Teacher and Teacher Assistant Perceptions of Their
Relationship

A Thesis
Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Education
in the Department of Curriculum Studies
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

PERMISSION TO USE

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree of Master of Education from the University of Saskatchewan, I agree that the Libraries of this University may make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for copying of this thesis in any manner, in whole or in part, for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professor or professors who supervised my work or, in their absence, by the Head of the Department or the Dean of the College in which my thesis work was done. It is understood that any copying or publication or use of this thesis or parts thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of Saskatchewan in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my thesis.

Requests for permission to copy or to make other use of material in this thesis, in whole or in part, should be addressed to:

Head of the Department of Curriculum Studies

University of Saskatchewan

28 Campus Drive

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

Canada

S7N 0X1

ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study examined teachers' and teacher assistants' perceptions of their working relationships. Three teachers and three teacher assistants reflected specifically on their work experiences and interactions with their job partners in their respective schools, as they worked to provide supports to students with a variety of behavioral, academic and medical needs. Two main questions guided this research: How did each participant describe their working relationship with his/her job partner? What factors were perceived as influential on a positive and effective working relationship?

Thematic analysis of the qualitative interview data from the participants informed the generation of dominant themes. The role of administration, professional interaction, and personal attributes emerged as main factors influencing the teacher and teacher assistant relationship. The researcher provides a model for conceptualizing this relationship and suggests that professionalism is required of both parties in the relationship. The model of professionalism is supported by three main behaviors exhibited by people in the relationship: competence, collegiality, and clarity of role.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Preface

A fundamental shift has occurred in education with the advent of inclusion. As children with special needs are integrated in the regular class setting, a larger number of assistants will be required to help teachers meet the needs of these students (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2001). Within the province of Saskatchewan, in particular, the SchoolPlus initiative directs schools to educate the whole child and provide for the delivery of support services to all children (Task Force and Public Dialogue on the Role of the School, 2001). This current context will directly influence the support of students with special needs and the employment of teacher assistants. Two or more adults will now be directing the learning, behavior, and socialization of a special needs student and his or her classmates (Daniels & McBride, 2001). The teacher is ultimately responsible for the programming and welfare of the students in the class (Saskatchewan Teachers Federation, 2003) yet teacher assistants may be called upon to perform a variety of tasks in the inclusive classroom, often with little formal training (French, 1999a). While debates occur over how much responsibility for providing direct instructional services should be shared with teacher assistants (Riggs & Mueller, 2001), the Saskatchewan Teachers Federation (STF) notes that "the teacher's basic responsibility for educational decision-making must not be compromised" (2003, Policy 3.10.3) and that "[teacher] associates shall not displace teachers" (2003, Policy 3.10.4).

Ideas and motivation for this study began at least two years ago, in my work experience with teachers and teacher assistants. Questions swirled in my brain as I sought to understand why a well-respected, experienced teacher and a well-respected, experienced teacher assistant in our school had difficulties working together in a positive and effective manner, yet had each been successful throughout their careers working with different job partners. Questions continued to swirl in my brain as I reflected on another one of my supervisory experiences with a new, qualified teacher assistant who struggled in her relationships with teachers and eventually did not have her contract renewed. The dynamics of interpersonal relations and the desire to understand those dynamics motivated me to pursue this research.

Definitions

Teacher assistants have been known in the educational field by the following terminology: TAs, teacher aides, teacher assistants, teacher associates, rehabilitative aides, educational assistants, paraprofessionals, and most recently, paraeducators. While their designation may be specific to the job they perform, such as working with medically fragile children, I will use the term teacher assistant throughout this paper to describe the person hired to assist in an inclusive classroom.

It is also necessary to define the term collegiality as this study will look at aspects of a teacher and teacher assistant relationship and the nature of their interactions. The common use of this term varies with its context so must be defined for this thesis. Collegiality will be understood to mean the sense of working together for the improvement of student learning, with teamwork strategies and interpersonal skills contributing to this collegiality. This places the term within an educational

context and implies the significance of having a shared purpose in the professional interaction of the classroom.

<div align="center">Purpose of the Study</div>

With the shift to the inclusion of students with special needs into the regular classroom, the role of the teacher assistant has changed from largely clerical duties to primarily instructional roles (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2001; Daniels & McBride, 2001, French, 1998, 1999b, Riggs & Mueller, 2001). The importance of the delineation of roles and responsibilities is apparent in the quantity of literature surrounding this topic (Giangreco, Edelman, Broer & Doye, 2001). Definitions of the teacher assistant role and specific job expectations are not the focus of this study although their influence on the nature of the relationship is important. This study will focus on the interpersonal relationship between a teacher and an educational assistant as they work together in the inclusive environment.

The importance of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship is further underscored in Riggs' and Mueller's research findings of "the high value that paraeducators place on their relationship with others in the school community" (p. 62) and "the importance that developing positive relationships had...on job satisfaction and effectiveness" (p.62). Collegiality between the teacher and teacher assistant is necessary to promote a professional relationship within the classroom for the benefit of all students under their care. How do people in this relationship describe their understanding of the working relationship? What issues or factors do they believe influence this relationship?

Research Question

My research question evolves from those prior foundational questions: What themes emerge from teacher and teacher assistant descriptions of their relationship?

Who is the Researcher?

Personal Background

I have a distinct perspective on the subject of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship and feel that I need to describe how I place myself within this topic. After obtaining a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology, I found employment as a teacher assistant in a Kindergarten room, working with a student having special needs. During that time, I had the opportunity to work for/with teachers who had very different philosophies of education, classroom management, student learning, and the use of my assistant services. I was exhilarated when working with children and attended university to obtain my Bachelor of Education degree. Throughout the next eight years of the classroom teaching, I worked with many skilled teacher assistants and often learned from them. Finally, I moved into a vice-principal's position which required me to supervise and evaluate educational assistants. Issues arose that, although I had been vaguely aware of them in my own experiences, necessitated mediation between the teachers and teacher assistants.

Ironically, it was my inability to relate to many of the practical issues that compelled me to study this matter in depth. As a teacher assistant I felt that I got along with others, doing my job and filling my role. As a teacher, I communicated clearly with other adults working in my classroom and had collegial relationships with them. As a supervisor, I was faced with situations that centered directly on the

teacher and the teacher assistant relationship. My varied experiences led to my proposal to further investigate the perceived issues in the relationships between the individuals.

My Role as Researcher

A fundamental aspect to my study is my role in the research. I need to be aware that my presence and act of interviewing the participants may have influenced their responses. I also prepared myself for the potential of having advice solicited from me, should participants have sought ways of improving the relationship they described. I also need to recognize the potential effect my research had on the participants' relationships with their job partners in their schools as they reflected specifically on their experiences with these colleagues. Finally, I acknowledge that I have prior experiences and understandings of situations similar to those described by the participants. I need to recognize these perceptions, set them aside, and reflect on them in order to move beyond my personal understanding to a sincere experience with the participants and their realities (Tisdell, 2002).

Significance of the Research

The primary significance of this study will be the contribution of a qualitative study to the literature surrounding this topic. As noted earlier, there continues to be an increase in the number of teacher assistants employed to work with children who have special needs. There appears to be a gap in the literature, with a lack of quantitative or qualitative studies that examine the relationship between teachers and teacher assistants (Giangreco et al., 2001). In addition, issues raised and themes explored in this study may point to other studies needed in the area and may assist in

understanding certain elements of human interaction. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) note that "the qualitative research tradition produces an interpretation of reality that is useful in understanding the human condition" (p. 24). Finally, the themes that emerged may be helpful in understanding the daily practical experiences of teachers and teacher assistants in similar environments and similar relationships. This research will contribute to understandings of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship and may help others pursue effective practices in use of teacher assistant services.

CHAPTER TWO: THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Background

What do we know about the teacher and educational assistant relationship from the current literature? Unfortunately, this particular topic has not been widely studied in an academic manner. In an extensive review of literature from the past decade, Giangreco et al. (2001) noted that, "[the] existing literature is top-heavy with non-data based articles on roles and training of paraprofessionals, calling for role clarification as well as more and better training" (p.53). They discovered that, of the twenty-three non-data based articles they found, "[few] of the articles focused on how paraprofessionals interact with students and school personnel, although aspects of this were embedded in discussion of roles and responsibilities" (p. 49). French (2003) also found that while some research has been conducted on the effects of teacher assistants on student achievement, anecdotal information is most often reported.

Not surprisingly, then, many practical instructional manuals and opinion based articles have been published to help clarify the role of the teacher assistant and to assist the teacher and teacher assistant team (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2001; French, 1999a; Lorenz, 1998; Palma, 1994; Pickett, 1995, 1999, 2000; Riggs, 2001; Sprick, Garrison & Howard, 2000; The Alberta Teachers' Association, 2003). In addition, Giangreco et al. (2001) observe that, of the seventeen data based research articles published in the past decade, "[only] two explored the relationship between

paraprofessionals and professionals" (p. 50). This indicates a lack of academic

research articles focused on the teacher and teacher assistant relationship and the

effect of this relationship on special needs students and their achievement.; it does,

however, point to an abundance of practical, 'self-help'-type manuals.

The sheer amount of literature on the definition and clarification of roles and

responsibilities of teacher assistants implies that the primary concern influencing the

effectiveness of the teacher assistant is the cognitive exercise of understanding these

duties and expectations. French (2003) even suggests three recommendations for

improving paraeducator effectiveness: clearly define the role and the

responsibilities, assure appropriate supervision by trained teachers, and provide

appropriate training. The issue of role clarity and appropriate training will

necessarily appear in this study; however, this study will attempt to address the

literature gap by examining people and their perceptions in a more holistic manner

While there is an apparent lack of academic research literature specifically

dealing with the lived experience and interaction of the teacher and teacher assistant

team, certain themes in the articles on the teacher and teacher assistant relationship

are addressed. The three themes I focus on from the related literature are:

Communication, Respect for Colleagues, and Teamwork.

Current Themes

Communication

A common saying states, "The key to a good marriage is good

communication." In fact, most relationships and experiences in life could have the

same mantra. Communication, or the lack of it, directly influences the interpersonal

relationship between co-workers. When examining the relationship between teachers and teacher assistants in an inclusive, educational forum, open professional communication is necessary for building a collegial relationship.

Information Sharing

  The sharing of information between the teacher and the teacher assistant is essential to students' programming. Carroll (2001) pragmatically notes that "[sharing] information about students is critical to a smoothly operating program, [but] there is rarely time to do this" (p. 61). While many educational assistants have extensive practical knowledge and effective communication skills (French, 1999a), an absence of professional communication can be a significant hurdle to overcome in the teacher and teacher assistant relationship (Downing, Ryndak & Clark, 2000; Lorenz, 1998). Carroll (2001) advises paraeducators and teachers to build time into their schedule for regular communication regarding the student; this can not only affect appropriate program delivery and improve student learning, but can also build rapport between the teacher and teacher assistant pair. Regular, professional communication is a key factor in the development of a positive and effective teacher and teacher assistant relationship.

Communication Regarding Roles

  Sharing expectations about roles and responsibilities among the teacher, teacher assistant, and other members of the educational team may also influence the nature of the teacher and assistant relationship. Each teacher and teacher assistant relationship can become confused due to assumptions and misunderstandings. Morgan & Ashbaker (2001) suggest that teachers and teacher assistants "clarify classroom and instructional issues…and begin communication about potential

conflicts" (p. 26). Communicating, clarifying, and understanding the tasks required

of each participant in the relationship are necessary to reduce confusion and increase

rapport between the participants in the educational team (Giangreco et al., 2001, The

Alberta Teachers Association, 2003). The Alberta Teachers Association (2003) even

suggests that "[effective] communication also depends on both parties listening and

accepting feedback" (p. 7) to ensure students benefit under their care. Ongoing

professional communication, therefore, is necessary between participants to maintain

a positive and effective relationship.

Teacher responsibility. Teachers may also need a clear understanding of

their roles with the addition of another adult in the instructional environment.

Unfamiliar roles such as supervisor and mentor must be taken on by teachers as the

educational environment changes (French, 1999b; Pickett, 1999) and will require

teachers to give specific feedback to teacher assistants regarding their performance

(Allen, 2002). Giangreco et al. (2001) observe that, "when the expectations of team

members match there is a greater likelihood that paraprofessionals will feel

appreciated, respected…since there is individually agreed upon role clarity" (p. 496).

Therefore, communication of the expectations of each person's role in the

relationship is imperative to establishing a positive and professional interaction in the

classroom.

Respect for Colleagues

Respect between educational team members is another theme discovered in

the literature surrounding teacher and teacher assistant interaction. Downing et al.

(2000) discovered that teacher assistants reported feeling undervalued and often

encountered negative or stressful interactions with other team members. In a parallel vein, teacher assistants must have respect for the teacher and trust that appropriate programming is being planned and delivered for the students. Difficulties and issues in the teacher and teacher assistant relationship may arise if this respect is not offered by all members of the educational team.

Recognition

A positive, collegial relationship cannot develop if one of the participants is feeling undervalued. As teachers are moved into roles of supervisors and mentors for assistants in the classroom, they also assume responsibility for aspects of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship. Certain signs of respect may be realized in the outward acknowledgement and appreciation for the team member (Giangreco et al., 2001; Palma, 1994). Appreciating the contribution of other educational team members can only help build a positive relationship between job partners.

Implicit recognition. Implicit signs of respect are illustrated in the reception of input, the level of trust, and the amount of responsibility that is assigned to the teacher assistant (Downing et al., 2000; Giangreco et al., 2001). In contrast, however, some paraeducators report feeling not respected when asked to perform duties they feel are beyond their responsibilities or capabilities (Downing et al., 2000). This illuminates a significant issue in the current literature: different teacher assistants perceive similar tasks and situations in contrasting ways. This diversity of opinions is prevalent throughout the literature and points to the contextual nature of the relationship and the negotiation that occurs in daily interactions between staff members.

Teamwork

Teamwork and strategies to enhance teamwork are found throughout the literature on teacher and teacher assistant relationships. The importance of teamwork was articulated by Morgan, Ashbaker, and Young (2001) in their findings that "paraeducators and teachers seem to be aware of both the benefits and pitfalls of teamwork, although the majority of participants appeared to prefer a team approach rather than working solo" (p. 9). Freschi also argues that teamwork is essential and requires team members to be responsible and ethical, "remembering that the child's success comes first" (p. 45). Finally, Morgan and Ashbaker (2001) advise that "effective collaboration and teamwork require [teachers and teacher assistants] to establish a new culture for their work environment, one that they negotiate and agree to have in common" (p. 25).

Negotiation of Authority in the Classroom

The mutual understanding of the teacher assistant roles, the control over the amount and type of communication, plus the respect for the colleague and the work being performed, is a function of the daily negotiation of authority in the classroom. This issue exists as the foundation behind decision-making, interpretation of events, and personal interactions. As previously noted, communication is imperative in the negotiation of roles and responsibilities in the classroom. However, personal attributes of the participants involved in the relationship plus hierarchical issues in the work environment also affect the negotiation of authority in the classroom and the nature of the teacher and teacher assistant working relationship.

Teacher Attributes

Supervisory and hierarchical issues arise when two adults are expected to work in the same proximity with overlapping responsibilities for a student. Teachers may feel a loss of contact and control over the learning of a student with the employment of an assistant (French, 1999b). Teachers must have attributes such as flexibility and collaboration to deal with this sense of lack of control. French (1999b) suggests that "[as] control decreases, however, a teacher's influence increases through the collaborative and consultative relationships the teacher develops" (p. 70).

In addition, a lack of training in supervision techniques of teacher assistants may limit a teacher's ability to provide guidance to the teacher assistant (Downing et al. 2000; French, 1999b). Due to the shift in expectations of the teacher, many teachers are not comfortable with these roles (French, 1998, 1999b), but need to accept these changes in order to develop a professional relationship for the sake of students' needs.

Teacher Assistant Attributes

Personality issues affect not only the rapport between colleagues but the work that is done in the classroom. Some characteristics identified by teacher assistants as necessary to work in an inclusive classroom were listed as patience, flexibility, and "remaining calm, without becoming upset or defensive" (Downing et al., 2000). While these characteristics are essential to working well with students who have special needs, they may also apply to the teacher and teacher assistant relationship. Interestingly, in a 1998 study by French, teachers listed an ideal teacher assistant as

one who required little direction or supervision by the teacher.   These attributes may

also contribute to a positive and effective teacher and teacher assistant relationship.

Hierarchical Issues

Negotiation of individual roles and responsibilities, duties, and expectations

can bring up issues of hierarchy. Teacher assistants report that 'who knows the

student best' attitudes create confusion over who should communicate with parents,

adapt the materials, and even engage in instructional tasks (Downing et al., 2000;

Freschi, 1999; Giangreco et al., 2001). French argues that "paraeducators [must]

share responsibilities, rather than have sole responsibility in any area" (1999b, p. 73).

Giangreco et al. (2001) concur in their recommendation that "teams should critically

scrutinize proposed roles to ensure that paraprofessionals are not being asked to

assume responsibilities that are appropriately those of teacher, special educators, or

related services providers" (p. 57). In contrast, however, a number of teachers in

French's 1998 study described teacher assistants as peers, failing to recognize the

hierarchy in the classroom and their different ethical and legal responsibilities.

Acknowledgement of the differing roles and responsibilities plus the acceptance of

the hierarchy in the classroom is necessary by both co-workers for the development

and maintenance of a positive and effective relationship.

Summary

The current academic and non-academic literature is infused with

assumptions that clarity of roles and appropriate training are the key to appropriate

use of teacher assistants and, ultimately, improved operation of the classroom and

student learning; this study looked at the lived experience of the participant in the

teacher and teacher assistant relationship. Communication, respect for colleagues

and teamwork in the classroom are evident in the current literature on the teacher and

teacher assistant relationship. This study will build on these themes and add to the

understanding of this relationship. Questions arising as a result of the literature

review are: What are the factors and issues, beyond the statement of the job

description, that influence the teacher and teacher assistant relationship? What do

teachers and teacher assistants reveal about their interactions in their working

relationship?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Research

"Qualitative researchers set up strategies and procedures to enable them to consider experiences from the informants' perspectives" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 7). The purposes, methods, and strategies of qualitative research suited both my topic and rationale for completing this research. I chose qualitative methodology because I wanted to investigate how teachers and teacher assistants understand their worlds and their professional interactions. This methodological purposefulness is directed both by the nature of the research questions and the nature of the data required to understand the participants' experiences (Morse & Richards, 2002).

Participant Sample

The selection of participants for this study was based on typical case sampling designed to highlight typical experiences (Glesne, 1999). Personal contact was initially made with a superintendent of education in a large school division in the province of Saskatchewan. The superintendent expressed interest in the topic of the study and participants were solicited by contact through this school division. Personal contact was then made with two administrators and a learning assistance teacher to find teachers and teacher assistants who would be interested in completing a study on teacher and teacher assistant relationships. Please refer to Appendix A for a copy of the letter to the school division, Appendix B for a copy of the letter of

intent to the participants, and Appendix C for a copy of the consent document completed by participants.

Participant Volunteers

Initial criteria for selection of the participant sample included: pairs of teachers and teacher assistants who possessed at least one year of experience. When this study was conceptualized, I hoped to solicit three pairs of teachers and teacher assistants from three schools to discuss their relationship with their job partner. However, three pairs of volunteers were not found, possibly due to the amount of emotional risk involved in discussing their close personal relationship, and this criterion was dropped. Six participants from three schools were eventually selected, with each of the participants possessing more than one year of experience. This criterion was established to ensure that participants had lived experiences and personal frames of reference when discussing examples and support for their opinions.

Revisiting the Role of the Researcher

As previously noted, due to my personal experiences and connection to the topic of this study, my conscious reflection was needed to understand participant perceptions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) of the teacher and assistant relationship. I needed to set aside my assumptions to sincerely interact with the participants' perceptions while acknowledging that I do bring previous knowledge to this interaction (Glesne, 1999). Personal memos, notes from my conversations with others and a reflective log were recorded in an attempt to be more aware of my assumptions and beliefs in order to set them aside.

Construction of Data

Data Collection

Individual and group interviews were my sole vehicle for collecting data on the participants' perceptions in this interpretive study. Glesne (1999) notes that, "[the] opportunity to learn about what you cannot see and to explore alternative explanations of what you do see is the special strength of interviewing in qualitative inquiry" (p. 69). In addition to audio-recordings made during the interview process, I made short notes to record my observations of particular body language, hesitations, and even rewording of questions.

My data collection followed three phases: initial interviews, follow-up interviews and group discussions. Every effort was made to accommodate the participants and their daily lives in scheduling the interviews with most of the interviews being conducted immediately before or after school times. The most convenient venue for the participants was at their respective schools. Choice of venue and time of day convenient for the participant is necessary not only for building rapport with the interviewee (Glesne, 1999), but is a practical acknowledgement of my appreciation of the individual's willingness to participate in the study.

Initial Interviews

The construction of the semi-structured interview questions was developed from the issues and themes found in the current literature and from my personal, practical experiences. Pilot studies of the initial interview guide were conducted with one teacher and three teacher assistants. As a direct result of feedback from the

pilot studies the questions were then adapted and streamlined to be used for both

teachers and teacher assistants. The questions were constructed in an attempt to

create data that portrayed experiences and perceptions of the teacher and teacher

assistant relationship. The open-ended question construction and the organization of

the questions were purposeful (Glesne, 1999) and were designed to encourage rich

descriptions from the participants. A copy of the initial interview guide may be

found in Appendix C.

Follow-up Interviews

Each of the participants was interviewed a second time, after the initial

interview transcripts were completed. The acquisition of data and simultaneous

qualitative analysis necessarily led to new questions (Glesne, 1999). In the follow-

up interview, participants were asked a variety of questions that were designed to

gain a deeper understanding of perceptions or to address themes and issues that

emerged from others' data. I purposefully structured the follow-up interview to

confirm or contrast data uncovered in the initial interviews. As a result all

participants were exposed to similar follow-up questions yet encouraged to take their

own direction during probes and summary comments.

Group Discussions

The final sessions of data collection were the use of a teacher discussion

group and a separate teacher assistant discussion group. The audio-recorded group

interview provided an opportunity for further clarification and stimulation of

discussion that may have been lacking in the individual interviews. In scheduling

the group interviews, all efforts to accommodate participants were made. The

teacher focus group met after school at an elementary school and was attended by

two of the three participants. Similarly, the teacher assistant group interview was

attended by two of the three participants in a more neutral location of a fast food

restaurant. While each group was missing one participant, both group meetings were

re-scheduled twice to try to accommodate members. The quality of the discussion

was still deemed positive as participants in both groups reflected on themes that

emerged through the study. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003) note that, "the interactions

among participants stimulate them to state feelings, perceptions, and beliefs that they

would not express if interviewed individually" (p. 238).

Data Analysis

In following qualitative research tradition, the data analysis consisted of

transcribing the audio-recordings, organizing and coding recurring information, then

analyzing for themes in the data (Morse & Richards, 2002). Recurring information

found in the data given by teacher assistant participants included: time for

communication, respect, teamwork, the nature of the job, personality issues,

understanding the hierarchy in the school and classroom, accepting the hierarchy in

the school and classroom, feeling part of a team, administration support, school

climate, having a positive attitude, and communication and perception of

expectations. Recurring information found in the data given by the teacher

participants included: teamwork, positive attitude, personality issues, respect,

appreciation of input, compatibility, administration support, communication, level of

teacher assistant skills and competence, teacher assistant initiative taking, role

clarity, teacher responsibility, negotiation of expectations, commitment to the job,

teacher assistant professionalism, and acknowledgement of hierarchy in schools.

These codes were then compared and contrasted to note any discrepancies in the

perception of factors influencing the relationship as noted by teacher participants and

teacher assistant participants. While different perspectives certainly emerged, the

codes were collapsed into three overall themes which accommodated the different

perspectives. A detailed analysis of the themes that emerged may be found in

Chapter Four: The Analysis of Data. I attempted to follow Glesne's (1999) advice

that,

> Data analysis involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read
>
> so that you can make sense of what you have learned. Working with
>
> the data, you describe, create explanations, pose hypotheses, develop
>
> theories, and link your story to other stories (p. 130).

The process of data analysis clearly brought out themes in the participants'

perceptions of factors that influenced their working relationship with their job

partners.

Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality

Every attempt to maintain confidentiality was used in this study, including the

use of pseudonyms for the participants and the schools in which they are employed.

However, due to the nature of obtaining the participant sample and the use of group

interviews, full confidentiality could not be guaranteed. Each participant was fully

aware of this, acknowledged her commitment to maintain confidentiality, signed off

the consent document found in Appendix C, and was reminded of confidentiality

issues prior to the group interview. However, in order to avoid issues of power

relationships in the collection of data, teachers and teacher assistants were

interviewed separately with all responses kept confidential between the individual

participant and the researcher. While responses by individuals informed the creation

of questions for the follow-up interviews, ideas were used in general terms and never

addressed with names, pseudonyms, or situational information.

Informed Consent

As noted in the previous section, all participants were required to sign a

consent form, found in Appendix C, which indicated that: participation was

voluntary, withdrawal could be made at any time during the study, all data is owned

by participants and could, therefore, be changed or deleted at any time during the

study through member checks of the transcribed data, all audio-recorded data will be

kept confidential and locked in the office of the Department of Curriculum Studies at

the University of Saskatchewan for a period of five years, all audio-recorded and

transcribed data will be destroyed after this period has elapsed. This level of

confidentiality and respect for the participants can only contribute to the rapport

established between the researcher and the participants and to the quality of data

collected as a result (Glesne, 1999).

CHAPTER FOUR: AN ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Profiles of the Participants

The six female participants for this research had a variety of backgrounds, years of experience, and positions in a school. Three of the six participants were employed as teacher assistants with the Riverview School Division, an urban school division in the province of Saskatchewan. The remaining three participants were employed as teachers or vice-principals with teaching assignments in their respective schools. Two participants each from three schools, serving elementary and middle years aged students, agreed to be part of the research.

Teacher assistant participants had a range of years of experience from four years to twelve years. Their backgrounds in the educational field were also varied as their experience ranged from academic support to behavioral support and support of special needs. Susan and Toni both worked in elementary schools with students requiring special assistance while Debbie worked in a middle school with adolescents requiring assistance with their behaviors. This richness of experience allowed me to probe each participant's understanding of a situation by asking her to recall specific details or contrast her current experiences with her experiences in previous positions as a teacher assistant.

Teacher participants also had a range of years of experience from six to eighteen years. One of the teacher participants worked in an elementary school while the other two participants worked as vice-principals who also had teaching

responsibilities. As with the interviews of the teacher assistants, the teachers were often asked to clarify and compare or contrast their opinions with real-life situations. Again, the varied experiences and concerted reflection by the teacher participants created rich and diverse data.

Participants' Perceptions of their Relationships

This chapter presents themes derived from the opinions and perceptions of the six participants as they reflected on their work experiences and relationships encountered with their job partners. Through a qualitative analysis of the data gathered, multiple codes were obtained from the individual teacher and teacher assistant interviews. While most data gathered followed the outline of the semi-structured interview guide, when divergent ideas were brought up by participants, follow-up interviews provided an appropriate format to probe for further information from the other participants. Final, focused, group interviews with the teachers and teacher assistants respectively afforded the opportunity to validate and elaborate some of the recurring themes emerging from the data which were transcribed between interviews. The data were then compared and contrasted between individuals and groups to find common themes. While some themes were addressed more extensively by one group than the other, whether by teachers or teacher assistants, all themes presented in this research were addressed by both groups.

Three major themes uncovered were: the influence of the in-school administration on the relationships between staff members, the daily professional interactions with a job partner, and personal attributes and competencies of respective teachers and teacher assistants. An expansion and explanation of these

themes follows, reflecting the perceptions of both teacher assistants and teachers of their working relationships.

The Influence of Administration

The environment of employment can be identified as conducive to a successful working relationship between a teacher and a teacher assistant. The influence of in-school administration, in particular, emerged as a factor of influence for both teacher assistants and teachers in their relationships with their job partners. Participants identified the need to be on the same page in expectations and acknowledged that the in-school administrators played an important part in clarifying the roles for the jobs. In a more affective dimension, participants discussed the modeling of behavior that in-school administrators provide to the entire staff in a school.

Effect on Staff Relationships

Teacher assistant perceptions. Each of the teacher assistant participants noted the influence of administration on the success of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship as a direct result of the role model they provide. Toni, a teacher assistant working with multiple students who have behavioral issues, suggested that the administration could be a role model for the staff by showing that "we are not any different, that we still have some importance." Toni also noted the importance of feeling as part of the staff by being involved in school routines. She commented

Well, this school treats TAs very well. We are part of staff meetings.

I've been in schools where they don't even have the TAs at

meetings...[Here] you know what is going on and you are a really big part of it.

She later added "[as] I say, here you are treated awesome…This is the second principal since I've been here and both were good…[They've treated us] just like one of the teachers." The sense of inclusion and belonging Toni felt emerged from an administrative act of inviting assistants to staff meetings, as well as modeling to teachers the importance of including assistants and keeping them informed.

Debbie, who works at a middle school, reflected on her previous experiences and noted that the administration influence is "with the respect that they show us." She qualified her comment by reflecting on her previous experience and noted, "I've been in schools where they treat us just as a TA. You're not the educated person who is educating kids, you are just here to help. Whereas here, they treat us very well." Debbie recognized that the administration at her current school treated her as a person with talents to deal with specific children and didn't treat her "just as a TA". She later added that administration needed to be open-minded and be able to treat "everybody with respect, it goes from the teachers right down to even the caretakers and treating them very well." Modeling acceptance and inclusion of all staff members was important for Debbie and her sense of being part of the team.

In one of her most emphatic observations, Susan, an experienced teacher assistant working with special needs children noted "I've been through five different principals and seven [vice-principals]. If their approach is very open and team oriented, then I think that it's a very positive experience for the teacher and the TA. And I think the kids benefit." Susan directly linked the role of in-school

administrators and their professional approach to the success of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship and ultimately to the success of the students being assisted.

In a later interview, Susan further clarified her understanding of why the administration is so important in fostering a positive teacher and teacher assistant relationship. She commented "I think my biggest thing is if the principal and [vice principal] can believe that the TA is an important part of the team. It shows through all the way through from the top down to the bottom." She clearly articulates the influence of modeling a teamwork approach, acknowledging that it "shows through" to all staff members in the school.

Each of teacher assistants pointed out the verbal and non-verbal influence of the administrators on other members of the school staff. The role modeling of inclusive behaviors to all staff members was identified as having an effect on overall school climate and directly linked to the development of teamwork within the school and between staff members.

Teacher perceptions. The teacher participants also addressed the role of in-school administration on the success of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship. While each had her own perspective on the influence of the in-school administrator, two of the three work as in-school administrators. This certainly showed through in their responses to questions and probes about the influence on the teacher and teacher assistant relationship.

A direct link between the in-school administration and the success of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship was made by Victoria, an elementary

teacher who reflected on her prior experience in a different school division. She

commented

> It was an administration that seemed to cause a lot of stress for the
>
> teachers. Nobody felt that they could go to the administration for help
>
> or guidance so we were left with dealing with our own problems. If
>
> there were teacher and TA problems, you were stuck…It was really
>
> stressful because I felt like I couldn't talk to anybody about it.

Victoria felt a lack of guidance and assistance when the situation was becoming

difficult and later acknowledged that it had a direct influence on her relationship with

the teacher assistant she was working with.

Victoria also addressed the role modeling capacity of the in-school

administration on the relationships between staff members. Similar to the responses

of the teacher assistants she reflected on the inclusion modeled by administrators.

Victoria observed "at this school everybody is welcome at staff meetings. At

another school I was at, the teachers and TAs each had their own and there was no

communication." In addition, Victoria recognized that the administration in that

instance modeled an overall lack of respect for the teacher assistants. She noted that

"there was pretty negative administration…they would use the term TA instead of

the person's name even." She also commented on the affect the administration

behavior had on her personally when she reflected "it was an uncomfortable

situation. You felt like you were high and mighty over these people even though

you're not." Victoria clearly understood, from her lived experience, the influence of

in-school administration on her relationships with teacher assistants.

Cathy, an administrator in an elementary school, did not reflect on specific experiences when asked to comment on the influence of in-school administration. Instead, she argued that the in-school administration, school climate, and appropriate programming were integrated factors in the success of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship. She suggested "if you have an effective model, if student needs are being met and the staff needs are being met I think that the school climate just blossoms after that." Cathy also commented

> Certainly, I feel that the administrator is important in setting the
>
> climate but everybody has to be involved…because an administrator
>
> can be very much in support of the role of the learning assistance
>
> teacher and the teacher assistant, but if we don't have the entire staff
>
> on [board], it makes it difficult.

She acknowledged that while administration does have a partial influence on the teacher and teacher assistant relationship, the rest of the school community has an influence and responsibility as well. This perspective may be a direct result of being an administrator, dealing with teacher and teacher assistant issues and having a different lens through which to view the staff relationships. However, Cathy did recognize the part that the administrators could play in the relationship by later commenting "if the administrator's philosophy is more inclusive and is team based, then that tends to radiate…it depends on how clear that administrator states where they are coming from or how they model that." The verbal and non-verbal influence of the administration is clearly noted from the perception of a teacher who is also in the administration role.

Nina, also an administrator who has teaching duties, discussed her perception of the influence of in-school administration on the working relationships of teachers and teacher assistants. Nina described the influence as "huge" and further clarified

> I can remember being at one school where the principal told the TAs that he didn't want them at the staff meetings. Well, not only is it demoralizing for them, but we knew that he didn't value them…we had to go underground in our friendship or relationship with them.

The lack of respect for other staff members obviously had an affect on Nina as she described this instance with indignation. She recognized the affect that the principal was having on the whole school and, especially, how the principal modeled treatment of teacher assistants.

Similar to Cathy, however, Nina recognized that other staff members in the school can have an impact on the teacher and teacher assistant relationships. She acknowledged that, at one of her previous schools, one teacher "felt that the TAs were below her and it was stressful on everybody…because we felt bad for them. None of them wanted to go into her classroom." Nina then described the further breakdown of the relationship as a direct result of the negative climate created in the school by the staff member. She noted "[if the TAs] don't have ownership in the building or the students, they don't care. They show up, they do their job and they go home, because they know they aren't respected." Nina points out the direct connection between the perceived lack of respect and the level of commitment of the teacher assistants to doing their jobs. Again, the integrated nature of human action

and interaction emerges; the in-school administration assumes a pivotal role in both the administrative and affective dimensions of creating a positive relationship.

Effect on the Clarity of Roles

Throughout the literature surrounding teacher and teacher assistant relationships, the clarity of roles and responsibilities of both teachers and teacher assistants is a central theme (The Alberta Teachers' Association, 2003; Ashbaker & Morgan, 2001; French, 1999a; Lorenz, 1998; Palma, 1994; Pickett, 1995, 1999, 2000; Riggs, 2001; Sprick, Garrison, & Howard, 2000). It is no surprise, then, that the participants identified their clarity of expectations, and, for some, the process of clarifying these expectations, to be of primary importance to the success of their teacher and teacher assistant relationships.

Teacher Assistant perceptions. The teacher assistant participants emphatically and repeatedly suggested that there needed to be an alignment of expectations between the teacher and the teacher assistant regarding the job that is to be done. Interestingly, there was a noticeable difference in the opinions of the teacher assistants and the teachers who were administrators. While both groups suggested that clarity of roles, responsibilities, and expectations were necessary, they differed in their understandings of when clarification of these roles should be negotiated. The teacher assistant participants all suggested that being "on the same page" in terms of expectations and their responsibilities in the classroom were a result of their communication with the classroom teachers with whom they worked and not as a result of administrator or division efforts. As a result, teacher assistant perceptions of the clarification of roles will be discussed further in a following section of the analysis, Professional Interactions: Communication.

Teacher perceptions. While the teacher assistants unanimously viewed the clarity of their responsibilities and the act of clarification of these roles as a result of discussion and negotiation with the teachers, teacher participants saw the clarity of expectations and the clarification of roles to be influenced by the administration of the school and even by the policies of the school division. While each teacher acknowledged role clarity is of high importance, their understanding of the lived experience of how this clarity is to be achieved varied with their position in the school and the contexts in which they have worked.

Victoria, as earlier noted in her reflections on a negative experience with administration, discussed the importance of role clarity and the need for clarification as well. In her previous work with a TA who held a Bachelor of Education degree, Victoria noted "[she] would get up and start teaching. That was hard to deal with but you have to do it. It comes back to the communication, just saying, "I'm sorry but your role in here is this." While Victoria knew she needed to communicate that directly to her teacher assistant, she felt abandoned when she continued to run into difficulties working with the teacher assistant. Again, as noted earlier, Victoria perceived that the administration was not supporting her in dealing with this difficulty and experienced stress as a result. The influence of administration on the clarification of teacher and teacher assistant roles in Victoria's experiences, therefore, point to a more indirect effect on the nature of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship. Victoria's negative experience may have been avoided if roles had been clear and accepted by the teacher assistant in the relationship.

Nina, a vice-principal who works with adolescents, expressed her integrated

perspective as she discussed the influence of administration in hiring people and

making sure they understood the vision of the school. Nina reflected

I do put extra emphasis on people who want to be a part of the

building and of the staff. It doesn't mean you don't do a good job if

you're not, but I'm very big on school climate and staff morale.

In Nina's role as a school administrator she admitted that she wants potential staff

members to understand what their role in the entire school is. She also admitted that

she communicates this desire very directly even in interviews for potential staff. She

noted that "if [a TA] comes in for an interview to work here, they need to know that

there is a team approach we take as a school." She places the responsibility for

communicating that expectation immediately on the in-school administration. Due to

the context of the school Nina works in, she conceded

 We don't have a manual, but we don't assign [TAs] to specific

kids…they need to be able to come on board as part of the team and

be flexible and willing to go. [For example], I need you here more,

this is more important. They have a schedule but it goes out the

window at any point in time in the day, depending on what else is

happening.

Nina understands that the role of administration in her building is to direct where the

teacher assistants are needed most, indicative of the unique context she works in. In

the focus group interview Nina commented "this relates to school climate, because

part of being in a school is that there are a million jobs that aren't written down."

She acknowledged the lack of a manual outlining all possible teacher assistant responsibilities and expectations, but saw the need to communicate the vision and mission of the school to teacher assistants beyond the job description.

Cathy's experiences and perceptions of the influence of administration on clarity of expectations, roles, and responsibilities again reflected a holistic view of human interactions. Cathy also mentioned the process of role clarification on several instances and noted "there has to be a point of time where it goes down to communication of expectations. So you know what each other is expecting." She recognized the importance of communicating expectations between staff members, but also acknowledged the role that school divisions play in the development of overviews and handbooks for teacher assistants. Cathy also reflected that

> role clarification has been something that we have to work through
> with some of our staff members….not only the TAs, but some of the
> teachers too. Some of the demands and specifics like phoning parents
> or communicating information to parents, and knowing whose job it
> is.

Her perception of potential difficulties with staff members and their working relationships is based on their clear understanding of the roles they need to play in the classroom. Delineation of duties and sorting out the details of daily interaction was seen by Cathy as necessary in her job as an administrator. Her view of the role of administration in clarifying roles and responsibilities, therefore, ranged from the use of school division generated handbooks to focused communication with staff members about their place on the school team.

As the teacher participants clearly noted, the role of administration, including the application of division policies and expectations as outlined in handbooks and manuals, is imperative to people maintaining clarity of roles and, ultimately, the success of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship. Clear direction and vision for the school must be communicated to all staff members as well as their roles within the school. While guidelines for expectations may be clearly written, the participants also noted the significance of the in-school administration in maintaining the clarity of roles through focused interaction and counseling of staff members on a recurring basis. The next section of the analysis of data is an examination of the professional interaction between the staff members and the factors influencing the success of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship.

Professional Interaction

The quality of the professional interaction emerged as a main theme in the analysis of teacher and teacher assistant relationships. Similar to the themes found in the current literature, teacher assistant participants and teacher participants in this study identified the following factors influencing professional interaction: communication, mutual respect, and teamwork. Each of these factors will be expanded in the following sections, reflecting the perceptions of all participants in this study.

Communication

Teacher Assistant perceptions. As previously noted, the teacher assistant participants perceived that role clarity and communication of expectations was achieved through their interactions with their job partners. Each teacher assistant

participant indicated the importance of communication to the clarification of expectations and the success of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship.

In her work with adolescents with behavioral issues, Debbie appreciated the importance of communication in a positive working relationship with a variety of classroom teachers. While Debbie reflected that in previous positions as a teacher assistant she encountered few formal strategies for communication, such as communication books that "tell what needs to be done and how a student is doing," the nature of her current job requires her to work with many children and teachers. She recognized that "each teacher is different, a lot just want you to be there to supervise and then one specifically asks you to go work with a kid."

Debbie provided insights to what she believed was the biggest factor in maintaining a positive teacher and teacher assistant relationship when she commented

> after you work with them for a while, you get to know what they're
> going to expect from you and being able to pick up on it. It's funny
> when they are a new teacher, they're almost afraid to ask you to help
> with anything. That's part of my job title, so ask me if you need it
> done.

Being able to perceive what is expected and what needs to be done in the classroom is seen by Debbie as essential to doing her job. When asked what advice she would give to teacher assistants graduating from a diploma program, she emphatically suggested "talk lots! Get clear expectations. Maybe even just write down what you want or what is expected of you." In a later interview Debbie added that a positive

relationship with a teacher included "a lot of talking, strategizing and…listening."
This sentiment was again reiterated in her advice "be on the same page in
expectations. I keep saying that but with every kid, you need to know what is
expected." Debbie takes on the personal responsibility for understanding the
expectations for each child she supports plus understanding the expectations from the
teacher regarding her daily responsibilities by consciously communicating with the
teacher.

In her individual interviews, Susan spoke specifically about the influence of
communication on her ability to do her job. Similar to Debbie's experience, she
discussed the use of written instructions and information in a student communication
book and discussed the informal conversations that happen throughout the day with
the teacher regarding programming needs for the student. Susan described her
previous experiences, both negative and positive, in the following reflection on what
affects the teacher and teacher assistant relationship the most.

> It is inclusion, if the teacher gives you information regarding the
> students. I've had teachers withhold the names of students with head
> lice. I mean, when you are working that closely to them as you are, I
> think that is something we need to know... [However], I've also had
> other teachers who include you in everything, if parents have
> concerns, meetings and everything.

Susan described the primary importance of information sharing regarding the
student needs as it directly affected her in her job and her responsibilities.

Susan also noted that the context of working in an integrated elementary classroom required her to be working beyond her assigned job description. She reflected that

[when] you are working with these kids, sometimes you know them better than the teacher does. I think if you are both professionals…[teachers] are able to talk to you and tell you what is going on in the classroom, regardless whether it is the student you are working with. Because you never just work with that student.

She later noted, "If you don't have discussion to that approach [in the classroom] then you are both going in different directions and then, of course, you're going to have, or there's going to be, conflict." Susan recognized that communication is necessary for her to be able to contribute to the entire classroom and is the key to a positive working relationship. Her understanding of what is expected of her has developed from direct communication with the teacher with whom she works.

Toni also ranked communication as a primary factor in the success of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship. As Toni reflected on a previous difficult experience, she discussed the formal schedule that was needed to keep lines of communication open. She noted

we basically had to talk it out. The principal got involved and it was nothing big, she just wanted to open up the communication. We had weekly meetings about how the week went…I didn't want hard

feelings yet I didn't want to be overly stressed out because of

something I didn't understand.

Toni linked her feelings of well being to the openness of communication and specific

communication of expectations by the teacher with whom she worked.   She also

mused "I don't know if the teacher and TA ever get a chance to sit down and discuss

things, just the two of them. That way, if the TA has something she wants to bring

up with the teacher, I think it would be a good thing to have." Toni also reflected on

the positive informal communication she enjoys with the teacher she is currently

working with. She noted that

[the teacher] is very open. I think if there is a problem, she would let

me know. We just keep a very open line of communication and I

think that we are lucky [that we both stay in the room throughout the

day]…So it gives us a chance to talk about the kids, what has

happened through the day. We laugh, talk about our home life, a little

bit about our backgrounds and I really like it.

The informal communication is obviously important to Toni and helps to clarify

programming needs for the children as well as provide a personal connection

between her and the teacher.

Toni understood the positive nature of this relationship compared to other

relationships with different teachers that she has experienced. Similar to Susan's

experiences, Toni feels that she needs to know what is going on in the classroom and

be informed both of students' needs and her role in meeting those needs. She

reflected

I don't feel that I am left out at all. [For example], even though I

was unable to stay for a meeting, I still feel that she brought me up

to par with what happened and I am still with her. I know what is

going on [because] we discuss things.

Again, communication with the classroom teacher is considered imperative by Toni

to doing her job well and to feel that she is a significant part of the classroom.

Teacher Perceptions. Observations made by the teacher participants on the

importance of communication in the teacher and teacher assistant relationship

echoed many of the sentiments raised by the teacher assistants. Making time for

communication and taking responsibility for communication with teacher assistants

clearly emerged from the participant interviews.

Communication, both formal and informal, was also of high importance to

Cathy, especially in her roles as a Learning Assistance Teacher and as a vice-

principal. Cathy stated

I think there has to be the opportunities for communication. Whether

those are formally planned, such as our committee meetings, or if they

are informal, those opportunities have to exist. Both the teacher and

the teacher assistant need to know that we need to keep touching base

here to make sure we are on the same page.

Keeping lines of communication open to assist in clarifying expectations for teachers

and teacher assistants was taken on by Cathy in her administrator role. She reiterated

this belief in her advice that

[the teacher and teacher assistant] need lots of opportunities, again,

for communication between the two to establish a plan and at least

then you'll have a roadmap. It's not as if the student is with the

teacher assistant and you [the teacher] are done. You are very much a

part of that child's programming and you are very much a part of a

team.

Cathy verbalized the responsibility required of the teacher in the relationship and the

communication necessary for planning and programming for students.

Cathy also noted that the affective dimension of communication was

important in maintaining a positive teacher and teacher assistant relationship. She

commented "I encourage our TAs to clear often, so if they have a concern about

something, whether it is me or a student or another teacher, let's deal with

it…instead of it becoming a bigger issue." Cathy reiterated that sentiment in her

observation that when lines of communication are absent "everything starts to break

down, not only the relationships on your team, but there are spin-offs for the kids

they are supporting and classroom teachers." This sentiment illustrates Cathy's

perception that students can be directly influenced by the nature of the adult

interaction in the classroom.

Victoria continued to address the affective dimension and discussed her

belief that communication was the key to a positive teacher and teacher assistant

relationship. While she noted that her communication time with her teacher assistant

was often informal, such as at lunch or at the beginning of the day, she observed that

my TA and I are very compatible and we think along the same lines,

with regards to when [a student] needs a timeout and what their

consequence should be.…But communication is probably the key

thing, because if you don't talk to each other and discuss things, it just

kind of builds up.

As noted earlier, Victoria recognized from her past experience that when open lines of communication were absent, difficulties arose in the classroom and in her professional interaction with the teacher assistant. She observed

[we] have to work so closely with other adults and kids can sense

when there is something wrong…If you're in a classroom with

another adult and you are not communicating, even body language,

they can tell right away and it can make it really uncomfortable.

Similar to Cathy's perception, Victoria noticed the direct impact that the adult behaviors and attitudes in the classroom can have on the students. In her current position, Victoria attempted to share as much information about the students with her teacher assistant as possible. She commented "if I write notes to the parents, I have her read them and know what we are doing, so she is on the same page."

Finally, Victoria also recognized the importance of being open to suggestions from her teacher assistant when she commented

you learn as much from the person in your room as much as they

learn from you…I think teachers sometimes get stuck in a rut and

they think that their way is the only way to do things. TAs have good

ideas…you just have to try and listen.

Victoria concluded her comments on communication with her advice "I guess my biggest thing is just [having] open communication and be honest. Try your best to have a good relationship because you're in there for the year."

Nina displayed the influence of her administration role in her comments on communication. Similar to the other participants, Nina truly felt that communication was the key to maintaining a positive relationship between a teacher and a teacher assistant, particularly in negotiating the responsibilities of teachers and teacher assistants in a non-traditional school. Nina suggested that a teacher assistant "ask the teacher what he or she needs done, but to also take initiative." Interestingly, Nina also perceived that teachers need to do more to communicate those expectations. While both Cathy and Victoria recognized the responsibility of the teacher in creating opportunities for communication, Nina was more emphatic when she advised that "they need to sit down with the TA and maybe with a third party and write out the expectations. What does she expect to be doing in your class, what do you expect her to be doing in your class."

Nina reflected that she favored the direct approach when communicating with teacher assistants, but acknowledged that teachers need to listen to teacher assistants and include them in decision making. She commented "I think you have to ask or tell [the teacher assistant], but do it in such a way that they are considered or they feel a part of the process." She further acknowledges that "[getting] their perspective on [students] and letting them know you think it is important. It's not even a [direction for them] it is a sharing." Finally, Nina expanded this sentiment of respect

and inclusion in her reflection on discussions she has initiated in past experiences as an administrator. She suggested

> I think it is part of valuing their opinion [to ask], 'Where are you on
>
> this? Do you expect to be doing more? Do you expect to be doing
>
> less? Do you think that you are working too hard? Do you think that
>
> you are doing enough and do you want more to do?'...I tell them,
>
> 'Tell me…and we will find the middle road.'

Nina perceived that the sharing of information and inclusion in decision making influences the success of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship. She valued the opinions of her teacher assistants and, as a teacher and an administrator, expected that they communicate as clearly with her as she communicated with them.

Mutual Respect

> *Teacher assistant perceptions.* Respect displayed to teacher assistants by

other staff members emerged as an important factor in the teacher and teacher assistant relationship. Respect for the talents and skills each person contributes to the classroom combined with respectful behaviors by job partners can only positively influence the working relationship.

"It comes down to respect for each other and it has to go both ways. Respecting each other," Susan concluded. Of the three teacher assistant participants, Susan felt most strongly about the influence mutual respect had on the success of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship. As noted earlier, Susan felt that the administration in a school had a vital role in modeling respectful and inclusive behavior to teacher assistants. She mused "how can the teachers even believe that

you are an integral part of the team if you're not seen as someone important [by the administration]?"

Susan reflected on a very positive working relationship she experienced; she commented "I think that I've had the ideal [teacher]. She valued my input so much that she would tell me daily 'I would really like your opinion on this'." Later Susan added "I think the ideal is for the teacher to treat me like an equal. Equal respect and equal information sharing." Susan obviously felt respected by her job partner when her ideas were accepted and she was treated like an equal.

Susan delved further into her understandings of this topic and surfaced a deeper understanding of what respect meant to her. She determined it was "a trust. They trust that we are able to be competent in our jobs. And I think that it comes down to mutual respect and a mutual understanding of what our talents are…being allowed to use your talents." Trust and respect were intertwined in Susan's understanding of what made her experience so positive.

Finally, Susan also established a link between competence and the respect earned by a person. As she pondered a negative experience she had while working with a child who had special needs, she noted "that was our worst year together [because of] the teacher's approach to him. He didn't want him in the classroom and you could definitely feel that." She also concluded

> I've had teachers that have thought they are better because they have
>
> the master's degree or the teacher's degree. As opposed to someone
>
> who doesn't have a degree, I don't think that anybody is better. Both
>
> people are skilled in what their job is.

Susan repeatedly discussed the partnership of the professional teacher and the paraprofessional teacher assistant in providing appropriate programming for students. She suggested that communication "also helps us do our job, because they're the professional and we're the paraprofessional. The two can work together to bridge that to be there for the student." She later confirmed this sentiment in her comment, "we are both professionals working side by side [and] we're both good in what our profession is." Susan clearly communicated her passion for her job and her desire to be respected for the talents she possesses and the profession that she chose.

Toni, in her reflections on working with different teachers, suggested that being open minded to teacher assistant suggestions reflected a sense of respect by those teachers. She advised "treat [teacher assistants] with respect and they should do the same…because we're not dumb people. While some of us didn't go to Kelsey…I think just bringing up your own kids you learn things."

Her understanding of the positive nature of her current working relationship emerged from her feelings of belonging and acceptance by the classroom teacher. She noted, "[the teacher] has the papers and the degrees, but with these types of kids you'll never, like raising your own, you'll never figure them out." The sense of shared purpose and contribution to solving problems in the classroom helps to portray a sense of respect from the teacher.

Toni also discussed the link between the level of competence of the teacher and the respect earned in the situation. When reflecting on her previous experience, Toni acknowledged the stress she felt when she was required to take on extra duties. She noted "I was taking on too much, kind of both roles in a sense. [I was] very worn

out because you had to be on par everyday, especially with the kids, and they were very demanding at times." In contrast, Toni admitted that working with her current teacher had made her job easier and helped her to enjoy the year more. She remarked

> I think this teacher has worked with similar kinds of children and she
>
> has brought along a fair bit of knowledge from teaching, which is
>
> going well. She is very full of energy, she doesn't let them drain her
>
> at all…When she is on top of it all, it's less [responsibility] for me.

Toni portrayed a respect for the teacher as she spoke confidently about her current experience. She later added

> you want to feel that [the teacher] is positive about what they are
>
> doing, their job as a teacher, how serious they are taking it. If they
>
> are putting a lot into it, I think as a TA, we [want] to do that as well.

Similar to Susan's experiences, Toni respected the teacher that she felt was putting all of her energy and effort into the students and who respected her enough to take her suggestions.

Debbie also felt respected when teachers or administration listened to teacher assistants. She noted "if you have a suggestion for the students, they will take your suggestion. They all listen. They won't just say, you have to talk to the teacher. It's good, the respect." Debbie also admitted that, "I have worked at other schools and you just get, the feeling. Here you are part of the team, which is good."

Also similar to the experiences shared by Susan and Toni, Debbie discussed the lack of respect shown by some teachers toward teacher assistants. She

remembered "I worked with this teacher once who just made me feel inferior to her…a lot of that is, 'I am the teacher and I've spent so many years in school, what I say goes.'" In addition, Debbie felt a lack of respect shown toward her when she was required to work beyond what she felt was her role in the classroom. She noted "you get the odd teacher who expects you to actually take the kid out and teach them. I'm thinking I don't have the education; I'll help the kid out with what you're doing but not actually teach it." Respect, or the lack thereof, can be shown and earned in many ways and is often elusive to define. However, each of the teacher assistant participants recognized the importance of mutual respect on the success of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship.

Teacher Perceptions. All of the teacher participants mentioned respect and respectful behaviors as important factors in creating a successful teacher and teacher assistant relationship. While each teacher participant brought up different insights to the topic, they reflected their backgrounds, experiences, and values in their discussions.

Victoria, in her role as a classroom teacher, is very aware of the hierarchy that can exist in schools and discussed breaking down those social barriers at length. She noted

> sometimes I know teachers can be a little bit more high and mighty
> just because we went to university, but if we didn't have TAs I think
> our schools will fall apart. People don't realize how much we need
> them and how talented they are.

Victoria revisited this thought when she concluded that

it would be nice if more people would see TAs as a more important

role that they do see them. I don't think TAs should be looked down

upon by some...because they are in the classroom, they're in the war

zone too. They're in there doing what they can even if they don't

have the paper behind their name.

Victoria had a sense of teamwork that included respect for teacher assistants for the

talents and skills they possess, regardless of the level of education the teacher assistant

may have obtained. She advised "be willing to listen to other opinions, to try new

things, because TAs do have good ideas even if they don't have a degree."

Interestingly, Victoria only spoke negatively about a previous experience with a

teacher assistant who had obtained a Bachelor of Education degree and felt that

assistant was not respecting her abilities as a teacher.

Finally, Victoria also addressed what she respected in a teacher assistant.

Victoria valued a certain level of competence in a teacher assistant and reflected on

experiences, both positive and negative, that portrayed her perceptions. Victoria

recognized that, in one negative experience, she felt like a "boss" because the teacher

assistant "was chronically late. She would take extra long coffee breaks and…I was

standing at the door [waiting for her]." On the positive side, Victoria discussed why

she felt that her current work experience was so positive. She noted "[the teacher

assistant] makes me feel that she likes working with me and she wants to keep things

smooth in here. We're both trying." Victoria felt that her teacher assistant was

contributing to the classroom and really wanted to be working with her; these

behaviors led Victoria to respect and appreciate her teacher assistant.

Mutual respect in the teacher and teacher assistant relationship also surfaced in Cathy's responses and reflections. Cathy also stated her recognition that "we all have different gifts and talents" and felt that respect, trust, and teamwork were integrated in the success of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship. When asked what her perception of the biggest factors affecting the teacher and teacher assistant relationship were, she answered "I would like to say trust. I think that there needs to be a relationship there and it doesn't necessarily have to be a personal, real tight-knit relationship but…it has to be grounded on trust." Cathy later qualified her answer by noting

> I know it seems quite a simple answer, as far as saying trust, but I
> think that if trust isn't there and maybe added on to that trust is that
> mutual respect, I think that it becomes a bit of a battle there.

Similar to Susan's perceptions, Cathy understands that trust and respect can have a direct implication on the behaviors of teachers and teacher assistants and the success of their relationships.

The link between competence in one's job and respect earned in that situation was also noted by Cathy. She advised "to be on time, to be accountable, to be conscious and conscientious of your work, those are the qualities that are part of the profession." Cathy also suggested, that showing up on time "goes both ways" and that "as a teacher assistant, you can [also] have a teacher not coming in [on time]." The importance of mutual responsibility and competence in the classroom are evident in Cathy's reflections.

Finally, Cathy talked extensively about her perception of an ideal teacher assistant as one having an "informed heart." She further expanded that "the informed part is certainly having some knowledge, some experience, some kind of best practices." Cathy, possibly as a result of the administrator lens, certainly values a level of competence in a teacher assistant. She later pondered "at what point should school divisions look at how teacher assistants get some sort of post-secondary training," yet also reflected that "we have some members on our team that have some additional training and some don't. It's hard to say…how much is the informed part or the heart part [of being a successful teacher assistant]."

As an in-school administrator, respect and inclusion in the overall school team were important to Nina. Respect for teacher assistants and their roles, skills, and abilities was clearly noted by Nina in the following.

> There has to be a level of equality…and respect for each other's job.
> I know that she has a certain responsibility and I do too. We have to
> be aware of each other…In the respect, she has to realize that I do
> have to plan the lessons and am responsible for…all of that business.
> Yet in the actual running of the classroom, she is as important as I am
> at the rules and [consequences].

Nina respects that her teacher assistant has specific responsibilities and skills to do the job. This attitude is also reflected in Nina's advice to teachers about support staff when she noted

> they do those little things that make your classroom and if you can't
> work with them, then you've created your own issues…Respect them

and appreciate the work that they do and guide them. They [may]

need guidance, but give them that.

Nina recognized that teachers need to consciously take on the responsibility to

respect and appreciate their teacher assistants.

In addition to a teacher's responsibility for maintaining good relations with

support staff, Nina implied that being competent in one's job is necessary to

maintaining respect in the teacher and teacher assistant relationship. She noted that

teacher assistants need

competence. They have to know how a school runs…It's not just a

mom who can come in, they have to have organizational skills. They

have to have discipline skills and management skills, if they are to be

a vital part of the classroom.

Nina reflected her frustration with assistants who have difficulties with the

expectations of the job or competency in completing a specific assignment when she

commented

I've had one that you'd send off to do photocopying and it would be

done wrong or upside down. By the time you realized what was

happening, the entire lesson was gone and you end up going down to

photocopy it yourself.

Finally, Nina suggested that self-respect and respect earned by the teacher

assistant were integrated in the overall school climate. She argued

some of them are just there for the hours and they are just going to

work with that one kid. They don't even see themselves as

important. I've seen TAs that will go off and do other jobs because

they don't see that what they are doing is important. I think that

also reflects an attitude of the teacher and the school.

Nina sees the integration of the self-respect of the teacher assistants and the social

realm of their working environments. If teachers and administrators have a positive

attitude toward working with teacher assistants then those assistants will have a

greater self-respect for the work they are doing.

Teamwork and Hierarchy in the Classroom

  Teacher assistant perceptions. The theme of teamwork emerged from two

different understandings of working together for the sake of the education of children.

Teacher assistant participant responses indicated the need to understand the overall

structure or hierarchy in the school. Teacher assistant participants, while wanting to be

treated as if they were a valued and valuable member of the team, discussed their

perceptions of knowing their place in the school.

  Toni's understanding of teamwork tied in directly with the respect she felt

from the teacher with whom she worked, the opportunity for her input of suggestions

and the requirements of her job. Her overall focus in her job, however, is to "put one

hundred percent into the kids" and not to worry about what the teacher was doing.

Toni, as earlier described, felt stress as a result of the teacher requiring her to take on

extra roles and duties in the classroom.   Toni's concept of teamwork developed

directly from her previous experiences and she noted that in her current job "I

basically just follow what the teacher is doing. I guess I support her one hundred

percent. Whatever she has in place, to do with rewards or the plan or whatever, I

back her up."   She acknowledged that "as a TA I feel that you basically do what that

teacher tells you…It is taking instruction from the teacher. I didn't go to university so I don't know what they know."

Toni's understanding of teamwork, as it is lived in the classroom, included her recognition that shared experiences can influence that sense of teamwork and a positive teacher and teacher assistant relationship. She acknowledged that "we are in here quite a bit…The teacher and I [even] eat lunch with them," and later reflected "we are very close in here. We get along great and we have really good days. I think that is really important." Toni also noted that, when dealing with children who have behavioral issues, sharing the experience with the teacher helps to alleviate the stress of the job. She noted "when we are feeling stressed we have a good one-liner between us. It makes your day."

Debbie echoed Toni's sentiment of shared experiences as she acknowledged that, with her school's clientele "you go wherever you're needed…everyone needs help of some sort," and also remarked that "we need to have a thick skin because [the students'] mouths can start going…you just can't take it personally." When dealing with students who have behavior problems, Debbie recognized that, "it is a bit different here…it's not boring, there is something new everyday," and "we all have to work together."

In the group interview, Debbie alluded to understanding the invisible hierarchy in the work environment by suggesting "I think we all understand how it goes." When probed for more information, Debbie clarified "ultimately the teacher's decision [is] what goes on." Similar to Toni's experience with taking on extra duties, Debbie felt uncomfortable when teachers "expect me to teach that lesson…I am there to help

along with the studies, but I am not there to actually teach them the lesson. I am not qualified to do it." Teamwork for Debbie, then, included a mutually clear understanding of her roles and responsibilities plus the teacher's respect for what she felt was appropriate for her position. She later joked "I always say, I don't get the big time bucks [to do the teacher's job]."

As previously described, Susan talked extensively about the need to be respected as a skilled member of the staff. She wanted to be "accepted as part of the classroom" and understood the team approach to mean "both on the same page, working for the student." She continued to expand this notion when she reflected "I think that if you are working towards a common goal then you both know where you are going and you both know the process you are going through to get there."

Susan clearly understood the social structure of her working environment and commented

> there is a hierarchy in this school. There has to be for it to work.
> And really, as a teacher assistant, we are on the bottom and it's OK
> with me…If you're not open to direction and being really kind of
> stepped on then don't be in this job, and I don't mean that
> negatively.

She accepted that her job required her to take direction and required her to be doing some uncomfortable jobs. Susan also delineated between feeling a sense of teamwork and sharing equal responsibility for the classroom. She commented "ultimately that student is their student. You don't want to make a decision that is going to affect that. It's [the teacher's] responsibility." When Susan summed up her

understanding of the factors influencing the teacher and teacher assistant relationship, she suggested that "being open to take criticism or being able to take direction…that's the most critical. I think really understanding the hierarchy and knowing your classroom teacher."

Teacher perceptions.   Teamwork, as a concept and in its actualization, also emerged in the teacher participant interviews. The teacher participant perceptions reflected their varied backgrounds and as a result, a distinct difference in their understandings of teamwork than teacher assistants.

Nina's perceptions of the teamwork needed to support students with behavioral difficulties also reflected her dual role of teacher and vice-principal. Nina spoke often about the vision of education espoused in the alternative school in which she worked and, as previously noted, Nina felt that all staff members needed to 'buy in' to the team philosophy. She noted "our TAs are so flexible. If we need them more here, we will pull them. They are not assigned to one specific student. They are here for the whole school." This team philosophy continued throughout Nina's interviews and she further noted "so we are always interacting, even if [the TAs] aren't in my class, because we are all involved with all of the students [in the school]."

Nina understood teamwork at the classroom level as well and, similar to the rest of the participants, acknowledged that the shared purpose of educating children could surpass any conflict or issues that arose in the relationship. She noted

we have to work together, we don't necessarily have to hang

together. But if we can work together and be on the same page of

wanting to do the best for the kids, and that is a legitimate concern,

then I can work with them.

Nina understood that, as a professional, she can work beyond the issues that may

arise to work toward the shared purpose of providing the best education for the

children as possible.

Aside from sharing a common purpose in the work environment, Nina also

pointed out the importance of having another adult in the classroom with whom to

share the experience. She reflected "as long as they are a good TA and they are

concerned, it is having two adults in the room trying to make the kids work and be

successful" and she earlier noted that it is important to

be able to catch each other's eye across the classroom. You know if

you are sort of teasing a kid, to be involved in it together…Even

going to them to ask, 'Do you think I got too angry?' or 'Did I read

that right or do you think this student was just manipulating me.'

Nina valued the opportunity of having a colleague in the room to share ideas,

perceptions, and even humor with.

Being perceptive to each other's needs, similar to the other participants'

reflections, was also deemed important by Nina. She acknowledged "[teamwork]

is huge in dealing with the stress. Even saying, 'You know we should go for a

walk because this isn't working'."   Nina later reinforced this sentiment when she

noted "you can also come together in circumstances like that and support each

other." Sharing both the stressful times and the positive times was deemed

important by Nina.

Nina reflected upon a very positive relationship she experienced in a previous job, as a consequence of her teacher assistant's perceptiveness. She remembered

> I had [a TA] at Middleton School that could second guess me…She was a part of the class and the running of it. The kids knew that they could go to her or me in Math and it was equal. I loved that. To me that's important, that she is an adult and professional in the classroom.

The sharing of the classroom experience, the lack of an observable hierarchy, and the sharing of responsibilities portrayed Nina's value of the importance of teamwork.

Finally, Nina rejected the concept of hierarchy as a positive factor in the teacher and teacher assistant relationship. Nina commented that "understanding the hierarchy in the school has a bit of a negative connotation for me because I have worked at schools that are definitely top down administration and the TAs are at the bottom." Nina obviously valued the teamwork approach and viewed communication and respect as tied directly into that approach. Shared commitment and effort levels plus shared purpose in doing one's job was clearly communicated by Nina. She reflected her desire to have an equal partner in the room when she noted "my frustration with that is they won't work past their time or start before their time." Nina later continued her train of thought

> because part of being in a school is that there are a million jobs that aren't written down…On the other hand, do [the TAs] just sit there

because the child they are assigned to is busy [elsewhere], so they

sit there and do nothing or go for coffee.

Nina struggled to accommodate both concepts and concluded "this is another adult who is there to help everybody and make it a learning community. I don't think it is a hierarchy as much, but it should be a team kind of idea." While Susan, a teacher assistant participant, expressed an understanding of her place in the school hierarchy as a necessity to the functioning of the school, Nina's contrasting philosophy of teamwork reflected her desire that members in the teacher and teacher assistant relationship fully share the job of educating students.

Cathy's understanding of teamwork reflected both her holistic philosophy and her experiences as a vice-principal. While Cathy also mentioned teamwork through out her interviews, she discussed teamwork as a separate concept or philosophy that permeated all functions of the school. Cathy discussed this perception when she reflected "we look at a team approach where a team of TAs and myself, with the classroom teacher, of course, are supporting the student. Not just one TA assigned to one student." She further clarified the actualization of this philosophy when she noted

I'll just use one student as an example. There are, through the

course of the day, four teacher assistants who will work with him.

What we do is meet to talk about his programming needs and what

our goals are…When we look at a team of individuals working as a

team for a student, we can come together. There are more of us

involved [and we] can get more of our brains together, working on

how we support that student.

In a later interview, Cathy re-iterated her sentiment "first of all, the fact that one individual does not have to work all day with that student. Second of all, when we do some program planning, we do have a team around for support." Both quotations from Cathy reflected her philosophy toward the administration of duties, the needs of the students and the shared responsibility of the staff members involved. Working both as a learning assistance teacher and as a vice-principal gave Cathy a unique perspective and she addressed how, organizationally, teamwork can affect the teacher and teacher assistant relationship.

Cathy also spoke about shared experiences and shared responsibilities that assist the teacher and teacher assistant relationship. She noted

I do think that, when you have the genuine team established, that

you start picking up for each other…If you have a genuine working

team, then you know you have other people [around] or a shoulder

to cry on or somebody to pick you up.

Sharing the stress and the overall experience of the working environment was clearly observed by Cathy; her vision of teamwork clearly includes daily interpersonal support.

When later discussing the roles of teachers and teacher assistants, Cathy touched on the dynamics of the overall school team and the hierarchical issues that are sometimes faced. She acknowledged that teamwork "is something you don't just say that you have and you stop working on it," and later added

I think the dynamics are important and that's my experience. I

worked on a team where there were thirteen teacher assistants and

the dynamics were quite powerful. Sometimes it worked in a very

positive way and sometimes it worked in a very negative way.

While personality issues will be addressed in another section, it is important to note

Cathy's perception that there are social issues to deal with in the relationship

between teachers and teacher assistants. Cathy advised

you need to feel like you are part of the team and, if you don't [feel

that], you need to take some steps to establish that. Team spirit

doesn't necessarily have to come from the administration or from

the learning assistance teacher, that team spirit can be initiated by

you. Working as a team, you are an important part of the whole

support team.

Cathy sees the personal responsibility of each member on the educational team,

whether teacher or teacher assistant, to fully contribute in order to feel part of the

team.

In the focus group interview, Cathy also discussed the teamwork and school

hierarchy dichotomy that may be faced by teacher assistants. She noted

I think that the difficulty is that we want to have a team [approach]

and we want to make sure that every staff feels that they are an

important and integral part of the team. I guess recognizing that we

are all in this together, but it becomes dicey when you start saying

this isn't your job and your salary doesn't [accommodate this].

While Cathy's philosophy is definitely team oriented, she acknowledged the difficulty experienced in the clarification of roles and expectations of teacher assistants and the nature of their employment.

Of the teacher participants, Victoria spoke the most about teamwork and how that was actualized in her classroom. In working with students who have behavioral difficulties, Victoria needed to feel that she and her teacher assistant were on the same team and supporting each other. She declared "we're all here together to work for the same outcome." This sense of shared purpose emerged throughout her interviews as she reflected on her previous experiences.

I've been in this division for a year now, and this classroom is totally different. The TA is in here to not just assist one student in particular, but with all of them. She has as much authority to discipline or to give consequences as I do. It is almost like team teaching, but she is the TA. We are working together rather than me giving her something to do. I decide what we need to do then we decide how we are going to do it together.

Victoria pointed out that her role is changed in the context of the classroom in which she currently works; she takes responsibility for programming for the students, but expects and needs the teacher assistant to take a leadership role in the classroom.

Victoria further explained the role her teacher assistant takes in running the classroom and acknowledged the importance of having a team approach. Victoria noted on more than one occasion "we are always in here together," and "I need her in this classroom." The sense of shared purpose and shared experience clearly emerged

in her following insights. "It is always a team thing. It kind of takes the pressure off

of me. It's a high stress classroom…and [having her there] really takes the pressure

off." She later noted

> if you work well with your TA, then your classroom can be good
>
> because you can converse about things, have stress together…if you
>
> don't have someone you can work with and you are disagreeing
>
> with, it can make your life bad.

For Victoria, sharing the stressful experience in the classroom with another adult

helps her deal with the stress. Yet Victoria also acknowledged that while a

personality issue with the other adult in the room can cause a negative work

environment, the adults need to remember their shared purpose and the importance

of the job that they do in education.

> Having a shared experience with another adult in the room continued to

emerge in Victoria's interviews and she further explained her perception.

> Not that I don't like kids, because that's why I obviously went into
>
> education, but another adult in the room definitely…makes things
>
> more interesting. It makes [my job] easier, it is nice to talk to adults
>
> once in a while.

Victoria highly valued having another adult with whom to discuss programming or

consequences, plus sharing the responsibility of working with difficult students.

This sense of shared experiences and shared purpose echoes Cathy's perceptions; it

is positive to give and receive support from a job partner who is sharing the same

stressful experiences.

Victoria spoke about the success of teamwork in her classroom and noted "even if I try something that doesn't work and she wants to try something else, she says why don't we try this, we use both ideas." Accepting input from her teacher assistant and sharing the problem solving process was indicative of the teamwork shared in her classroom. Victoria also described the actualized teamwork in the classroom as

> giving each other little breaks. Because if it is a really stressful day
> in here…one of us might say 'I need to fill my water bottle.' It's
> almost just a little sign to say 'I've got to get out of here, just for a
> little bit.'

Again, the stress of the working environment was shared by the teacher and the teacher assistant in the classroom. Shared purpose and shared experiences clearly showed through in Victoria's interviews as the key to her successful relationship with her teacher assistant.

Personal Attributes

Personal attributes also emerged from both the teacher participants' data and the teacher assistants' data. This common theme was predictably addressed in different ways among the participants, but encompasses the overall perception that individuals and their attributes can have an influence on the nature of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship. More specifically, participants discussed flexibility, adaptability, perceptiveness, life-long learning, effort, motivation, positive attitude and a sense of humor as personal attributes that affect the working

relationship. Three topics addressing these ideas in the following sections are: Life Long Learning, Effort, and Positive Attitude.

Life Long Learning

Teacher assistant perceptions. The importance of being a life-long learner and having a flexible and adaptable personality, learning from experience, were identified by teacher assistant participants as important factors in their success in the classroom and in their success in their working relationships. Susan noted that, in order to be successful in a teacher assistant job, one should "be able to go with the flow, be flexible and adaptive." She later reiterated this conviction in her observation "the biggest thing is being able to adapt and be flexible. Your day can change instantly." Susan recognized that her job constantly changes and a successful teacher assistant needs to be flexible and adapt to the teacher, the student, and a variety of situations. Toni echoed Susan's perception in her interviews and noted "as a TA you are always learning something new. Each day is a new experience." As noted previously, Debbie recognized the fluctuating context of schooling; she also commented "it's not boring, there is something new everyday."   However, unlike the other teacher assistant participants, Debbie made a link between the flexibility needed to deal with situations and her need to be a learner. She observed "you learn something new every day. Even me, I'm still here and I'm still learning." Debbie concluded with her perception that people need to be "open-minded and friendly" to ensure a positive working relationship between teachers and teacher assistants.

Teacher perceptions. The teachers again presented a range of information and perspectives on the influence of being a life-long learner on the success of the

teacher and teacher assistant relationship. Similar to the experiences shared by the teacher assistants, Victoria noted the flexibility needed to solve daily problems. Victoria valued collaboration with her teacher assistant and discussed practical examples of how she and her teacher assistant worked together. She noted "we talk about what happened during the day and what we can do to fix things." Sharing the experience and including her teacher assistant in programming compelled both Victoria and her teacher assistant to take on the role of learner.

Cathy reflected extensively on teacher assistants and the qualities assistants need to be successful in the educational environment. She advised "be prepared to be flexible, be prepared to continue to be a learner because when you think you know everything, you are going to get a kick in the pants and figure out that you don't know everything." Cathy understood that while "it's certainly good to have that formal training [as a teacher assistant], know that you will be constantly learning." She later clarified her reasoning with her comment "again, somebody doesn't have to have a million years of experience to be a good TA. [However, they should be] wanting to be informed, continuing to learn and then really building on what they've learned." Cathy valued working with teacher assistants who demonstrated their willingness and ability to learn about and from situations.

Nina also valued her teacher assistant's ability to learn from experience and, when questioned about characteristics of an ideal teacher assistant, Nina emphatically responded "flexible…adaptable, perceptive." Nina summed up her opinions on a teacher assistant's ability to learn and adapt in different classrooms. She commented

I feel though, and a hard part of the job is, they have to be able to

read the teacher they are with. There has to be adaptability. [For

example], I like it when they get involved, [but] some teachers don't

want them wandering around the room as it is a distraction.

[Teacher assistants] need the ability to read what their role is in the

classroom.

Nina directly links the ability of a teacher assistant to be perceptive, flexible and

adaptable to the success of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship in the

classroom.

Effort

Teacher assistant perceptions. Unlike the teacher participants, the three

teacher assistant participants did not consistently talk about the effort required to

do their job or the amount of effort they would prefer to see from their job partners

in the classroom. However, Susan did speak about the perception of shared

commitment to the children in the classroom. Susan described the ideal teacher to

work with as one who is willing to take on all aspects of working with children

who have disabilities. Susan suggested "I also think [the ideal teacher] is able to

deal with not being prissy, being able to deal with the snot and things thrown in

your face, because that's reality."

Toni echoed Susan's perception that teacher assistants need to see teachers

put their full effort into all aspects of their job. Toni noted

You want to feel that they are positive about what they are doing,

their job as a teacher, how serious they are taking it. If they are

putting a lot into it, I think as a TA, we do that as well.

Toni clearly linked the teacher's personal attributes and behaviors to her own attitude and behavior in the classroom.

Debbie addressed the concept of teacher effort as linked to the success of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship in passing when she suggested that "if the teacher doesn't pull her share or do her share, it could add to the stress." Debbie also reflected on the perceived effort of teachers if they gave away their teaching responsibility to the teacher assistant. She reflected that she respected "someone who doesn't throw a kid at you and expect you to teach them a lesson…You teach the lesson and I'll help him with it." Debbie perceived that some teachers were not putting in an appropriate effort in teaching and were passing their responsibilities on to the teacher assistants.

Teacher perceptions. While few of the teacher assistants addressed the level of effort expended by their job partners as a factor in the success of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship, all of the teacher participants addressed the concept. Again, while their perceptions clearly reflected their previous experiences and the roles they played in the school, a common thread of effort required by a teacher assistant emerged from their responses.

Nina, in her experience as a teacher and a vice-principal, extensively addressed the concept of teacher assistant effort and the success of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship. Nina repeatedly defined this effort as initiative. She advised teacher assistants

> to ask the teacher what he or she needs done, but to also take your
>
> own initiative. Take a look at how the classroom runs. Don't be

afraid to start correcting the spelling books if they're sitting there.

Use your time well.

Nina valued the initiative that teacher assistants take in the classroom and expected them to pick up duties that contribute to the running of the classroom. She later described an ideal teacher assistant to work with as "independent, self-starter, motivated. I could say that about any profession to be successful at it."

Nina's value of work ethic emerged throughout her interviews. She described how this value impacted her relationship with a teacher assistant. She noted that "even if I don't agree with somebody or we don't have the same personality, if they are a hard worker and they are trying their best, I will respect them." Nina clearly linked her personal feelings of respect for her job partner with the effort she perceived was being put forth. Nina further clarified her opinion with "again, it goes back to…taking initiative and to me that goes back to professionalism. There is no point in time when you should be sitting in a school saying I have nothing to do." Making an effort, taking initiative, and working hard are personal attributes that Nina feels are important in the teacher and teacher assistant relationship; these attributes are reflective of Nina's overall philosophy of administration and the teamwork needed by all staff members in a school.

Victoria, in discussing the teacher assistant characteristics that she felt affected her relationship with a teacher assistant, noted the importance of having a teacher assistant work collaboratively with her. She commented that a teacher assistant needs to "get in there, be ready and willing to get your hands dirty, because working in a school is not easy." This similar sentiment was expressed by

both Susan and Toni; each team member must show effort in contributing fully to the classroom.

With regard to the teacher and teacher assistant relationship in particular, Victoria noted "be willing to work hard because a teacher, TA relationship takes a lot of work. You might be running around and doing extras, but that is part of the job." Victoria's advice to teacher assistants again points to the discrepancy of roles and expectations between teachers and teacher assistants. Victoria wanted teacher assistants to show a good effort in the classroom, be diligent in the teacher and teacher assistant relationship, and be willing to work beyond the job description to assist in doing the extras. Victoria's perceptions came directly from her experiences that she related later in the interview. She reflected that

> [one year] I had two full-time TAs for behavior management and
> one just did not want to get her hands dirty and help out. She
> wanted to work by the clock; I do realize that they are unionized
> and they do have to work by the clock, but she didn't want to help
> with anything…The other TA even noticed that she wasn't doing
> what she was supposed to be.

This situation made Victoria feel uncomfortable and she noted "I really felt like her boss." Similar to Nina's philosophy described earlier, Victoria valued having a colleague who shared her motivation and effort in working with the children and felt uncomfortable when she was required to take on a hierarchical role in the classroom to address this personal attribute. Victoria's perceptions point to the

integrated nature of the factors influencing the teacher and teacher assistant relationship.

Cathy also noted the importance of attitude and effort in the success of the teacher assistant and the relationship in the classroom. Cathy provided insight when she noted

> sometimes, when you have different commitment levels, when
> somebody is very committed to reading a student's needs and
> maybe the other individual isn't, I think that often gets in the way of
> relating to that child.

She suggested that conflict between the teacher and the teacher assistant can arise when each individual has a different level of commitment to their job and the effort they expend. She also directly linked this to their relationships with students.

When discussing characteristics of an ideal teacher assistant, Cathy reflected "I think about when I see teacher assistants and how they have felt about their positions, it really boils down to their attitude and their willingness to give it all they've got." She later supported her opinion with the following example.

> The ideal TA needs to realize that it goes beyond the job and is a
> calling. You know, even though your job ends at three thirty, if a
> student is throwing up in the hallway, you don't walk by and head
> out the door.

Similar to Victoria, Cathy suggested that teacher assistants should not be restricted by either the hours they work or the description of their roles when committing to a

vocation in education. Again, the personal attribute of effort is linked closely to issues of roles, duties and expectations.

Finally, Cathy presented her interpretation of effort as it ties into the nature of teacher assistant employment. She commented

it is so much of an individual thing…There are individuals that

we've had the opportunity to work with that work around what they

are being paid for, wanting days in lieu. We are certainly conscious

in recognizing that theirs is an hourly position and their wage is

minimal yet it is a demanding job.

Cathy focused on the nature of individual perception and interpretation of the work environment. She understood that how each person interprets the description of his or her job is individual, as is his or her actualization of the job description in daily life.

Positive Attitude

Teacher assistant perceptions. Throughout the teacher and teacher assistant interviews, each of the participants mentioned having a positive attitude as an important factor in the teacher and teacher assistant relationship. All of the teacher assistant participants mentioned their love of their jobs and the fun they have working with children. Teacher assistants noted the importance of having a positive attitude and working with a teacher who has a positive attitude or even a sense of humor. Susan, in her discussion of personal attributes that affect the success of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship, noted "I think, first off, you have to be warm, caring, [and have] empathy…Have a good sense of humor. If you can't laugh if you get crap splattered all over your shoes, I don't know what

you would do." Susan needs to know that her job partner has a positive attitude in these shared experiences.

Toni noted the importance of personality issues when she explained "because the kids can stress you out, you don't want to have someone you work with stress you out." She commented further "I think there have been TAs who have been in a classroom with a teacher that they just don't get along with." Toni acknowledged that she thought her current working relationship with the teacher in the classroom worked well because "she has a sense of humor and so do I. It's just the silly things we say…even some of the things the kids may do." Toni enjoys sharing the experiences of the classroom with her job partner and feels camaraderie when they can share a laugh together.

Debbie's perception of the influence of a positive attitude is infused in her experiences working with students who have severe behavioral difficulties. She understood her personal responsibility in maintaining a positive attitude regardless of the circumstances. Debbie repeatedly discussed the importance of not taking things personally; she commented "you just can't take it personally, you just have to let it go in one ear and out the other." When reflecting on her personal attributes, Debbie later suggested "I just get along with everybody…I'm an easy going person, I guess." Later Debbie commented about the importance of personal attributes and the teacher and teacher assistant relationship, "I think there are a few with personality conflicts and you just have to let them go, for your sake as much as anyone else's." Similar to the other teacher assistant participants, Debbie

concluded "I love working here. It's not boring, there is something new everyday and it's exciting."

Teacher perceptions. Similar to the teacher assistant participants, each of the teacher participants commented on the importance of having a positive attitude, sharing a sense of humor or making the work experience fun. Teacher participants often talked about positive attitude and effort in a combined manner, particularly in the focus group interview.

Cathy reflected her administration background and her overall philosophy of education in her responses to questions about personal attributes. Cathy truly felt that a positive attitude was essential to success in the classroom and in the teacher and teacher assistant relationship. She pondered "there is often not a whole lot of instant rewards coming your way. Sometimes those special perks are what you're going to have to give yourself…Again, that whole attitude is so important, not just for teachers but for teacher assistants."

Cathy also reflected on her integrated understanding of teamwork and the responsibility of all team members to be positive in their work. In the focus group interview, Cathy argued that the most important factor in the teacher and teacher assistant relationship was

> just starting with the positive attitude. I think that it certainly has to
> be mutual but if one of the members of the team has a negative
> attitude, it's a dynamics thing, it can pull everybody else down. If
> you have a positive attitude, you feed off of that from each other
> and you will be far more effective, supportive and powerful.

Cathy felt that having a positive attitude was infused throughout the success of the individual, the team and the student. She concluded that "if one person is really negative, and it doesn't matter who the team player is, it can really set the tone. With the student, of course, that is essential."

Nina also linked positive attitude and a positive teacher and teacher assistant relationship. When asked what characteristics an ideal teacher assistant would possess, Nina responded "have a sense of humor."   Similar to many of the other participants in the study, Nina saw humor as a shared method of dealing with stress in the workplace. She provided the following example

> a huge thing is laughter. We need to be able to laugh with each other or even be able to catch each other's eye across the classroom. If you are teasing a kid, to be involved in it together. [Saying]…so and so is upset because work is being given out, 'Darn those pesky teachers,' I'll always say. Then [my teacher assistant] will laugh with me and say, 'Yes Nina, I don't know what you are thinking, giving him school work in school.'

Nina appreciated the sharing of humorous experiences in the work environment and recognized the need to laugh when dealing with stressful experiences. She further summed up her feelings

> it is fun to have another adult in there to [bounce] things off of or to share the look across the room or to laugh at the thing the kids say that they don't think are funny…If you've got a good TA, you can work together through the stress.

Nina's experiences and direct communication style are reflected in her manner of dealing with instances of negative attitudes on the school team. She commented

> I tell [teacher assistants], 'Tell me [what you want]. Don't go home and complain that you are bored or you are overworked, because that is not part of your job. You tell me and we will find the middle road.

Nina sees the connection between the personal attributes and a positive attitude intertwined with the interpersonal skills of communication and respect.

Victoria portrayed her philosophy of teamwork and ideal of shared experience when she discussed the importance of having a positive attitude when working with children who have behavioral difficulties. She noted "it's always good to like going to work. Teaching is stressful as it is, you don't have to make it more stressful." Victoria later clarified "try to have a positive outlook. Come to school with a smile…I'm assuming that you want to be here, have fun." When asked to describe an ideal teacher assistant with whom to work, Victoria suggested "somebody that just enjoys their job and comes to school happy. You don't want to work with a grouch or someone who brings their home problems to work." Victoria understood the importance of a positive attitude on the discussions and interactions that happen between a teacher and teacher assistant on a daily basis.

Victoria also discussed her perception that humor in the classroom can alleviate stress and can be shared between the two adults in the room. "You have to laugh about it, you have to. You'd go crazy if you didn't, sometimes you just

have to laugh," she noted. Victoria continued this train of thought and, when asked

how she and her teacher assistant support each other in the classroom, she

expanded

> [you need to] laugh a lot and make jokes. Not about the students,
>
> but to laugh about the day…[You need to] have a sense of humor,
>
> have fun. We try to make it as fun as possible. If the kids aren't
>
> having fun, we're not having fun. So we try to plan things that are
>
> enjoyable for all of us.

Victoria understood that a positive attitude and sense of fun can have benefits not

only on her relationship with her teacher assistant, but is also directly linked to the

students and their learning.

Data Analysis Summary

Multiple interviews with each of the participants produced both predictable

and surprising results, notwithstanding the diverse level of experience, training,

duties and school context encountered with each participant. Similar to literature

published on this topic, this study found that communication, mutual respect, and

teamwork were important to the participants. However, data from this study also

points to the influence of administration on the teacher and teacher assistant

relationship as well as the personal attributes displayed by all stakeholders in the

relationship. My experience with the process of data analysis also pointed to the

integration of factors that influence the teacher and teacher assistant relationship.

Clarity of roles, expectations, and responsibilities is tied inextricably to

interpersonal skills such as communication. In addition, personal attributes are

integrated in interpersonal skills and interactions. As I coded data, sorted, re-coded, and finally analyzed for themes, a holistic interpretation of the teacher and teacher assistant perceptions of factors that influence their relationship emerged. A description of the holistic interpretation follows in Chapter Five with a focus on professionalism; the integration of competence, collegiality and clarity of expectations exhibited by individuals in the teacher and teacher assistant relationship.

CHAPTER FIVE: IMPLICATIONS OF THE DATA

Toward a Professional Teacher and Teacher Assistant Relationship

Introduction

As previously noted, I began this research due to personal, practical

experiences and a need to better understand the teacher and teacher assistant

relationship. Through the process of thematic analysis, I identified major themes

that emerged from the participants' perceptions of the factors effecting their

relationship. The role of administration emerged as a main influence on the

teacher and teacher assistant relationships and is consistent with literature

suggesting that principals initiate, model and support collaboration in their

schools (Daniels & McBride, 2001). The Alberta Teachers Association (2003)

further elaborate that, as the educational leader, the principal has a major

responsibility for making the relationship work. As two of the teacher assistant

participants and each of the teacher participants noted, the influence of the

administration goes beyond the administrative duties to the "role model" they

provide for all of the staff. Participants especially noted the importance of the

administrators' attitudes and willingness to include staff members in the life of

the school.

The interpersonal skills of the members in the relationship also emerged and

echoes findings of Riggs and Mueller (2001). Similar to many of the

participants' perceptions, Riggs and Mueller found that interpersonal

relationships between teachers and teacher assistants were, at times, characterized by a lack of "mutual respect" and that communication was often one way with teacher assistants "not asked for their opinions on student issues" (p. 56). The sharing of pertinent information and the willingness to listen to input and ideas also emerged in this study as participants reflected on both their positive and negative work experiences.

Finally, the personal attributes, such as competencies and attitude, of the teachers and teacher assistants in the relationship emerged as a recurrent theme in both the teachers' and teacher assistants' responses. Teacher participants such as Cathy and Nina, for example, noted the importance of personal attributes such as a positive attitude and the effort put forth by their job partners as factors in their relationship. As both Riggs and Mueller (2001) and the participants in this study reported, however, personality issues and differences in style did occur. As Debbie noted "with personality conflicts, you just have to let them go…for your own sake as much as anyone else's."

It should be noted that these data are limited to the perceptions of the three teacher participants and the three teacher assistant participants. These data do not point to generalizations of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship, but reflect the researcher's interpretation of the participants' perceptions. Keeping this in mind, within the responses and reflections of the teachers and teacher assistants there ran an overall theme. The primary factor that emerged influencing the nature of teacher and teacher assistant relationships was the overall professionalism of each of the team members.

Throughout the process of interviewing, transcribing, and analyzing data, I reflected on what the participants understood to be ideal characteristics, behaviors and attitudes of their job partners. In fact, when a teacher was describing her ideal teacher assistant to be punctual, appropriately dressed and motivated in the classroom, I asked her if she was really talking about professionalism. This thought continued to develop as I looked deeper into the data provided to me by the participants and emerged as the core principle in a positive and effective teacher and teacher assistant relationship.

In this chapter, as a result of both the participants' perceptions and the knowledge gained from the literature, I will present a model for viewing the factors influencing the teacher and teacher assistant relationship and their integration in an overall professionalism.

Professionalism

Definition

The term professionalism implies a standard of professional attitude, skill, and motivation needed by a person in an occupation. Professionalism is defined as "the conduct, aims, or qualities that characterize a professional person: a moral code is the basis for professionalism." (Merriam-Webster, 2002). Furthermore, Sockett (1996) argues that "at the heart of teaching are moral or ethical relationships" (p. 23). As noted by the participants in this study, it is highly desirable that administrators, teachers and teacher assistants (or paraprofessionals) all exhibit professionalism in their interactions. A model of professionalism is expanded in the remainder of this section.

A Model of Professionalism

When individuals in the teacher and teacher assistant relationship work daily to, as Nina observed, address the million jobs not written down, clarity of roles can rarely be achieved. Overall professionalism becomes an avenue toward a positive and effective relationship between teachers and teacher assistants. While much of the literature on teacher and teacher assistant relationships is centered on the clarification of roles between teachers and teacher assistants (Giangreco et al., 2001), professionalism is a holistic concept and emerged from the participants' perceptions as a combination of a professional attitude, ability, and character. As a result of the reflections and perceptions gathered from the participants in this study, three factors of professionalism emerged: competence, collegiality and clarity of roles. These three concepts can be interpreted as pieces in a personal professionalism and in a professional relationship.

Figure 1 exhibits the holistic model of professionalism and the integration of concepts interpreted from the perceptions of both teacher participants and teacher assistant participants. Emergent themes from the data are represented throughout the model and the three central domains. Personal attributes, such as the level of qualifications suggested by Cathy, the use of personal talents and gifts suggested by Susan, or the life-long learner attributes suggested by Debbie are all reflected in the competence domain and infused in the clarity of roles domain. The emergent theme of the role of administration is infused in both the collegiality and clarity of roles domains. Finally, the theme of professional interaction is addressed in the collegiality and clarity of roles domains.

The model speaks to personal responsibilities and attributes exhibited within the

context of an educational environment and driven by the commitment to students and

their needs above all else.
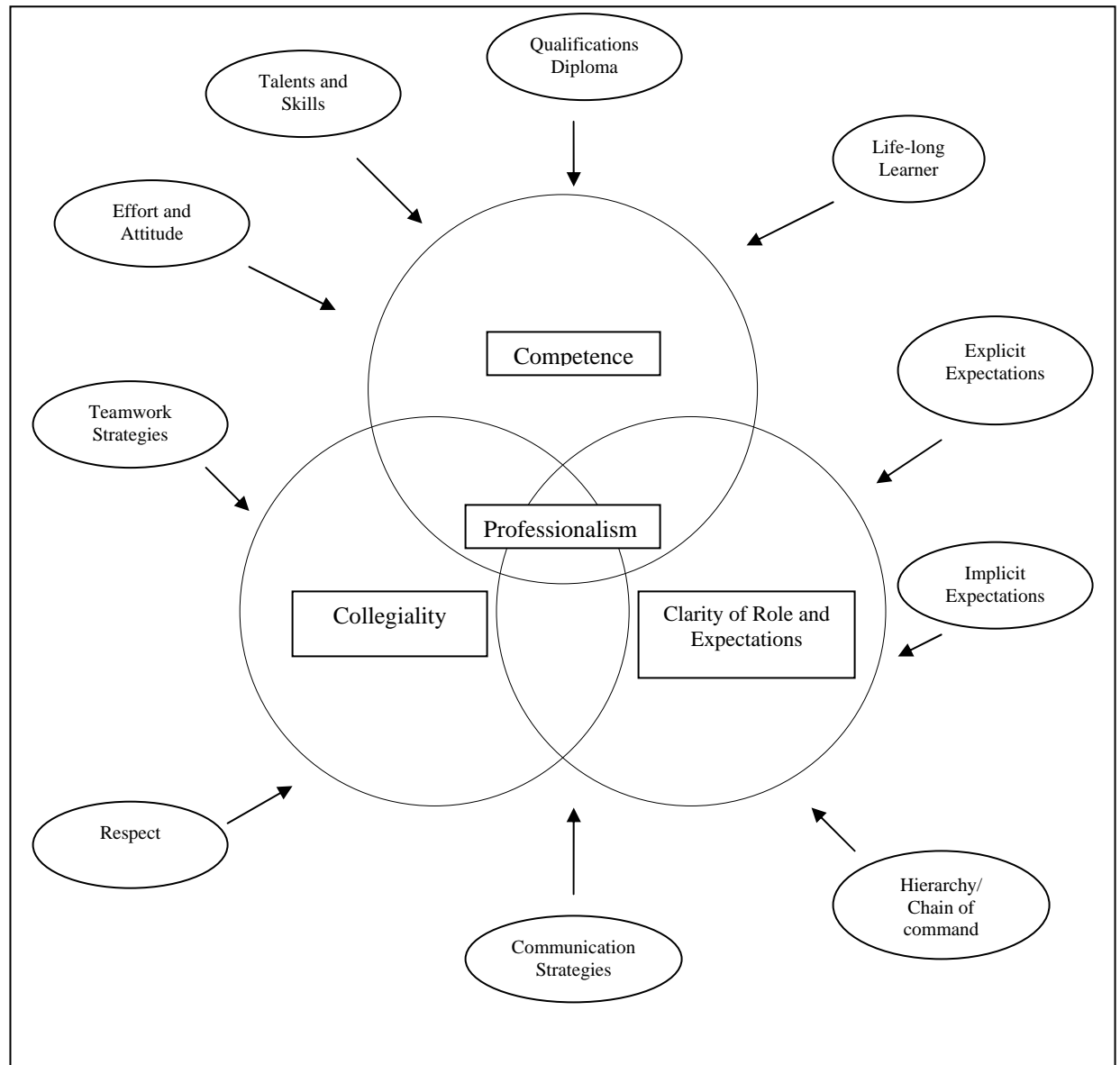

Figure 1 Professionalism: A Model of Competence, Collegiality, Clarity of Roles

Competence. Competence was identified in this study as an important

influence on the teacher and teacher assistant relationship as exhibited by both

parties in the relationship. Analysis of both the teacher and teacher assistant

perspectives indicated that each member in the relationship should be able to trust

that the other member is willing and able to share an appropriate level of skill and

talent in educating students with special needs. While certain contextual issues must

be assumed, such as clear school division standards for hiring and administrator

competence (Daniels & McBride, 2001), competency is necessarily required by each

member of the team for the success of the relationship and the effect on student

learning.

The acquisition of specific training, skills and qualifications is desirable for

specialized work with students having exceptional needs (French 1998; Riggs &

Mueller, 2001). This certainly has legal and ethical implications when responsibility

for instructional programming is at stake (Allen, 2002; French 1998, 1999a, 1999b).

As noted earlier, much of the literature surrounding the employment of teacher

assistants has been aimed at the practical training and professional development of

teacher assistants. In fact, teacher participants in our study also indicated valuing

teacher assistants who were competent, motivated, and positive in their jobs.

Teacher assistants in this study also pointed out a need for teachers to be

competent in their jobs. They suggested that teachers should be competent in their

ability to create appropriate programs for the students they serve, not pass that

responsibility on to the teacher assistant. Teacher assistants also noted the

competence in communication needed by the teacher, as suggested in the literature

(Morgan, Ashbaker, & Young, 2001; Wallace, Shin, & Bartholomay, 2001). Similar

to themes in the current literature, the teacher assistant participants in this study also

argued that teachers need to be competent in their delegation of appropriate duties for their assistants (Daniels & McBride, 2001; French, 2000; Wallace et al., 2001).

The possession of diplomas or specialized training can certainly be of benefit to the support that a teacher assistant provides in an inclusive classroom (Downing et al. 2000), but was not perceived as essential by participants in this study. In fact, individual talents and skills plus life-long learner attributes may be utilized by a teacher assistant to successfully do his or her job (French 1999a; Harris, 2002; Morgan, Ashbaker & Young, 2001; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). Flexibility, adaptability, and ability to perceive and learn from experience resonated throughout this study from both the teachers' responses and the teacher assistants' responses. Competence for teacher assistants, therefore, may not be restricted to the possession of a diploma but by personal talents, skills and attributes. As Cathy, a teacher participant, noted "we have some members on our team that have additional training and some that don't…it's hard to say how much is the [being] informed part or the [having a good] heart part."

Collegiality. Collegiality emerged from the factors of communication and teamwork strategies perceived by participants as being important factors in the teacher and teacher assistant relationship. Within the context of a school where collegiality and teamwork is valued by the administration, both teachers and teacher assistants take on the responsibility for maintaining positive interaction. As earlier described by participants in the study, both members in the relationship should ideally be able to put the child's needs above all else and work to move past feelings of defensiveness.

Communication strategies and teamwork behaviors are an important part of collegiality and the overall professionalism of both teachers and teacher assistants. While specific times for communication and connection between members is often the responsibility of the teacher (Allen, 2002; French 2000; Morgan, Ashbaker & Young, 2001), teacher participants in this study also encourage teacher assistants to take initiative in communicating with teachers. Both Cathy and Nina expressed their desire to have any problems or difficulties dealt with immediately and suggested that teacher assistants need to come forward to teachers with issues before they escalate.

Teachers, however, should also take responsibility for addressing any interpersonal difficulties they are experiencing with their teacher assistants. Teacher assistant participants, such as Susan, described a link between the respect shown to teacher assistants as paraprofessionals and the willingness to share information about students and their needs with the paraprofessional. From communicating relevant information about students and their programming (Wallace et al., 2001) to resolving issues in the classroom, participants suggested that collegiality is necessary in their professional interactions.

In addition to the possession of open lines of communication and use of teamwork strategies, mutual respect is also exhibited by teachers and teacher assistants who have a positive and effective relationship. This concept is supported by the participants' perceptions and the literature on teacher and teacher assistant relationships. Respect should be exhibited not only by acts of acknowledgement (Giangreco et al., 2001), but by a mutual recognition of each member's skills and talents. Teacher assistant participants also strongly recommended that teachers have

a clear understanding of their role in the classroom and, consequently, not require the assistant to take on the role of the teacher. Toni, in particular, felt that she was not being respected in her role as an assistant when a teacher expected her to teach an entire lesson to a student having difficulties. The concept of collegiality, therefore, was informed by perceptions of mutual respect, teamwork, and communication between members in the relationship.

Clarity of role. As noted repeatedly throughout this research, the clarity of individuals' roles in the classroom and the process of clarification of roles have been widely studied in the current literature (Giangreco et al., 2001). While the clarity of roles includes the knowledge of expectations in specific classrooms, as noted by both Susan and Debbie in their reflections of their previous experiences, other factors such as hierarchy and implicit expectations emerged from the participants' data.

As noted in the literature review section of this study, the negotiation of authority in the classroom may be seen in struggles over which adult knows the child the best and the instructional roles that are played by the members in the relationship. Similar to observations in the current literature, teacher assistant participants in this study recognized that this struggle (ie: the clarity of the roles each member possesses and their understanding of the hierarchy in the school) has a profound effect on the nature of their relationship with teachers.

Acknowledging that there is a chain of command and a hierarchy in schools was not seen as a 'negative thing' by teacher assistants; it instead provided them with a predictable understanding of how to function in the school. Interestingly, it was the teacher participants who perceived the hierarchy in the school as a negative

influence on their relationship. This perception is consistent with the findings in current literature that teachers are uncomfortable with the supervisory role (Allen, 2002; French, 1999b; Harris, 2002; Riggs & Mueller, 2001) and, instead, value having a colleague or peer relationship in the classroom (French, 1998).

Understanding the clarity of roles in a classroom, however, went beyond understanding the chain of command and hierarchy in a classroom or a school. The data analysis process brought about an understanding of the distinction between explicit and implicit expectations in a classroom. Explicit expectations in the form of written job descriptions at the school division level can guide the clarity of each person's role. As noted by one of the teacher participants, however, the constant change in the context of working in a school precludes a complete delineation of roles. In light of the participants' observations about clarity of roles, I believe that the understanding of both the explicit and implicit expectations in the classroom is at the heart of the continued confusion over roles and responsibilities.

Helpful to the success of the relationship, however, is the communication of expectations by the teacher and the negotiation of responsibilities based on an individual's skills and talents. As teachers communicate expectations to the teacher assistant and move their implicit expectations, as seen in Nina's desire to work with a teacher assistant who would take initiative to correct the spelling books, to explicit expectations a more positive and effective relationship may result. Victoria, as well, exhibited her implicit expectations in her argument that an ideal teacher assistant be "on time," "dress appropriately," and even "talk appropriately." This movement of implicit assumptions to explicit expectations may require teachers to be reflective

practitioners and to consciously vocalize what their personal understanding of what a teacher assistant's role is in the classroom.

The data analysis indicated that the clarity of the teacher assistants' role is assisted by the ability of a teacher assistant to perceive implicit expectations and use communication skills to reinforce these perceptions. As noted in the teacher assistant participants' reflections, each context is different and each teacher is different. Debbie noted the importance of this perceptiveness and her attitude of life-long learning when she described it as "Being able to pick up on it" and that "after you work with them for a while, you get to know what they're going to expect from you." The contextual nature of the relationship is further observed in Debbie's comment, "Each teacher is different too" and "just learn as you go." The teacher assistant's ability to be perceptive to unspoken, implicit expectations emerges as an important factor in the teacher and teacher assistant relationship and has not been addressed in the literature to this point.

<center>Thesis Summary and Recommendations for Further Research</center>

This study looked closely at the perceptions of teachers and teacher assistants and their understanding of factors that influence their relationship. The data analysis points to the integrated and holistic nature of human interaction. Emergent themes of the role of administration, professional interaction, and personal attributes indicated an overall theme of professionalism. Participants' perceptions indicated that competence, collegiality, and clarity of roles were necessary in a positive and effective teacher and teacher assistant relationship.

Data analysis in this study also pointed to topics not prevalent in current literature on teacher and teacher assistant relationships. An important finding of this study was the identification and acceptance of the hierarchy in the classroom. Embedded in this hierarchy and the daily functioning in the classroom was the role of implicit expectations, including the perception of these expectations and the necessary overt communication of these expectations. Movement of implicit expectations to explicit expectations may have a direct impact on the nature of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship with, as participants suggested, an increased personal responsibility of members in the relationship to be reflective and communicative. A more positive and effective relationship may be the end result with possible effects on student learning outcomes.

Summary Comments of the Researcher

Three teachers and three teacher assistants spoke candidly about their relationships with their job partners and about their experiences through their years of employment. Predictably, recurring themes of communication, respect, and teamwork emerged as did clarity of roles. Upon further reflection of their perceptions and their insights, I got a clearer picture of teacher and teacher assistant relationships and what they felt were the factors that influenced their relationships. As Giangreco et al. (2001) noted, "One gets the sense reading much of the literature that if we merely did a better job with role clarification, training, supervision, and compensation, the field's identified problems would be solved." I believe that this research has addressed the teacher and teacher assistant relationship in a more holistic manner and has provided me an opportunity to conceptualize the integration

of factors in a teacher and teacher assistant relationship, encompassing, but not restricted to, the clarity of roles in the classroom. Professionalism of both teachers and teacher assistants, in their conduct, aims, and attitudes is highly desirable in people working with children who have special needs. A focus on responsibility to exhibit competence, collegiality, and clarity of role at all levels in the school may address some of the difficulties encountered in a teacher and teacher assistant relationship.

Recommendations for Further Research

As noted earlier, caution should be exercised when attempting to generalize this study in any manner. The research was designed to give voice to both teachers and teacher assistants involved in the study and it certainly fulfilled that purpose. As a result of this research, however, questions continue to be raised about specific issues in the teacher and teacher assistant relationship. I recommend further research and study in the following areas.

- Studying the benefits of hiring teacher assistants with a specific level of training or qualifications.

- Additional research on the affect of administrators on the relationship between teachers and teacher assistants.

- Further research on the nature of the teacher and teacher assistant relationship and the benefits for students under their care.

- Broader development of the concept of professionalism in a teacher and teacher assistant relationship.

REFERENCES

Allen, R. (2002). Teachers and paraeducators: Defining roles in an age of

accountability. *Education Update, 44*, 5-8.

Ashbaker, B.Y., & Morgan, J. (2001). Growing roles for teachers' aides.

The Education Digest, 66, 60-64.

Bogdan, R.C., & Biklen, S.K. (4th Ed.). (2003). *Qualitative research for education:*

An introduction to theories and methods. Boston: Pearson Education Group.

Carroll, D. (2001). Considering paraeducator training, roles and responsibilities.

Teaching Exceptional Children, 34, 60-64.

Daniels, V.I., & McBride, A. (2001). Paraeducators as critical team members:

Redefining roles and responsibilities. *NAASP Bulletin, 85*, 66-74.

Downing, J.E., Ryndak, D.L., & Clark, D. (2000). Paraeducators in inclusive

classrooms: their own perceptions. *Remedial and Special Education, 21,*

171-181.

French, N.K. (1998). Working together: Resource teachers and paraeducators.

Remedial and Special Education, 19, 357-368.

French, N.K. (1999a). Paraeducators: Who are they and what do they do? *Teaching*

Exceptional Children, 32, 65-69.

French, N.K. (1999b). Paraeducators and teachers: Shifting roles. *Teaching*

Exceptional Children, 32, 69-73.

French, N.K. (2000). Taking time to save time: Delegating to paraeducators.

Teaching Exceptional Children, 32, 79-83.

French, N.K. (2003). Paraeducators in special education programs. *Focus on Exceptional Children, 36*, 1-16.

Freschi, D.F. (1999). Guidelines for working with one-to-one aides. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 31*, 42-45.

Gall, M.D., Gall, J.P., & Borg, W.R. (7th Ed.). (2003). *Educational research: An introduction.* Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Giangreco, M.F., Edelman, S.W., & Broer, S.M. (2001). Respect, appreciation, and acknowledgement of paraprofessionals who support students with disabilities. *Exceptional Children, 67*, 485-498.

Giangreco, M.F., Edelman, S.W., Broer, S.M., & Doyle, M.B. (2001). Paraprofessional support of students with disabilities: Literature from the past decade. *Exceptional Children, 68,* 45-63.

Glesne, C. (2nd Ed.). (1999). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction.* New York: Addison Wesley Longman.

Harris, J.J. (2002). Teachers and teacher assistants create dynamic duos. *Momentum, 33,* 46-48.

Lorenz, S. (1998). *Effective in-class support: The management of support staff in mainstream and special schools.* London: David Fulton Publishers.

 Merriam-Webster. (2002). *Webster's third new international dictionary.* Retrieved July 14, 2004 from http://unabridged.merriam-webster.com

Morgan, J., Ashbaker, B.Y., & Young, J.R. (2001). Teaming, supervision and evaluation: Teacher-paraeducator team perspectives of their teaching. In

Paraprofessional Staff in Education Settings: Issues Relating to their

Employment, Training and Supervision as They Impact Teacher Education.

Symposium conducted at the AACTE Annual Meeting and Exhibits, Dallas,

Texas.

Morse, J.M., & Richards, L. (2002). *ReadMe first: For a user's guide to*

qualitative methods. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc.

Palma, G.M. (1994). Toward a positive and effective teacher and paraprofessional

relationship. *Rural Special Education Quarterly, 13*, 46-48.

Pickett, A.L. (1995). *Paraprofessionals in the education workforce.* New York:

National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related

Services, Center for Advanced Study in Education, Graduate School and

University Center, City University of New York.

Pickett, A.L. (1999). *Strengthening and supporting teacher/provider*

paraeducator teams: Guidelines for paraeducator roles, supervision,

and preparation. New York: National Resource Center for

Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Services, Center for Advanced

Study in Education, Graduate School and University Center, City University

of New York.

Pickett, A.L. (6th Ed.). (2000). *A training program to prepare teachers to supervise*

and work more effectively with paraprofessional personnel. New York:

National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related

Services, Center For Advanced Study in Education, Graduate School and

University Center, City University of New York.

Riggs, C.G. (2001). Twenty ways to work effectively with paraeducators in

    inclusive settings. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 37*, 114-117.

Riggs, C.G. & Mueller, P.H. (2001). Employment and utilization of paraeducators in

    inclusive settings. *The Journal of Special Education, 35*, 54-62.

Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation. (2003). *Statement of policy and by-laws 2003-*

    2004. Saskatoon: Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation.

Sockett, H. T. (1996). Teachers for the twenty-first century: Redefining

    professionalism. *NAASP Bulletin, 80,* 22-29.

Sprick, R., Garrison, M., & Howard, L. (2000). *Parapro: Supporting the*

    instructional process. Colorado: Sopris West.

Task Force and Public Dialogue on the Role of the School. (2001). *School plus:*

    A vision for children and youth: Toward a new school, community and

    human service partnership in Saskatchewan.   Prepared by

    M. Tymchak, Chair and the Saskatchewan Instructional Development and

    Research Unit. Regina, Saskatchewan: Government of Saskatchewan.

The Alberta Teachers' Association. (2003). *Teachers and teachers' assistants:*

    Roles and responsibilities. Edmonton: The Alberta Teachers' Association.

Tisdell, E. (2002). Phenomenological Research. In S. Merriam and Associates

    (Eds.), *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and*

    Analysis (pp. 93-95). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Wallace, T., Shin, J., & Bartholomay, T. (2001). Knowledge and skills for teachers

    supervising the work of paraprofessionals. *Exceptional Children, 67*, 520-

    533.

APPENDIX A: LETTER OF PURPOSE

Attention: Mr. _____, Superintendent of Education

Dear Mr. _____:

As per our earlier emails, I am writing to request your consent to conduct research in your school division as fulfillment toward a Master's Degree in Education. My proposed thesis topic is: Teacher and Educational Assistant Perceptions of Their Relationships.

This qualitative study is designed to explore the perceptions of teachers and educational assistants as they reflect on their interactions and interpersonal relationship while working in the inclusive classroom. Questions guiding this research are: How do participants in this working relationship each describe their relationships? What factors impact the working relationships of the participants? While much of the current literature focuses on the definition of the roles of educational assistants and their training, this study will focus specifically on the relationship between a teacher and an educational assistant.

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted individually with the participants. Final group interviews will be held with the teachers and the educational assistants respectively to clarify and further develop ideas emerging from the initial sets of interviews. Descriptive memos and reflective notes will be kept throughout the process with the analysis of data following traditions of qualitative methods.

As a researcher, I would appreciate your consent to interview teachers and educational assistants in your school division. I anticipate the data collection phase to be completed by April 30, 2004 with the data analysis to be completed by August 31, 2004. I believe that this study will provide a richer understanding of a relationship between a teacher and an educational assistant and be of benefit to your school division and the educational community. In accordance with regulations for Behavioural Research, I have sought approval for this study by the Behavioural Ethics Board of the University of Saskatchewan on February 4, 2004.

Please find a detailed summary of this study enclosed. If you have any questions please contact me at 665-8189 or email me at de_brand@telus.net. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Alan Ryan at 966-7579 or the Office of Research Services at 966-2084 for further clarification. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Elena Brand

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT LETTER OF INTENT

Letter of Intent

April ___, 2004

Dear _____,

      This letter is to confirm, as per our recent telephone conversation, your agreement to participate in my research study, "Collegial Interaction in the Inclusive Classroom: A Discussion of Teacher-Educational Assistant Relationships." I am very appreciative of your willingness to participate in the study and will do everything possible to accommodate you and your schedule.

      As we discussed, I am interested in collecting data on your perceptions, ideas and insights in your working relationship with your job partner. I anticipate our meetings to be held over approximately six weeks with one initial interview, one follow-up interview and one group interview with the two other participants in your position.

      I have enclosed a consent document which is designed to inform and protect you throughout this study. Please read it over carefully and sign it prior to our first meeting. If you have any questions or concerns about the study, please contact me at the university (966-7670) or at home (665-8189). You may also call my supervisor, Dr. Alan Ryan (966-7579) if you have further questions about the study or the Office of Research Services (966-2084) if you have questions about your rights as a participant in the study. Thank-you again for your participation, I look forward to getting to know you!

Sincerely,

Elena Brand

APPENDIX C: CONSENT DOCUMENT

Participant Consent Document

The Study: This research study is an investigation and discussion of teacher and educational assistant relationships as they work together in the inclusive classroom.

This research study is designed to give voice to teachers and educational assistants as they discuss their perceptions of their interpersonal relationship. Although much information is available about the roles that teachers and educational assistants play in their direction of the inclusive classroom, there is little research completed that looks at the relationship between these adults. My research question directing this study is: What themes emerge from teacher and educational assistant descriptions of their collegial relationship in an inclusive classroom?

Participant Involvement: You will meet individually with me for two sessions: an initial interview and a follow-up interview. To complete the process, you will meet with the other participants as a small group, separate from your job partner and their peers, to discuss the ideas and issues that have appeared in the interviews.

Possible Risks or Inconveniences: There are no personal or professional risks anticipated for you. However, you may be inconvenienced by the scheduling of the interviews, although all attempts at accommodating your schedule will be made.

Confidentiality/Right to Withdraw: Your personal information and your data will be kept in strict confidence throughout and after the study. You will be asked to give a fictitious name and will not be identified by the school in which you work. All information shared during the study will be owned by you and not shared with the other participants in the study. You will be required to protect the integrity and confidentiality of what is said by others in the group interview. However, due to the nature of the group interview, confidentiality cannot be entirely guaranteed.

Transcripts of the individual interviews and the group interview will be presented to you for review. You have the right to delete or change any of the information you have provided during the study. All audio-recorded or transcribed data will be kept locked at the university for a period of five years, after which time all data will be destroyed. You also have the right to withdraw at any time during this study, with all data acquired being destroyed at this time.

Questions: If you have any questions concerning the study, please feel free to contact me at 306-966-7670 (office) or at 306-665-8189 (home) or my research supervisor, Dr. Alan Ryan at 306-966-7579. This study has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Sciences Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Office of Research Services at 306-966-2084.

Thank-you for participating!!

> ***I have read and understand the contents of this consent and I agree to participate in this research study. I have freely volunteered to participate and I understand that I have the right to withdraw at any time.***

_____   _____

Signature of Participant   *Date*

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDES FOR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

Initial Interview Guide

1. General information.

    a. Describe your work experience in the educational field.

    b. Describe your job assignment for this year.

    c. What would a typical school day look like for you?

2. Tell me about your interactions with job partner.

3. What factors in particular affect your relationship?

    a. What are the largest issues facing you in this relationship?

    b. Why are those issues important to you?

    c. If you were asked to go to SIAST to speak to the students in the TA program, what advice would you give them about creating and maintaining a good relationship with the teacher?

    d. If you were asked to go to the university to speak to students who want to become teachers, what advice would you give them about creating and maintaining a good relationship with teacher assistants?

Follow-up Interview Guide

1. Communication seems to be a very big factor in the TA/teacher relationship. What strategies have you used to maintain lines of communication?

2. The stress of the job and the types of students that you work with has also been noted as a large factor in the TA/teacher job, what do you do, or could you do, to support each other in your job?

3. Some people have mentioned the importance of in school administration and the overall school climate in creating a positive relationship between TA/teacher. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

4. Think about the ideal TA (or teacher), what characteristics would he or she have?

5. How do you make sure that you are on the same page in terms of expectations with your job partner?

6. Is there anything in your teacher/TA relationship that makes your job easier?

7. Describe anything in that relationship that gets in the way of doing your job well.

APPENDIX E: PARTICIPANT RELEASE FORMS

Release Form for Individual Interviews

"Teacher and Teacher Assistant Perceptions of Their Relationships"

        I have read the transcript of the audio-recorded interviews for this study and verify that these are my own words spoken during my conversations with Elena Brand. They accurately reflect what I intended to say in the interviews.

        I, _____ give my permission for the use of this information in any report associated with the findings of the study. I understand that all information given by me to the researcher will be used for the expressed purpose intended for the completion of the research.

_____   _____

Signature of Participant   Date

Release form for the Group Interview

"Teacher and Teacher Assistant Perceptions of Their Relationships"

I have read the account of the group interview that I participated in and verify that the written account reflects what was discussed in the interview.

I, _____ give my permission for the use of this information in any report associated with the findings of the study. I understand that all information given by me to the researcher will be used for the expressed purpose intended for the completion of the research.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date