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Craig Howley

WordFarmers Associates LLC

Aimee Howley

WordFarmers Associates LLC

Deborah Telfer

University of Cincinnati

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Special Education Paraprofessionals in District Context

Craig Howley
Aimee Howley
WordFarmers Associates

Deborah Telfer
University of Cincinnati

This survey research investigated the experience of Ohio districts using paraprofessionals assigned to special education students. This study provides a unique statewide description of district experience. Based on themes from the literature and preliminary conversations with educational practitioners in Ohio, the survey conceptualized district experience in five domains: role definition, assignment, supervision, training, and pay. Survey respondents (n = 184) included district superintendents and staff from Educational Service Centers and State Support Teams. Findings, overall, suggest that districts confront challenges in even defining the role of paraprofessional, and that assignment, supervision, and training are often haphazard in Ohio districts; furthermore, that wages are low. These findings suggest that district leadership in Ohio typically pays little attention to the use of special education paraprofessionals. Recommendations are included for research and district-level practice.

Introduction

American school districts' increased use of paraprofessionals (parapros) in special education is described as one of the more remarkable developments of the past 30 years (Carlson, Brauen, Klein, Schroll, & Willig, 2000; Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010). Some school district practitioners claim that school systems could not function without them (Webster, Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, Martin, & Russell, 2010).

Despite their numbers and perceived importance to the functionality of schooling itself, almost no research provides a *statewide description of districts' experience* using SPED parapros.¹ Such a statewide description of district experience, though, might suggest leverage points for the improvement of practice, as well as insights for studies in other states or the nation as a whole.

The issue of district experience is important, moreover, because school districts have the responsibility and the authority to structure the parapros role (including decisions about pay and benefits), deploy and supervise incumbents, and provide in-service training to them. If district leaders do not meet that responsibility, no one will. But according to several research teams (see, e.g., Webster et al., 2010), few school districts fulfill the responsibility with adequate care.

¹ Breton (2010) reported a statewide survey of SPED parapros training in Maine, but without a district focus. In other words, statewide studies are rare, and none has yet focused on districts' experience using paraprofessionals. The literature review, however, examines extant research for the issues likely relevant to such a study.

The aim of this study, then, is to describe districts' experience with paraprofessionals in one state; the research question, therefore, is *What is the experience of districts across one state in the United States with respect to role definition, assignment, supervision, training, and wages for SPED paraprofessionals?* Without details of that experience, neither district leaders nor state-level policy makers are in a good position to exercise leadership responsibly.

Empirical research, including the present study, seems to highlight a range of difficulties—not with paraprofessionals, but with how they are deployed and supported. So before considering the difficulties, we want to quote two respondents to the present study.

[Paraprofessionals] are a crucial piece to making education work for our most difficult students and I've found that most who work for me are people who go above and beyond.

Our paraprofessionals are a valued asset in the district. Many times when I take visitors to classrooms, they are unable to distinguish the teacher from the paraprofessional.

Given the potential help that paraprofessionals might provide, and that some in fortunate circumstances do manage, what could account for the reported lack of research attention at the district level? Perhaps the nature of the work and the characteristics of the paraprofessionals explains researchers' apparent apathy. Paraprofessionals are low-paid, irregular members of the school workforce who, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2015), reinforce lessons and otherwise provide assistance in schools and classrooms. SPED paraprofessionals provide this service, moreover, to the students of lowest status in most schools (i.e., students with disabilities). Qualifications, pay, and perceived importance have always been low despite the contributions paraprofessionals make (Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010). The meager requirements (in Ohio, for instance) include a high school diploma and competence on a 6th grade literacy test. Many districts (in Ohio) pay minimum wage. Considerable variation, of course, surrounds these averages. Some districts are able to hire paraprofessionals with college degrees, even in education. Paraprofessionals receive very irregular inservice training, much of it focused on local procedures (see Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education [SPeNSE], 2001, for further details).

Casanova's study of elementary school secretaries (Casanova, 1991), for example, showed how similar circumstances and similarly low status deflected organizational attention away from the role of school secretary. One might well speculate that lack of organizational status is associated with lack of organizational attention. Indeed, one of the respondents in our study observed, "We oftentimes assign the least educated and trained adults to work with the most challenging students. Something is wrong with this picture" (see also Giangreco et al., 2010; Webster et al., 2010).

The scope of the problem is significant because paraprofessionals are hardly a small part of the instructional workforce. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015) reports that the nation employs 1.2 million paraprofessionals, of which about 821,000 were assigned to instructional duties, about half of

those in special education (Bitterman, Gray, Goldring, & Broughman, 2013).² The largest other group of paraprofessionals serves in Early Childhood Education.

Relevant Literature

This review of what is known about the circumstances of SPED paraprofessionals' work begins with an assessment of extant studies that focus on district issues. The review then briefly describes five persistent realms of concern implicitly related to districts' responsibilities for deploying paraprofessionals: (1) role definition; (2) assignment; (3) supervision; (4) training; and (5) pay, benefits, and career advancement. These realms of concern are well documented in the literature (see, e.g., the most recent literature review by Giangreco and colleagues, 2010).

Districts and SPED Paraprofessionals

Logically enough, the extant professional literature (syntheses and policy recommendations in particular) exhibits an *appreciation* of the fact that districts are the ultimate agents in schooling—the legally authoritative actors—with respect to SPED paraprofessionals (i.e., they are referred to as Local Education Agencies). However, published empirical *research* about how districts manage and deploy paraprofessionals does not exist.

Michael Giangreco and colleagues, the leading researchers in the field, have completed two comprehensive reviews restricted to *empirical* literature (Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001; Giangreco et al., 2010). In neither review, even the more recent one, does the word “district” appear in the text. Twenty years of empirical research have not engaged the notion that districts are responsible for hiring, using, and developing SPED paraprofessionals. What about prescriptions for best practice? Although the word “district” is used repeatedly by Pickett (1999) and Schmidt and colleagues (1999) in their works recommending state and local best practices, not a single entry in their ample reference lists used the word “district” in a title. The silence of both research and practice demonstrates the lack of attention given to district experiences with special education paraprofessionals.

Our literature searches for the present study found that absence of a district-level focus represented a “gap” in the research literature on paraprofessionals. Indeed, few statewide studies of any sort exist, though there have been several national studies, principally related to federally funded efforts to study special education personnel (e.g., SPeNSE, 2001). More typical are studies that use selected schools or districts as “sites” for studies (e.g., Suter & Giangreco, 2009). This pattern characterizes the dissertation literature as well. The district may be a site of something investigated, but districts are not phenomena in their own right.

² In other words, approximately 400,000 workers fill the role of SPED paraprofessional, not too many fewer than fill the role of SPED teacher (450,700 according to BLS data). The typical SPED paraprofessional is female, aged 44, with about seven years of experience in the role (SPeNSE, 2001). Ohio, the state in which we conducted the study, employed about 13,000 paraprofessionals in classrooms in 2004, and if the national proportions prevailed (i.e., roughly 53% in SPED), then the state might have employed about 7,000 SPED in 2013 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). The Schools and Staffing Survey has not updated its 2004 estimates and exact data on SPED paraprofessional employment are not available from the Ohio Department of Education. The estimate given likely underestimates the actual 2016 total. The number refers to persons and not to FTE equivalents (Bitterman et al., 2013).

This observation *does not* mean that empirical work completely fails to acknowledge district circumstances. It seems, rather, that the history of investigation begins with the concerns and characteristics of paraprofessionals and teachers and then, as findings have accumulated, has started to turn attention to systemic issues. Thus leading researchers now examine school-level dynamics (Suter & Giangreco, 2009; Giangreco, Suter, & Hurley, 2013), in particular, the staffing patterns that facilitate inclusive schooling practices (e.g., “special educator school density”: see, e.g., Giangreco et al., 2011, p. 130). Logically, of course, such dynamics are the purview of district leaders, but the operant delimitations (of scholarly attention, which tends to focus on some schools in some districts in a state) mean that the overall district experience with paraprofessionals is beyond the scope of the available studies.

Searching for *any* empirical literature with a statewide district focus, we discovered a single dissertation (Snodgrass, 1991) centering on district *preferences* for managing paraprofessionals with the aim of making recommendations for best practice.³Tellingly, the dissertation overlooked role definitions (at the time, standards for the SPED paraprofessional had not been established) and lacked a conception of organizational capacity and dynamics. We also found a *statewide* investigation of paraprofessional preparation (Breton, 2010), but it did not conceptualize district-level conditions or influences.

Although consideration of districts’ overall experience of deploying paraprofessionals is missing from the literature, the key parameters of organizational concern with SPED paraprofessionals have been theorized, discussed, and repeatedly studied. Conceptions vary somewhat (see, e.g., the syntheses and recommendations of French, 2003; Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2001; Pickett, Likins, & Wallace, 2003), but most recent studies and syntheses (of the past 10 or 15 years) include role definition, assignment, supervision, training, and remuneration, either implicitly or explicitly. The rest of the literature review is organized by those categories.

Role Definition

Role definition refers to the scope of the position and its relationship to other positions in the school. Definitions may be clear, ambiguous, or even confusing. With SPED paraprofessionals, role confusion is *typical*, according to key researchers (French, 1998; Giangreco et al., 2001).

The challenge of clarifying the role reflects the changeable mandates for operating public schools. In a previous, more progressive era—roughly 1960 to 1980 (see Bickel, 2013), the introduction of paraprofessionals was planned as a way to make schooling more responsive to local communities, families, and students in poverty. For instance, Yawkey and Silvern (1975) discussed paraprofessional deployment as increasing the ratio of adults to students; paraprofessionals would be community *volunteers*. Of course, at that time, the use of paraprofessionals was much more rare, both in special education and in general education (see for the origins of the SPED paraprofessional about 1960, see Pickett et al., 2003, and for a very early study of SPED paraprofessionals see Cruickshank & Herring, 1957).

³ Snodgrass (1991) recommended pre-service behavior management training, assessing paraprofessional academic skills, establishing (in Idaho) a paraprofessional credential, and providing in-serve training,

The advent of federal education law, particularly in early childhood education and special education (e.g., the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, P.L. 94-142, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, P.L. 89-10), led rapidly to the recruitment of the large paraprofessional workforce now in place. In particular, the move from what Whitburn (2013, p. 147) calls the “strong arm of traditional special education” (i.e., special, segregated classrooms and programs) to less segregated education (i.e., more “inclusion”) dramatically enlarged the SPED paraprofessional workforce (see, e.g., Carlson et al., 2000).

Across the decades SPED paraprofessionals have commonly been assigned one-on-one to students judged as the most difficult candidates for inclusion (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Giangreco, et al. 2013; Webster et al., 2010). Webster and associates (2010, p. 330) frequently heard, for instance, that without such paraprofessionals “schools would struggle to cope.” SPED paraprofessionals have a difficult job, one that is poorly structured and poorly rewarded, and the stressors reported by paraprofessionals are reasons they sometimes seek other work (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014; Carlson et al., 2000; Giangreco et al., 2010).

Rather than clarifying the SPED paraprofessional role,⁴ the practice of inclusion is associated with additional *role confusion* (French, 1998; Giangreco et al., 2001). Districts that “struggle to cope” by assigning SPED paraprofessionals to individual students with disabilities (a low-road to inclusion) also often (and one might say “unwittingly”) hand off full instructional responsibility to these same SPED paraprofessionals—educators with the lowest status and least preparation, serving students with lowest status and, arguably, the most complex needs (Giangreco et al., 2010). The *struggle to cope* is shorthand for the organizational dilemma of being required to do something (for instance, inclusion of students with low-incidence sensory disabilities) for which an entity (school or district) lacks organizational and probably professional capacity.

Assignment

Assignment means deployment: the specific tasks required, the location, the time period involved with a task or location, and the students with whom paraprofessionals work; in other words, the nuts and bolts of what a role entails. When assignment matches a well-thought-out conception of the role, it makes sense on those terms. Without such a conception, though, assignment is likely careless (Giangreco et al., 2013; Pickett, 1999).

The proliferation of SPED paraprofessionals, in fact, is often reported as a way to “cope” with the students who exhibit low-incidence disabilities (e.g., blindness, deafness, autism). SPED paraprofessionals have been typically hired to supervise individual students with such conditions (Giangreco et al., 2013; Webster, et al., 2010). To counter that prevailing assignment, Giangreco, Halvorsen, Doyle, and Broer (2004, pp. 84-88) developed a list of seven alternatives to one-on-one assignment of SPED paraprofessionals: (1) resource reallocation—trading paraprofessional positions for special educators; (2) increasing ownership of general educators and building their capacity; (3) transitional paraprofessional pool (for temporary assignments); (4) clerical/paperwork paraprofessional (no instructional duties); (5) lowering caseloads for special educators; (6) peer support strategies (for students); and (7) involving students with disabilities in making decisions about

⁴ Official standards, in fact, specify an instructional role for special education (SPED) paraprofessionals (e.g., Council for Exceptional Children, 2011; Ohio Department of Education, 2014).

their own supports. It's notable that this article uses the word "role" 15 times. This list shows how clearly assignment depends on a well-thought-out role definition.

French (2003) suggested a relevant logic: Assignment should be contingent on establishing a worthy (e.g., evidence-based) program with clear roles in it for SPED paraprofessionals. Slavin, Lake, Davis, and Madden (2011), in fact, reported the success of assignment of SPED paraprofessionals conducted on such a basis (in a report not focused on SPED paraprofessionals per se). Webster and colleagues (2010) concluded that instructional assignments "should be more tightly defined and supported by better training and monitoring" (p. 334).

Whether or not the district defines a role formally or well, paraprofessionals are deployed (as they must be as district employees). In the absence of such a definition of role, the ways districts assign SPED paraprofessionals nevertheless constitutes a *de facto* definition of the role (Abbate-Vaughan, 2007; Giangreco et al., 1997; Giangreco & Doyle, 2002; Giangreco, Suter, & Hurley, 2013; Mueller & Murphy, 2001; Tews & Lupart, 2008; Webster et al., 2010; Whitburn, 2013).

Supervision

Supervision refers to all who might or should (depending on the role definition) give direction and feedback to SPED paraprofessionals: teachers, principals, and district administrators. Supervision commonly falls to teachers, but researchers have often reported how ill-fitting the expectation that teachers supervise paraprofessionals is (Giangreco et al., 2010; Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl, 2001; Webster et al., 2010; Whitburn, 2013). One alternative is the inclusion of paraprofessionals on instructional teams (this alternative, in fact, is a ready option in the state in which we conducted the present study).

Poor supervision—a lack of direction, no feedback on performance, and meager communication—is, in fact, commonly reported in the literature. Poor supervision perhaps best illustrates the overall lack of attention that SPED paraprofessionals receive from those responsible for the system that employs, directs, and trains staff (Schmidt, Greenough, & Nelson, 2002; Webster et al., 2010).

Without adequately conceptualizing the role and then delimiting the related tasks of paraprofessionals, well-intended specifications for teachers who supervise paraprofessionals might seem premature. That is, one might ask if a generic form of supervision is sufficient. Such generic competencies were suggested by Wallace and colleagues (2001, p. 525): (1) communicating with paraprofessionals, (2) scheduling, (3) instructional support (i.e., providing feedback), (4) modeling a careful and respectful manner, (5) public relations (i.e., advocacy for the paraprofessional role within the organization), (6) providing on-the-job training, and (7) managing paraprofessionals (i.e., maintaining positive relationships and supporting skill improvement). The generic model shifts responsibility from the district to individual teachers for explaining the role (possibly defining it in absence of a district-level conceptualization), advocating for the role organizationally, and providing training. A district might, indeed, conceptualize such a role for teachers. And in that case, it would need to provide considerable support to the teacher-paraprofessional team. Such a situation is reportedly rare (Pickett, 1999; Tillery, Werts, Roark, & Harris, 2003; Webster et al., 2010).

Evidence of role confusion and haphazard assignment calls into question, then, what one might mean by “supervision.” According to Webster and colleagues (2010, p. 332),

Many TAs⁵ [teaching assistants] go into lessons “blind,” unaware of what teachers will ask them to do in order to support the learning and engagement of pupils with special needs. This is largely due to a lack of time for teacher-TA communication prior to lessons.

Training

Training includes the full range of role-relevant preparation from pre-service to in-service, with the former rare and the latter thin (Pickett et al., 2003; Suter & Giangreco, 2009). Especially with the confusion regarding role, assignment, and supervision, SPED paraprofessionals need training. A variety of organizations (e.g., the University of Nebraska’s Project Para, 2016; the Ohio Partnership for Excellence in Paraprofessional Preparation, 2016) offer well-designed online training packages.⁶

Giangreco and colleagues (2010, p. 45) report empirical research that demonstrates that paraprofessionals “can be effectively trained to undertake a variety of tasks that result in positive student outcomes: embedding teacher-planned instruction...facilitating social interactions... and implementing social stories.”⁷ But even where careful training takes place, it tends to be short-lived and disconnected from a trajectory of career-long professional development (Carlson et al., 2000; Giangreco et al., 2010; Pickett et al., 2003). Good training, one might speculate, requires a defined role, with the specifics of assignment (and even supervision) clearly established.

Pay and Status

In literature reviews 10 years apart, Giangreco and colleagues (Giangreco et al., 2001; Giangreco et al., 2010) highlighted the consistent organizational marginalization that characterizes working conditions for paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals are seldom recognized as important team members (McKenzie, 2011; Pickett et al., 2003); they work for an hourly, often minimum, wage; seldom receive benefits like health insurance (Giangreco et al., 2010; Juravich, 2015); and are often employed part-time (Tillery, Werts, Roark, & Harris, 2003). Their status in school organizations is low (Giangreco et al., 1997; Juravich, 2015; Pickett et al., 2003). Even their status in unions has been reported as problematic:

[Paraprofessionals receive] the low wages, precarious tenure, and workplace marginalization that characterize non-union jobs in our post-industrial economy, particularly those held by

⁵ The paraprofessional role is variously indicated by such terms as “teacher aides,” “teaching assistants,” and sometimes simply “paras.” In our data, some respondents claimed they did not employ paraprofessionals, only teacher aides. In its reports, for instance, the National Center for Education Statistics uses the term “teacher aides.”

⁶ The Ohio program, directed by Telfer, develops its materials and services in collaboration with districts and regional agencies; it provides on-site training as well as online modules; and it revises materials and develops new ones in response to district and agency feedback. . Please consult the reference list for URLs for both the Nebraska and Ohio programs.

⁷ “Social stories” are an instructional exercise for students with autism, who have particular difficulty with social interactions and the internal narrative accompanying social interactions.

women of color. As teachers' unions rediscover the paraprofessionals in their midst, they are discovering that unionization, in its current form, has not always guaranteed security or prosperity for these educators. (Juravich, 2015, p. 5)

Summary

The available literature gives a sobering picture of SPED paraprofessionals as a low-cost bulwark for managing difficult and low-status students (e.g., Webster, 2010). Rather than role definition, it seems that role confusion prevails (e.g., Giangreco et al., 2010). Assignment is reportedly dominated (as suggested in conversations with educational leaders in Ohio) by the practice of assigning one paraprofessional to a single high-needs student (e.g., Giangreco et al., 2013). Supervision falls mainly to teachers, who seem ill-prepared for the role (e.g., Wallace et al., 2001). Pre-service preparation is rare and in-service training thin (e.g., Pickett, 1999; Suter & Giangreco, 2009). Pay, benefits, and status are low (e.g., Giangreco et al., 2010; Juravich, 2015). Also relevant to the present study is the absence of research that systematically examines the experience of districts in an entire state as they struggle to manage the work of SPED paraprofessionals.

Methods

This study used a survey design to explore districts' experiences using paraprofessionals across the state of Ohio from the perspective of educational leaders in Ohio school districts: superintendents of local school districts and relevant staff at Educational Service Centers (ESCs) and State Support Teams (SSTs). The study tested no formal hypotheses relevant to any identifiable theory but rather sought to accurately reflect circumstances specific to practices related to SPED paraprofessionals in Ohio. Approval for the study was secured from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Dayton, which ruled the research exempt.

This study is the first to examine districts' use of paraprofessionals across an entire state. Previous studies have used districts as a site of research, but without conceptualizing the set of related issues (e.g., role definition, assignment, etc.) as a systemic problem across districts within a state system. Our research team, therefore, held preliminary conversations with educational practitioners in Ohio to bring to light issues related to Ohio districts. Their perspectives informed the content of the study by (1) helping confirm or disconfirm major concerns in the published literature as applicable to the Ohio context, (2) surfacing concerns specific to the Ohio context, and (3) providing the research team insight into the relationship among dilemmas of concern to district-oriented practitioners (a prime directive of regional agencies in Ohio is service to districts.).

Survey

Starting with themes from the review of literature, survey development began with the creation of a framework that took into consideration the Ohio educational context. The framework went through several iterations as members of the research team reflected and offered suggestions for change.

When the framework was finalized, the creation of survey items began. The process of drafting, vetting, and revising led to a final version of the survey with 25 items, with many producing multiple data points (e.g., item 20 asked respondents “to what extent does fading raise the following concerns in your district?” and then presented five concerns for rating). Nearly every item on the survey included a comment field; excerpts are used to illustrate and enhance the quantitative findings. (See Appendix A for the list of survey items.)

The survey consisted of groups of items relevant to role, assignment, supervision, training, and status/pay. The groups reflect major concerns in the literature that also present in the Ohio context, as informed by the observations of the expert panel (i.e. one-on-one assignment, fading, and teaming).

Because of the lack of previous research about districts’ experience statewide, we can hardly argue that the indicators we used to represent the key constructs are the best array of performance indicators. Certainly they are not the only ones possible, even for these constructs. The logic of variable selection and grouping as indicators is defended next.

Role Definition. We selected five variables to indicate role definition (i.e., “role clarity” or “role confusion”). This grouping is intended to reflect *organizational attentiveness to the SPED parapro role*:

- (1) degree of familiarity with the variety of standards,
- (2) frequency of review of the SPED parapro job description,
- (3) frequency with which SPED *teachers* serve on Teacher-Based Teams (TBTs),⁸
- (4) frequency of planning to fade SPED parapro support, and
- (5) general education [GENED] *teachers*’ receptivity to inclusion.

According to claims from both the empirical and prescriptive literature, a district that paid attention to the role would be cognizant of applicable standards, review job descriptions frequently to maintain their currency with emerging standards, and acknowledge the potential contributions to instruction that SPED parapro can make (e.g., by including them on instructional teams and by treating the support they provide as a kind of instructional scaffolding). Furthermore, such a district would also contextualize the work of parapro within an organizational culture of openness and inclusion—as represented here by general education teachers’ receptivity to inclusion and SPED teachers’ participation in TBTs—because applicable standards favor this perspective.

Assignment. In an operational sense, *assignment* defines the SPED parapro role within the classroom, school, and district (see, e.g., March & Simon, 1993). The professional literature clearly documents varied assignments, so we selected 10 variables to capture that variety and organized them in three blocks (see Table 1). This grouping reflects the three organizational

⁸ TBTs are established groups of teachers—and, prospectively, parapro—who meet to plan instruction and consider evidence (“data”) as a basis for such planning. The teams are mandated statewide as part of the Ohio Improvement Process, but they are organized to suit local purposes; membership of SPED teachers and parapro is an option determined locally.

forces shaping assignment. Taken together, the 10 variables exhibit the potential to portray, or at least illustrate, the complexity that confronts districts as they make assignments.

Table 1
Assignments and Organizational Forces

Assignments	Organizational Forces Shaping Assignment
Proportion of local assignment of SPED paraprofessionals to three contexts: single student, SPED classroom, GENED classroom.	District choices about where to assign SPED paraprofessionals.
Importance of kinds of work to which SPED paraprofessionals might be assigned locally ^a .	District beliefs about the functional domains applicable to paraprofessionals.
Parental and teacher insistence that SPED paraprofessional services not be removed from single students.	District willingness to respond to parents' and teachers' pressure for one-on-one assignment of paraprofessionals.

^a Clerical, personal care, functional skills instruction, academic instruction, support of students with low-incidence disabilities.

Supervision. Line-of-authority compliance supervision (e.g., contract renewal, formal evaluation) is not the concern of this study, but *substantive supervision* is. In this light, exclusion of SPED paraprofessionals from teams indicates a lack of substantive supervision⁹, an organizational incapacity to see and influence the work of paraprofessionals intentionally. Research reports (e.g., Giangreco et al., 2010; Webster et al., 2010; Whitburn, 2013) clearly indicate that “lack of supervision” is a substantive—not a formal—issue, and the teaming variables (particularly appropriate to the Ohio context) give the present study the opportunity to operationalize the indicator as a form of communication.

Supervision in Ohio districts can take place in a variety of contexts for a variety of purposes. The five teams to which SPED paraprofessionals in Ohio might belong are:

- (1) informal and *ad hoc* instructional teams (e.g., on-the-go collaboration with a teacher),
- (2) formal instructional teams (e.g., scheduled meetings with a teacher or teachers),
- (3) IEP teams,
- (4) Teacher-Based Teams, and
- (5) whole-faculty assemblies.

Training. Two items directly addressed *training*:

- (1) source of training and
- (2) extent of access to training.

Choice of these indicators seems hardly to need explanation (cf. Wallace et al., 2001). We should note, however, that “extent of access” refers to access to “high-quality training” (see the relevant item in Appendix A). Thus, the indicators of this construct embed the idea of quality (see e.g.,

⁹ Note that we treat substantive supervision as “instructional supervision,” not as oversight of clerical work or other non-instructional support functions.

Calzada et al., 2005) as well as source and degree of access (see e.g., French, 1998; Pickett et al., 2003).

Pay. Two items also directly addressed *pay*:

- (1) pay linked to education credentials (i.e., educational attainment) and
- (2) comparative level of pay (tied to the average full-time wage of \$23,000 in Ohio).

These items, too, seem to require little explanation. Both constructs—training and pay—would surely benefit from a more robust set of indicators, but we decided to give precedence in our short survey to the antecedents (i.e., role, assignment, and supervision). Findings from the pay variables (reported below), however, disclose a reality consistent with previous research results (see, e.g., Giangreco et al., 2010).

Data Analysis

Results for each construct are reported with descriptive statistics for each of the separate Likert items representing the indicator. Items are not combined (e.g., summed or averaged) to make this representation. The analysis simply reports the frequency of responses, and where appropriate, means and standard deviations. Findings for each indicator, moreover, are illustrated by one or more excerpts from respondents' comments, which after analysis resulted in categories that roughly paralleled the survey constructs.

Despite the simplicity of the analysis, we maintain the findings are meaningful in the contexts of the national literature, state-level policy, and district-level practice.

Respondent Population and Administration

The study solicited responses from educational leaders in a position to provide authoritative views of districts' experience with SPED paraprofessionals. From preliminary conversations with educational leaders in the state, two groups had the necessary expertise: (1) superintendents of local school districts (N = 614) and (2) relevant staff at Educational Service Centers (ESCs) and State Support Teams (SSTs) (N = 129 and N = 31, respectively).¹⁰ Superintendents could nominate other staff members with relevant expertise to complete the survey. Relevant staff at ESCs and SSTs was identified by the research team, and included ESC special education directors and professional employees working under contract at local districts (e.g., district-level directors of special education). SST staff occupied the role of special education consultant.

Survey administration occurred via SurveyMonkey, a currently popular utility for administering surveys in an online format. Over the course of one month, data collection included an initial invitation and five reminder messages. From the 614 superintendents, we received 111 responses—a response rate of 18%. From the 160 ESC-SST staff members, we received 73 responses—a response rate of 47%. For the two groups together, the overall response rate was 25%. Although the sample cannot be claimed as representative, the respondents' locales are

¹⁰ ESCs are the fiscal agents for SSTs; most SSTs are housed at ESC facilities.

similar to the locales of districts statewide, and the proportion of their students with IEPs is close to the statewide average.¹¹

Findings

We report findings related to the key constructs (role definition, assignment, supervision, training, and pay) as reflective of districts' experience with paraprofessionals in Ohio. Overall the findings are consistent with previous research, but they importantly provide additional details that characterize respondents' experience across the many districts in one state.

Role Definition

Results for the five items that function as indicators of role definition appear in Tables 2-6. Frequencies reported in Table 2 suggest that familiarity with standards for the role is shaky in Ohio. Less than 12% of the sample is "very familiar" with them, and approximately 35% were not familiar with their particulars or were unaware that they even existed. One respondent observed, "I really don't know how familiar my district is with the descriptions of the roles and capacities of SPED paraprofessionals." Another noted, "The ESC has created a job description using many of the resources above [national and state standards documents]. Our districts rely on the ESC to hire staff and define their role."

Table 2

Familiarity with Standards

Response Categories	N	Percentage
Unaware of their existence	18	10.9%
Aware but not familiar	40	24.2%
Somewhat familiar	44	26.7%
Familiar	44	26.7%
Very Familiar	19	11.5%

Note. Mean = 3.04; SD = 1.19

The irregularity of reviewing the job description for the SPED paraprofessional position is another sign of role confusion across Ohio districts (see Table 3). One respondent bluntly noted, "We have plenty of paperwork now. I don't think more paperwork would improve the situation. I like to see staff working with students."

¹¹ Distribution of districts by locale in Ohio was: city = 3.1%, suburb = 33.1%, town = 19.1%, rural = 44.7%. The superintendent sample distribution was: city = 2.7%, suburb = 27.9%, town = 23.4%, rural = 45.9%. The percentage of students with IEPs was also similar among the respondents' districts: statewide average = 14.6% (SD = .062); sample average = 14.8% (SD = .035). The locales of all ESCs follow: city = 14.1%, suburb = 22.9%, town = 36.9%, and rural = 26.4%. By comparison, organizational locales (weighted by respondent) of the ESC/SST respondents were: city = 15.1%, suburb = 21.9%, town = 35.6%, and rural = 24.7%. The total number of "aides" (CCD term for paraprofessionals) among the respondents' ESC/SST organizations was higher than the statewide average: statewide = 46.42 (SD = 46.13); respondents' organizations = 59.98 (SD = 44.29). In Ohio, paraprofessionals are often employed by ESCs rather than by local districts. (Source: *Common Core of Data* [2012-2013]: <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/ccddata.asp>)

Table 3
SPED Parapro Job Description Review

Response Categories	N	Percentage
Unknown or not applicable	36	19.6%
Irregularly	85	46.2%
Every 2-4 years	33	17.9%
Every year or two	6	3.3%

Note. Mean = 2.06, SD = 0.76

Fading of one-on-one parapro support (Table 4) is yet another variable that suggests role confusion: Permanent assignment without fading seems typical in over 65% of the districts represented by respondents. On the upside, more than 70% of districts include SPED teachers (“intervention specialists” in Ohio) on TBTs at least frequently (Table 5), and more than 60% of the respondents report that GENED teachers are at least accepting of inclusion (Table 6).

Table 4
Plans to Fade SPED Parapro Support

Response Categories	N	Percentage
Fading is uncommon	33	22.0%
Plans for fading are:		
sometimes considered	65	43.3%
routinely considered	45	30.0%
required in IEP meeting	7	4.7%

Note. Mean = 2.17, SD = 0.83

Table 5
Intervention Specialists (i.e., SPED Teachers) on TBTs

Response Categories	N	Percentage
Almost never	16	9.9%
Sometimes but not frequently	31	19.1%
Frequently	41	25.3%
Almost always	74	45.7%

Note. Mean = 3.07; SD = 1.02

Table 6
Estimated GENED Teachers' Receptivity to Inclusion

Response Categories	N	Percentage
Vocally opposed	5	2.7%
Quite skeptical but not actively resistant	32	17.4%
Accepting and struggling hard	68	37.0%
Practiced and engaged	44	23.9%

Note. Mean = 3.01, SD = 0.81

Assignment

Tables 7-9 summarize findings for the three blocks of items (as illustrated in Table 1) relevant to assignment. For the three context variables, one can interpolate the proportions of assignment for the entire sample by taking the midpoint of each response (e.g., 10% for “20% or less”), multiplying by frequencies, and dividing the product by the total N, thereby producing a weighted average for the entire sample.

Using this method, roughly 30% of SPED paraprofessionals in respondents’ districts are assigned one-on-one to single students, 40% to SPED classrooms, and 30% to GENED classrooms. One might also observe that about one-quarter of respondents’ districts assign *more than half* of their SPED paraprofessionals to individual students (cf. Giangreco et al., 1997) but that just two respondents (about 1%) estimate that 80% or more of SPED paraprofessionals in their districts are assigned to GENED classrooms (certainly an uncommon decision, and one likely reflecting a district-wide policy of inclusion).

Table 7
Estimated Frequency of Assignment to Three Contexts

Assignment Context	Proportions Assigned ^a									
	20% or less		21% – 40%		41% - 60%		61% - 80%		Over 80%	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Single Student	79	49%	35	22%	23	14%	9	6%	14	9%
SPED Classroom	21	22%	37	39%	16	17%	13	14%	9	9%
GENED Classroom	75	50%	27	18%	27	22%	18	12%	2	1%

^aMean response per assignment context, respectively: 2.03 (SD = 1.29); 2.50 (SD = 1.24); 1.96 (SD = 1.14).

Table 8
Frequency of Perceived Importance of Particular Tasks

Task	Importance					Mean	SD
	Un-important	Not very important	Relevant	Important	Very Important		
Clerical Support	53	43	43	11	1	2.10	.99
Personal Care	1	7	38	77	29	3.83	.81
Functional Skills	1	4	44	74	29	3.83	.79
Academic Instruction	1	6	37	69	40	3.92	.85
Low-Incidence Support	0	6	37	57	53	4.03	.87

Table 9
Frequency of Perceived Importance of “Fading Concerns”

Concern	Importance					Mean	SD
	Not a concern	Not much of a concern	Some concern	Substantial concern	Highest concern		
Parental Reaction	6	8	48	66	20	3.58	.93
Teacher Reaction	5	22	62	47	11	3.25	.92

As for the kind of work to which SPED paraprofessionals are assigned, clerical functions are considered “unimportant” or “not very important” in their districts by about 64% of respondents, whereas 70% or more regard personal care, functional skills, academics, and support for students with low-incidence disabilities as “important” or “most important.” One respondent asserted firmly that “academic instruction should be done by the teachers,” and another, more ambiguously, that “some [paraprofessionals] plan their own instruction, some modify as needed, and some follow explicit instruction of a teacher.”

Resistance to fading, especially among parents, is clearly a strong concern across reporting districts: as one respondent observed, “Once they [paraprofessionals] are assigned to specific students, parents become very territorial to ‘their’ child’s paraprofessional.”

Supervision

The five “teaming” variables represent features of substantive supervision. Values for these variables are consistent with the prevalent national reports of poor supervision (see Table 10 for the results).

Note that “informal and ad hoc instructional teams” would most often consist of a teacher and a paraprofessional and that 65% of respondents report that such teaming rarely (“almost never” or “sometimes but not frequently”) occurs in their districts! This finding suggests that *lack of day-to-day supervision and even moment-to-moment coordination* is typical, as with the “ambiguous” response quoted above.

Nonparticipation is a bit worse for formal teams (about 73%) and, most remarkably, for IEP meetings (also about 73%). This finding tends to support conclusions drawn by other researchers (e.g., Giangreco et al., 2010), that paraprofessionals’ understandings and experiences are widely ignored and little valued. Their lack of participation even in IEP meetings for students whom they know well seems, at best, odd. Participation varies, of course, as the comment of one respondent suggests: “Their attendance at IEP meetings depends on if they are assigned to a specific student. If they are one-on-one then they are in the IEP meeting.” TBTs, as noted earlier, have a significant tactical function in the Ohio Improvement Process¹², but more than 80% of respondents indicate that SPED paraprofessionals are rarely involved— “almost never” for 50% of respondents’ districts. This exclusion is predictable from the research literature.

¹² The “Ohio Improvement Process” is the Ohio Department of Education’s current improvement framework and provides the foundation for the “statewide system of support” implemented in part through the network of SSTs.

One respondent, echoing recommendations in the literature (e.g., Pickett et al., 2003), insisted that “if paraprofessionals are involved with students then they should be participating in meetings and their opinions should be noted.” More typical was the view that the way schools are or must be run prohibits involvement: “Times that meetings are held are generally not in the scheduled workday for a parapro.”

Table 10
Supervision (Frequency of Participation in Teams)

Teams	Frequency of Participation									
	Almost Never		Sometimes		Frequently		Almost Always		Mean	SD
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%		
Informal Teams	38	23%	68	42%	46	28%	11	7%	2.18	.87
Formal Teams	58	36%	60	37%	34	21%	10	6%	1.98	.91
IEP Meetings	51	31%	69	42%	33	20%	10	6%	2.01	.88
Teacher-Based Teams	82	51%	47	29%	21	13%	10	6%	1.74	.91
Whole-School Faculty Meetings	20	12%	41	25%	56	35%	45	28%	2.78	.99

Training

Tables 11 and 12 present the results for training. The survey did not address the type or amount of training, but did address degree of access to *high-quality* training. Results (see Table 11) show that consistent local access to such training occurs in just 27% of responding districts. Otherwise it is not accessible, inconsistently accessible, or accessible only in a remote location. One respondent confessed, “My district does not provide training for paraprofessionals. They are only are paid to attend work if the students for whom they are responsible are in school [i.e., if the student is absent, the parapro is told to stay home without pay.] ”

The plurality of districts represented by this sample relies on ESCs to provide high-quality training to their SPED paraprofessionals (see Table 12). But almost as many (about 38%) claim to provide it themselves.¹³ A proactive respondent reported,

This is an area I have recently tried to bolster. We are having a problem with retaining good, quality, paraprofessionals. I am putting on an 8-week mini training course for my paraprofessionals. About 20+ paraprofessionals [are] in the ESC MD [multiple disabilities] program. These classes are completely optional, but I was shocked to see how many people I already have signed up for them.

¹³ Recall that about 60% of responding districts are no better than “somewhat familiar” with standards for the role: unreported cross-tabulations show that districts with the lowest awareness of SPED paraprofessional standards conduct their own training much more frequently (60%) than those with highest awareness (5%). The decline is, in fact, linear across categories of awareness.

Table 11

Access to High-Quality Training

Response Categories	N	Percentage
No access	17	10.6%
Access at remote location	26	16.1%
Inconsistent local access	74	46.0%
Consistent local access	44	27.3%

Note. Mean = 2.90; SD = 0.92

Table 12

Training source

Response Categories	N	Percentage
District Itself	62	37.8%
Educational Service Center (ESC)	72	43.9%
State Support Team (SST)	26	14.6%
College or University	3	1.2%
Other	6	2.4%

Pay and Benefits

Tables 13 and 14 present the results for this set of indicators. Findings demonstrate the extent to which Ohio SPED paraprofessionals are indeed economically “marginalized.”

More than half of districts do not associate pay levels for SPED paraprofessionals with education credentials. Many reporting districts (about 42%) do make this association, however. Pay levels referenced in the survey item were tied to a reported \$23,000 Ohio annual full-time wage for SPED paraprofessionals, and this “average wage” is indeed reported as common by respondents. The distribution, however, shows strong positive skew: About half of the responding districts pay less than the average wage, and just a few (about 3%) claim to pay SPED paraprofessionals a higher-than-average wage. One respondent reported, “Our annual wage is \$14,709.” Another (perhaps referencing the average statewide salary or a tiered wage based on education) flatly asserted “This is NOT going to happen!” In other comments, respondents noted that paraprofessionals were often employed part-time and without benefits. A respondent who supported the tiered-wage approach observed, “If you want quality you need to pay, same as in nursing homes. However, more pay equates to more professional training and evaluations of on the job professionalism.”

Pay is the economic dimension of all five issues and the survey gathered many frank, even heated, comments about it. As one comment pointed out:

Because most IEP Meetings happen during the school day, the cost of paying two substitutes for the same classroom would be prohibitive. Moving the meeting to after school is not a good option because that would cost the district overtime pay.

The same observation applies to time for training, supervision, and structuring assignments. The most expensive time, though, would be the time needed for defining the role: the time of district leadership.

Table 13
SPED Parapro Pay Linked to Credentials

Linkage	N	Percent
No	83	52.5%
Yes	66	41.8%

Table 14
SPED Parapro Pay Level

Pay Level	N	Percent
Rather lower than average	79	50.8%
About the same as average	72	46.2%
Rather higher than average	5	3.2%

Note. Mean = 1.53; SD = 0.56

Discussion and Recommendations

The findings of this study add district-level detail to the extant literature by sketching the “landscape” in one state. For instance, research (Giangreco et al., 2009; Giangreco et al., 1997) and synthesis (Giangreco et al., 2010; Pickett et al., 2003) describe role definition as essential to the effective deployment of paraprofessionals, and the present study describes in some detail the antecedents of role confusion in the Local Education Agencies (districts) that must formally define and operationalize the role. Many Ohio districts, as this study discovered, are unaware of national and state standards that might help them understand the dimensions of the role despite employing and using many paraprofessionals—a situation consistent with the extant literature.

As another example, much of the literature describes lack of supervision as a persistent condition of paraprofessionals’ employment (e.g., Wallace et al., 2001; Webster et al., 2010; Whitburn, 2013). The present study ties substantive supervision to Ohio’s use of teams (including the informal instructional team of teacher and paraprofessional). Teams provide a locus for direction and feedback to paraprofessionals. This is a form of substantive supervision, and one reads in the findings the continuing marginalization of paraprofessionals in terms of their inclusion.

The findings, we think, provide a district-level outlook that suggests widespread (but hardly universal) inattention not only to the role, but to the actual practices of paraprofessionals. Some comments from the survey are indeed, in this respect, discouraging, but others are encouraging and insightful. It seems that a minority of district leaders in the study state *are* interested and seemingly attentive to the issues, and some report they are taking steps to structure and support the SPED paraprofessional role and its functions.

District-Level Status Dynamics and SPED Paraprofessionals

At the top level of inattentiveness to SPED paraprofessionals, one finds *role definition*. Without adequate role definition, assignment, supervision, and training are not quite pointless, but are likely to be much less effective than they might otherwise be. The findings develop greater detail of “role

confusion”—and its results and antecedents— than have been previously reported (see e.g., Giangreco et al., 2010; Pickett et al., 2003).

Confusion seems to be based on ignorance of authoritative statements describing the role (national and state standards). Such ignorance is likely (or possibly) also the result of inattention to paraprofessionals and their role in general. Time is money, and perhaps the default position is the result of a desire not to waste the most expensive time (district leadership time) on figuring out how best to deploy the least expensive time (paraprofessional time). It makes a short-sighted kind of economic sense, but it does not make organizational sense—nor educational sense.

Certainly, roles (really) are what practitioners ultimately do in them, but professional organizations attempt to distinguish roles more formally in order to support¹⁴ organizational efficiency and effectiveness. In the data from this study, one sees that the SPED paraprofessional role is frequently treated as *whatever paraprofessionals do* (cf. Biddle, 1979; March & Simon, 1993) in the absence of attentive consideration of the role and the development of those in the role. With such a careless approach, assignment, supervision, and training will occur haphazardly and perhaps prove organizationally dysfunctional—as critical scholars have concluded it *is* at least in some places (see, e.g., Giangreco et al. 2010; Webster et al., 2010).

Recommendations for Research

Research about paraprofessionals exists at an academic margin, but this margin harbors rich research opportunities for scholars willing to go there. A key feature of that academic marginality concerns the low status of students, the low pay of the workers, and the organizational marginality of the work. These realities render the work interesting, the effort to examine it productive, and the resulting research findings and insights useful. It also means that funding is not ample.

Recent developments in the limited empirical literature on paraprofessionals (Giangreco et al., 2013) have taken a systemic turn, meaning a turn towards understanding school- and district-level phenomena that influence the effective use of SPED paraprofessionals. Multi-level modeling is, of course, one statistical approach to dealing with the variability by levels (as with Giangreco et al., 2013). Statewide research about the role of district leadership in attending to the paraprofessional role is another approach. This study is a beginning in that alternative approach. We have a few suggestions for follow-up studies related to the present effort.

Additional work relevant to the dimensions of the role in organizational context (e.g., assignment, supervision) is necessary. Instruments could, for example, be developed to provide reliable (and even valid) measures of assignment and supervision. It seems, from this study, that many districts are unaware of the possibilities for assigning and reassigning paraprofessionals. Further, an unexamined default position places sole responsibility for supervising and developing paraprofessionals into the portfolio of teachers. Instruments that assessed how paraprofessionals actually were deployed and supervised would help leadership teams focus their attention on their own responsibility to conceptualize and evolve the role.

¹⁴ Biddle (1979, p. 394) provides a relevant definition: “Two roles are said to be differentiated if they have but few behaviors in common.”

Similarly, deeper empirical dives into any of the five themes (role, assignment, etc.) would be possible. These investigations could involve multiple states or a single state. The single-state approach makes sense because State Education Agencies (SEAs) are the ultimate education authorities in the United States. Their legislation and regulations govern, if not the role, then the parameters (e.g., funding levels, preparation requirements) in which the role might be defined and paraprofessionals deployed. Of course, groups of states can be categorized as similar or dissimilar with respect to the paraprofessional role and might then be studied on that basis.

The economics of SPED paraprofessional use seems to be in need of particular scrutiny for a variety of reasons. A national study of district arrangements would seem to be useful here. SPeNSE (2001) is the only somewhat related nationwide effort made to date, and paraprofessionals were just one role in a study of all special education personnel. One should not anticipate a large-scale federally funded survey to concentrate on paraprofessionals, however. We would instead advise fellow researchers to plan modestly and focused efforts with resources from whatever sources might be available (cf. Webster et al., 2010 for a UK counterexample). For this project, a mixed-methods approach (e.g., combining interviews with surveys) would provide insights about dynamics that quantitative data alone might miss.

Another possibility is the study of outliers. The literature currently lacks contrasts between districts that are using paraprofessionals effectively (or purposefully) and those that are not. Researchers and national groups have, after all, defined what effective (or at least purposeful) practice looks like (e.g., Council for Exceptional Children, 2011; Giangreco et al., 2013; Giangreco et al., 2001; Pickett et al., 2003). Developing criteria to identify suitable districts for outlier studies is familiar territory. But it hasn't yet been done in this field. Such studies, however, should approach prescriptions for "best practice" skeptically. Circumspection is necessary in view of the fact that a variety of conceptions of the role are possible and are being debated currently (see, e.g., Giangreco et al., 2013).

Finally, researchers can see in this field of study yet another instance of deeply structured inequity at work in American education (see e.g., Tye, 2000). The lowest-status workers, whose absence would make schooling more difficult for professional educators, are asked to work with the lowest-status students performing poorly paid functions (Giangreco et al., 2010; Webster et al., 2010). From this social justice perspective, unparalleled opportunities for research exist: studies of the lifeworlds of paraprofessionals, and their students and families; studies of organizational realities for paraprofessionals (relationships with teachers, with administrators, with wage and benefit issues, with unions); and studies of paraprofessionals' engagement both with pedagogy and with the contestable construct of "professionalism" generally. Historical literature on the origins of paraprofessional staffing (e.g., Gartner, Jackson, & Reissman, 1977) is particularly useful for this purpose.

Recommendations for District-Level Practice

The research literature and informant interviews supporting the design of the present study anticipated that the practicalities of district experience would turn out to be problematic, and the study's findings mostly supported that prediction. So what, now, might district leaders who wish to deploy SPED paraprofessionals in ways that support organizational effectiveness and efficiency instead of undermining it, do?

Systematizing leadership attention offers a salient point of leverage, we suspect. Systematic leadership attention involves regular review and discussion. It should be easy, but clearly it is difficult. Most districts that are now doing very little, however, have the capacity to do *somewhat* better immediately. Some could do a lot better. In this light, as a way to systematize leadership attention, we think that districts should:

1. **Form a leadership team to attend to the issues.** The team needs to examine the relevant standards and the varied literature and interpret their review of these sources in consideration of district circumstances. This work, again, is more difficult than it seems. The difficulties are foundational as the next recommendation indicates.
2. **Orient the leadership team to push back** against the marginalization of low-status students and SPED paraprofessionals. Support for inclusive practice is uncommon in American schooling (see, e.g., deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999; Sturges, 2015; Tye, 2000), but it is clearly possible (e.g., Tefs & Telfer, 2013).
3. **Work up, not down.** Starting with assignment, conceptualize the role. Generic templates will not suffice; the hard work involves assessing local contexts and capacities and planning accordingly. Common across contexts, of course, is attention to practices that will improve the educational lot of low-status students.¹⁵
4. **Unroll planned changes** slowly and with continuing attention. Organizational context matters. Smaller systems, operating on a more intimate scale, should be able to accomplish substantial change more easily than large systems, for instance.

Limitations

Landscape studies merely describe. They cannot explain what they find (except interpretively in consideration of other studies). They cannot precisely specify causes. Their possible usefulness, moreover, partly depends on the quality and accuracy of the descriptions provided. Future research *should* develop hypotheses relevant to the indicators and to district-level influences (including contextual variables), and *should* validate appropriate measures (see recommendations).

¹⁵ Some teams might be able to do this work themselves. Many teams, though, will probably need support from organizations with experience and capacity related to SPED paraprofessionals (e.g., ESCs and SSTs: in Ohio).

One circumstance possibly limiting the study's accuracy was the poor response rate, particularly from superintendents. Even though district (superintendent) and ESC locales (ECS/SST respondents) resemble statewide averages for these groups, the resultant error bands are somewhat larger than convention dictates as acceptable (95% confidence level, 5% confidence interval). Indeed, for both superintendents (n=614) and ESC/SST staff (n=170), the study would need about twice as many subjects as responded in order to be able to claim that findings were representative.¹⁶

With this caution in view, it may be useful to treat the findings more like those from a case study than like those from a generalizable survey. Some of the findings (e.g., the relative absence of paraprofessionals from teams) are likely characteristics (if not strictly representative). Findings from the study are likely to resemble situations in states that are similar to Ohio (e.g., populous states with many small districts, possibly including Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Indiana, Texas). Certainly, the degree of possible similarity is enough to support the development of hypotheses, constructs, and assessments for investigating district practices and policies in other states. While readers should not anticipate exact similarities even in similar states, the patterns across all findings are consistent with the conclusions in extant research.

Survey research itself embeds problems with respondent "voice." In this survey, however, we provided opportunities for more extended commentary, and received 313 comments of varying length (i.e., from several words to four or five sentences). Opportunities for good qualitative studies of districts' experiences with paraprofessionals obviously abound, and the extant literature, including this study, could provide guidance for developing promising research questions.

All in all, and limitations taken into consideration, this study does suggest leverage points for further study and the improvement of district-level practice, and not only in Ohio. Further, the especially poor response rate (18%) among superintendents may be a telling finding in its own right. The majority of Ohio district superintendents seems—perhaps understandably—too concerned with other matters to prioritize the challenge of improving the effectiveness of district use of SPED paraprofessionals.

A Moral Imperative

Although the point of special education is to better attend to the schooling of individual children with special needs, the industrial template of schooling, in the view of some observers, makes a genuine response of this sort unlikely (see, e.g., Tye, 2000; White, 2011). One must observe as well, the tendency of American schooling to allocate whatever organizational capacity that does exist to high-status schools and high-status students within schools (Goldhaber, Lavery & Theobald, 2015; Tye, 2000). Predictably, on this basis, schools with many SPED paraprofessionals and many students with disabilities would struggle to develop the requisite capacity.

The research literature on SPED paraprofessionals suggests to us, as it has to others, that the main purpose of SPED paraprofessionals is *to buffer the schooling system (as a whole) from itself* (see, e.g.,

¹⁶ The obtained sample size of n = 111 for superintendents and for the ESC/SST panel (n = 73) inflates the margin of error from 5% to 8.5% for both groups. If one were to consider the respondents to represent a single group (n = 774), margin-of-error inflation would be from 5% to 6.5% (n = 184 respondents total).

Gartner, Jackson, & Reissman, 1977; Suter & Giangreco, 2009; Webster et al., 2010).¹⁷ Without them schools would indeed struggle to cope (Webster et al., 2010, p. 33). The standards for SPED paraprofessionals (e.g., Council for Exceptional Children, 2011) and the reality of what so many of them find themselves doing are worlds apart.

We can surely do much better. Some district leaders already are, more could follow suit, and the forgoing recommendations—and much else in the professional literature—suggests how. Doing so is a matter of care and attention from district leadership.

Author Notes

Craig Howley is a Senior Researcher at WordFarmers Associates (retired from Ohio University).

Aimee Howley is Principal Investigator at WordFarmers Associates (Professor Emerita at Ohio University).

Deborah Telfer is Director and Research Associate at the systems Development and Improvement Center at the University of Cincinnati.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Craig Howley at howleycb@gmail.com.

¹⁷ When Webster and colleagues (2010, p. 330) write that the system “could not cope,” they point to this buffering function of SPED paraprofessionals.

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Appendix A: Study Variables
(24 study variables and 4 district context variables)

Familiarity with the variety of standards

Item text: Various professional groups (e.g., the Council for Exceptional Children) have defined the roles and capacities of SPED paraprofessionals. How familiar is your district with such descriptions? *See Table 2 for response categories*

Frequency of SPED parapro job description review

Item text: How often does your district revise the job descriptions) for SPED paraprofessionals? *See Table 3 for response categories.*

Frequency with which intervention specialists serve on TBTs

Item text: Intervention specialists (i.e., special education teachers) sometimes participate in Teacher-Based Teams (TBTs). In your district how often do they participate in TBTs? *See Table 4 for response categories.*

Frequency of planning to fade SPED parapro support

Item text: How does your district practice the fading of SPED parapro support? *See Table 5 for response categories.*

GENED teachers' receptivity to inclusion

Item text: How might you characterize the reception of general education teachers in your district to the inclusion of special education students in their classrooms? (please select an estimate) *See Table 6 for response categories.*

Frequency of assignment to three contexts (3 variables)

Item text: About what percentage of SPED paraprofessionals in your district are assigned to the following contexts? (percentages are approximate; please try to estimate as best you can) *See Table 7 for variables and response categories: single student, SPED classroom, GENED classroom*

Importance of particular tasks (5 variables)

Item text: The SPED paraprofessional role might include a variety of activities. Please rate the prevalence of the following activities in your district. (please use the pull-down menus to select your rating: 1=least important... 5=most important) *See Table 8 for variables and response categories: clerical, personal care, functional skills, academic instruction, support for students with LI conditions.*

Fading concerns (2 variables)

Item text: To what extent does fading entail the following difficulties in your district? (a) parental insistence on direct support from the SPED paraprofessional; (b) teacher insistence on direct support from the SPED paraprofessional. *See Table 9 for response categories.*

Supervision: participation in teams (5 variables)

Item text: How often do SPED paraprofessionals participate in the following sorts of teams and meetings in your district (please try to estimate as best you can, across all schools in the district) *See Table 10 for meeting types and response categories.*

Training source

Item text: SPED paraprofessionals need training for professional development and licensure. Please select the source of training most common in your district [item is forced choice]. *See Table 11: our district, another district, ESC, SST, college or university, other.*

Access to training

Item text: To what extent does your district have access to high-quality professional development for SPED paraprofessionals (including PD to qualify for licensure)? *See Table 12 for response categories.*

SPED parapro pay linked to credentials

Item text: Does your district differentiate pay for SPED paraprofessionals on the basis of educational qualifications? *See Table 13 for response categories.*

SPED parapro pay level

Item text: The mean annual wage (or salary) for SPED paraprofessionals in <STATE> is about \$23,000. In your estimate, does your district have a rather lower, about the same, or rather higher average salary (or annual wage)? *See Table 14 for response categories.*

Exploratory context variables (4 variables describing districts)

Source: *Common Core of Data* (data set for 2012-2013): <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/ccddata.asp>

1. rural or non-rural (12 locale codes recoded dichotomously)
2. student membership (total student membership for the district)
3. proportion of students with African American heritage (African American enrollment divided by student membership)
4. percentage of students with IEPs (students with IEPs divided by student membership)