knowledge and skill core competencies and roles and responsibilities</td>
<td>• coordinating and directing the work of paraeducators</td>
<td>• should receive training on the supervision and evaluation of paraeducators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• receive ongoing training on building effective teacher-paraprofessor teams, instructional strategies, and other relevant topics</td>
<td>• should receive training on building effective teacher-paraprofessor teams</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• access to orientation programs and career preparation training and should have access to professional growth and career advancement opportunities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. NEA Training Recommendations for Paraprofessionals, Teachers and Administrators

Figure 5 presents responses when paraprofessionals were asked if training was provided at the state and/or district level. The surveys were sent out via the NRCP’s digital newsletter. The total number of respondents was not included in the final report.

From the survey results, paraprofessionals reported that the statewide training received was provided the following: the school, University, Department of Family Education, community college, school district, local teachers, state support team, National Education Association, area education agencies, union, paraeducator consortium, and a training and technical assistance network (Pickett et al., 2003).
Figure 5

*Availability of District and State-level Training for Paraprofessionals*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Training</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In State Training</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>45.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In District Training</td>
<td>48.7</td>
<td>51.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked about presenters at paraprofessional training at the district level, responses included: other paraprofessionals, human resources, special education department, special educators, a college, and contracted professionals including: outside agencies, behavior strategists, reading and math coaches, and district staff development.

Figure 6 survey results from the *State of the Art* report, also determined that the majority of paraprofessionals in the study received 1-5 hours training per year. In addition, researchers surveyed the kind of training actually requested by paraprofessionals. Respondent results were varied but the majority of participants asked for more

Figure 6

*Hours of Paraprofessional Training Available Per Year*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of Respondents</th>
<th>Training Provided</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>1-5 Hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>6-10 Hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>11-15 Hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>15-20 Hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
training on roles and responsibilities of their positions. While the report is nearly two
decades old, anecdotal issues in the report are still mentioned today. As such, the 2003
report serves to provide context for issues that still exist.

Although studies have investigated the adequacy of the preservice preparation of
special education teachers, few studies have investigated the preparation of their
paraprofessionals (Breton, 2010). In his study, Breton investigated perceptions of special
education paraprofessionals in Maine. Paraprofessionals were asked to share their
perceptions about the adequacy of their training, current training needs, and the
effectiveness of their supervision for them to successfully meet their mandated role and
responsibilities to serve students with disabilities (see Figure 7). Breton’s findings
indicated that most paraprofessionals perceived they were inadequately prepared for their
duties.

Figure 7

*Topics of Training Requested by Paraprofessionals (Breton, 2010)*
Other studies also suggest paraprofessionals are not prepared to support teacher instruction. Although paraprofessionals have become an increasingly integral part of special education services, many paraprofessionals lack training in evidence-based instructional strategies (Brock & Carter, 2015). Further, professional learning opportunities for paraprofessionals are limited resulting in inadequate application of evidence-based practices in their work (Wright & Prescott, 2018).

Patterson (2006) found 90% of paraprofessionals surveyed from self-contained and inclusive settings indicated that student behavior management was their primary responsibility. This responsibility often was more of a priority than assisting students with academics. The study showed, during the course of the workday, the paraprofessional was typically the one expected to respond to a student demonstrating inappropriate or disruptive behaviors (e.g., refusing to work, aggression, self-injury, screaming, leaving the classroom), whether the child had a disability or not. All of the participants in this study, regardless of educational background or experience, agreed they needed to know more about behavior management.

Results from a more recent study suggest that the focus of training for paraprofessionals should be on behavior management (Preston, 2015). The study’s goal was to identify the most effective ways to prepare paraprofessionals assigned to special education settings through professional development practices. Recommendations include training and preparation for paraprofessionals on how to manage the most challenging and frequently occurring student behaviors in the K-12 school setting, applying principles of adult education to training for paraprofessionals, and to shift from one-day training events to ongoing, research-based, systematic, consistent, relevant
training. Preston’s work emphasizes successful paraprofessional training involving practice time, modeling, meaningful feedback, and activities aiming at the higher-level thinking skills identified in Bloom’s taxonomy. Lastly, study discussion recommended that school districts include input from principals, teachers and paraprofessionals when developing professional development activities for special education paraprofessionals.

Fisher & Pleasants (2011) work centers on the importance of the “paraprofessional voice” in efforts to better understand the paraprofessional role as an effective intervention and clarification for paraprofessionals, identified as paraeducators in the study. The researchers were particularly interested in determining if paraprofessional perceptions changed based on a one-to-one or group time in general educational settings. Findings supported previous studies based on a preference for smaller groups. Paraprofessionals in general education settings and paraprofessionals that spent all or most of their day in self-contained settings, reported concerns working in one-to-one and group settings.

So how does increased responsibility, consistently low wages, expressed lack of training and supervision, affect paraprofessional self-efficacy? While there little direct research, there are hints in the literature. In 2009, Giles wrote a dissertation regarding training and efficacy of paraprofessionals that resulted in the identification of a perceived need for relevant training addressing changing roles and responsibilities in today’s educational settings. Giles revealed paraprofessionals perception of two pertinent and interrelated forms of efficacy: organizational efficacy and self-efficacy. Additionally, Straus & Bondie (2015) found strong relationships between supervision and role
definition as well as job satisfaction and collaboration greatly affect paraprofessional self-efficacy.

**Critical Theory’s Effect on Self-Efficacy**

What prohibits self-efficacy to develop in the first place? Critical theory makes certain assumptions about truth (Butin, 2010). The key goal of critical theory is to examine, expose, and/or overturn hidden relations of power. In the school setting, the paraprofessional must submit to the power of the teachers and administrators. Hierarchically speaking, the paraprofessional is the low “person on the totem pole”.

When pressure is placed on teachers from administrators, it is human nature for teachers to place added pressure on paraprofessionals.

Bringing hope, critical theory seeks to improve understanding of society and ultimately, human emancipation, to bring freedom from oppression (Bohman, 2016). Critical theory is concerned with preventing the loss of truth that past knowledge has laboriously attained. The current study assumes a better understanding of the paraprofessional experience by tapping into the “paraprofessional’s voice” will support teacher and paraprofessional training. Do paraprofessionals work in oppressive circumstances? If so, what does it look and feel like?

The key criterion of critical theory is theoretical consistency and insight, an impetus for change (Butin, 2010). Under this lens, perhaps the knowledge obtained from the “paraprofessional’s voice” can be utilized to foster and develop teacher and paraprofessional training that will promote a more collaborative relationship that will alleviate pressure for both teachers and paraprofessionals and improve the paraprofessionals self-efficacy.
History of Critical Theory

Before exploring self-efficacy more, the review will present an explanation of critical theory. Critical theory emerged out of Marxist tradition and the influence of Sigmund Freud (Geuss, 1981) and was developed by a group of sociologists at the University of Frankfurt in Germany who referred to themselves as The Frankfurt School. One leader of the Frankfurt School, Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), was amongst a group of social scientists and philosophers associated with the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt am Main. Horkheimer was the director of the Institute and Professor of Social Philosophy at the University of Frankfurt from 1930–1933. Horkheimer led the Institute in exile, primarily in America until he returned to lead in person from 1949–1958. Writings from Horkheimer during the 1930s were largely responsible for the development of the methodological and epistemological orientation of Frankfurt School critical theory. Horkheimer’s work influenced his contemporaries (including Adorno and Herbert Marcuse) and continues to maintain an enduring influence on critical theory’s later practitioners (Geuss, 1981).

Critical theory maintains that ideology is the principal obstacle to human liberation (Geuss, 1981). A distinguishing point, as Adorno and Horkheimer elaborated in their Dialectic of Enlightenment (1947), is ambivalence concerning the foundation of social domination. This ambivalence brought on the pessimism of the new critical theory over the possibility of human emancipation and freedom (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002).

The members of The Frankfurt School were Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, and Erich Fromm. Critical theory maintains that ideology is the principal obstacle to human liberation (Geuss, 1981). A distinguishing
point, as Adorno and Horkheimer (1947) elaborated in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is ambivalence concerning the foundation of social domination. This ambivalence brought on the pessimism of the new critical theory over the possibility of human emancipation and freedom (Translated, 2002).

Modern Critical Theory has additionally been influenced by György Lukács and Antonio Gramsci, as well as the second-generation Frankfurt School scholars, notably, Jürgen Habermas (Geuss, 1981). Habermas' work explains how critical theory has transcended the theoretical ideology rooted in German idealism and has evolved closer to American pragmatism. Habermas' theoretical system reveals the possibility of reason, emancipation, and rational-critical communication that has been latent in modern institutions. This theoretical system believes in the human capacity to deliberate and pursue rational interests. Concern for social superstructure is one of the remaining Marxist philosophical concepts in contemporary critical theory (Geuss, 1981). Over time, social scientists and philosophers who have come after the Frankfurt School have adopted the goals of critical theory. Critical theory today is recognized in cultural theory, media theory, media studies, gender and queer theory, many feminist theories and approaches to conducting social science, and in critical race theory (Tyson, 2014).

Critical Social Theory is a school of thought that stresses the examination of culture and society; the use of social criticism works in two-stages: first, investigators discover the best explanation using an available comprehensive theory; then, those inquirers persuasively communicate critical consequences to participants who may have false beliefs about their practices (Bohman, 2016). Critical social theory constitutes an effort to rethink and reform Marxist social criticism; it rejects mainstream political and
intellectual views, criticizes capitalism, promotes human liberation, and consequently attempts to expose domination and oppression in their many forms. Critical theory provides descriptive and normative bases for social inquiry to ultimately increase freedom in all forms (Bohman, 2016).

According to Marx (Wolff, 2017), society is characterized under the bourgeois as a place where rulers take their private concerns and turn them into public concerns. This effectively pushes rulers’ personal preferences onto the public. The public cannot refuse these preferences, which leads to oppression. Political emancipation is a state of being where people are freed from this process. The problem that Marx discovered is that although political emancipation frees the state, it is still a barrier to the freedom of individuals within the state (Wolff, 2017). Marx does not directly define human emancipation in his writings. Marx does contrast human emancipation with political emancipation, suggesting that it is the actual emancipation of human beings, not the state, from oppression (Wolff, 2017). With Critical Theory in mind, the current study seeks to investigate if human emancipation needs to occur within the difficult to access population of educational paraprofessionals.

**Educational Studies in Self-Efficacy**

An assumption of this exploratory study is that limited access is the reason there is scant research on paraprofessional efficacy. Self-efficacy studies in education have been around for years. In fact, a study integrating 40 years of teacher self-efficacy (TSE) research, recently explored the consequences of TSE for teachers’ psychological well-being, students’ academic adjustment and the quality of classroom processes. Upon review of 165 eligible articles that were included for analysis, results suggest that TSE
shows positive links with patterns of teacher behavior and practices related to classroom quality, students’ academic adjustment, and factors underlying teachers’ psychological well-being, including commitment, personal accomplishment, and job satisfaction. Not surprisingly, negative associations were found between TSE and burnout factors (Zee & Koomen, 2016). TSE has predominantly been explored using quantitative instruments; some researchers suggest that this is only a limited view of the concept. It is argued that to achieve a more complete and comprehensive picture of teacher self-efficacy, it is essential that traditional quantitative approaches are better triangulated and integrated with other sources of data in particular, lesson observations. By using this technique, TSE can continue to be explored more comprehensively (Glackin & Hohenstein, 2018).

The review of the literature indicates educators’ self-efficacy has been studied, but paraprofessional self-efficacy has not. Self-efficacy studies of principals are not uncommon, but studies about their perceptions of their efficacy about teacher evaluations have begun being explored (Neuss, 2016). School climate issues are having administrators consider leadership growth cycles to help leaders build their self-efficacy and a teacher observations cycle centered on building a collective efficacy (Dewitt, 2017). Recent descriptive research specifies the interrelation between the happiness and self-efficacy levels of school administrators. Results suggest that happiness and self-efficacy levels of the school administrators according to their perceptions can be observed as “fine” but differ according to the length of service groups they belong to. The highest score of self-efficacy was within the group of administrators who had 21 years of service or more, and the experience groups of 16-20, 6-10, 11-15, and 1-5 years follow
them respectively. The self-efficacy levels also show significant difference within the variable of age (Duran, & Yildirim, 2017).

Closely related to academic confidence, self-efficacy comes directly from Bandura’s social cognitive theory and is the degree to which a student feels capable of being successful performing academic and school related tasks (Bandura, 1997). Multiple studies reveal a strong correlation between self-efficacy and overall academic performance (Stankov et al., 2014). Research shows that when students believe they are able to achieve academic tasks, they are far more likely to persist and overcome challenges. On the other hand, researchers assert students lacking confidence in their ability to perform a task or challenge, are more likely give up and may possibly go out of their way to avoid assignments. Beyond elementary and secondary education, additional studies show that self-efficacy plays a profound role in their success in college and for career choices. Students with high levels of self-efficacy consider a wider range of occupations and are more likely to attempt, as well as complete, higher education and challenging training programs (Betz, 1989).

**Four Factors of Self-Efficacy**

The promise of the theory of self-efficacy is that self-efficacy can be developed (Bandura, 1997). The four factors of self-efficacy are 1) Performance Outcomes, 2) Social Modeling, 3) Social Persuasion, and 4) States of Physiology. Bandura (1994) states that mastery of experiences means to encounter the results of self-efficacy and that four factors support development. Performance outcome is the first and most important source of self-efficacy; it is determined by how tasks have been performed previously. Mastery experiences are the most influential source of efficacy information
because they provide the most authentic evidence of whether one can muster whatever it takes to succeed. The best way to learn a skill or improve performance is by practice. One example would be how some paraprofessionals practice different tasks such as administering feeding tubes with only on the job training. The repetitiveness of that daily task with a specific child teaches that, through practice, people are capable of acquiring new skills. As such, success builds a robust belief in one's personal efficacy.

Social modeling, also called vicarious experiences, refers to choosing role models that demonstrate self-efficacy. People can develop high or low self-efficacy vicariously through others’ performances. One can watch someone in a similar position perform, and then compare personal competence with the other individual’s (Bandura, 1994). If a person sees someone similar to them succeed, it can increase their self-efficacy. However, the opposite is also true; seeing someone similar fail can lower self-efficacy. Observing those who employ self-efficacy in their lives and have continued to reach their goals despite adversity can provide personal motivation. These social models do not necessarily need to exist in one’s own life. Modern technology, like the internet and other digital resources, can be used to provide access into the lives of many inspiring role models (Bandura, 1994). One example of embracing social modeling would be when a paraprofessional decides to go to college and earn a teaching license. The paraprofessional is doing many of the same tasks a teacher does already. In this case, the teacher is the role model that the paraprofessional emulates. Social modeling can help fuel inspiration and drive to help achieve self-efficacy.

Just as social modeling refers to the study of a mentor, social persuasion refers to having the influence of someone else on one’s self-efficacy. This occurs when the
direct influence provides opportunities for mastery experiences in a safe and purposeful manner. Social or verbal persuasion is about finding the right mentor. Coaching and feedback are helpful tools for social modeling. Positively using verbal persuasion generally leads individuals to put forth more effort; therefore, individuals have a greater chance at succeeding. Self-efficacy strengthening experiences occur by striving to meet moderate to difficult challenges and avoiding of easy successes that encourage complacency (Bandura, 1994). One example could easily be that the paraprofessional encourages students, and shows them they are capable to face any challenge ahead. Social persuasion can encourage and motivate students, as well as adding a growing belief in one’s own ability to succeed.

Yet self-efficacy is not just an intellectual concept or exercise, self-efficacy has to do with belief, which is related to a person’s feelings (Bandura, 1994). States of physiology refer to a person’s emotions, moods, and physical state that can greatly influence a person’s sense of self-efficacy, according to Bandura (1994). Sensations people experience from their bodies and how they perceive their emotional arousal influences their beliefs of efficacy. Some examples of work situations that provoke significant physiological reactions are: giving a speech in front of a large group of people, making a presentation to an important client, taking an exam, etc. All of these tasks can cause physiological responses in the form of: agitation, anxiety, sweaty palms, and/or a racing heart (Moesgaard, 2014). Self-efficacy allows one to work through situations that cause negative states of physiology with success.

Although “states of physiology” is considered the least influential of the four ways to create self-efficacy; it is important to note that if one is more at ease with the task
at hand, they will feel more capable and have higher beliefs of self-efficacy. One can readily be biased when one judges one’s self, especially based on the state one is in when something bad happens. An integral piece of the self-efficacy puzzle is present when a paraprofessional must pay attention personal mental states and emotional well-being, or that of a student, during especially challenging situations.

To feel stress, tension and anxiety is normal, but society views these states negatively, which can lead to a stronger sense of failure in the wake of these feelings. Positive and negative emotions act as magnets which further influence one’s sense of self-efficacy, especially in the case of a depressed mood when feelings of helplessness can occur. Introspection, mindfulness and education can combat the negative response to these physical states. When one recognizes that it is normal to experience negative states and that there is nothing wrong when those experiences occur, self-efficacy can be interpreted in a more salient way (Bandura, 1994).

**History of Bandura’s Theory of Self-Efficacy**

It is helpful to discuss the history of the theory of self-efficacy to provide great context. Psychologist Albert Bandura (1925-present) has contributed to the field of education, social cognitive theory, therapy, personality psychology, and was also influential in the transition between behaviorism and cognitive psychology. For the last 60 years, Bandura has researched and written about human behavior. Bandura is known as the originator of social learning theory and the theoretical construct of self-efficacy (Mind, n.d.). Bandura defines self-efficacy as a personal belief in one's ability to accomplish a task or succeed in specific situations (Bandura, 1991). Therefore, self-efficacy plays a significant role in how one approaches goals, tasks, and challenges. This
is not to be confused with self-esteem; self-esteem is defined as a person’s confidence or satisfaction with oneself (Mruk, 2018). Self-esteem reflects an individual's overall subjective, emotional evaluation of self-worth; it is the decision made by an individual as an attitude towards the self. Self-esteem encompasses personal beliefs and feelings about oneself that can include: triumph, shame, pride, and despair (Snyder & Lopez, 2009). In fact, healthy self-esteem plays a pivotal role in helping individuals explore different personal, career, and interpersonal dimensions of life, move beyond comfort zones, take risks, and see new possibilities (Mruk, 2018). Self-efficacy is a person's belief in his or her ability to succeed in a particular situation (Bandura, 1991).

The concept of self-efficacy is central to Bandura’s social cognitive theory, which is motivated by and regulated by self-influence and emphasizes the role of observational learning, social experience, and reciprocal determinism in developing a personality (Bandura, 1991). According to Bandura, a person’s attitudes, abilities, and cognitive skills comprise what is known as the self-system. This system plays a major role in how we perceive and how we behave in response to different situations. Self-efficacy is an essential part of this self-system (Parajes, 2002). Ten items are included in Bandura’s General Self-Efficacy Scale. Each item refers to successful coping and implies an internal-stable attribution of success (Bandura, 1997). Perceived self-efficacy is an operative construct; it is related to subsequent behavior and is relevant for clinical practice and behavior change (Jerusalem & Schwarzer, 1995). Relevant to the current study, self-efficacy has been widely researched in education with school leaders, teachers and students; however, there are no self-efficacy studies reflecting the paraprofessional
perspective. Measuring paraprofessional self-efficacy would provide insight into a population where access and research is limited.

**Summary**

The literature review explores the historical development of paraprofessionals and how their roles and duties have become more complex over time to include more academic responsibilities in inclusive classroom serving all students. Yet, paraprofessionals remain the least trained staff working with the most demanding students in a school setting (Patterson, 2006). Further, paraprofessionals are guided by certified classroom teachers who report little to no supervisory training (Breton, 2010; Downing et al., 2000; Etscheidt, 2005; Giangreco et al., 2001). At the same time, teachers report feeling unprepared to supervise and work collaboratively with paraprofessionals in the educational setting (Brownell et al., 2006). An exploration of the paraprofessional experience from the perspective of the paraprofessional supports efforts to access paraprofessionals so their experience and voice may be reflected in the research and support training for teachers and paraprofessionals for greater collaboration.
CHAPTER 3

METHOD

The literature review reveals limited findings about paraprofessionals experience including self-efficacy. A large body of research is available about paraprofessionals’ lack of training, unclear job duties, and the lack of supervisory training for certified teachers regarding paraprofessional directives that has remained over time (Biggs et. al., 2018, Breton, 2010; Carter et al. 2009; Chopra et al., 2004; French, 2001; Fisher & Pleasants, 2011; Giangreco et al., 2010; Giangreco & Suter, 2015; Harris, 2012; Howley et al., 2017; Minondo et al., 2001; Wigstrom, 2016). However, with a void of the paraprofessional voice, it can be concluded that accessibility is a potential limiting factor in obtaining the paraprofessional’s perspective. Grounded in Critical Theory and Bandura’s Theory of Self-Efficacy, the current study uses data to understand paraprofessional experience. Questions that guide the exploratory research are:

R1. What is the perceived level of self-efficacy experienced by paraprofessionals?

R2. What is the role access plays in obtaining the paraprofessionals voice?

Study Design

The current study used a holistic approach to explore access to paraprofessionals for their input regarding their role as paraprofessional and their sense of self-efficacy. This holistic approach resulted in more comprehensive results using quantitative and qualitative data. Data collected from all participants is confidential. Documentation and reporting provided no information that identified neither the participants nor their schools. Participants were not compensated for their participation.
Study Participants

The target population for this exploratory research is paraprofessionals working in from K-12 schools who have direct contact with students; specifically those with primary responsibility for students with special needs. The study used convenience sampling as survey participants were drawn from a population of the Council for Exceptional Children’s (CEC) online community forum and paraprofessionals employed at the school district where I am employed.

Procedure and Data Collection

The study collected data over two phases to explore and describe paraprofessional experience and their level of self-efficacy.

Phase 1: Paraprofessional Self-Efficacy

This phase of the study investigated the level of self-efficacy of paraprofessionals through the survey addressing research question #1. The self-efficacy survey was distributed via email to the CEC’s 30,000 person membership. Members of the CEC are primarily administrators and certified special educators. As such, I relied on members of the CEC to forward the survey to paraprofessionals at their schools, as well as relying on the district special education supervisor to email the survey directly to paraprofessional employees. Therefore, direct contact via email from me, as the researcher, to the survey participants was nonexistent. Permission from the CEC was granted in January 2019 to send out the self-efficacy survey (see Appendix B). Informed consent was included in the survey documents (see Appendix I). The survey was sent out in August 2019, and was made available for 14 days. Responses to the survey included demographic data and data regarding the participant’s level of self-efficacy.
Phase 2: Access to Paraprofessional Voice

This phase focused on research question #2 concerning access to paraprofessionals so their voices might be heard. To access district data regarding specific roles and numbers of paraprofessionals in districts and request recommendation for accessing paraprofessionals, educational entities including the following were contacted: offices of human resources, regional educational service centers and cooperatives, state education departments, as well the national CEC. The process and challenges in accessing individual paraprofessionals is reported and discussed in Chapters 4 & 5.

Internal Review Board Approval

The Texas A&M University – Texarkana Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained before the proposed survey was administered. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) training on protecting human subjects was completed in September 2018 and is well within the one-year timeline to complete research (see Appendix A).

Instrumentation

The instrument used for this research is the 10-item General Self-Efficacy Scale that was revised by Jerusalem and Schwarzer (1992) based on Bandura’s studies in social cognitive theory and self-efficacy (See Appendix B). The scale was created to assess a general sense of perceived self-efficacy in order to predict how one copes with daily struggles as well as personal adaptation after experiencing various stressful life events. The scale is normally self-administered taking an average of four minutes to complete and is often included as part of a more comprehensive questionnaire. Responses are
scored from a 4-point scale. A final composite score is determined by summing up the responses to all ten items to yield the final composite score with a range from 10 to 40. In samples from 23 nations, Cronbach’s alphas ranged from .76 to .90, with the majority in the high .80s. Criterion-related validity has been documented in numerous correlation studies where positive coefficients were found with dispositional optimism, favorable emotions, and work satisfaction. Negative coefficients were found with anxiety, depression, stress, burnout, and health complaints. The measure has been used internationally with success and is suitable for a broad range of applications. This self-efficacy scale indicates quality of life at any point in time and can be taken to predict adaptation to life changes (Jerusalem & Schwarzer, 1992). Due to the exploratory nature of the current research, only score averages are reported.

**Additional Interviews**

Following Phase 1 & 2, paraprofessionals were interviewed via phone to explore personal perspectives of the working experience; the goal was to tell the paraprofessional’s story. Interviews were conducted with ten paraprofessionals who were either currently working in K-12 schools or who had recently retired from schools in Miller County, AR; Caddo Parish, LA; Cass County, TX; and McCurtain County, OK. Due to the difficulty in accessing paraprofessionals for interviews, snowball sampling was used. Snowball sampling occurs when research participants recruit other participants for a test or study. It is used when potential participants are hard to find. It is called snowball sampling because once the ball gets rolling; it picks up more “snow” along the way, becoming larger and larger (Snowball Sampling, 2014).
Survey questions were used to structure a 30-60 minutes interview with paraprofessionals in a manner unconstrained by personal perspective. Interview questions were based on modified versions of an exit survey for educators in Ohio (see Appendix C), general happiness survey (Appendix E), job satisfaction survey (Appendix G) and life satisfaction survey (Appendix F). Member checking was used to create credibility and consisted of telephoning interviewees to check the accuracy of statements and commentaries. Participants were asked to review the data collected by the interviewer and the interpretations of that data. Member checking gave participants the opportunity to verify their statements, as well as to fill in any gaps from the initial interview.

In this manner, ten informal interviews were completed. The use of phone interviews was supported by a discussion in Chapter 1 in which Patterson (2006) obtained access to paraprofessionals in three different school districts in the state of Florida by telephone. As the researcher, I felt paraprofessionals would feel more at-ease with this method rather than meeting a doctoral candidate face-to-face at their school or in public. A doctoral candidate’s presence might invoke a sense of authority much like that of a teacher or principal and interfere with the rapport necessary in qualitative study for answering what could be interpreted as personal questions. As questions were only meant to serve as a basic structure for the interview, data from the surveys and interviews are not reported or analyzed. Overall, the additional interviews focused on collecting the stories from individual paraprofessionals that could provide context for study results.
Summary

This research employs a descriptive exploratory approach to the experience and self-efficacy of public school paraprofessionals. The purpose of the study is to provide information for educational leaders regarding the perceptions and self-efficacy for paraprofessionals, which has mostly gone uninvestigated. Participants were additionally interviewed to help explore the paraprofessional experience more broadly to provide context to study findings.
CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this exploratory study is to describe the paraprofessional experience from the perspective of the paraprofessional, allowing the *paraprofessional voice* to be heard. Quantitative data was collected for findings related to research questions on self-efficacy. Findings will be discussed from the frame Critical Theory and Bandura’s Theory of Self-Efficacy in Chapter 5.

**Findings for Research Question 1: Level of Self-Efficacy**

Research Question 1 asks, *what is the perceived level of self-efficacy experienced by paraprofessionals?* Surveys were distributed online through Google forms. Twenty-four responses were received. Exploratory findings present respondent demographic information as well as responses to questions on the General Self-Efficacy (GSE) survey (Jerusalem and Schwarzer, 1992).

**Demographic information**

Demographic information collected includes gender, age, race/ethnicity, years of experience, and educational levels. Frequency data is presented (see Table 1). All 24 respondents to the survey were women. The largest group of paraprofessional respondents was 45-54 years old and white. Paraprofessionals with the least amount of experience, under a full year, were 8% of survey respondents with 37% of respondents with under five years of experience. Those with over 10 years of experience make up almost 50% of the pool, nearly evenly distributed. Reported educational levels of respondents showed a large percentage of paraprofessionals with education ranging from some college to Master’s degrees.
Table 1

Survey Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of Respondents</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
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<td>45-54</td>
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<td>55-64</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 or above</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more races/Multiracial</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years Worked as Paraprofessional</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 21 years</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest Education Level</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School Diploma/GED</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college-no degree</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Degree</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor Degree</td>
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<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master Degree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Self-Efficacy Survey Responses

Table 2 shows central tendency, mean, for each of the self-efficacy statement in the survey. Scoring for each statement response was as follows: 1 = not at all true, 2 = hardly true, 3 = moderately true, 4 = mostly true, 5 = exactly true. In Table 2, data reports the average of positive responses for each statement. In addition, the percentage of positive responses for each statement is noted.

Table 2

Scores for Self-Efficacy Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Efficacy Statements</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I can remain calm during difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. If someone opposes me I can find the means and ways to get what I want.</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals.</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I am confident I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Thanks to my resourcefulness I know how to handle unforeseen situations.</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort.</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my own coping abilities.</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. If I am in trouble, I can usually think of a solution.</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I can usually handle whatever comes my way.</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find a solution.</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Previous research was conducted with the same General Self-Efficacy (GSE) survey as the current research. Nearly 20,000 people in 23 countries participated in the GSE. It was determined that the international score average was 29.55 points out of 40. This score can be translated into a percentage of 73.8% (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995). The current study of paraprofessional self-efficacy is higher than the international average in every area.

**Obtaining Access to Paraprofessionals**

Participants disclosed, through one-on-one phone interview, perceptions and experiences encountered while working as paraprofessionals in public schools. Locating paraprofessionals for the current study proved more difficult than initially thought. Low response rates negatively impact the ability to access paraprofessional voices. Obtaining the paraprofessional perspective via survey through the CEC was minimal, a .0006% return. The members of the CEC have access to an All-Member Online Forum where questions can be asked, researchers post surveys, and discussions about education are executed. Of the 30,000 members in the CEC, many who post are administrators and teachers. The self-efficacy survey was active in the CEC’s All-Member Online Forum for a period of two weeks. Fifteen survey responses came from this group.

Due to such low results, I personally met with the Local Education Agency (LEA) Supervisor in my district. The supervisor agreed to send out the survey to the paraprofessionals in the district. There are approximately 83 paraprofessionals working directly with students who were emailed. Of those emailed, 11 surveys were completed for a response rate of 13.2%. Looking for more ways to access paraprofessionals, I went to social media to find more survey participants.
The search for online paraprofessional groups on Facebook resulted in the discovery of six groups active globally. Each group administrator was directly contacted via Messenger asking for permission to send out the self-efficacy survey. There was only one response from those six groups; the answer was a polite “no.” The total number of participants that completed the self-efficacy survey was 26. Of the 26 surveys returned, 24 were usable: one survey was answered by a teacher and one from an administrator. Surveys were only considered if the responder was a paraprofessional.

Locating and accessing paraprofessionals for additional interviews also proved to be difficult. Local educational cooperatives were emailed in SW Arkansas, NW Louisiana, SE Oklahoma, and NE Texas. No responses were received, and the educational cooperative in Oklahoma seemed to be closed or not in operation. Email and phone numbers for the Oklahoma educational cooperative were also not functional. At this point, I began making phone calls in order to find information about gaining access to paraprofessionals for interviews.

The Arkansas cooperative employee who was reached via telephone explained that access/information about paraprofessionals was not an available resource to them. I was directed to call the Arkansas Department of Education. After speaking to several employees at the Department of Education, I was directed to an employee working in the special education department. The employee explained that the Department of Education did not maintain data about paraprofessional employees in the state of Arkansas. The employee further clarified that paraprofessional numbers in public school districts often change throughout a school year due to the fluidity of student need; therefore, The Department of Education did not have that information.
It was at this time I was advised to contact each school’s human resource director in each district to gain access to information about paraprofessionals. Human resource directors for all school districts in each state and county were emailed. The only response received was from the human resource director at the school district where I am employed. The responded with the number of paraprofessionals that were employed districtwide. This district reported having a total of 87 aides, broken down as follows: Office aides (4), Paraprofessionals (79), Personal care aides (4). Interestingly, according to this district's categorization of paraprofessionals, office staff are included. The definition of paraprofessional can vary from school district to school district and state to state.

Directly reaching out to educational cooperatives, schools, and the Department of Education to gain access to paraprofessionals in Arkansas proved ineffective. After failing to gain access to paraprofessionals in this manner, the researcher began contacting peers, other school personnel at professional development sessions, and even went so far as to reach out through social media (i.e. Facebook). Finding participants to interview came down to a “who you know” process. For example, I personally knew paraprofessionals in Arkansas. Because these acquaintances had personal trust, the Arkansas interviews were completed quickly. One Arkansas interview came about because her husband was a longtime friend that was also a Facebook friend. In this case, social media was helpful in finding paraprofessionals that were willing to be interviewed.

Gaining access to paraprofessionals in Texas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma proved to be even more challenging. I did not have personal relationships with any school employees in these states. One interview participant in Texas was obtained due to the
researcher’s husband's connection with a longtime friend who happened to be the mayor. The mayor contacted her friend that was a longtime paraprofessional. This contact was also made through Facebook. The second Texas interview came about via a friend of a friend. Both Louisiana paraprofessional interviews occurred in the same manner. Friends reached out to fellow family members that were teachers in Louisiana. The participants trusted their friends and family; therefore, they trusted talking to the researcher.

The Oklahoma interviews were obtained due to a professional development training for local certified teachers. During introductions at the training, a teacher mentioned that she was from Oklahoma. Reaching out to this teacher proved effective. This particular teacher had worked as a paraprofessional in Oklahoma for two years before becoming certified personnel. It was this teacher who directed me to a friend who was still working in Oklahoma as an educational paraprofessional.

**Summary**

Quantitative data was collected from emailed surveys to determine paraprofessional self-efficacy. Demographic information about participants is reported. Survey results show that the current study of paraprofessional self-efficacy is higher than the international average of 73.8% (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995) in every area with scores ranging from 77%-92%. Interviews were difficult to obtain and were eventually secured using a snowball sampling. How the interviews were actually obtained are reported.
Chapter 5

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The current study explored self-efficacy, access, and the experience of paraprofessional educators teaching students with special needs. A review of the literature revealed gaps of understanding in regard to paraprofessionals. Although older studies existed, current research was extremely limited. In fact, there is no research available about paraprofessional self-efficacy prior to the current study. Using a holistic approach, data collected from survey and additional interviews provide insight into paraprofessionals’ experiences including access and self-efficacy. The current chapter includes a discussion of the findings grounded in a theoretical framework based on Critical Theory and Bandura’s Theory of Self-Efficacy. The chapter concludes with a discussion on recommendations for future research and practice.

Summary of Findings

Current findings on paraprofessional self-efficacy survey results were not expected. Self-efficacy scores were higher in paraprofessionals than the international average for the General Efficacy Scale (GSE). In addition, access to paraprofessionals was more difficult than expected leading to low response rates on GSE survey and minimal interviews. Interviews for the current study support research presented in older studies showing inequitable conditions still exist today related to paraprofessional training, supervisor training for teachers, equitable pay, collaboration between teachers and paraprofessionals.
**Conclusions Grounded in Critical Theory and Bandura’s Theory of Self-Efficacy**

An assumption of the current study was that a population that experiences inequities and is considered somewhat invisible would presumably exhibit low self-efficacy. However, the current study shows the opposite. Perhaps such dedication to special needs students would require high self-efficacy from the outset. However, accessing paraprofessionals who are representative of the population was difficult. While study questions related to constructs of self-efficacy and access initially appears separate; survey outcomes and interviews reveal constructs to be linked, likely by a construct of trust.

**Critical Theory**

Critical theory is a social theory that examines culture in a society as a whole, in contrast to traditional theory which only seeks to understand or explain (Bohman, 2016). Critical theory seeks to find those who are disempowered, then empower them (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002). Viewing the current study under the lens of critical theory, it can be said that educational paraprofessionals are a disempowered group. One way this became apparent in the current research was evidenced by the lack of available research on paraprofessionals, particularly in the area of self-efficacy. The literature is rich with studies of self-efficacy in the field of education to support student learning. Studies about specific types of teachers and administrators are readily available. Yet, there is not much current research available about paraprofessionals. The research that is available is older and focuses on inconsistent training, roles and expectations for this population (Breton, 2009; Chopra et al., 2004, Doyle, 2008, Downing et al., 2000;

As I began Phase 1 of the current study, I expected to find a plethora of paraprofessional responses from the survey via the CEC; however, response rates were low. Because the thousands of members were mostly teachers and administrators, it was up to them to disseminate the survey to a third party. This approach was mostly unsuccessful. In fact a very specific group of paraprofessionals, white women more educated than expected, responded to the survey. The group does not appear representative of the population which appears to be a reflection of survey distribution. Then, when the special education supervisor at my school district agreed to email the survey to paraprofessionals currently employed, only a few more surveys were completed. This confirmed that those who responded to the survey were not representative of the population of paraprofessionals. Based on the research, I initially assumed the lack of access was due to external causes like access to computers, etc. However, based on the study results, the inability to access appears to be more of an internal factor rather than external. In this case, lack of trust could be a reason why more completed surveys were not returned.

During Phase 2 of the research, locating and interviewing paraprofessionals also became problematic and revealed inequities regarding the paraprofessional role in school culture. I was unable to get information about paraprofessionals employed by educational cooperatives and state departments. School districts did not respond to phone calls or emails regarding paraprofessionals. Social media groups politely declined participation. Interviews were eventually secured over a period of several months using a snowball
effect, one person recommending another person, establishing a sense of connection showing trust, again, as a potential condition to gaining access to paraprofessionals.

In addition to trust, other inequities regarding the role of the paraprofessional should be considered. Based on research in the current exploratory study, poverty-level incomes for paraprofessional educators can be considered limiting and oppressive. Critical Theory distinctively aims to unmask ideology that falsely justifies some form of social or economic oppression, and seeks to end that oppression. Invisibility of any population can considered to be oppressive (Burt, Russell, & Brooks, 2016). Multiple social identities such as race, gender, and age interlock and reflect larger societal patterns of oppression and privilege (Bowleg, 2012). The lack of regard for the role of paraprofessional as evidenced in the lack of pay, causing some to live at or below the poverty level, may make some feel oppressed and invisible. Therefore, from the lens of critical theory, society fails to see this critical group, rendering this population invisible. Marxism critiques capitalist economic relations and argues that true freedom is to be found positively in our relations with other people. It is to be found in human community, not in isolation (Amherst College, n.d.). Lack of financial resources can impact participation in activities and events that increases isolation. When considering critical theory, human emancipation was a factor explored in the current research. Within this population, increased wages could very well contribute to human emancipation and a sense of trust that would support studies regarding self-efficacy more representative of paraprofessionals.
Four Factor Model of Self-Efficacy

As discussed, demographic and survey outcomes reveal study data as not representative of the population. However, informal interviews with paraprofessionals provide insight into outcomes. Bandura (1994) identified four factors that create and build self-efficacy: 1) mastery experiences (performance outcomes), 2) social modeling (vicarious experiences), 3) social or verbal persuasion, and 4) states of physiology (emotional status). Experiencing success, such as mastering a task or controlling an environment, builds self-belief in that area whereas a failure will undermine that efficacy belief. A resilient sense of self-efficacy requires experience in overcoming obstacles and success through effort and perseverance. Bandura warns failure can undermine self-efficacy, especially if failures occur before a sense of efficacy is firmly established. Success that is too easily achieved can lead a person to constantly expect rapid results, creating discouragement. Failure is an important tool that helps build personal resilience. Treating failure as a learning opportunity and trying again with another approach builds resilience, problem-solving skills and self-confidence. The satisfaction of goals achieved is the key to mastery (Bandura, 1994).

Specifically viewing self-efficacy under the lens of performance outcomes, paraprofessional interview responses varied. There were mixed reports about technology and training from interviewees. Some noted that there was limited or no access to technology in the paraprofessional role. In Arkansas, Joan, a pseudonym, (Interview 1) reported: “No use of emails because we did not have use of a computer.” Joan went on to say, “I am self-taught. I’ve had very little training. Paraprofessionals are always in the classrooms so the certified teacher can go to training. Not us.” Joan retired feeling bitter
about her experiences in her long-time career after 33 years as a paraprofessional. Access to technology, email, and all electronic communication is beneficial for the entire school staff and faculty’s optimal and up-to-date communication. Lack of technology potentially influences lowered self-efficacy due to feelings of disempowerment. Feeling disempowered could negatively affect Mastery Experiences (Performance Outcomes).

Social Modeling is present in the interviews where paraprofessionals continued their educations and became certified teachers. Paraprofessionals observed teachers and determined that it was possible to become the same. Earning a teaching license and obtaining a college degree rewarded paraprofessionals rewarded with self-confidence, happiness and more adequate financial compensation. Financial compensation can affect job satisfaction positively or negatively. For example, Rebekah (Interview 5) in Oklahoma stated her yearly pay was only $13,000.00. Several interviewees brought up low pay and how they would not have kept their position without support from a spouse. Jan (Interview 6) from Texas said, “Ridiculous what the pay is for paras or teachers”. Jan passionately expressed her frustration about how low pay made her unhappy at her job. Tammy (Interview 7) from Oklahoma shared, “I wish it paid better. I could not afford to have this job if my husband wasn’t a truck driver,” and “I became a para because I like children. I have a disabled child that I could not care for and wanted to help others. I had other jobs before this but this is where I want to be. I love all my kids.” Rebekah (Interview 5) from Oklahoma even suggested that reliability and quality of paraprofessionals in the schools would rise with increased pay. “Sometimes people aren’t reliable. You can’t get the people you need with such low pay. Do you know what I mean?” Rebekah asked. Rebekah also shared, “…it was not enough money. You can’t
make it on that. You can’t get good people for that amount. So the people they are hiring could be better. We need to take pride in our educators.” Paraprofessionals reported that poverty level wages most definitely lowered overall job and life satisfaction as well general happiness. Although paraprofessionals expressed great dedication to the children they served, inadequate financial compensation was problematic.

Social or Verbal Persuasion is indicated in interviews where inclusion, rather than exclusion, was experienced by paraprofessionals in the workplace. For example, interview participants reported varying accessibility to technology. Several interviewees reported having access to their own computers and technology as needed. Rachel (Interview 4) from Texas shared that she experienced high job satisfaction, life satisfaction and general happiness in her position: “I have my own room and computer”. Rachel went on to say, “I feel respected in my job and I am included in events”. Catherine (Interview 3) in Arkansas discussed how the inclusion of paraprofessionals in her school raised personal job satisfaction: “I have access to a computer and check my emails constantly. I work in a new school district and they are working hard not to repeat mistakes made in the past by schools.” Catherine expressed that her school leaders realized inclusion helped to create a more positive school climate. Catherine commented, “The culture at our school is that everyone is included. All must attend all meetings. And professional development. Great school culture. Great inclusion”. Inclusion provided encouragement for the reporting paraprofessionals; therefore, raising self-efficacy.

In regard to States of Physiology (Emotional Status), participants interviewed shared the benefits and difficulties of day-to-day interactions with their supervisors. Interviewees reported both positive and negative comments. Some
comments could possibly be interpreted as both positive and negative. Strained relationships between certified and/or supervisory teachers were reported. For example, Liz (Interview 2) from Arkansas stated, “Two other paras that didn’t like me. They talked about me when I wasn’t around. It was miserable. Everyone knew what each other was paid and I was paid more cause I had a degree. I think that was part of the problem”. Liz went on to say, “There was lots of complaining of others behind backs”. I observed what appeared to be frustration during this portion of the interview. Liz (Interview 2) continued to explain that she did not have good relationships with most of the teachers that supervised her. Maria had been working as a paraprofessional in the same school district for 34 years and said, “There is no communication. No respect. We are left out of loop and we’re not told what was going on”. States of Physiology can be observed in this case when Liz discusses feeling miserable. A person’s emotions, moods, and physical state, when working in stressful job conditions, can negatively influence personal interpretations of self-efficacy.

Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy explains how core beliefs can be influenced and developed; and illustrates how it positively affects all facets of human experience (Bandura, 1977). More recently, Bandura (2012) asserts perceived self-efficacy is a judgment of one’s capability to execute particular types of work. Outcome expectations are judgments about the results that are likely to flow from such performances and take on three specific forms (Bandura, 1993). The outcomes one anticipates are determined by one’s opinion of how well they will be able to perform in certain situations (Bandura, 2006).
Considering the explanation of Bandura’s four areas of self-efficacy, the expectation was that paraprofessional self-efficacy would be lower than the international average. Upon consideration of this thought process, one might expect that only paraprofessionals with high self-efficacy would even to bother to complete and return the survey. Without core belief in self and established resiliency, it seems paraprofessionals would not bother to fill out a survey.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Paraprofessional self-efficacy has mostly gone unexplored. As discussed, access to paraprofessionals was a challenge in this research. Current study findings reveal internal conditions, like a lack of trust, may interfere with access to paraprofessionals in addition to external conditions, like a lack of access to technology. With this in mind, this section will describe several future research designs that can extend this study.

Due to such a small sampling from the current self-efficacy survey, further research needs to be explored with paraprofessionals extend survey results. Further study should seek to expand the paraprofessional demographics for further understanding of this population and self-efficacy. Of those surveyed, 66.7% of all participants were white. Minority participants were largely underrepresented within the current research. A larger sampling of the paraprofessional population may provide respondents more racial diversity that would allow for deeper analysis regarding self-efficacy. Further, the replication of a study shows research results are a product of independent research methods and not of conscious or unconscious bias (DeVault, 2016).

The interviews from the current research were informal and only investigated a four state area in SW Arkansas, NW Louisiana, NE Texas and SE Oklahoma. Increasing
rigor and including other locations in the U.S. would provide data that would support paraprofessional voice and increase generalizability of current interview results. The voices of paraprofessionals heard by school leaders, will benefit the school campus and district as a means by which a positive culture and climate, one that regularly includes the voice of the paraprofessional, could grow.

Lastly, issues related to paraprofessional pay were explored in the literature review and discussed by paraprofessionals in the interview portion of this study. As presented, financial compensation for paraprofessionals is often very much below the federal guidelines for poverty. Despite this factor, over half of those interviewed reported working as paraprofessionals for ten years or more. Paraprofessionals reported in the interview setting that low pay was a problem. Perhaps the cost of joining professional organizations, like the CEC in which the survey was distributed, hinders this population’s activity in online and/or professional communities. Specifically, an interviewee in Louisiana reported earning $13,000.00 per year. National poverty guidelines for 2019 show that poverty level for two individuals per household are $16,910.00 per year. Researching how paraprofessionals survive financially with such longevity in their fields despite such low pay could also prove insightful about the grit and tenacity of this population. Further, exploration about ways to more adequately compensate educational paraprofessionals may prove beneficial for school districts and student learning in the future.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The literature and findings suggest there is a need for more training for paraprofessionals as well as supervisory training for certified teachers working with
paraprofessionals (Biggs et al., 2018; Breton, 2009; Carter, et al., 2009; Wigstrom, 2016). Lack of training for certified teachers supervising paraprofessionals and for paraprofessionals leads to strained or uncertain relationships; relationships that are critical to meeting needs of special education students. Paraprofessionals have varying and unclear understanding of their responsibilities, roles, duties and expectations that differ even among individuals who work at the same school. It is challenging to specifically identify roles and needs of paraprofessionals, and to provide training that appropriately meets the needs of students (Patterson, 2006). Researchers suggest unclear roles and expectations along with untrained supervisors can contribute to low paraprofessional self-efficacy that, ultimately, negatively affects students served.

As evidenced by the stories and testimonies provided by the interview participants, the inconsistencies in training, professional roles access to technology, and inclusion varied greatly. Each participant interviewed indicated a high level of commitment to students despite any professional challenges encountered. Guided by the experiences, stories, and testimonies of the participants, the conclusion is that the overall inconsistencies in regard to access and job roles vary from each paraprofessional from school to school, district to district and state to state. These variations can possibly affect perceptions of self and overall satisfaction in the paraprofessional field. Survey results in the current study were higher than that international average. Perceptions of paraprofessionals were varied.

Current educational trends may be a factor when looking at varying roles and responsibilities for paraprofessional educators. For example, Betsy DeVos (2018), United States Secretary of Education, recently stated, "For the United States, lasting and positive
changes to education cannot and should not be mandated by the federal government." In fact, the paraprofessional qualification requirements of Section 1119 of Title I, as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act (2004) is the most current federal guideline (U. S. Department of Education, 2005). Inconsistencies could very well be a factor in the difficulty accessing educational paraprofessionals in the United States. Armed with this information, state and school leaders may find that creating professional handbooks specifically for paraprofessionals could greatly increase clarity of job roles and expectations. Along with clear guidelines, specific training for paraprofessionals and licensed personnel that monitor and evaluate paraprofessionals may be an effective tool to increase overall self-efficacy of those involved.
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Appendix A

IRB Certificate

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that Elisabeth Eaton successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants."

Date of Completion: 09/21/2018

Certification Number: 2946300
## Appendix B

Self-Efficacy Scale

### General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Not at all true</th>
<th>Hardly true</th>
<th>Moderately true</th>
<th>Exactly true</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough.</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to get what I want.</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals.</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations.</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort.</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions.</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. If I am in trouble, I can usually think of a solution</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I can usually handle whatever comes my way.</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

Educational Exit Survey

Teacher Exit Survey (TEx S)

By responding to this survey, you will help our district better understand teacher mobility and attrition. Thank you for your participation!

1. Will you be returning to the same position you held during the past school year? (Note: If you have been transferred within or outside of your home district, please select "No" for this question.) ☐ Yes ☐ No

2. What is your gender? ☐ Female ☐ Male

3. How old are you?

☐ 21 or under ☐ 26-30 ☐ 36-40 ☐ 46-50 ☐ 56-60

☐ 22-25 ☐ 31-35 ☐ 41-45 ☐ 51-55 ☐ 61+

4. What is your ethnicity

☐ American Indian or Alaskan Native ☐ Black or African-American, non-Hispanic ☐ White or Caucasian, non-Hispanic

☐ Asian or Pacific Islander ☐ Hispanic ☐ Other __________________________

5. Please select the highest degree you have been awarded.

☐ High School diploma or GED ☐ Master's ☐ PhD

☐ BA/BS ☐ Specialist ☐ None

6. Did you receive most (four years or more) of your college-level education training in Ohio?

☐ Yes ☐ No

7. Including this year, how many years of teaching experience do you have?

☐ 0-3 years ☐ 7-10 years ☐ 16-20 years ☐ 26-30 years

☐ 4-6 years ☐ 11-15 years ☐ 21-25 years ☐ 31+ years

8. If you have a preferred email address that you would like to share, please provide it here.

______________________________

In this section, we are asking a series of questions to better understand your decision to leave this position. If you have been transferred or are simply moving to a new school, we also are interested in hearing your experiences.

9. When did you start the position you are now leaving? (month/day/year) __________________________

10. When will you officially leave the position? (month/day/year) __________________________

11. How would you classify the position you are leaving? (If you have more than one position, please describe your primary position. In subsequent questions, please refer to that primary position for your answers.)

☐ Regular Education ☐ Student Teacher ☐ Long-term Sub ☐ Administrator

☐ Special Education ☐ Educational Aide ☐ Short-term Sub ☐ Other

☐ Resource Room Teacher ☐ Itinerant Teacher (teach in more than one school)
Appendix D
Survey Approval from the CEC

Bryan Reynolds <bryanr@cec.sped.org> Thu, Jan 3, 8:08 AM
to me

Elisabeth

The CEC has an online community we call the All-Member-Forum. If you are a member you can make a one-time post to the All-Member-Forum requesting that people participate in the survey. The form goes out to our entire membership of approx. 30,000 members mostly Special Ed. Teachers and administrators.

If you have additional concerns or questions please contact me.

Bryan Reynolds
Membership and Database Manager
Council for Exceptional Children
2900 Crystal Drive, Suite 100
Arlington, VA 22202-3557
Toll-Free: 888-232-7733 ext. 480
Direct: 703-264-9480
Fax: 703-264-9494
bryanr@cec.sped.org
www.cec.sped.org
Appendix E
Examples of Questions for Paraprofessional Interviews-Happiness Survey

Sample of Happiness Survey Questions:

1. In general, I consider myself: not a very happy person 1234567 a very happy person.

2. Compared with most of my peers, I consider myself:
   not a very happy person 1234567 a very happy person.

3. Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you? Not at all 1234567 a great deal.

4. Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterization describe you? not at all 1234567 a great all deal.
Appendix F

Examples of Questions For Paraprofessional Interviews-Life Satisfaction

Sample of Life Satisfaction Survey Questions

1 = Strongly Disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Slightly Disagree

4 = Neither Agree or Disagree

5 = Slightly Agree

6 = Agree

7 = Strongly Agree

1. In most ways my life is close to my ideal.

2. The conditions of my life are excellent.

3. I am satisfied with life.
Appendix G

Examples of Questions for Paraprofessional Interviews-Job Satisfaction Survey

Sample of Life Satisfaction Survey Questions

1 = Strongly Disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Slightly Disagree
4 = Neither Agree or Disagree
5 = Slightly Agree
6 = Agree
7 = Strongly Agree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Many of our rules and procedures make doing a good job difficult.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I like the people I work with.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I sometimes feel my job is meaningless.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix H

Letter to School Leaders (CEC – Self-Efficacy Survey)

My name is Elisabeth Parrish Eaton. I am currently at the dissertation stage of an Ed.D. program in Educational Leadership at Texas A&M University - Texarkana. I am requesting your assistance in forwarding this email and survey to paraprofessionals within your school or district. The Council for Exceptional Children has given me permission to make this request. Here is information regarding my study and the survey:

**Self-Efficacy Survey:** The 10-item survey assesses the self-efficacy levels of special education paraprofessionals. While there are many studies regarding teacher and administrator self-efficacy, there are no studies with paraprofessionals.

The survey will take no more than a few minutes. Consent for taking the survey will be requested and participants may choose to stop the survey at any time.

**Confidentiality:** The survey information provided is anonymous and confidential. No staff names or school district names will be collected or associated with this data. Data will be reported in aggregate.

I appreciate your willingness to assist me with my research and your consideration of my request.

Sincerely,
Elisabeth Parrish Eaton
Appendix I

Informed Consent

Paraprofessional Survey

Dear Educators,

I am Elisabeth Eaton, a doctoral candidate at Texas A&M University-Texarkana researching paraprofessional self-efficacy. The attached survey for paraprofessionals will take five (5) minutes and provide me with valuable information for my study.

All information you provide will be confidential and anonymous. Any information published will not identify you or your school in any way. There are no wrong answers and your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose not to participate at any time without negative consequences. By responding to the survey, you are giving your consent for your responses to be used for research purposes.

There are no known risk; however, the benefits associated with the survey outcomes may include information that increases awareness about the paraprofessional perspectives, which has previously been unexplored.

Thank you for your consideration and participation. If you have any questions regarding this email, please contact me at (elisabeth.parrish@ace.tamut.edu) or my dissertation chair, Dr. Sara Lawrence at (sara.lawrence@tamut.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject you may contact Dr. Dana Leighton, IRB Chair at 903-334-6627 or email (dleighton@tamut.edu).

Thank you for your consideration,

Elisabeth Eaton, Doctoral Candidate

To begin the study, please identify your role: *

- Paraprofessional or paraeducator
- Teacher
- Administrator
- Other (Please Specify):