

# Paraeducator Relationships with Parents of Students with Significant Disabilities

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationships between parents of students with significant disabilities and paraeducators who supported the students in inclusive educational settings to gain an understanding from several perspectives on the role paraeducator–parent relationships played in education of students with significant support needs. The study included the perspectives of parents, paraeducators, and teachers of students with significant support needs. We conducted in-depth interviews with 17 participants; 16 of them represented three program sites for students with significant support needs in the same district, and 1 was the district coordinator of programs for students with significant support needs. Results revealed five types of relationships between parents and paraeducators: close and personal friendship, routine limited interactions, routine extended interactions, tense relationship, and minimal relationship. Results indicated that it is important for paraeducators and parents to communicate because paraeducators spend more time with the students and gain insight into their academic and social behaviors. However, for paraeducator–parent relationships to be beneficial in the students' education, they must remain within the limits and boundaries established by the teacher.

instruction (French & Pickett, 1997; Marks, Schrader, & Levine, 1999; Wadsworth & Knight, 1996). Paraeducators often spend more time and have more contact with students who have severe disabilities, compared to teachers and other service providers. As a result, paraeducators play important roles in the education and life of the students they serve (French & Chopra, 1999; Friend & Cook, 1996; Giangreco & Putnam, 1991).

At the same time, the perceived role of the parents of children with disabilities has changed. In the early part of the 20th century, parents were viewed as the primary cause of their child's disability. Now parents are often viewed as valued agents who provide positive changes in the lives of their children (Paul & Simeonsson, 1993; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). Since the 1960s, parents of students with disabilities have been the primary driving force behind the passage of major laws pertaining to inclusive education for their children (Bennett, Deluca, & Bruns, 1997; Garrick-Duhaney, Spencer, & Salend, 2000). "Exceptional" parents are now recognized as the best advocates and initiators of reform and as partners and collaborators with the school in the care, treatment, and education of their children (Dennis, Williams, Giangreco, & Cloninger, 1993; Guralnick, 1994; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997).

Thus, both paraeducators and parents are major role players in the education of children with severe disabilities in inclusive school settings. The special education literature discusses at great length the family–school collaboration, parent–professional partnerships, or alliances that focus primarily on the relationship between teachers and other school professionals (e.g., psychologists, speech therapists, school nurses,

**I**N RECENT YEARS, PARAEDUCATORS HAVE BECOME the primary means of support for students with disabilities in inclusive settings (French & Pickett, 1997; Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Haas, 1997). To conform to the new ideology of inclusion and rapidly changing societal and legal priorities and demands, the role of the paraeducator has expanded to provide direct services that include monitoring of behavior as well as individual- and small-group

school psychologists) and parents (Dinnebeil, Hale, & Rule, 1996; Dunst & Paget, 1991; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). These discussions fail to mention paraeducator–parent relationships regarding the education of students with disabilities. There are multiple reasons to explore this relationship, particularly where needs of children with severe disabilities are concerned.

First, in a recent study, parents reported having close relationships with paraeducators and valued that relationship because it helped them and their children to participate more fully in the education process (French & Chopra, 1999). Second, further research reveals that the paraeducator serves as the person with whom parents of students with disabilities in inclusive settings have daily contact regarding their child's performance (Bennett et al., 1997; Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; French & Chopra, 1999; Marks et al., 1999). Third, several authors have stated that the practice of employing paraeducators to facilitate inclusive education of students with disabilities in general education has emerged out of perceived necessity and parental pressure (French & Pickett, 1997; Giangreco et al., 1997; Haas, 1997). Fourth, paraeducators often get to know the students they support better than anyone else at school (Coots, Bishop, & Grentot-Scheyer, 1998; Giangreco et al., 1997; Hanson, Gutierrez, Morgan, Brennan, & Zercher, 1997; Marks et al., 1999). Fifth, paraeducators typically live in the community in which they work and have opportunities to interact with the students and their families in, as well as outside of, school (Chopra et al., this issue; French & Chopra, 1999). Finally, paraeducators have been recognized as important links or liaisons in parent–school–community relations (Chopra et al., this issue; French & Chopra, 1999; French & Pickett, 1997; Genzuck & Baca, 1998; Miramontes, 1990; Nittoli & Giloth, 1997; Pickett, 1989; Rubin & Long, 1994; Rueda & DeNeve, 1999).

Except for references to existing relationships cited in the above studies, empirical information about the nature of the relationships between parents and paraeducators is nonexistent. Some of the questions that remain unexamined and unanswered are “What kinds of relationships exist between parents and paraeducators?” “What factors are associated with the existing relationships between parents and paraeducators?” and “How do the relationships between parents and paraeducators impact the education of students with significant needs?”

## METHOD

### Sample Selection Procedure

Purposeful sampling techniques were used to identify participants who would generate rich information to address the exploratory nature of the study. The selected school district has a reputation of being effective in terms of its implementation of inclusion policies, paraeducator training, and parent

involvement. The study sites included three elementary Significant Support Needs (SSN) programs in a single school district. The district SSN coordinator helped in the identification of the sites on the basis of four criteria:

1. The paraeducators have worked with the same child for at least 6 months.
2. The paraeducators worked one-on-one with the same students on a daily basis.
3. The students with significant or severe needs were included 70% or more of the time in general education classrooms.
4. The SSN teacher was willing to participate in the study and help in securing consent from other participants (i.e., the parents and the paraeducators).

All these conditions were met at three sites, Mount Evans Elementary, Riverside Elementary, and Fox Trail Elementary (see Note 1).

### Respondents

A total of 17 persons were interviewed: 16 respondents at the three program sites and the SSN specialist. At each site, the perspectives from three categories of participants (parents, paraeducators, SSN teachers) were gathered, thus triangulating and corroborating evidence using different sources of data (Creswell, 1997; Miles & Huberman, 1994). At Mount Evans Elementary and at Fox Trail Elementary, the two paraeducators alternated working with two different students at different times of the day, but at Riverside Elementary, the two paraeducators alternated delivering services to a single student. At Fox Trail, a private-duty nurse stayed all day in the school for one particular student but not necessarily *with* the student. She supported the student primarily out of the classroom with tube feeding and toileting. Table 1 presents a summary of the categories and locations of the participants. The level of needs of the five students whose parents, paraeducators, and teacher participated in the study was significant or severe. To provide a context to the study, Table 2 presents an overview of the background information about each of the five students at the three sites.

### Data Collection

Teachers, paraeducators, and parents provided basic demographic information on forms that asked for educational background, experience with inclusion, number of professionals/paraprofessionals they worked with, and level of the special needs of the students they worked with. The information gathered through these information sheets is summarized in Tables 3 and 4.

**TABLE 1. Respondents by Site**

Program site	Category of participants				Total
	SSN teacher	Paraeducators	Parents	Other	
Mount Evans	1	2	2		5
Riverside	1	2	1		4
Fox Trail	1	2	3	Private nurse—1	7
District level				SSN specialist—1	1
Grand total	3	6	6	2	17

Note. SSN = Significant Support Needs.

**TABLE 2. Selected Student Profile**

Student characteristic	Mount Evans		Riverside		Fox Trail
	Child 1	Child 2	Child 1	Child 2	Child 1
Gender	Girl	Boy	Girl	Girl	Girl
Age	6	7	9	7	7
Grade	1st	1st	3rd	1st	2nd
Diagnosis	Down syndrome	Autism	Cerebral palsy	Smith-Lemli-Opitz syndrome	No formal diagnosis
Support needs	Motor, academic, speech	Behavior, academic	Physical and motor, easily distracted	Multi-intense	Multi-intense

### Interviews

The interviews allowed participants to express themselves freely while addressing the research questions through the use of an interview guide. The guide was composed of questions on identical themes for each category of participants. This ensured that the focus for each interview remained the same. The themes included general questions about the level of special needs of the students included in the study, roles of parent/paraprofessional/professional in inclusion, relationships among team members with a special emphasis on parent-paraprofessional, and implications of these relationships on education of the students. During the course of every interview, more probing questions were added to seek further elaboration of each participant's unique response to a particular question. Interviews averaged 1 hour in length and were tape-recorded. The interviewer remained focused, listened closely, probed as needed, and took field notes.

### Data Analysis

Interview tapes were transcribed verbatim. In addition, the interviewer reviewed the field notes taken during the inter-

views and recorded reflective notes after listening to each tape. To make sense of the data, the researcher listened to each taped interview and read each transcript several times while writing common themes in the margins of the transcriptions. Next, the researchers transported the written data to QSR\*NVivo, a computerized qualitative data analysis program. A coding tree was created that reflected the research questions and initially identified themes. Subsequently, each data document was coded. Then, reports were generated on each theme, resulting in re-examination of data and reorganization of themes. Revisitation of data and re-examination of the themes continued throughout the writing process and eventually resulted in rich interpretation of the data.

## RESULTS

The purpose of the study was to explore the relationships that existed between parents and paraeducators in the context of children with significant needs. The study revealed five different types of relationships: close and personal friendship, routine limited interactions, routine extended interactions,

TABLE 3. Profile of Paraeducator Participants

Paraeducator characteristic	Mount Evans		Riverside		Fox Trail			
	Paraeducator 1	Paraeducator 2	Paraeducator 1	Paraeducator 2	Paraeducator 1	Paraeducator 2		
Education level	2 years in college in Europe		High school diploma		4-year college	2-year college	Master's in nursing	Some college—no degree
Teaching license	None		None		Yes (non-USA)	None	RNP	None
Total experience	3 yrs.		5.5 yrs.		2 yrs. <sup>a</sup>	4 yrs.	1 yr. 10 mos.	8 yrs.
Worked as 1-on-1 paraeducator	1.5 yrs.		5 yrs.		2 yrs.	2.5 yrs.	1 yr. 10 mos.	8 yrs.
Worked with student in the study (yrs.)	Child 1	Child 2	Child 1	Child 2	1.5	2.5	1	1.5
	1.5	0.5	0.5	0.5				

Note. RNP = registered nursing practitioner.

<sup>a</sup>This paraeducator has additional 21 years as a remedial teacher in her native country.

TABLE 4. Profile of SSN Teacher Participants at the Selected Program Sites

SSN teacher	Mount Evans		Fox Trail		Riverside
Educational level	Bachelor's degree		Master's degree		Master's degree
Teaching license or endorsement	Early childhood special education		Moderate, severe needs and early childhood special education		Early childhood special education
Total experience as teacher (yrs.)	1.5		2		13
Total experience in the current SSN program (yrs.)	0.5		2		1.5
	0.5		2		1.5
Worked with students in the study (yrs.)	Child 1	Child 2	Child 1	Child 2	1.5
	0.5	0.5	2	2	

minimal relationship, and tense relationship. It was found that parents and paraeducators generally communicated directly or indirectly, but the level and nature of their communication varied from situation to situation.

**Parent-Paraeducator Relationships at Mount Evans Elementary**

At Mount Evans Elementary, two kinds of relationships were found between the parents and paraeducators who worked

with their children: routine limited interactions and a close relationship and friendship.

**Routine Limited Interactions.** Routine limited interactions involved professional, brief, and succinct exchanges on a daily basis between the paraeducators and parents. All participants at the site reported daily contact between the paraeducators and parents. The paraeducator who was assigned to the child at that time was the person to whom the parents spoke. These daily limited interactions occurred as

parents dropped their children off in the morning or picked them up at the end of the school day. The paraeducators described the nature of the conversations as brief, professional, and pleasant. They simply reported what happened on a particular day with the child. Their conversations did not include discussions or decisions about matters related to the child's progress, behavior, or performance in the classroom. Paraeducators did not give details of any sensitive performance or behavior issues regarding the child. One paraeducator explained,

I do not pass judgment. I am not a psychologist or a psychiatrist. I will not diagnose the situation. . . . I will not go deep searching why it happened, because I do not have the background knowledge. . . . I do not know why it happened.

Those explanations, in her opinion, needed to come from the licensed teachers, the classroom teacher, or the SSN teacher. The other paraeducator reported that she did not get "into the 'nitty gritty'" or make judgmental comments to the parents. She specified that she refrained from giving her opinions in terms of "what should be done" and "how it should be done." She also viewed herself as someone who "tells the parents about the day," but, as she says, "when it gets down to the finer detail, that needs to come from the teacher."

Both mothers confirmed they talked to the paraeducators about general matters such as what happened in the morning, during lunchtime, on the playground, or in the classroom. As one mother stated, "I have never really . . . discussed with them [the paraeducators] what's going on academically with Clare [the child]."

**Factors Contributing to Routine Limited Interactions:** The relationship characterized by routine limited interactions between parents and paraeducators was structured and managed by the teacher who was highly involved and who communicated regularly with the parents. However, during the first week of her tenure in this program, the teacher established boundaries around the interactions between the paraeducators and parents and became the primary contact person. Realizing the importance of the daily contact between parent and paraeducators, the SSN teacher encouraged paraeducators to exchange information with the parent in terms of the child's morning at home and the day at school. She said, "I think it's really crucial that they [parents and paraeducators] communicate. I never want . . . para[s] [see Note 2] to feel like they can't talk to a parent, because . . . they have more information than I do on most days because they are more with the child."

In her ongoing formal and informal conversations with the paraeducators, the teacher cautioned them against "analyzing the situations concerning children to their parents." She stressed that it was her job to analyze and diagnose. She advised paraeducators to be honest and forthcoming with parents and to "tell them what happened, what was done, or to explain the plan." She clarified that any plan conveyed to par-

ents by paraeducators had previously been discussed with her. The teacher chose to do this because she did not want parents to feel unsupported or overwhelmed with "things coming at them and feeling that there's no solution." She believed that the parents needed to know about the problems with the child but that they should be communicated in a manner that was solution oriented.

When the situation was more severe than a minor behavior infraction or sickness, the teacher communicated directly with the parents but kept the rest of the team informed. She communicated regularly in a scheduled weekly meeting with the parents of all the children on her caseload. The parents, therefore, had an opportunity to address all their questions/concerns on a regular basis. The teacher shared that in her 14 years of experience in special education, she had seen several similar instances where situations "got out of hand" when the special education teacher rarely communicated with parents. In such situations, she noted, paraeducators who worked day after day with the same child became too involved with parents and sometimes overstepped the boundaries of their role. To illustrate her point, she related an incident that occurred the previous year, when she was not yet employed at the school. A paraeducator who worked closely with parents overstepped her bounds by writing a long letter about the child's behaviors; she added her interpretations on why he was doing these behaviors and what she thought might be wrong with him psychologically. According to the SSN teacher, the letter "really, really shook the family" because they believed that it was the teacher's, not the paraeducator's responsibility to analyze their child's behavior. This was the reason that the SSN teacher had decided to take an active role herself and clarified the role of paraeducators in communicating with parents.

Both paraeducators and parents expressed that they had a clear understanding of what information to share with each other through ongoing conversations with the SSN teacher. The parents viewed paraeducators as the persons who supported their children under the guidance and supervision of the SSN teacher; the latter closely supervised their relationship with the paraeducators as well. With the SSN teacher's accessibility and availability to the parents, they considered her the person ultimately responsible for their child's education. The following statement from one of the mothers summed up what the others had to say and conveyed a sense of satisfaction with the situation: "Joan [the SSN teacher] definitely sets the tone and they [paraeducators] know where the boundaries are. . . . I like that because I feel like she's the boss and they [the paraeducators] know that. And so if there's a problem, they seem to go through her."

**Close Relationship and Friendship.** A close relationship and friendship existed primarily as an out-of-school relationship between one of the two paraeducators and the parent of the 6-year-old first grader with Down syndrome at Mount Evans Elementary. Their friendship had developed during the

child's kindergarten year, when the paraeducator worked one-on-one with the child. Both parties reported that since the beginning of that school year, they had communicated in a limited manner as described in the preceding section while at school, but they had continued to maintain their personal friendship outside of school. The paraeducator forcefully stated, "In school, I deal with Judy [the mother] in a professional manner . . . I have a very sincere but a very personal relationship with her. And personally, I really, really try to separate the two [relationships]."

The SSN teacher was aware of the close friendship between the mother and the paraeducator, but it did not seem to be an issue with either one. She confirmed that the parent and the paraeducator interacted in a very professional manner in school and referred to their friendship as an "outside relationship," separate from their "school relationship."

**Factors Contributing to the Close Relationship and Friendship:** The paraeducator and the mother each explained that the relationship began before the child started kindergarten, when the paraeducator went to observe the child in her preschool because she knew she would be working with this child the following year. When the child started kindergarten, the paraeducator's presence made her transition from preschool to kindergarten in a new elementary school easier because the paraeducator "was there as the person that she knew" and "was not a stranger to her." The mother was touched by the paraeducator's devotion to her job, and she developed a great deal of respect for her. The mother felt that the paraeducator had "gone beyond the line of duty" to help her child.

In addition, during the previous year, the circumstances led the parents and paraeducator to align with one another. The previous teacher had communicated very little with the parents. The child was included very little and was alone with the paraeducator much of the day. The mother began to depend on the paraeducator for information about her child's education. The mother said, "I think she [the paraeducator] kind of helped fill that gap because she knew I wasn't getting information from the teacher." The paraeducator was impressed with the mother's interest and involvement in her daughter's education. The paraeducator explained, "She was always there looking for ways to know how she could help Clare [the child] at home."

During the course of the year, their professional relationship of mutual respect and trust progressed into a close friendship. Another factor that contributed to their closeness was that they lived in the same subdivision; they often ran into each other at the neighborhood swimming pool. The following statements are reflective of their friendship and admiration for each other. The paraeducator said,

She [the mother] is extremely easy in a positive way of getting along with, communicating with, talking to, and it was . . . natural. None of us worked at this. I did not really put a lot of effort

in to get this relationship or get this mother's trust or her confidentiality, not at all. It just naturally progressed.

Similarly, the mother indicated,

She [the paraeducator] just really clicked with Clare. I mean, from the get-go just loved working with Clare; I saw that she just went above and beyond, you know, working with Clare . . . It's more than just a job to her.

### ***Impact of the Paraeducator-Parent Relationships at Mount Evans Elementary***

Each participant had experienced both kinds of relationships between parents and paraeducators. They all perceived routine conversations between parents and paraeducators to be important and helpful, particularly in the context of the children who had no or limited verbal abilities as they kept everyone informed about what was going on in the child's day at home and school. Both mothers reported that to get this information from the paraeducators, they preferred to bring their children to school or pick them up from school or both. The paraeducator explained how it made her job easier to know what went on with the child before he or she came to school:

You cannot spend a whole morning wondering, my goodness, what is wrong with him this morning? Maybe he watched a certain TV show or they went on this walk or they went to the park or they went to the movies . . . and that can affect his school day the next day.

In her opinion, it was irrelevant whether she liked or did not like parents of the children she worked with, but it was important to her to maintain "a professional and to-the-point relationship that was . . . in the interest of the child."

The other paraeducator interviewed also preferred relationships with parents that were professional rather than close and personal. She shared her experiences from previous years, when she worked one-on-one with a child with special needs over a period of 3 years. She was exclusively responsible for the academic, as well as all other, needs of the child during the day. The child's parents were very appreciative of her because "she was there for [their child]." The parents saw her more and communicated with her more than the teacher. Due to these circumstances, she and the parents grew close. However, this familiarity made the parents overly dependent on her and made their expectations of her unrealistic. She elaborated, "Sometimes parents put too much stock in the person that works so closely with their child, and then they see something and maybe they don't like it, and they can turn on that person."

In the opinion of the paraeducator and parent, the current situation, in which the SSN teacher was the primary contact person for the parent, worked better. They both admitted that they were a little unsure about the situation right after the SSN teacher came into the program and set boundaries around communication between paraeducators and families.

Another change that impacted the relationship was that the teacher scheduled the paraeducators so that they worked with Clare only part of the day. They both reported that it did not take them long to realize that these changes were positive. The paraeducator reported feeling relieved that the responsibility for Clare's education was shared and that a licensed person was overseeing it. She explained, "It was a big burden off me." The mother was impressed with the paraeducator's support of Clare the previous year but expressed that the current situation was "fantastic and working much better now with Joan [the SSN teacher] in charge." She further explained, "I know I am getting the best services. Last year, I know the paraeducator was wonderful, but I was not sure if Clare was getting the best." The reason, she shared, was the lack of involvement of the previous SSN teacher. Both the paraeducator and the parent expressed that the change in their level of interactions in school had not impacted their out-of-school personal friendship in any way.

### ***Parent-Paraeducator Relationships at Riverside Elementary***

**Routine Extended Interactions.** The third type of relationship that this study revealed was characterized by routine extended interactions between a parent and two paraeducators who shared the responsibility of her child. The mother and the paraeducators maintained daily face-to-face contact and had extensive conversations when she brought the child to school every morning and picked her up from school every afternoon. All participants interviewed at the school confirmed that the parent communicated with paraeducators more than she did with any other school personnel. The nature of the communication involved not only sharing general information about what happened with the child at school or at home but also discussing the child's educational program, such as what was taught, how it was taught, and what the parent needed to do at home for consistency with the strategies followed at the school.

The mother reported talking more to the two paraeducators than the teachers because the former worked more with her child, but she reported communicating with the teachers, too. She believed,

To be successful, everybody has to communicate. It can't be that the parent just goes to one person [the teacher] and then that person relays the message to the paras. That will not work, because then you don't get the right communication path down.

One of the paraeducators respected the mother's need for daily face-to-face communication and always made an attempt to provide that to her. This was not something she did for all the parents with whom she worked. She explained,

You work with each parent differently . . . I think Karen [the mother] . . . feels like if she takes the time to come down here and pick up her child, then you need to take the time to tell her what's going on or . . . something special happened in the classroom or something.

She kept the mother informed about what was being taught in the classroom and how she was presenting it to the child. Her purpose of passing on this information was to give the parent ideas about what he or she needed to work on with the child at home "because it's a two-way street. . . . We can't do it by ourselves."

The other paraeducator reported that she maintained a purely professional relationship with the mother but "knew her well" and had "a good relationship with her." She admitted being close to the child, whom she had promised to stay in touch with and become pen pals with after she (the paraeducator) moved back to her native country at end of the school year. She had explained to the child that after she left, their relationship would change "because then she [the child] will be working with another para, and I'll just be her close friend."

**Factors Contributing to Routine Extended Interactions.** The following two factors are associated with this relationship.

**Parent's demand for daily detailed communication.** Over the years, the mother had made it clear to the school that she wanted to stay involved in her daughter's education on a daily basis and therefore needed to communicate with someone every day. In previous years, there had been instances when the mother had taken matters to the principal and assistant principal when she had felt "unheard and not listened to." The SSN teacher had been aware of the situation in the past. She accepted the mother's need for daily communication with regard to her daughter and believed that her demand for a daily report on her daughter was not unreasonable. She remarked, "If it is important to her to have the information, we need to provide it." As a result, the SSN teacher encouraged the paraeducators to be responsive to the mother and share information. The SSN teacher reported that on any given day, she rotated among six students that she had on her caseload and therefore spent less time with the student than did the paraeducators. In her opinion, the paraeducators were in a better position to give daily updates to the mother.

**Parent's trust in paraeducators.** The teacher indicated that the mother trusted these two paraeducators because she found them competent in two different areas; one was in read-

ing and the other in math. The mother had always stressed that she wanted paraeducators who could teach, as “she did not want anybody as a babysitter in there with Aubrey [the child].”

The mother confirmed that she trusted these two paraeducators and was particularly complimentary of one of the paraeducators who “is very well qualified and is doing a great job and is keeping Aubrey [the child] pretty much on track for reading for her age and grade level, which is great, because she knows different strategies.” In her opinion, the other paraeducator was not as qualified but was taking classes and “trying her best.”

The mother reported noticing a great deal of improvement in her daughter, particularly in reading, and she attributed it to the paraeducator. According to the paraeducator, the relationship got off to a bad start. Realizing the tension, the paraeducator met with the mother and addressed the tension between them. From then on, their relationship improved tremendously because they had discussed their issues openly and honestly. According to the paraeducator, the mother began to trust her after the mother was convinced of her capabilities in dealing with the child:

Well, I think possibly she thinks that Aubrey is improving and some areas are improving a little bit quicker than she had previously hoped for. I think, in general, she knows I want the best for Aubrey, and I’m doing the best that I possibly can for her.

In the paraeducator’s opinion, winning the parents’ trust was important to her, and once trust was established, she believed, “you must keep that trust and not do anything to undermine it.”

The other paraeducator who worked with the child had a similar understanding about working with the mother, who, in her opinion, was tough but appreciative when she was convinced that the paraeducator was doing her best for her daughter. Other factors that contributed to this paraeducator winning the mother’s trust were “just communication and being a listener.”

The paraeducator stated, “I think what works with Karen [the mother] is just being upfront, being open, being willing to listen to her idea.” She was “willing to listen and wanted to be listened to,” and she preferred school personnel who were open and straightforward with her. When the paraeducator started working with the mother, she had little experience working with a child with needs like Aubrey’s. She had heard through the grapevine at school that the mother was “tough” and “she had had a very rough time with the previous paraeducator.” She, therefore, approached the mother tactfully and told her honestly, “If there’s anything you want to show me . . . I don’t know what I’m doing with her yet.” According to the paraeducator, the mother appreciated her openness and “it was like relief all over her face.”

### ***Impact of the Paraeducator–Parent Relationship at Riverside Elementary***

The parent believed that her current relationships were beneficial for her child’s education. This was especially true when compared to her previous experience, in which she felt she was not being heard and that her child’s education and welfare were being compromised. She recalled how communication between her and the paraeducators had broken down to the extent that the situation became so tense between them that it began to impact Aubrey. She explained, “There was a time . . . this kid [cried] every morning because she didn’t want to come to school, and now Aubrey loves school . . . absolutely loves school.”

She described that period when Aubrey did not want to come to school as a period of “failure and horror, just the absolute worst scenario that you can have,” whereas her current experience was the “best so far. . . . It certainly is working and it is working because the paraeducators are so knowledgeable.”

Both paraeducators were satisfied and comfortable with the nature and level of interactions with the parent. Neither of the paraeducators was interested in a friendly relationship with the parents of their students; they preferred a professional relationship that involved mutual respect. As one of them commented, “You’d have to know that parent is doing all in all for that child, and the parent would need to know that you were doing all in all for the child. I think it just boils down to mutual respect.” Both paraeducators shared that, for them, being comfortable and getting along with the parents was important because that was in the best interest of the child. One of the paraeducators narrated an experience from the past with a child whose mother would not talk to her but would talk to the other paraeducator who worked with the child: “It felt very uncomfortable, because I think it interfered with my feeling towards the child, because there was no contact with the mother. It really is very important to feel comfortable with the parent.”

### ***Parent–Paraeducator Relationships at Fox Trail Elementary***

The study revealed the existence of two types of relationships between the paraeducators and parents interviewed at Fox Trail Elementary.

**Minimal Relationship.** The parent and paraeducator who had a minimal relationship met face-to-face only once, at the annual Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting. They occasionally communicated through the back-and-forth book (see Note 3), but the primary link between the two was a private nurse who accompanied the child on the school bus every day. The parent communicated regularly with the SSN teacher through the nurse and often directly by telephone. In spite of limited interactions, all agreed that the



mother trusted the paraeducator and had a good opinion of her. The mother requested that the paraeducator attend her daughter's IEP meeting. She had also insisted that the paraeducator be assigned to her child when she moved to first grade, for a smooth transition and consistency. She explained, "It [transition] is easier if you had the same paraprofessional, especially if you have a good one and especially if you have one that has rapport with your child."

**Factors Leading to a Minimal Relationship.** All respondents from the school pointed to one primary factor for minimal interactions between parents and paraeducators (i.e., the presence of the nurse, who acted as the liaison between the school and the mother). Almost all communication between the paraeducator and the parent went through the private nurse. The mother had enormous trust in the nurse, and she stressed that because the nurse had worked with her daughter from the time she was 18 months old, she knew her better than anyone else at school. She said,

Pat [the nurse] can look at her [the child's] expression and tell you pretty much what she wants, what she doesn't want. . . . Other people, especially people that aren't in tune, don't know that. And it takes a while to learn some of those things.

Having the private nurse available at school for her daughter gave the parent a feeling of comfort and security, even though the teacher perceived the need for a nurse to be minimal. The teacher reported that the child previously had serious health problems requiring suctioning. But the child's health had improved, and the needs were limited to diapering and tube feeding, which the school personnel could easily handle. However, out of respect for the mother's feelings, they had let "the practice [of the nurse accompanying the child to school] carry on." The mother also indicated that she would be in school more and personally meeting with the school personnel if the private nurse was not there. But she insisted that if the nurse was not the interim person, she would be interacting more with the SSN teacher rather than the paraeducator. She explained,

I would be checking in with the paraeducator, but my main contact would be Dan [the SSN teacher], where he would be saying, "This is what happened. This is what didn't happen. This is what the para did or didn't do." . . . He would know this is what the para's having trouble with and what needs to be done.

The paraeducator concurred. The paraeducator also indicated that she had more interactions with parents of other children because she met them when they came to pick up and drop off their children at school, and they regularly wrote to each other in the back-and-forth book. She insisted that routine conversation was needed between the paraeducator

and parent, especially in the cases of students who were non-verbal. She also believed that to communicate and interact with the child, the paraeducator needed to have some information about the family. In this case, she acquired such information through the nurse. She gave the following example to explain the situation:

Since she [the child] is nonverbal, I need to know what certain signs mean for her. And if I didn't have Pat [the nurse] to tell me that, then I think I would be talking to the mom to say, ". . . Lauren [the child] makes this certain sign across her heart . . . what do those signs mean?" But Pat is right there to say, "Oh, that means she's happy." . . . So, that . . . is very helpful.

**Tense Relationship.** A second type of relationship also existed at Fox Trail Elementary between paraeducators and parents who rarely saw or communicated with each other. In this case, the parents stayed in touch with the SSN teacher on a daily basis by writing in the back-and-forth book and leaving phone messages with general information about the child's evening at home. The paraeducator occasionally wrote in the back-and-forth book, but her communication was about minor issues like "Sarah [the child] needs more diapers, please send some more tomorrow." Sarah rode the bus for students with special needs, so she was not dropped off at or picked up from school by her parents. The child's mother rarely visited the school, but her father occasionally came to spend time with her in the lunchroom or to observe in the classroom.

The SSN teacher reported to have noticed that the paraeducator was very uncomfortable talking to him or being around him; the teacher sensed an undercurrent of tension between the two. However, he clarified that this was simply his observation, and he had not openly discussed it with either the paraeducator or the child's father. He reported that the father seemed to be pleased with the paraeducator's work with his child. He elaborated, "The feedback that I've gotten from him [the father] is that the paraeducator knows Sarah [the child] really well and she's great about sending work home." The same sentiments were reported in the parents' interview in this study. The parents expressed that the paraeducator was "doing a good job" and that her input was beneficial in the child's education.

The paraeducator admitted to being uncomfortable around the father. She reported that he had always been polite and there had never been any open confrontation between the two of them. She believed that it was important for paraeducators and parents to have a working relationship, but she did not see that happening between these parents and herself. She regretfully stated, "I would love to have a relationship with them. I really would. But I just do not feel comfortable talking to him. Her mom . . . I never see. I've only seen her once out of the year." The section that follows elaborates on the

reasons for the paraeducators' feelings of discomfort with regard to the parents of the student.

**Factors Associated with the Tense Relationship.** The following four factors were found to be associated with the tense relationship between the student's parents and the paraeducator.

**Paraeducator's opinion of the parents.** The paraeducator was convinced that the parents were negligent. Some of the activities and techniques that she had tried at school with Sarah were not practiced at home, even after they were requested. In her opinion,

I just don't think they care . . . it is very hard having them not work at stuff that we work on here in school . . . They use the back-and-forth book . . . to write about things like she had a good night or what she did for fun.

She also disapproved of the father's physical handling of the child while he was in school a few times. She felt that he used excessive force to restrain Sarah, whose behavior often became out of control.

**Paraeducator's sense of ownership toward the child.** The teacher was appreciative of how well the paraeducator worked with Sarah but was concerned that her negative feelings toward the parent could be the result of her excessive involvement and consequent sense of ownership toward Sarah. He said,

When she sees other people working with her, especially a parent, I think she feels, "that's not how I would do it, that's not how you should do it." And that's kind of come up with other paras that have worked with Sarah, too . . . she's very engaged, and I think she sees it as kind of . . . "I'm going to save this child. I'm going to fix this child."

The paraeducator herself admitted that she liked working with Sarah and it "hurt her heart" to see that Sarah's parents were not very involved in her education.

**Conflicting perceptions of a situation.** Another source of conflict reported by the teacher and the paraeducator was related to Sarah being sick at school while the father was on a vacation break. On noticing symptoms such as a runny nose and a fever, the paraeducator called the parents and requested they take her home. The paraeducator reported that the parents' "explanation of the situation was that Sarah was angry and frustrated and that is why she felt warm." Her mother stated in her interview, "An angry child can raise her temperature." The paraeducator's perception regarding the situation was that the "parents did not believe her and did not care about the child," whereas the parents felt that their child was being sent home to inconvenience them. The teacher summarized the situation as follows:

It was a true case of different perceptions, parents thought, "they [the paraeducators] are just sending her home, they're tired of dealing with her, they can't handle her." And the para felt that the parents were dumping her on us as a [babysitter], "well they don't want to deal with her."

The situation resulted in feelings of mistrust between both parties. Finally, the principal of the school became involved and he instructed that the school nurse, and not the paraeducator, check the temperature and make the decision of whether or not to send the child home.

**Inaction on the part of the SSN teacher.** The SSN teacher had sensed the tension on the part of the paraeducator regarding the parents but had not addressed it. He stated,

[The paraeducator] is very uncomfortable talking to them . . . and last year there were numerous occasions where Sarah's [the child's] dad would come in to observe Sarah, or he just wanted to come in once a month and spend like a few hours eating lunch with her, sitting in class with her. [The paraeducator] kind of avoided him.

When questioned if he had addressed the issue with the paraeducator, his response was that he had questioned her "in subtle ways" but had never talked about it openly.

### **Impact of the Relationships at Fox Trail Elementary**

Because the interaction between the paraeducator and the parent was almost nonexistent, none of the participants commented on the impact of the relationship on the child's education. In contrast, the relationship, characterized by an undercurrent of tension and discomfort between parents and paraeducator, led to a stressful and unhealthy atmosphere. The paraeducator reported that sometimes she wanted to spontaneously "pick up the phone and tell them [the parents] what Sarah did in school." But she was hesitant to talk to the parents because she felt there was a mutual lack of trust between them and her, and she was not sure how they would respond to her spontaneity. The SSN teacher reported that the negative feelings on part of the paraeducator were leading to "a kind of an unhealthy atmosphere sometimes," but it had not "caused any direct problems so far."

During the course of this study, the paraeducator requested to take some time off from working with Sarah because "it was getting to be too stressful." This was quite a contrast to the previous year, when she had wanted to work only with Sarah. The SSN teacher stated, "She would frequently come to me and say, 'I want to spend more time with Sarah. I want to work with Sarah exclusively.'" Under the existing circumstances, he viewed her decision to back off as good, but was a little disappointed with it because, in his opinion, she was so effective with Sarah.

The SSN teacher spoke of the need for the paraeducators and the parents to communicate: “I wouldn’t have any problem with them [parents and paraeducators] talking as long as that information gets to me or kind of goes through me. I think it is much healthier if it would be a three-way collaboration or communication.”

## DISCUSSION

This study revealed five different types of relationships: close and personal friendship, routine limited interactions, routine extended interactions, minimal relationship, and tense relationship. This study confirmed that paraeducators and parents communicate on a daily basis—sometimes extensively (Bennett et al., 1997; Downing et al., 2000; Marks et al., 1999), sometimes sharing close relationships (Chopra et al., this issue; French & Chopra, 1999)—and that parents and paraeducators believed that close relationships were beneficial to the child. However, these findings show that close relationships and extensive communications were not always helpful or beneficial; on the contrary, sometimes they negatively affected the student’s education. Close relationships between paraeducators and parents can be particularly precarious when (a) they exist without the involvement and or authorization of the person in charge of the program and (b) the paraeducators involved are not qualified and closely supervised. This study indicates that the role and involvement of the teacher impacted and determined the extent and type of relationship between parents and paraeducators. It was apparent that parents communicated more with the paraeducator in situations where the SSN teacher was not as available to them or as involved as the paraeducators. In some situations, the parents communicated more with the paraeducators when the teacher gave permission for the paraeducators to be the primary contact for the parents. In another situation, the parents and paraeducator communicated strictly within the boundaries established by the teacher. These boundaries included that the paraeducators and parents exchange general information about the child’s day at school or routine at home, whereas matters or concerns related to progress, behavior, or any other kind of challenges were to be addressed by the teacher, who is ultimately responsible for implementing the student’s IEP.

While the findings revealed potential drawbacks of close relationships between parents and paraeducators, they also imply that strained relationships between paraeducators and parents, leading to a complete breakdown of communication, could also be damaging. The existing evidence that paraeducators and parents need to communicate because paraeducators spend more time with the students and thus know them well (French & Chopra, 1999; Marks et al., 1999) was confirmed by this study. However, the findings of this research suggest that an important part of the role of the supervising teacher is to guide and direct the nature of communications.

This study confirmed previous evidence that when paraeducators fail to exercise boundaries in their relationships with students and “own” the student, they become a barrier to the education of the student (French & Chopra, 1999).

### Limitations

To ensure robustness of this research we used triangulation of data through more than one category of respondents, thick description of findings with participant quotations (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Wolcott, 1990), and a detailed description of methodology (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). Despite all these strategies, this study still had some inherent limitations. Several sampling issues need to be taken into account while viewing the findings. First, participant selection was limited to a single district that is very wealthy. Second, there was no linguistic diversity and negligible cultural diversity among parents, paraeducators, and teachers. Third, in spite of attempts to recruit a balance of mothers and fathers, both parents participated in only one case. Therefore, the findings may not apply to situations where economic, linguistic, cultural, or gender diversity exists.

### Implications for Future Practice and Research

The findings of the study suggest promising practices that may be replicated by parents, paraeducators, school professionals, and others who have a stake in the education of students with disabilities. The findings of this study draw attention to certain specific topics in the content of training for paraeducators. First, paraeducator–parent and paraeducator–student relationships were usually more beneficial to the student when they were professional and not personal. Given the experiences shared by the participants, paraeducators need to be educated and cautioned about the importance of boundaries in their relationships with parents and students. Second, paraeducators need to be clear about their roles in terms of communication with parents of the students they work with.

This study presents implications in the area of preparation and inservice programs for special education teachers also. Teachers need to recognize that parents and paraeducators are valuable members of the team whose contributions are vital to the success of students with disabilities but require support to be successful in their roles.

The study revealed the benefits of the teacher’s ability to lead and supervise paraeducators, as well as manage or structure their relationships with parents. Preservice as well as inservice teacher training programs need to prepare future teachers to be competent in supervision, teaming or collaborating, and leading, in order for them to effectively work with parents and paraeducators.

Based on the findings of this research, several potential topics or areas are recommended for future research. This research could be replicated in a different setting, such as a

middle or a secondary school or a school in an economically and geographically different area. It would be of particular interest to examine the relationships between parents and paraeducators who share a native language that is not shared by the teacher. Another area of research could be an examination of the impact of training programs designed to enhance the skills of school professionals to supervise para-professionals and work with parents. It would also be informative to study how the leadership skills of special education teachers impact the roles of parents, paraeducators, and other professionals in the education of students with disabilities. ■

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## NOTES

1. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for schools and respondents participating in this study.
2. Throughout this article, we have provided the exact quotations of participants. The terms *para* and *parapro* were used by the respondents. We prefer to use the term *paraeducator* or *paraprofessional*.
3. In some education programs, parents and paraeducators and/or teachers exchange daily information related to the child in notebooks that go back and forth between them.

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