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Paraeducator Experience Participating in Professional Development: a Phenomenological Perspective

Loren K. Sickles

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PARAEDUCATOR EXPERIENCE PARTICIPATING IN PROFESSIONAL
DEVELOPMENT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

by

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Presented to the Faculty of the
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Abstract

This qualitative research used a phenomenological method to foreground Washington State instructional paraeducator voices describing their experiences participating in state mandated professional development certification program. The participants all received a minimum of 14 hours, out of 98 hours, of the state's required professional development for the paraeducator certificate program. An unstructured interview method was utilized to allow participants to openly describe their experience participating in the professional development and describe impacts the professional development had on how they understand their role and responsibility as a paraeducator. Analysis of the data was conducted through the lenses of two adult learning theories, transformative adult learning (Mezirow, 1991) and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), due to the shared element of communicative learning. Participants provided rich descriptions of their experiences of how their school district implemented the professional development along with comparisons and contrasts between three learning modalities: in-person, synchronous online, and asynchronous online. Due to COVID-19 putting in-person meetings on hold, synchronous online learning replaced in-person trainings and provided the unexpected opportunity to explore the participants' experiences learning in that environment. These experiences revealed five emerging themes. Three themes related to impact on practice include confidence, purpose, and collaboration. Two themes of communicative learning and agency provide evidence of elements of the transformational and situated learning theories in the participants' experiences. This study filled a gap in the literature by centering paraeducator voice in the experience of paraeducators participating in professional development. Implications for this research include the need to create more space for paraeducator voices when exploring their experiences, and further exploration of the emerging themes and new themes not yet identified.

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I dedicate this research to the hundreds of thousands of paraeducators who show up everyday and pour themselves into the lives of the students they support, assuring that they will have equal access to the opportunity to learn and grow alongside their peers.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Professional development (PD) is an expectation for most professional career fields in modern society. The field of K-12 education is no exception, and in most cases, professional development is required on an ongoing basis to retain a professional teaching certificate. However, the position of paraeducator has lagged in receiving regular and ongoing professional development that supports growth for those filling the role. For purposes of this study, I will use paraeducator throughout as inclusive of paraprofessional, teacher aide, instructional assistant, and other terms as defined in Pickett and Gerlach (2003, p. 7) and Maher (2016, p. 263). Over the last 45 years, due to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) reforms brought about at the federal level (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), a number of scholars have drawn attention to the increased responsibilities of paraeducators and the ongoing lack of comprehensive professional development for paraeducators (Giangreco, 2003; Giangreco et al., 2001; Giangreco et al., 2003; Giangreco et al., 2010; Pickett, & Gerlach, 2003). While there is broad agreement that paraeducators should have access to relevant professional development, support for implementation at state and local levels has remained inconsistent or non-existent (Giangreco et al., 2002). First, I will introduce the evolving roles of paraeducators in K-12 public schools. Then, in chapter two, I will review in depth the literature regarding these changing roles and the current state of affairs in the area of paraeducator professional development.

Evolution of Paraeducator Roles

Education scholars are united that the role of paraeducators has gone through a significant transformation over the last four decades. The K-12 public school education landscape continues to go through changes initiated in the 1970s by national and state policies

such as Free and Appropriate Public Education and Least Restrictive Environment (IDEA, n.d,a; IDEA, n.d,b; Richmond, 2014). As Richmond (2014) explains, “public schools were transformed along the way from places where *many* kids could bank on getting a reasonably solid education into institutions where *all* children were expected to receive a ‘free and appropriate public education’” (p. 16). Sweeping policies like these are designed to assure access to the general education classroom for students with disabilities, as defined by the IDEA (n.d.c) to include a student “with intellectual disabilities, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance (referred to in this chapter as “emotional disturbance”), orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities” (Sec 1401 (3) (A) (i)), who had previously been excluded or greatly restricted from joining their peers in the classroom.

In an effort to address the influx of students resulting from these policies, state educational agencies (SEAs) and local educational agencies (LEAs) increased their dependence on paraeducators to support students in the general education setting (Richmond, 2014; Picket & Gerlach, 2003). SEAs are agencies that oversee education policy at the state government level, such as the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) in Washington State (IDEA, n.d.c, Sec. 1401 (32)). LEAs are local agencies such as the elected board of directors for a specific school district (IDEA, n.d.c, Sec. 1401 (19) (A)).

In chapter two I will demonstrate how the literature makes the case there is a gap between the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators and how they are prepared to fulfill their responsibilities, before and after entering the classroom. This will provide a backdrop for the

section where I present several adult learning theories with a focus on transformative adult learning (Mezirow, 1991) and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Problem Statement

The transformative effect of professional development offered to paraeducators in K-12 public schools is an understudied area. The literature demonstrates a long history of acknowledging the value of professional development for many professional disciplines, including educators (Cranton, 1996; Pickett & Gerlach, 2003). More specifically, McKenzie (2011) highlights the value of providing professional development to paraeducators. However, while the literature is clear that professional development for paraeducators is an essential element in developing their effectiveness to support students, the literature does not explore if, or how, professional development leads to a transformation of meaning perspective(s) in paraeducators. Put another way, does the professional development lead them through a process to critique their beliefs by identifying their assumptions?

Purpose of the Study

Utilizing a phenomenological approach, this study explored the experiences of paraeducators in a K-12 public school system who received state-mandated professional development. More specifically, I captured the voices of paraeducators in order to analyze individual experiences through the lens of adult learning theory. This study drew from these experiences to investigate the possibility of transformative learning occurring with paraeducators participating in professional development. Two adult learning theories provided the backdrop for exploring possible relationships between the paraeducators' experiences and transformative learning. The theoretical lenses being used to explore potential transformation effects are Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory and Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated

learning theory. These theories were chosen due to their foundational role in understanding and explaining how adults learn, change, and are transformed through professional learning opportunities.

A second purpose for this study, and the approach being used, was to capture the voices of paraeducators describing their personal experience participating in professional development. As stated previously, there is general agreement that, due to the changing roles and responsibilities of paraeducators, they need ongoing training to adjust and adapt to these changes. Over the last several years, I had been directly involved with the roll out of a statewide, mandated, professional development for paraeducators in Washington State. During this time, state policy makers had received feedback from numerous stakeholders, however the majority had been from those who manage paraeducators or are responsible for providing the professional development. What was missing was a robust account from the paraeducators themselves describing their experience participating in the professional development. In addition to online surveys that have been conducted over the last few years, I believed that a phenomenological study was needed to capture paraeducator voices in order to gain a deeper understanding of how they made sense of the opportunity for professional growth and to what extent transformative learning was evident in their descriptions of the professional development experience.

Research Questions

Research is limited in the area of the experiences of paraeducators participating in professional development, and whether transformational learning is reflected in their experiences as a result of the professional development. To explore this further the following research questions were asked:

RQ1: How do paraeducators describe their experience participating in state mandated professional development?

RQ2: In what ways has the professional development experience impacted paraeducators' practice?

RQ3: How are elements of transformative learning indicated in the descriptions of paraeducators receiving professional development?

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This overview will explore the literature about the historical and evolving roles of paraeducators, the current conditions around paraeducators receiving professional development, and the fundamentals of two adult learning theories. This will set the groundwork for the phenomenological research method I used in order to understand how paraeducators describe their own experiences participating in professional development, and whether their accounts describe elements of meaning perspective transformation. Transformation, according to Mezirow (1991), includes “reflective assessment of premises” and “identifying and judging presuppositions” (p. 5). Exploring the participating paraeducators’ experiences will provide greater insight into how, or if, they made sense of the professional development in relationship to the roles they perform.

Paraeducators Then and Now

Paraeducators were first introduced to the K-12 public school system in the mid-1950s, and their numbers and responsibilities continue to increase (Picket & Gerlach, 2003; Richmond, 2014). Between 1970 and 2010, according to Richmond (2014), the numbers of paraeducators in United States schools increased over 10%, or more than 670,000 paraeducators. In British schools, the number of paraeducators increased over 72,000 between 2005 and 2011, resulting in a 49% increase in paraeducator full time equivalents (FTE) (Department of Education, 2012; Graves, 2014). In the United States the total number of special education paraeducators in 2005 was approximately 390,000, and nearly 20 out of 50 states had more special education paraeducators than special education teachers—based on FTE (Giangreco et al., 2010). It should become apparent that the increasing role of the paraeducator is not unique to the United States,

as evidenced above and in what follows, the British and Australian public school systems have experienced similar increases in paraeducators providing student support.

A primary driving force behind this dramatic increase in paraeducators is due to changes in national policies leading to significant increases in the number of students with special needs being included in the general education classroom. Maher (2016) points to changes in the UK, in the early 1980s, when the term *handicap* was replaced with *special educational needs* (SEN) to identify students eligible for educational supports beyond that provided to the majority of their peers, leading to an increase from 2% of students identified as handicapped to 20% of students identified with SEN and eligible for educational supports in schools. In Australian schools, Gibson et al. (2016) identify a similar cause and effect relationship between the increase in the number of students requiring special education services and the increase in the number of paraeducators, stating that “in many schools, providing [paraeducators] to support students with disabilities has become the primary method for implementing inclusive education” (p. 2).

Pickett and Gerlach (2003) point to significant changes in United States education law mandating greater inclusion of students with special needs into general education classrooms. They claim that federal laws, such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—later renamed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB Act)—along with the implementation of Free and Appropriate Public Education and Least Restrictive Environment policies, increased enrollment of students with special needs in general education settings, all led to a significant increase in paraeducators providing tutoring and instruction under the direct supervision of a teacher. In U.S. schools, Richmond (2014) found a significant correlation between an increase in individualized education programs (IEP) and an increase in the numbers of paraeducators. In the United States an IEP is a program mandated by federal statute that requires state education

agencies (SEA) and local education agencies (LEA) to provide equal access to “students with disabilities” (IDEA, n.d.c; n.d.d; Picket & Gerlach, 2003). Next, I will describe how the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators have changed due to the increase in the number of students with special needs in general education classrooms and the current state of professional development (PD) provided to paraeducators.

Changes in Paraeducator Roles and Responsibilities

According to the Washington State Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB, 2016), in the State of Washington, 60% of special education instructional hours are provided by paraeducators in the form of direct instruction, such as one-to-one or small-group instruction. As Carter et al. (2009), Fisher and Pleasants (2012), and Pickett and Gerlach (2003) claim, there has been a significant shift in the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators, adding to earlier, primary responsibilities of making photocopies, filing, running errands, monitoring the playground, and other types of non-instructional duties. Butt (2018) describes the typical role, prior to 2005, of an Australian paraeducator as “a classroom helper and administrative assistant responsible for tasks such as preparing materials, supervising non-instructional activities, organizing and maintaining the teaching and learning environment, ordering supplies, creating classroom displays, and photocopying” (p. 217). Hauerwas and Goessling (2008) further explain that “traditionally, teacher assistants [paraeducators] were employed to assist with students with severe and multiple disabilities that needed support with daily living activities and other care issues in the school” (p. 5). They go on to say that the traditional role of paraeducators is in student safety and keeping them on task (Hauerwas & Goessling, 2008).

As national policies regarding students with disabilities changed in countries such as Australia, United Kingdom, and the United States, the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators

have changed too (Butt, 2018; Gibson et al., 2016; Richmond, 2014). In the United States, over time paraeducator roles evolved from volunteer parent helpers to paid classroom assistants to current roles that include responsibilities of lesson planning, curriculum choice, classroom management, and direct instructional support (Brock & Carter, 2013; Giangreco et al., 2010; Graves, 2014). The increases in paraeducator responsibility have been identified by Gibson et al. (2016) in areas of curriculum decisions, deciding learning outcomes, classroom management, and determining the appropriate level of student support. While researching Response to Intervention (RTI), an early intervention program, in Rhode Island schools, Hauerwas and Goessling (2008) discovered that some paraeducators were involved in assessments through grading, monitoring, administering, and tracking behavior. In the intervention approach being studied, assessments are considered a key component, and the authors believe paraeducators can have a role in administering assessments, with the caveat that “training, encouragement, and communication is necessary for these assessment practices to be effective” (p. 5).

Professional Development, What Is It Good For?

With the increase in the numbers of paraeducators, one thing has not kept pace: the requirement for, and availability of, paraeducator professional development. The professional development piece is critical to the effectiveness of paraeducators fulfilling their expanding roles and responsibilities supporting students and teachers (Brock & Carter, 2013; Fisher & Pleasants, 2012; Giangreco et al., 2003; Giangreco et al., 2010). However, as the literature indicates, while the roles and responsibilities have expanded, the requirements for entering the field remain low (Butts, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2004), and providing ongoing development of paraeducators has been left to the discretion of SEAs and LEAs.

As previously outlined, the literature points to the increased use of paraeducators, and their evolving roles and responsibilities, as two primary reasons for providing paraeducators necessary professional development. Giangreco et al. (2003; 2010) highlight the concern regarding providing paraeducator professional development by pointing out the practice of using what they refer to as, the least qualified and poorly trained staff to support students with the most complex learning and behavior needs, needs defined in the IDEA (n.d.c) as intellectual, physical, speech or language, and health impairments, as well as emotional disturbance and learning disabilities. This is evidenced by past hiring practices of indicating minimal requirements to enter the profession.

According to the U. S. Department of Education (n.d.; 2004), paraeducators in federally funded Title 1 programs—schools with high numbers, or percentages, of students from low-income households—are required to have a high school diploma (or equivalent) and one of the following additional minimum hiring requirements: an associate’s degree, completed two years or more of accredited college courses, or passed a general aptitude test in math, reading, and writing—such as the ETS *ParaPro Assessment* (ETS, n.d.). These minimum hiring criteria are not required for paraeducators in non-Title 1 programs. This leads to a circumstance where paraeducators fill positions with little to no qualifications needed for the job, and yet work with students with any number of disabilities or lagging skills. This condition of low entry requirements for paraeducator positions, exists outside the United States as well. Butts (2018) explains that one third of Australian paraeducators lack qualifications beyond the equivalent of a high school diploma—highlighting the concern with a number of studies that demonstrated the high percentage of paraeducators providing instructional services such as planning, producing, and adapting lesson materials for small group and one-on-one activities.

In addition to low minimum hiring requirements to enter paraeducator positions, according to Deardorff et al. (2007), over three-quarters of paraeducators are hired without prior training. The training they do receive is typically on-the-job training or unstructured and completion-based—training not designed for career advancement, or the need to demonstrate competency (Pickett et al., 2003). However, as Deardorff, et al. (2007) claim, the quality of support paraeducators provide students with disabilities correlates directly to the training they receive. Like preparing teachers to implement a new practice, Hauerwas and Goessling (2008) point out that paraeducators require professional development as well. In addition, professional development for paraeducators can lead to less confusion and ambiguity around the responsibilities of paraeducators and teachers (Gibson et al., 2016). Additional non-instructional benefits of providing professional development for paraeducators are less turnover, greater job satisfaction, and higher morale—resulting in a more stable workforce and continuity for students and staff (McKenzie, 2011).

Adult Learning as a Theoretical Lens

With this background on the evolution of paraeducator roles and responsibilities, and the critical component professional development provides for paraeducator effectiveness, I will now highlight several adult learning theories to provide context for the two theories that will frame this study. These theories were selected because they represent foundational understanding of diverse ways adults learn and develop. Merriam and Bierema (2014) refer to five adult learning theories as traditional and foundational to our understanding of how adults learn. These theories, or perspectives, on learning include “behaviorism, humanism, cognitivism, social cognitivism, and constructivism” (p. xiii). From a multi-disciplinary perspective of learning theories, Dochy et al., (2011) place an emphasis on workplace learning. The theories highlighted in Dochy et al.’s

volume range from less complex to highly complex theories and include both organizational and individual workplace learning. For purposes of this review, I focus primarily on the perspective of individual learning.

Behaviorism

According to Merriam and Bierema (2014), learning is a behavior that involves psychomotor, affective, and cognitive elements; put another way, it is how we do something, feel about something, or think about something, respectively. They draw a distinction between behaviorism—skill acquisition and observable behavior—and humanistic learning, where the inner person is the focus of learning. Behaviorism was elevated as a theory through the work of B. F. Skinner's research beginning in the mid-20th century (Smith & Woodward, 1996). Applied Behavior Analysis or ABA (BACB, n.d.), is a growing field that draws from the work of Skinner and others to affect change in the behavior of individuals by making changes to their environment.

In education and adult learning, behaviorism is evident in the requirement of specific learning outcomes, curriculum that is competency-based, and the demand for evidence-based practices. When recently completing training to become a certified registered behavior technician, I was required to complete a supervised competency checklist and a timed standardized exam to earn my certification. Similar expectations and requirements are demanded of many professions to assure a basic level of knowledge and competence. It is customary for educators, attorneys, doctors and nurses, trades people, and many other professions to complete a course of prescribed study and then demonstrate skill and competency through a series of examinations. Mezirow (1991) refers to this type of learning as instrumental learning; or learning that is focused on increasing knowledge and skills.

Two learning approaches that align with the behaviorism approach are Ericsson's deliberate practice theory and Billett's workplace or learning curriculum (Dochy et al., 2011). Both approaches to learning focus on the individual gaining greater expertise in a specific area. The example of Ericsson's deliberate practice, from Dochy et al. (2011), is physicians in the residency phase of their careers. This is considered non-formal learning because it is centered in the workplace and involves the learner carrying out their normal duties with close supervision by an experienced physician. It too is a form of instrumental learning as, in the example with the resident physicians, the emphasis is on increasing skill and expertise caring for clients and directing supervisees.

Workplace curriculum has a similar focus and outcome as deliberate practice learning. Drawing from the work of social anthropologist Lave's (1990) learning curriculum, Billett developed the workplace curriculum approach to explain how adults learn and develop their skills for performing specific tasks—described in the example of his time spent in the clothing manufacturing industry (Dochy et al., 2011). Unlike formal education with a curriculum designed by the teacher or institution, Billett's workplace curriculum was driven by the skills needed to perform the assigned tasks and was personalized to his knowledge and growth. In both these learning approaches the focus is on the learning increasing knowledge and skills to perform tasks as described in the behaviorism approach discussed previously and resulting in instrumental or behavior modification level learning.

Humanism

Humanistic learning takes us to a deeper, more personal level of learning. According to Merriam and Bierema (2014), three major theories fall under the umbrella of humanistic learning: andragogy, self-directed learning, and transformative learning. Each of these three

approaches to adult learning recognize distinct differences in the needs of adult learners as opposed to child and adolescent learners.

Andragogy. As explained by Merriam and Biereman (2014), based on the work of Knowles in the field of andragogy, our understanding of adult learning developed to recognize how the needs of adult learners differed from younger learners. Knowles (1980; 1984; Knowles & Associates, 1984) proposed six assumptions to differentiate the process-driven approach of andragogy from the content-driven model of pedagogy. These assumptions include: adults develop a self-concept that is less dependent on others to one of being self-directed; adults develop a store of experiences that become a resource for future learning; tasks related to the adult learner's social role is a factor in their readiness to learn; as an adult matures, their perspective of time becomes more immediate causing learning to be more problem oriented; adult learners become more intrinsically motivated; and the reason for learning becomes more important.

Self-directed Learning. Self-directed learning, according to Merriam and Bierema (2014), can be both a personal attribute where the learner is drawn to and enjoys autonomy in their learning, and a process where the learner exercises greater control over what and how they learn. Self-directed learning has been studied in many contexts, from exploring and gaining proficiency in a new hobby (e.g., portrait painting, gardening, wood working, or auto restoration), to increasing existing knowledge to enhancing professional skills or moving into a new career (e.g., accounting, labor law, spreadsheet design, or computer code). Unlike what the name implies, self-directed learning can take place in both formal and informal learning environments. The learner may seek out learning through their local community college, online

learning platforms known as massive open online courses (MOOCs), the local library, online video hosting services (e.g., YouTube), or a group of people with a shared area of interest.

A critical point Merriam and Bierema (2014) make is that self-directed learning is not necessarily suitable for all adults. The level of planning, organization, and control in the process may be more than some learners are prepared for and may initially require more support and direction. Even then, the self-directed learner has a say in what they are interested in learning and how they want to go about learning. While this approach recognizes the role the individual can have in their own learning it is still focused on increasing knowledge and skills. The next theory of learning moves the focus of adult learning beyond simple acquisition of knowledge and skills as demonstrated in the previous theories.

Transformative Learning. Transformative learning, according to Merriam and Bierema (2014), has eclipsed andragogy as the prevailing theory in the field of adult learning. Transformational learning causes the learner to think differently about how they know something. Merriam and Bierema describe it as “that occasional, often dramatic life experience that causes us to stop and examine how we think about something” (p. 84). They also state that these life experiences, or disorienting events, can be a collection of experiences that come together over time to stimulate a transformational experience.

Transformational learning is the outcome of a 10-step process beginning with the disorienting experience(s) and concluding with choices and actions based on new meaning perspectives (Dochy et al., 2011; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). The key to this process is built on a foundation of critical self-reflection. Dochy et al. describe three phases of the process: First is critical reflection leading to new perspectives being developed, second is discourse with well-

informed others; and last is acting on the new perspectives and integrating with other perspectives.

Merriam and Bierema (2014) point out that reflection takes place at three levels: The content level focuses on the what of the experience, the process level explores the how of the experience, and the premise level reflects on the why of the experience. Merriam and Bierema (2014) conclude by stating that the premise, or why, level is where the transformation takes place in the individual. The second phase, discourse, is an outgrowth of the self-reflection process. Discourse, as Dochy et al. (2011) explain, refers to the individual setting aside presuppositions, bias, and a personal attachment to previously held beliefs. In this state they engage with others who are more informed and objective in the perspective being evaluated. If the individual embraces their new perspective, the theory claims that in the third phase of transformation the process is completed when the learner is compelled to act.

Cognitivism

Learning, from the cognitivist perspective, focuses on the mental process. Another name for this learning method is information-processing. This label originated from the common metaphor of the computer “with its input, throughput, and output” information processing (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 31). The brain and memory are key features in the cognitivist approach to learning. At its core, the cognitivist approach is about information—intaking, processing and storing, and retrieval to complete a task or solve a problem. As with many of the previous theories this one continues the focus on information and task completion. The next one includes a social aspect to learning.

Social Cognitive

In the social cognitive approach, the social environment of learning is emphasized. Merriam and Bierema (2014) state “not only do we cognitively process information as we learn, we also observe others and model their behavior” (p. 35). This theory is described as a blend of cognitivism and behaviorism. It is believed that the cognitive piece does not provide a complete picture of how adults learn. Their behavior, or how they interact with their environment is equally important for understanding how adults learn. Examples of social cognitive learning, provided by Merriam and Bierema (2014), are new parents learning to care for a child by observing other parents, and mentoring or apprenticeships where a new employee learns how to both perform job related tasks and understand the culture of the organization.

Constructivism

In contrast to these last two approaches to learning, based on cognitivism, are the constructivist perspectives. According to Merriam and Bierema (2014), constructivism assumes that learning is making sense out of experiences, or put another way, meaning is constructed from experiences. Unlike the cognitivist approach, where the learner is an empty vessel to be filled with information, constructivism views learners as active participants pursuing meaning through their experience. Merriam and Bierema (2014) claim that constructivism is fundamental to understanding adult learning, further stating that “aspects of constructivism, especially the social construction of knowledge, are central to self-directed learning, transformational learning, reflective practice, situated cognition, and communities of practice” (p. 37).

Experiential learning theory is another approach that builds on the constructivist perspective. According to Dochy et al. (2011), experiential learning is where “social knowledge is created and recreated in the personal knowledge of the learner” (p. 55). One of the early

developers of the experiential learning theory, Kolb (1984), defines learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 38).

Two approaches to experiential learning, and by extension constructivist learning, are central to understanding the experiences of the participants in my study. What follows will be an in depth look at transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) and situated learning, or communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

A Tale of Two Theories: Communicative Learning

In the field of adult learning, two perspectives continue to hold a prominent place in the literature—Lave and Wenger (1991) and Mezirow (1991). Cranton (1996) delves into Mezirow’s theory, building a case “that technical interests and instrumental knowledge are not adequate to understand our practice” (p. 24). Cranton claims, a new point of view of what it means to learn about educator practice is achieved when professional development is seen as a process of transformative learning. While Cranton does not specifically mention Lave and Wenger’s (1991) situated learning theory, theirs and Mezirow’s theory have a common thread in Habermas’ theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1984). Communicative action, according to Habermas, is when two or more individuals come to an understanding about a specific situation that requires they reach an agreement on a particular course of action (p. 86). The following theories are deeply rooted in the types of interpersonal relationships identified by Habermas (1984).

The shared communicative nature of Mezirow’s (1991) transformative adult learning and Lave and Wenger’s (1991) situated learning provide complementary lenses to explore further the common communication-embedded language each uses to describe transformational learning

outcomes when their approach is implemented (Deetz & Simpson, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Mezirow, 1991).

Transformative Adult Learning

In his seminal book, Mezirow (1991) describes the communicative nature of learning as the result of shared collaboration, including goals, actions, and circumstances, that leads to the carrying out of an objective (p. 13). In Mezirow's theory, there are two dimensions of learning: instrumental learning and communicative learning. Instrumental learning concentrates on learning by completing tasks for the purpose of solving problems. In contrast, communicative learning strives to share ideas, and create meaning with others, through various forms and mediums of communication, such as spoken and written language, performing arts, and visual arts. As the name implies, communication is foundational to learning in the communicative domain. It is through communication, and more specifically dialogue, that we "relate to the world around us, to other people, and to our own intentions, feelings, and desires" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 65).

Due to the social aspect of communicative learning, our personal beliefs, values, and judgements come up against those of others, requiring the ability to engage in logical discussion and question the presuppositional basis of the beliefs, values, and judgements (Mezirow, 2003). Another difference in communicative learning is that problem solving is metaphorical-abductive as opposed to hypothetical-deductive. Meaning that the abductive nature of communicative learning involves the learner drawing from their known experience to make sense of a new experience. Which is in contrast to a deductive approach to learning which draws from the knowledge and experience of others to understand new information (Mezirow, 1991). This

means the domain of communicative learning is an ongoing process, negotiated and renegotiated with each new communicative interaction.

King (2009) points out that Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory has been the focus of publicized research for more than two decades and continues to be a leading theory for explaining the perspective-change process. From the vantage point of transformative learning, paraeducator professional development is an under-researched area of adult learning methods.

Situated Learning

Finally, situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is another adult learning theory, embedded in the communicative process, that warrants exploration in relation to paraeducator professional development. Situated learning has its roots in an effort to better understand apprenticeships as a method of informal learning. Their use of apprenticeship differs in that, unlike in a typical master-apprentice relation, the master is not the locus of authority, the locus of authority resides in the community an apprentice joins. Put another way, learning is more often than not, shaped by the systems of work than by the hierarchal relationship of the master and apprentice. A key feature of situated learning is their concept of *legitimate peripheral participation*. The intent is to emphasize the inherently social aspect of learning, drawing a distinction between it and the common perception of learning as simply knowledge acquisition. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), the learning of expert skills is encompassed in a social process.

Fuller et al. (2005) claim that Lave and Wenger's work grew out of the inability of conventional learning theory to explain how people acquire knowledge and skills without formal education or training. In addition to the original focus on apprentices as legitimate peripheral participants, Monk and Watts (1998) expanded the understanding of peripheral participation:

While outside the primary interaction—not being directly involved in the conversation—it is understood that peripheral participants are involved through observing and overhearing.

As a theory of social practice, situated learning is grounded in a relational perspective. Lave (2012) explains that knowledge or knowledge-ability, understood from the relational perspective, takes meaning from people engaged in their own changing experiences and drawing from various aspects of their lives. As stated by Lave and Wenger (1991), the relational aspect of learning takes place within *communities of practice* (COP). This does not mean that participants must share the same physical space, be members of an easily defined group, or other socially determined features of community. Rather, it implies that participation is identified as shared understandings about what they do and how this relates to their lives and the life of their community. Lave and Wenger (1991) further describe a COP as relations including people, human activity, and the broader world, across time and including other peripheral and intersecting communities.

Put another way, COPs are made up of people who share a concern or passion around something they do, and through regular interaction become more proficient in doing it (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Wenger (2010) draws a direct line to COP as social learning systems. The focus is on the relationships between people and the world they inhabit together. Central to this learning perspective is the individual as a social participant, meaning that learning is more than just developing skills and gaining information; it involves the individual gaining a new identity and new competency all while contributing to the community's identity and competency.

Summary

As is evidenced in this review of adult learning theories, there is a broad range of approaches that guide our understanding of how adults learn. While learning can be broken into organizational and individual learning, for the purposes of this project, my focus was theories of individual learning: behaviorism, humanism, cognitivism, social cognitivism, and constructivism. Furthermore, these theories can be divided into subsets of instrumental and communicative learning. I chose to use the lens of communicative learning as the basis for my research to bring a new perspective on paraeducator professional development.

As demonstrated previously in the literature, much of the writing and research highlights more of the instrumental learning perspective of professional development provided to paraeducators.

With this research I endeavored to dig below the surface of current understanding regarding paraeducator professional development by shining the light of communicative learning on how participant paraeducators describe their professional development experience. It is because of this focus that I selected a qualitative approach to better capture and analyze how the paraeducators describe this experience in their own words. I believe the best method to accomplish this was through a phenomenological approach.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

The previous chapters have highlighted the overall lack of consistent and on-going professional development (PD) for paraeducators. Compounding this deficit is the lack of research from the perspective of the paraeducator on professional development that is provided. Much of the research has been conducted from the perspective of people in supervisory or managerial positions in the institutional hierarchy. The key component of my research was to understand the paraeducator experience from the perspective of the paraeducator participating in professional development. The work currently being done in the State of Washington, providing mandatory statewide professional development for K-12 paraeducators, offered a unique opportunity to explore the paraeducator experience participating in this professional development program.

Research Design

My study was conducted using a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of participants while watching for key elements of transformational learning due to receiving the professional development. While a quantitative approach would provide useful insights through the use of established survey measurement tools (Caruana et al., 2015; King, 2004; 2009), its limitations would prevent gaining a deeper understanding of how individuals understand and make sense of their own experiences. To fully explore the possibility of transformation experienced by the participants, it is necessary to understand how they make sense of the experience through their own words.

Exploring the experience of paraeducators participating in professional development is an under researched phenomenon. Phenomenology focuses on exploring how people make sense or

give meaning to the experiences they encounter in the context of their world (D'Addelfio, 2017). The phenomenological approach is an ideal method to explore the lived experience of professional development through the words and descriptions of the paraeducators and to identify transformational experiences due to participating in professional development (Adams & van Manen, 2008; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

D'Addelfio (2017) identifies two methods of data collection used to operationalize phenomenological concepts—descriptive and interpretive. This study incorporated the interpretative method which relies on open-ended or unstructured interviews. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) describe respondent interviews as an interview approach that aligns with the interpretive method. Unlike other types of interview methods that focus on participant observations and opinions of events and experiences, respondent interviewees speak only about, and for, themselves. This creates an environment where the participant is guided to explore their own experience and how they make sense of it through open-ended questions—prompted by the participant's responses—probing for clarity and deeper interpretation. The respondent interview approach aligns with an interview framework that Høffding and Martiny (2015) refer to as a *phenomenological interview* (see also van Manen, 2016). As they describe, the intent of the interview is to understand the individual's experience, as well as common essentials of the experience shared by others.

Target Population and Sampling Method

The target population of this study was instructional paraeducators working in rural and suburban public school districts located in one county in the State of Washington. Based on school district personnel reporting for the 2020-2021 school year there were approximately 1400 paraeducators employed by the nine districts in the study area (OSPI, 2020-21). As will be

discussed later, the study area was eventually broadened to the entire state to assure sufficient participation. A purposive sampling of 10-15 participants was to be recruited out of this county-wide pool of paraeducators; purposive refers to making an “informed judgement about what to observe or whom to interview” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 110). Paraeducators qualified to participate if they were currently employed as a paraeducator in the State of Washington, and had completed a minimum two days (14 clock hours) of the state’s mandatory Fundamental Course of Study (FCS). The FCS is a paraeducator professional development program of 12 required courses aligned with five standards of practice (Appendix A), providing 28 hours of the skill and knowledge competencies shown in Table 1. The FCS is the prescribed introductory training for the General Paraeducator Certificate that is comprised of a total of 98 hours of professional development. The additional 70 hours of training also align with the same five standards as the FCS but cover a broader range of subject matter. Per the PESB’s directive, any professional development that a certificated teacher may receive clock hours for will meet the requirements of the general certificate. Upon successful completion of the 98 hours of professional development the paraeducator is eligible to apply for the General Paraeducator Certificate. The certificate is required for every instructional paraeducator in the state but does not require renewal and is transferable to any K-12 public school in Washington. (PESB, 2022b)

In addition to the General Paraeducator Certificate, a paraeducator may choose to complete two subject matter certificates: Special Education and English Language Learner, as well as the Advanced Paraeducator Certificate (PESB 2022c). The subject matter certificates require 20 hours of professional development and there are free asynchronous online modules developed by the state available for the paraeducator to fulfill the training requirements. The advanced certificate requires 75 hours of professional development that align with the same

standards as the general certificate with expanded knowledge and skill competencies (PESB, 2018). The three optional certificates are valid for five years and must be renewed if the paraeducator chooses to do so.

Table 1

Fundamental Course of Study: Course Outline

Supporting educational outcomes (11 Hours)

FCS01: Introduction to cultural identity and diversity (4 hours)

FCS02: Methods of educational and instructional support (4 hours)

FCS03: Technology basics (2 hours)

FCS04: Using and collecting data (1 hour)

Demonstrate professionalism and ethical practices (6 hours)

FCS05: District orientation of roles and responsibilities (3 hours)

FCS06: Equity (3 hours)

Support a positive and safe learning environment (8 hours)

FCS07: Behavior management strategies including de-escalation techniques (2 hours)

FCS08: Child and adolescent development (2 hours)

FCS09: Emergency and health safety (1 hour)

FCS10: Positive and safe learning environments (3 hours)

Communicate effectively and participate in the team process (3 hours)

FCS11: Communication basics (2 hours)

FCS12: Communication challenges (1 hour)

Note: In January 2020 a fifth standard, *Demonstrate Cultural Competency*, was added and the competencies were rolled into the existing 12 courses for the FCS.

Washington Professional Educators Standards Board (PESB, 2020a)

Demographic factors, such as age, number of years as a paraeducator, position(s) held (e.g., special or general education), gender, race and ethnicity, and education level, were intended to be applied to the extent that the number of willing participants allowed for this level of targeted selection. In reality, the response to my request for participants was much less than

anticipated, as will be discussed later, and the need for a screening tool was not necessary.

However, prior to beginning an interview I did ask each participant the following five questions:

- 1) Are you currently employed as a paraeducator in the State of Washington?
- 2) Have you completed a minimum of 14 hours of the FCS training?
- 3) How long have you worked as a paraeducator?
- 4) What is the approximate size of your district based on student population?
- 5) What is your specific role as a paraeducator?

As stated previously, the efforts to solicit study participants did not result in a large pool of candidates to choose from so I was limited to the few respondents who accepted a request for an interview. In total, I received nine responses that expressed an interest to participate in an interview. Of these nine, five followed through with an interview.

To connect with potential participants, I reached out through established networks of paraeducators including Washington State's two largest paraeducator labor unions: Washington Education Association (WEA) and Public School Employees of Washington (PSE). In addition, I posted on a social media based forum: International Site for Teacher Assistants and Paraeducators. Prior to reaching out to the labor unions' membership, I communicated with state and local union leadership to establish transparency and confidence in my research. In every instance of reaching out to potential participants, I provided a brief introduction to myself and the purpose for my need to talk specifically with paraeducators and provide assurance that their participation is voluntary and confidential [Appendix B]. I believed it was necessary to provide this additional assurance due to leadership roles I had held with both PSE and the Washington State Paraeducator Board.

Initially, to facilitate a screening process, a short online survey [Appendix C] was included with each solicitation request for potential participants in an effort to identify the qualifications and demographic criteria listed above. While I did receive several responses, and two individuals provided contact information to follow up, none of the respondents offered to participate in the interview process. On the possibility that the nature of my research approach and topic fostered uncertainty with respondents, I altered the survey for a second round of requests to include a few questions, based on a 5-point Likert scale, that aligned with prompts from my interview script [Appendix D] (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). This second round did result in one response that eventually led to an interview, although the participant did not complete the survey.

Population Sample. Ultimately, while networking at a conference, I connected with four additional paraeducators who self-selected to participate in my study. All five paraeducators met the two minimum requirements to be a participant: Employed as a paraeducator in a Washington K-12 public school district and had completed at least 14 hours of the Fundamental Course of Study (FCS). The five participants represented districts from across the state ranging in size, by student population, from 6,200 to 20,300 students. Four of the five paraeducators identified working in special education programs (SPED) including Structured Learning Classrooms (SLC) and Learning Assistance Programs (LAP). One paraeducator specified a general education role, including instructional support, recess, and lunch duties. The participants' years of experience in the role as a paraeducator ranged from seven to 15 years, with a mean, and median, of 11 years. Given that the professional development requirement for the State of Washington paraeducator certificate program was not fully implemented until the fall of 2019, each of the participants had worked as a paraeducator for several years before participating in the FCS.

Data Collection

Those that agreed to continue in the study participated in a one-on-one interview based on the interpretative and respondent interview methods (D'Addelfio, 2017; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). These complementary approaches are unstructured interviews that rely on open-ended prompts to explore the participant's own experience by responding to their account of their experience. While the initial response to my opening prompt typically included opinions and feelings about the paraeducator professional development in general, and how it was delivered, I found, if I allowed participants to work through that part, their comments revealed elements about their lived experience I was able to explore further with additional prompting.

Each participant was interviewed once and the interviews lasted between 30 to 60 minutes using an online video conferencing service (Zoom, 2022). This service was utilized due to physical distance and on-going social distancing recommendations pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing this service also allowed for ease of recording the interviews. In keeping with the informed consent agreement, the video portion of the recording was deleted immediately upon conclusion of the interview. The audio recording was transcribed utilizing Temi (Temi, 2022), an automated online transcription service, and verified for accuracy by comparing the written transcript with the audio recording and cleaning up the verbal pauses and repeated words. Upon verification, each participant received a copy of their transcript for a member check (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Data collection through interviews is foundational to capturing the lived experience of the participants. Utilizing open-ended questions (Høffding & Martiny, 2015; Sohn et al., 2016; Sohn et al., 2017; van Manen, 2016), the focus was on eliciting first-person perspective, pre-reflective, experiences that provide a candid narrative of how a paraeducator experienced the professional

development provided by the state. In addition to open-ended questions, and to guard against influencing participant response, I performed a bracketing exercise to bring forward my own experience on the subject (Sohn et al., 2017; Tufford & Newman, 2012). The bracketing exercise I chose was to put in writing my experience participating in the FCS trainings provided by my district. I knew going into this project that I had unstated expectations and frustrations with how the roll out of the FCS should have been accomplished. As a member of the Washington State policy board tasked with providing direction to school districts during the initial stages of the new paraeducator certificate program, I had a vested interest in the success of the implementation both locally and across the state. By documenting my personal experience I acknowledged my own biases about the specific professional development program, how my District presented it, and my expectations and assumptions regarding professional development in general. Having performed this exercise prior to conducting the interviews and subsequent analyses, helped me to be conscious of not responding to participants' experiences that did not align with what I knew to be the purpose and intent of the professional development.

Sohn et al. (2017) describe in detail the process of interviewing study participants. Key points that I paid close attention to included, first, creating a safe environment to foster a dialogic atmosphere that provides a feeling of privacy, engenders trust, and builds rapport. If circumstances had allowed, interview locations would have included small conference rooms at a local library, union offices, or school district building to name a few. However, considering COVID-19 guidelines and restrictions regarding in-person contact, or due to distance, all the interviews were conducted remotely utilizing the online video conferencing service.

Second, the questions [Appendix E], or prompts, were designed to focus the interviewee on responses that are more likely to provide "vivid, detailed descriptions of experiences as lived"

(Sohn et al., 2017, p. 132). An example of this would be: *Describe what it was like to participate in the professional development.* In the event a respondent began providing explanations or analysis of their experiences, a follow up prompt was used to guide them to provide a story that described the experience.

Third, to not rush the participant, I prompted them for additional examples of when they had a similar experience or referred them back to a previous point to expand on it further. An example of a follow up prompt would be: *Would you describe [refer to previous response] further?*

Finally, as recommended by Sohn et al. (2017), after completing the first interview I took the opportunity to review my questions and follow up prompts and identified word choices that might have elicited responses not suitable for a phenomenological study. Doing this helped me to be conscious to avoid words like *why* and *how*, and focus on words like *what* and *describe*.

Following IRB requirements, and with participant approval, each interview was recorded, and as described previously, converted into a written transcription prepared for in-depth analysis. The protocol for securing the recordings is outlined in further detail later.

As was mentioned previously, the number of interviewees was expected to be between 10 to 15 individuals. Ultimately five interviews were conducted, and while less than anticipated, met the standard for number of participants in a qualitative study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Once the interviews were transcribed, each participant was provided the opportunity to perform a member check of their interview transcription for accuracy and validity of the recounting of their experiences.

Identification of Attributes

Attributes of the study were identified once the voices and stories of the participants had been thoroughly analyzed for common patterns that could be joined together into shared themes. Høffding and Martiny (2015) state that they “try to dispense with pre-established theories, explanations and beliefs about [the phenomenon], letting the descriptions themselves come to the fore” (Sec. 2.1, para. 1). In keeping with this approach, I allowed the participants’ own descriptions of their experiences to reveal what Høffding and Martiny refer to as *invariant structures* of experience.

Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis followed steps outlined in Sohn et al. (2017) and van Manen (2016). As van Manen explains, “‘analyzing’ thematic meanings of a phenomenon (a lived experience) is a complex and creative process of insightful invention, discovery, and disclosure” (p. 320). Sohn et al. describe a process that “involves scrupulous attentiveness to the particular words, metaphors, and phrases chosen by participants to describe their experiences” (p. 135). Both outline a similar approach to analysis of the data gathered during the interviews—beginning with a wholistic reading of the text, seeking to identify the main significance of the text; followed by a selective reading, identifying phrases or statements that are essential to the experience described; ending with a detailed reading, a word by word, sentence by sentence, examination of the text to identify exemplars that can be combined to create a narrative of shared experiences.

Sohn et al. (2017) explain that coding includes both *micro* aspects of the text—specific words and phrases referred to as *meaning units*—and *macro* aspects, the recurring patterns that may reveal themes, which provide context for experiences. The step between the meaning units and themes, referred to as *imaginative variation*, requires the researcher to apply different

perspectives to the text in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of the participants experience. Usher and Jackson (2014) further explain that, in spite of the approach to phenomenological research, the process includes organizing the text into units of significant statements. From these units, themes are identified and become the foundation on which a description of the lived experience is built. Together these steps lead to identifying significant agreement between multiple descriptive experiences of the phenomenon. Culminating in the development of a narrative or diagram, referred to as a *thematic structure* (Sohn et al., 2017), tying together the relationships of the themes with the existential context of the phenomenon.

Validation: Credibility, Dependability, and Trustworthiness

Sohn et al. (2017) addresses the concern that qualitative, and specifically phenomenological, research continues to be suspect when it comes to credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness. However, as they claim, to the extent that a phenomenological study is able to shed new light on the critical features of a phenomenon, the results may be transferable and of value to others that experience the same phenomenon. As van Manen (2016) reiterates, “empirical generalizations cannot be drawn from phenomenological studies” (p. 352). While it is true that empirical results are outside the scope of qualitative research, this does not mean a phenomenological study has no value beyond describing the experiences of a few individuals. Furthermore, van Manen makes the case that it is possible to identify “recurring aspects of the meaning of a certain phenomenon,” and “recognize what is universal about a phenomenon” (p. 352).

Another important piece in assuring a high degree of credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness was accomplished by following van Manen’s (2016) questions of validity:

(a) Is the study based on a valid phenomenological question; (b) is analysis performed on experientially descriptive accounts, transcripts; (c) is the study properly rooted in primary and scholarly phenomenological literature; and (d) does the study avoid trying to legitimate itself with validation criteria derived from sources that are concerned with other (non-phenomenological) methodologies? (pp. 350-351[letters added for clarity])

Ethical Issues in the Proposed Study

My study had in place the customary measures to assure the protection of the human participants involved. The steps in place to accomplish this are outlined in the following section.

Informed Consent

All participants of this study are represented by a union labor group and, as a precaution, the leadership of each union was given the opportunity to review the intent of this study and ask questions pertaining to how their members would be involved. Potential participants were provided a consent form [Appendix F] that explained the purpose of the study, described the extent of their participation, and identified the benefits, as well as risks, to their participation. All participants were notified at every point of contact that they might choose to withdraw participation at any time without penalty. Participants were provided the means to contact the researcher directly in order to address any questions or concerns regarding this study.

Data Management Procedures

The study was conducted using one-on-one interviews approved by the George Fox University institutional review board (IRB) [Appendix G]. All data collected for this study is kept in a secure, password protected file and accessible only by me as the primary researcher. All personally identifiable information was dissociated from the participants' interviews. Each participant was assigned a study code for the purposes of tracking individual participant

interviews. As the primary researcher, I am the only one able to access any files or documents with personally identifiable information. Analysis was performed on data that had an assigned study code. Per IRB requirements, all personally identifiable information will be destroyed within three years of the successful defense of this dissertation. To maintain confidentiality, each digital file was given a unique alpha-numeric identifier for individual participants.

Given the precautions related to social interactions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted using video conferencing software. As a result, all participants were notified of the video conferencing software use and that only audio files of the recording would be retained for transcription and analysis. All video files were deleted upon conclusion of each interview. An online conferencing software that allows for the separation of video and audio files was used. The audio files were stored and secured as indicated previously.

Researcher's Interests and Position

My interest in this subject arose from direct involvement as a member of a government agency board tasked with establishing state-wide policy in the area of paraeducator professional development for K-12 public school districts. Consequently, I had a desire to better understand effective approaches for providing professional development to paraeducators that delivers a result beyond simple transmission of information, or instrumental learning (Mezirow, 1991). Secondly, as a paraeducator, I received numerous hours of professional development delivered through various means. This led me to question how other paraeducators experience, and are affected by, the professional development they receive. Finally, I served on a state-level committee for a union that represents close to 50% of all paraeducators in the state. This committee was tasked with the implementation of education and training for fellow union members across the state.

While I had connections to several groups that may benefit from this study, none of these groups have a controlling interest in the outcome of the research. I did not receive any compensation from any of these entities related to conducting this research. I was awarded a small scholarship from my union, as a member-in-good-standing, at the outset of my doctoral studies. However, no stipulations were placed on me for the use of the scholarship regarding course work or research, aside from covering customary expenses of attending school.

Limitations and Delimitations

The nature of a study like this one is that there were limitations outside of my control conducting the research and are be identified as clearly as possible. In addition, it was also possible for a study to grow beyond its intended purpose and focus; in order to guard against this, I noted the boundaries or delimitations of this research project below.

Limitations

Several limitations were inherent to this study. First, the access to study participants was a major factor in obtaining a broad cross section of experience and perspectives. I believed the study group identified would provide participants that were representative of different regions of the state. However, participation was entirely voluntary and on a self-selection basis. This could lead to a condition where perspectives are weighted heavily towards a narrow perspective and experience level. In order to offset this possibility, my plan was to have potential participants complete a brief demographic survey, as previously described. The survey was intended to be a tool to identify perspectives that may have been missed through the self-selection process. However, as described previously, the survey did not provide any useful results.

Second, the phenomenological interview method came with its own intrinsic challenge. It can be difficult for participants to open up about their experiences or put their story into words

that capture the existential characteristics of the phenomenon (Høffding & Martiny, 2015; Sohn et al., 2017; van Manen, 2016). Every effort was made to present open-ended questions that elicited accounts of pre-reflective experiences—avoiding “cultural narratives, socio-psychological opinions, personal views, perceptions, perspectives, or interpretations” (van Manen, 2016).

Finally, there may be elements of professional development and the way it is delivered that were not identified, especially with how it relates to paraeducators. This may have been possible given that my own experience was limited to what had been provided by my employing school district. It was anticipated that the experiences of paraeducators in other districts may have provided perspectives that were unforeseen by this study.

Delimitations

The focus of this study was to open the door to exploring an under-researched understanding of paraeducator professional development experiences. For this reason, only the perspectives of paraeducators were considered. While hearing from district administrators and professional development instructors may have been beneficial overall, for the purposes of time constraints they have been excluded from this study. In addition, while there were 23,909 paraeducators in the state’s K-12 public school system for the 2020-2021 school year (OSPI, 2020-21), the intention was to limit the study group to a specific geographic location with the possibility of up to 1800 paraeducators—of which a smaller group would be interviewed. The purpose was so that I would be able to meet in person with union leadership to answer questions pertaining to the study and conduct in-person interviews in locations convenient for both myself and the interviewees. However, as has already been discussed, COVID-19 health safety guidelines made in-person interviews inadvisable. The upside to this was that most paraeducators

had become familiar with using online video conferencing through work which facilitated me being able to conduct interviews online more reliably.

A significant delimitation was the focus on transformative adult learning (Mezirow, 1991) and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). There may be other learning theories that would provide equally valuable insight into the topic of paraeducator professional development, however the communicative learning element of the two theories selected were of particular research interest to myself. Being able to determine if the experiences of paraeducators receiving professional development align with communicative learning, and under what conditions, could be a useful finding. Ideally this will provide districts and professional development trainers with new insights for providing professional development to paraeducators. Increasing the possibility that paraeducators will gain new perspectives in the roles they fill—as key members of the education team serving students and families in their schools.

Conclusion

The intent of this research was to explore paraeducator experiences in the area of professional development and capture these experiences through their own words. As demonstrated above, this is an under-researched area of K-12 public education staff development and, with paraeducators as a growing segment of school staff, it deserves closer scrutiny. Every precaution has been taken to assure the results of this research are valid and provide a reliable perspective on the topic. In addition, participants' interests will be protected through stringent data management procedures.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS

Utilizing a phenomenological approach for this research, my purpose was to explore the experience of paraeducators participating in a new professional development (PD) and certification program mandated for all paraeducators in the State of Washington. This chapter presents data collected from unstructured interviews, utilizing open-ended prompts; conducted, due to COVID-19 restrictions and distance, utilizing online video conferencing services. This worked well given that the last couple of years video conferencing had become a common tool being used in education. Through analysis of the data collected, I was able to identify themes to inform my three research questions:

- Research Question #1: How do paraeducators describe their experience participating in the state mandated professional development?
- Research Question #2: In what ways has the professional development experience impacted paraeducators' experience?
- Research Questions #3: How are elements of transformative learning evidenced in the descriptions of receiving the professional development?

In this chapter I provide an in-depth description of each participant's experience participating in state's paraeducator professional development program. Then I explore common themes that emerged through the shared experiences of the paraeducators. Finally, I will evaluate these shared experiences through the lenses of the Transformational Learning (Mezirow, 1991) and Situated Learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) theories.

Participants

All five interviewees met the minimum requirements for participation in this study: working as a K-12 instructional paraeducator in Washington State and completed at least 14 of the 28 hours required for the Fundamental Course of Study (FCS). In most cases, participants had received professional development beyond the FCS towards the General Paraeducator Certificate. Four of the participants were located on the western side of the state with one on the eastern side. Together they represented districts ranging in size, by student population, from 6,000 to 20,000 students. Four of the five paraeducators identified working in special education programs (SPED) including Structured Learning Classrooms (SLC) and Learning Assistance Programs (LAP). One paraeducator specified a general education role, including instructional support, recess, and lunch duties. The participants' years of experience in the role as a paraeducator ranged from seven to 15 years, with a mean, and median, of 11 years. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for participants and any identifying reference to an employer or location. The following profiles will provide additional context for the five participants' experience. As explained in Lindlof and Taylor (2011), and Creswell and Poth (2018), a sample size of one participant is not unheard of in qualitative research. A target sample size from three to 10 participants is recommended for phenomenology. The sample size of five participants in this study meets this accepted threshold. As will be evidenced in the analysis to follow, several common themes emerged in the descriptions of the five participants' experiences.

Interestingly, when given the opening prompt to describe their experience participating in the State mandated professional development, each participant began with a description of how their respective district handled the roll out of the new training program. While this, in and of itself, was a different level of experience than what I was looking for, I found that these

descriptions did provide useful insight I was able to probe for more subjective experiences. In keeping with the open-ended nature of my interview method, and the claim that “there are no right or wrong answers,” I intentionally did not redirect and allowed the descriptions to play out to a natural segue.

Another unexpected turn of events in the early stages of preparing for this study was the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to schools closing and restrictions on in-person gatherings, districts and staff had to quickly pivot to using online video conferencing services like Zoom (Zoom, 2022) to continue providing synchronous instruction for students. This carried over into delivering professional development to paraeducators in order to meet the state’s professional development timelines during the pandemic. As would become evident later, this played a part in the experience of participants receiving their professional development.

Sapphire’s Experience

Sapphire has served as a paraeducator for 11 years and currently works for a district with a student body of approximately 14,000 students. They work in special education supporting students with significant behavior and/or medical needs. Sapphire was one of two interviewees that had an active part in helping their district prepare to offer the new professional development to paraeducators, claiming, “I was part of helping in the development of the process within our school district.” Stating, “I personally went on Moodle, and I had done our Fundamental Course of Study (FCS). Then I helped our professional development team access the FCS to develop and supply them to the rest of the paraeducators.” As to the state of the professional development program in their school district, Sapphire stated, “I’m in a larger district that already had a professional development program in place, so we didn’t really have to reinvent the wheel;”

claiming, they have had “professional development for maybe 15 or 20 years—10 years ago it was flourishing.”

Regarding the District’s delivery of the state’s new paraeducator professional development program, Sapphire stated, “our school district was very well set up to implement this program,” and that it “was very easy to just go, okay, sign up for these classes, you know what to do, you know where to go.” Because of the existing infrastructure for professional development at the district level, when the COVID-19 pandemic shut down schools and in-person training in Washington State, in March of 2020, according to Sapphire, training was easily moved online through the use of Google Classroom. In addition, because the school district had a long history of providing professional development for paraeducators, Sapphire claims that the District was “very proactive in having in-person [professional development] prior pandemic.” Further surmising, “I think at that time we had like 485, something like that, paras in our district and over 60% or 70%, I’m not sure the percentage, a fair amount of them that had already had their in-person hours accomplished.”

When it came to Sapphire’s specific experience participating in the paraeducator certificate professional development, they described their in-person trainings as “very interactive by nature,” while expressing some concern with how effective the online learning modules were. At the beginning of each school year, school employees are required to complete a series of online trainings in a variety of topics on health and safety of student and staff. Sapphire raised a common perception this method of online learning is prone to participants being able to complete the modules without really engaging with them. As a retired business owner, Sapphire stated:

I'm not a nine to five thinker. So, I look at the whole thing. So, I was looking at the class and go, 'boy, I wonder if a person could cheat on this and just skip through it and not get the training? I wonder if people will do that?'

Despite expressing a general concern about online modules, Sapphire described their personal experience as being engaged and wanting to share with coworkers what they had learned. In one case in particular, they had completed a module on the history of special education and took what they learned back to their class team and facilitated a series of discussions on the subject.

In comparison to the asynchronous online modules, as stated previously, Sapphire described the in-person learning as interactive. However, during the COVID-19 shut down, and in-person learning was not an option, professional development continued using synchronous webinars. Sapphire's experience with these was that, like in-person professional development, the webinars provided a level of interaction that is not possible in the asynchronous modules. Through the use of the webinar chat feature, facilitators and participants were able to ask and answer questions that came up during the presentation. Utilizing this tool allowed the presenters to stop and address specific themes coming up in the chat, or moderators would respond directly in the chat thread if it was a more general question. When comparing the impact between in-person and synchronous webinars, Sapphire stated "I think they both are good. To be honest with you, I think in-person is always more impactful just for the personal interaction with people and the give and take. I think in-person is always going to be premium."

Jade's Experience

Jade has served in the paraeducator role for 10 years and works for a district with a student body size of 20,000 students. They work in general education providing instructional support along with supporting students during recess and lunch. Jade's district provides two days

of professional development just prior to the beginning of each school year and for this reason Jade had completed 14 hours of the FCS professional development, including the seven hours of required in-person, prior to COVID-19 shutting down in-person meetings in the spring of 2020, and everything shifting to online or virtual meeting platforms. For Jade, participating in professional development was a new experience, stating that “I think, for me, that had been the first time that I’ve ever done anything like that.” Jade explains further that:

The school I’m at now, they really keep the paras informed on getting classes and I’d never taken classes until 6 years ago and that was the FCS classes, or whenever that came out, that was really the start of really getting involved in knowing what’s doing [sic].

Jade described contrasts in their experience participating in the professional development between in-person and synchronous online learning. An important piece to their experience between in-person and online was being in the same physical space together. According to Jade, “I like talking once I get out of my shell and start opening up, it was fun talking to different people in person.” In contrast Jade stated that “on Zoom, it’s not as personable, you know, it’s like talking through a computer and seeing inside of whatever somebody has in the background and whatnot,” admitting, “I liked it better in-person because then I don’t have a tendency to nod off or start fiddling with something on my desk.” In addition to the personal interaction, being able to get up and move around, if needed, and still be able to follow what is being presented was a crucial factor for Jade feeling engaged, in comparison to watching through a computer screen and feeling limited in being able to move around out of concern for missing something.

Ruby's Experience

Ruby, one of the longer serving paraeducators, has 14 years of experience as a paraeducator currently working in special education supporting students with autism. They work in a district with a student body of 18,000. Ruby explained that their district:

Was really good at the beginning of the FCS, when those first came out, they were really good at having those first 14 days completed by everyone they had. This is prior to COVID. They set up like all day training things just to get as much out as they could. And then they reached to new people and provided that. But as COVID has still stayed or, I should say, arrived and stayed, the lack of, the availability of FCS classes has lessened. I mean, even though they had transitioned to Zoom.

Overall, it is Ruby's opinion that "it's nice that it was there but now that COVID is still lingering it's been lacking."

Aside from the unforeseen effects of a global pandemic, Ruby described other factors that contributed to their experience participating in the required professional development. First, while, as was described earlier, Ruby felt the district did well at the initial roll out of the FCS training, they did however express frustration with the way the district communicated the purpose of the training. According to Ruby, "it was more or less presented as 'we have these topics and you need to improve.'" While they acknowledged they could have misread the district's intent, stating that "it could have been my mood or whatever. It just felt like, 'well, you, you need to improve of what you have.'"

Second, Ruby described factors that had to do with the professional development moving to synchronous online learning due to COVID-19 meeting restrictions. Comparing their experiences between in-person and synchronous online they described it in the following way:

during in-person learning they experienced the opportunity for engagement and feedback through brief breakout sessions as table groups and the occasional breakout when they moved to different tables. This provided a connection and experiences with different perspectives that gave Ruby assurance that “it’s just not me or it’s just not happening in my building.” Then when things moved to Zoom for trainings, it became what Ruby described as “that whole Zoom thing.” Meaning that people would interrupt the speaker or not speak up at all, giving them the sense that they were missing out learning from the experiences of other, like what happened during the in-person professional development.

Finally, added to the physical aspect of the in-person versus online format, Ruby described factors pertaining to the people presenting the training. Stating that “most of our presenters that we’ve had in the past, and as well from Zoom, are very strong figures in person.” Ruby felt that, in person, these presenters were very skilled at maintaining the attention of the group and keeping people engaged. However, online, they lost that group, in-person, dynamic and training resulted in more of a “here watch the slide, here is this video” presentation. Not that they did not feel some of the information presented through slides and videos wasn’t relevant, only that there came a point in some presentations where Ruby would wonder why they kept on showing the slides. Stating:

It’s like, they’re, they’re still learning a new skill, which was good for them. But, when we’re also trying to learn a new skill at the same time, it just, it has that disconnection and it’s, and then it, you kind of feel bad for the presenter, and for us as well, due to everybody was like learning something new.

Leaving Ruby feeling like “we were missing that piece that needs to be really emphasized.”

Despite experiencing frustrations concerning the online learning format, there were also experiences that allowed for connections that equaled an in-person format. In the breakout rooms, during online presentations, there were opportunities to hear from other paraeducators that they might not typically have been with in the same training together. This brought perspectives that were new or not heard during the normal training opportunities. In addition, when a presenter was willing, Ruby asked to stay on a little longer to ask some questions about the topic. Turns out there were others that wanted join in and continue the discussion beyond the posted meeting time. This had a significant effect on Ruby, stating:

It was a blessing that she did stay on as long as she did. Because, you know, with Zooms, a lot of it's like, "nope, we got to cut it off at this time." And she took the moment to stay on. And so, for me, that gave me the motivation and reminded me that, "oh yeah, just giving somebody that extra time and attention can just change the whole day."

Violet's Experience

Violet, the participant with the least experience at 7 years, supports students in a Learning Assistance Program. The district where they work has a student population of 6,000. According to Violet, the District chose to offer the paraeducator professional development during school conference week, creating a barrier for some paraeducators with children in the schools, having to choose between attending a conference meeting with their child or attending the training. In Violet's case they were only able to attend two out of the 20 conferences scheduled for their three children.

Violet described their first year of the paraeducator professional development, held in-person, as being "broad spectrum" but provided "some tools to be able to use; how to interact with students, how to work with technology." However, they also felt that the time was too brief

to be able to retain the information they were provided. The second year, due to COVID-19 restrictions, all learning went online utilizing modules provided by the State. Violet did not feel it was “applicable to what we were doing on a daily basis.” And felt that it “gave us zero tools that we could use. Just felt like we had to jump through hoops to be able to finish our time.” The third year, this past year, they again felt like it was something the District had arbitrarily chosen and it too, according to Violet, “gave very little information that would help us on our day to day basis,” and that it “was checking off the boxes that we had to put in the hours but did not give us the tools that we needed to actually do the work.”

Another difference in experience Violet mentioned was during the first year of professional development, the training was provided by one instructor to each building team, independent of other buildings, which allowed hands-on training specific to each group’s needs. Unlike the third year when training was held on Zoom and included the District’s entire paraeducator workforce together with one instructor. In addition to the large Zoom meetings and the difficulties they experienced due to the size of group, there was also an issue with the technology provided to the paraeducators. According to Violet, “we had devices that were so inadequate that the students weren’t allowed to use them, but it was applicable for paras to be able to use them. So, we were bottom feeders.” However, if the Zoom groups had been made smaller, like during the first year in-person training, they felt that the technology issues might not have been as much of a factor, and they would have gained the benefit of learning together as a team, and discussing things specific to their building’s needs. Like in the first year when they felt like the training was “more of a toolbox filler,” and offered “tools that we could actually use on the ground as a paraeducator.”

Overall, in Violet's experience with the professional development, other than the first year when they felt the training provided useful tools to use while working with students, "there's been very little that we've been able to use. It's theoretical, it's very hands-off versus hands-on."

Ebony's Experience

Ebony, the longest serving paraeducator at 15 years, works in special education supporting students in a Structured Learning Class, in a district with 17,000 students. In addition, Ebony was the second of the two interviewees that had a direct role in helping their district to prepare for the roll out of the new paraeducator professional development program. As an active member of their union Ebony had been anticipating for several years the implementation of the paraeducator certificate program. In preparation for the roll out of the program the District approached Ebony to participate as part of a team to plan for the launch of the new training. The summer before the program was to begin, the District hired a new person to oversee the implementation of the paraeducator professional development. However, according to Ebony, the new hire did not express much interest in the program and when approached about the plan for the professional development dismissed it, saying "well, it's funded for this year." Implying to Ebony that it was not worth the time and effort because it may not be funded again the next year. This led to important training dates in the Fall being missed and the trainings being delayed by several months until Spring. Ultimately because of the delays, the Spring plans were derailed by mandated school closures and a moratorium on public meetings due to COVID-19. Which, according to Ebony, led to a scramble to provide the training through the state's online modules. With districts across the state making this same pivot to online learning it, they believe it put a lot of strain on the Moodle platform that was being used and caused access issues.

Once the State gave approval that synchronous online learning could be used to fulfill the in-person requirement, Ebony was recruited to help lead the communication professional development class, and over the course of three days provided the training via Zoom to nearly 400 paraeducators. The next fall, when the trainings began again, Ebony discovered one session had not delivered the appropriate content and, after calling attention to the need to have over 40 paraeducators retake the class, was asked to present the class to all the paraeducators. This led to Ebony being involved in other aspects of the professional development program and eventually discovering important documentation, required for proof by the state for reimbursement, could not be located by the people that eventually took over from the staff member previously responsible for the program. This also created an issue with missing documentation submitted by the paraeducators proving they had completed all the required hours of the FCS. Which in turn led to Ebony helping many of their fellow paraeducators track down their copies of the missing documents.

Despite all of this, Ebony stated that “the majority of us are all into our General Certificate.” However, going forward the District is looking at doing away with the Fall and Spring professional development days and instead providing it on conference days. This raised a concern in Ebony’s mind about scheduling conflicts for paraeducator’s with children in school.

Stating:

A lot of our paraeducators work as paraeducators because it, it goes with their child’s school schedule. So when there’s a day off like this, they’re home with their kids, because they’re not going to be paying a babysitter when they’re making \$30,000 or less a year, you know, especially [if] they’re a single parent.

With this new development, Ebony has expressed their concern and suggested to the District that “you need to make these classes available via Zoom and in-person at the same time, because you are going to have this, or you need to provide childcare.” Due to the possible change of when professional development will be provided, and the missteps experienced along the way, the question was raised by Ebony as to “why is it that it’s not a para in [charge] because they know what it is we need, how we need it, what we really, how we all learn it.”

Emerging Themes

This study sought to answer three questions: Research question one stated, how do paraeducators describe their experience participating in state mandated professional development? Research question two stated, in what ways has the professional development experience impacted paraeducators’ practice? Research question three stated, how are elements of transformative learning indicated in the descriptions of paraeducators receiving professional development?

Under the umbrella of the three general themes, aligned with the three research questions, of experience participating in professional development, impact on practice, and elements of transformational learning, several common sub-themes rose to the top during the process of analyzing the data collected from the five interviews. Under the general theme of experience, a theme of how districts approached the professional development program and a theme of in-person vs. Zoom vs. online emerged. Under the theme of impact on practice, three themes emerged: confidence, purpose, and collaboration. Finally, under the theme of elements of Transformational Learning, two themes surfaced: communicative learning and agency. The following section aims to describe each of the themes through the shared experience of my participants.

Experiences: District Approach and In-person vs. Zoom vs. Online

Research question one stated: How do paraeducators describe their experience participating in state mandated professional development? The previous section highlighted the individual experiences of each participant. This section will bring together the similarities and dissimilarities of their experiences related to how their districts approached the professional development program and, more specifically, their experiences receiving the professional development via in-person, Zoom, and online modules. As mentioned previously, each participant provided a rich description of how their district rolled out the new paraeducator professional development program. Although I initially was looking for experiences more personal to the paraeducators I realized that the descriptions they provided offered useful contextual backdrops to the subjective experiences they described with probing follow up questions.

District Implementation. The five districts represented by the paraeducators in this study varied in their preparedness for providing the new paraeducator professional development program. Out of the five districts, Sapphire's, according to their account, was the most prepared to roll out the new professional development, having a system in place going back 20 years—stating that the “district was very well set up to implement this program” and highlighting the ease in which paraeducators could sign up for classes. As stated previously, Sapphire was one of two of my participants that had a more direct role in helping their district prepare for the launch of this new training program.

Ebony was the other participant with direct involvement in helping the district to prepare for implementation of the paraeducator professional development program; invited to join the district team tasked with planning the delivery of the new training, and later being asked to teach

one of the classes. However, according to Ebony, the team's plans ran into difficulty being implemented due to a new hire, given the responsibility of overseeing the new professional development program, either not being informed of the responsibility when hired, or not having interest in the program and questioning its viability. Reportedly stating, "well, it's funded for this year," implying that the program might not continue due to funding not being available. This led to the situation where important training dates were missed, causing the training to be delayed and eventually affected by school closures due to COVID-19 in the spring of 2020. In addition to unforeseen difficulties rolling out the program, Ebony explained that the district is making a change going forward that the training will be conducted on conference days, when students are not in school. However, Ebony's concern is that attendance will be difficult due to many paraeducators having school age children. Believing this may cause a paraeducator to incur the cost of childcare and possibly missing their children's conferences.

Violet validates Ebony's concerns as their district took this approach of holding professional development classes during conference week. According to Violet, this put paraeducators with school age children in the position of having to choose between attending their child's conference meeting or participating in the state mandated professional development. Violet recounted having to miss 18 out of 20 conferences scheduled for their three children.

Another factor that impacted the district's implementation of the professional development program was the abrupt onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to mandated school closures, Violet's district held trainings in person at the building level, meaning that each building's paraeducators participated as a group in the professional development; allowing for the training to be more specific to each building's needs for their paraeducators. However, with the moratorium on in-person meetings, all training went online either as asynchronous learning

modules or synchronous virtual meeting services like Zoom. According to Violet, unlike the in-person trainings at the building level, the online meetings were held districtwide and not tailored to the needs of specific buildings or programs. In addition to the professional development being less personalized, Violet claimed that the computers issued to paraeducators, in order to participate online, were subpar in quality; so much so that the devices couldn't be issued to students. Leading Violet to state that "we were bottom feeders."

Jade and Ruby both provided minimal accounts of how their district's implemented the paraeducator professional development program. In Jade's case they had not received professional development in the past so this was a new experience for them. The one thing they noted was that their district provides two days of training opportunities prior to the beginning of school each fall. Jade did point out that, prior to COVID-19 shutting things down, the district was able to provide the required seven hours of in-person professional development. Ruby as well recounted that their district did a good job of rolling out the first 14 hours of the FCS, utilizing all-day trainings to accomplish it as quickly as possible. According to Ruby the district was able to include recently hired paraeducators as well. The one concern raised was with how Ruby felt the district communicated about the new professional development, coming across as if the paraeducators are not doing their jobs well and needed to improve.

In-person vs. Zoom vs. Online. The advent of a global pandemic and the eventual closure of schools and moratorium on in-person meetings created a unique opportunity to explore the experiences of paraeducators participating in multiple forms of learning mediums. When the Washington State law, (H.B. 1115), was originally passed, the law required a minimum of one day (seven hours) of the FCS professional development be provided in person. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, for districts with a professional development program already

in place, providing in-person training was easily accomplished as described by Sapphire, Jade, Ruby, and Violet. Ebony's was the one district that was not able to meet the in person requirement the first year due to the missteps during the launch of their training program mentioned previously. When differentiating between *Zoom* and *online*, participants are referring to Zoom [synchronous online] as the commercially available video conferencing service (Zoom, 2022), and online is referring to prepackaged online learning modules [asynchronous online]. In some cases referring specifically to the *Paraeducators: What we do matters* modules produced by the Washington Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB, 2022a) and provided on Moodle; an open-source learning platform (Moodle, n.d.).

The four participants able to experience some of the professional development through in-person training all describe similar benefits of in person compared to Zoom. The most common benefit of in person being the ease of interaction when you share the same physical space with others. Allowing the opportunity to break out into smaller table groups and discuss topics brought up during the training. Ruby described in-person experiences that were engaging, provided feedback, and created connections with the experiences of paraeducators in other buildings. Jade echoed a similar in-person experience where they felt it was easier to engage with others through table conversations and break outs with groups designated by a number card. Jade also stated that being in person helped them come out of their shell and move around to see what else was going on. Violet highlighted the benefit that in person allowed for training to take place within each building so teams that worked together trained together, providing a more hands on experience. Sapphire described in person as "very interactive by nature," identifying learning experiences where the training session included role playing or open discussions about specific

topics or classroom experiences. As a group the participants expressed positive benefits in an in-person format.

In comparison, their experiences in Zoom meetings were mixed regarding the efficacy of using virtual meeting spaces. Drawbacks expressed by Ruby and Ebony were as basic as technical issues, including presenters and participants having difficulty managing, what for many was a new technology, and for some communities, reliable internet or Wi-Fi connections. Jade, Sapphire, and Ruby described experiences that both mirrored benefits of in-person learning and revealed impediments to learning in a virtual meeting space. Some of the impediments according to Jade were the lack of personal connection, looking at people through a computer screen, and being distracted by what is in the background of the room where people are at while on a Zoom meeting. In a similar struggle to attend to the meeting, Jade described a “tendency to nod off or start fiddling with something on my desk.” As well, Jade felt constrained to sit in one place in order to watch the screen, not being able to move around and risk missing something. Another drawback of virtual meetings experienced by Ruby, along with the lack of personal connection, was participants interrupting the presenter, or on the other end of the spectrum, not participating in discussions. Jade echoes the experience of lack of participation, especially when participants would not show up in the virtual breakout room to discuss specific topic, leading to a sense they were missing out on learning from their paraeducator peers’ experiences.

Sapphire on the other hand described experiences in virtual meetings similar to in-person trainings. They explained that during their virtual meetings the chat function was active so that participants could ask questions of the presenters and facilitators without interrupting the training. Claiming that, similar to in-person settings, using the chat feature provided a “fluidity of comments and ideas or thoughts or concerns and they were being answered live in the

moment.” Along with this, the presenters would ask questions in the chat and provide an opportunity for participants to respond back in the chat for all to see. Ruby also described experiences where being in a virtual meeting allowed them to interact with paraeducators that they might not typically be in the same training together; feeling that this provided them with perspectives they had not heard before.

The online learning modules on the other hand, while providing an easy way for paraeducators to access important information, did not factor into the participants experiences in any significant way. For Violet they did not feel that the online learning provided them with much in the way of useful tools for daily use and felt more like being made to “jump through the hoops to be able to finish our time.” Sapphire made a similar claim “that it was just something to click through,” expressing a belief that people could complete the course by skipping through and not learning anything. Despite this concern however, Sapphire did describe an experience where they took some information they learned from an online module and were able to facilitate discussions on the subject with their class team.

Impact on Practice: Confidence, Purpose, and Collaboration

Research question two stated: In what ways has the professional development experience impacted paraeducators’ practice? Exploring how their participation in the professional development impacted their practice as a paraeducator was another primary area of interest and revealed three impacts shared in common with all five paraeducators. Each of the three—confidence, purpose, and collaboration—will be identified through the descriptions of their experiences from having participated in professional development program.

Confidence. Confidence for the purpose of this analysis is understood as a person’s certainty about the outcome of a prospective event or “assured expectation,” leading to a

“willingness to act” (Barbalet (1993, pp. 229, 231; 1996, pp. 76–77). Through this lens, the following descriptions demonstrate how the participants experienced feelings of confidence.

Ebony described experiences of being more confident in their understanding and role as a paraeducator due to participating in the paraeducator professional development program. Describing it as recognizing “your lane needs to be a little bit wider than what you thought” [A reference to the saying “stay in your lane” or stick to what you know (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).] and coming to an understanding that “I can go ahead and say something, or I can do that.” Further asking the question, “why would they give you the knowledge if they didn’t want you to: A, know about it, B, take care of it, or C, be involved in it.” Ebony recounted experiences after talking with teachers, who expressed amazement about the type of professional development paraeducators were receiving, thinking to themselves “Yeah. That’s right, you’re not nearly as important as you think you are. The rest of us are too.” Ebony explained this dynamic as a type of dichotomy between what they called “cert knowledge” and “para knowledge.” [“Cert” is an abbreviated reference to a certificated or licensed teacher] Stating that:

After many years as a para, realizing that I didn’t know that, and then some of the things maybe I knew but didn’t know to the full extent, because once again, that was cert knowledge, not para knowledge, even though all of us should have the same exact knowledge.

Violet described a feeling that the professional development was a “toolbox filler,” providing them with things they could actually use as a paraeducator. One particular technology training stood out in how it gave them more confidence to be able to access the technology to support a class if the teacher were not available. They also made a point of stating that they were more impacted by the first year of the training, which was provided in person; unlike the second

and third years due to going online and using Zoom during the COVID-19 closures and meeting moratoriums.

Jade expressed an increase in confidence when it came to better understanding the students they work with. Individualized Education Plans (IEP) are an important legal document that drives the services a student in Special Education receives. Jade found that gaining a better understanding of IEPs help them to have more assurance they would be able to provide the services any particular student was entitled to. Jade also described their experience taking Social Emotional Learning (SEL) classes and coming away with a better understanding of how individual students learn, and how to adjust their approach to each student's needs. Stating, "I think I'm more understanding towards the kids and if one way doesn't work to help one student, I will certainly try and find a different way to help them out."

On a personal level, Jade related that the classes "taught me to be more vocal and to ask more questions if I don't understand something." Helping them to "come out of my shell a little bit;" feeling confident to recognize when a student needs help and know how to "tweak" things a bit to help the student. As Jade stated previously, being a paraeducator was something that was new for them and had felt "overwhelmed with all the stuff before," and now felt they understood better what was going on.

Ruby, a paraeducator with 14 years of experience, stated that some of the classes offered "more of an updated situation instead of like what I already know, and it just gave me my confidence back." Further claiming that it was a good reminder of "how you got into this position and how you go forward;" along with the realization that "I can make a difference."

Sapphire referred to similar experiences participating in the professional development, recalling times when something was presented in a way that caused them to think "I'm so glad

they said that. That was on my mind and I've been in that situation but I didn't [know how] to handle it." Specifically remembering a class on better techniques for working with behaviors and thinking, "I thought about that, but this really brought it home."

Purpose. Duffy and Dik (2012) partially define having a sense of purpose as deriving from "when a person's work actually contributes to the sense of meaning experienced in life" (p. 12). Gaining a greater sense of purpose in their role, through their experience participating in the professional development, was a common theme for several of the participants.

Violet identified a specific instance of training that caused them to feel more a part of the team. The training was on the topic of classroom management and behaviors, with a focus on a large group classroom setting as opposed to working one-on-one with a student. Violet felt that what they learned provided them more skills to better "participate and support the teacher and, or a substitute, that made it feel like we were more of a team." With this training they felt they would have a bigger impact helping the class as a whole be successful, stating that the tools they were provided "just kind of bonded us to the classroom itself, not just the one student or the four students that we push out or pull in." Giving them the sense they were having more of an impact by "supporting my school, my students, my teachers."

Sapphire and Ruby both expressed a new perspective of their purpose in their role as paraeducators. Sapphire recounted an experience when the paraeducators in their building spent time exploring and understanding the history of special education and the paraeducators' evolving role supporting students in special education programs. They claimed that there was a realization among the paraeducators, especially for new paraeducators, that "we are really doing something amazing." Further stating "it really helped in our building, it brought a unity in our building like we've never seen."

Ruby referred to it as a “new tradition” around the expectations of the paraeducator role in the classroom. Examples of the new tradition were being the “first wall of defense and [doing] the problem solving;” or instead of “I go tell my teacher supervisor, to learning this information and doing it.” According to Ruby this has led to tension being experienced when a teacher, especially one new to the profession or the program, questions why a paraeducator is performing functions believed to be a teacher’s responsibility. Ebony expresses this tension between teacher and paraeducator responsibilities in even more detail. Often relating it to a perception of “cert knowledge” versus “para knowledge.”

One dynamic in particular was brought to light through their experience participating in the paraeducator professional development. Often, in the past, when a teacher would receive training on a new learning strategy or curriculum it was their responsibility to bring the information back to their classroom team and share the information they had learned. In Ebony’s experience, what was most likely to happen was one of two things: first, a teacher would only remember parts of the training—the parts they thought were important—and consequently there would be gaps in the paraeducators’ understanding of the information. Second, ignore the new information entirely because, as Ebony reported hearing, “I’ve done things my way for 20 years, why should I change.” However, over time, as more paraeducators began receiving professional development, Ebony saw incidents of teachers noticing what paraeducators were beginning to learn and how it was impacting paraeducators supporting in the classroom, causing teachers to respond, “oh, it’s really making a difference. So I think I’ll get on board now.” Ebony recounts one instance when, together with their classroom teacher, they participated in training on a new curriculum. Being there together meant that the teacher was not solely responsible to later communicate everything to Ebony and, as an additional benefit, later when they were

implementing the new curriculum they could check with each other if they were uncertain about some part of what they had learned together.

Ebony described this change in perspective, or purpose, as being in a lane that has become wider, stating that “you always knew you were like in this lane, but you go through all this training ,and you realize your lane needs to be a little bit wider than what you thought.” A reference to the “stay in your lane” metaphor but with the recognition the professional development has increased their knowledge to what Ebony frequently referred to as ‘cert knowledge’ (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). While Ebony expressed this sense of broader purpose, they also acknowledged that supervisors or district administrators may want to keep them within the narrower lane; their response is “you can’t tell me I’m overstepping because this is why the state gave me this training, because you are not the only person who can do this.”

Collaboration. Gray (1989) defines collaboration as a process where “parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible” (p. 5). Another benefit of participating in the professional development was evident through the opportunities when paraeducators, and at times along with certificated staff, were able to discuss what they were learning and collaborate on how their new knowledge would apply in their specific work environment. In analyzing the participants’ experiences, collaboration appears to be foundational to the previous themes of confidence and purpose. Sharing in learning together, being able to talk through each other’s experiences, and identifying common problems and their solutions were integral to the paraeducators benefiting from the professional development.

Sapphire mentioned previously there were times when, the next morning after a training session, you could hear a lot of discussion in the building and in classrooms about what was

presented the day before. They particularly felt that the in-person professional development was more conducive to “personal interaction with people and the give and take,” concluding with “I think in person is always going to be premium.” Sapphire did, however, also experience thoughtful discussions with coworkers after participating in an online learning module, but they were very intentional about bringing what they had learned back to the classroom team and prompting deliberate conversations about the material. Leading many coworkers, from Sapphire’s perspective, to gain a deeper, or newfound, appreciation for their role as paraeducators.

While Jade also expressed that in-person professional development was more effective for them personally, they did experience a Zoom meeting professional development opportunity and recounted how they were given time to break out into “chat rooms” to discuss specific problems and solutions with the meeting hosts, and both teachers and paraeducators. These opportunities to collaborate with colleagues from diverse backgrounds and experience levels was very beneficial to Jade feeling they were better prepared to support the students they work with. Violet also described experiences learning and collaborating with colleagues from across the district, however, in some cases resulting in a less positive outcome. According to their experience, conversations during the trainings at times revealed discrepancies in how information or programs were available in some buildings and not in others.

Ruby and Ebony also described collaborative discussions taking place both during trainings and in some cases continuing on into the classroom. One particular experience for Ruby took place during a Zoom meeting professional development including paraeducators from other buildings and programs, and Ruby found it particularly helpful to hear a male paraeducator’s

perspective on a particular issue the group was discussing and recognizing that he had provided a perspective and solution they had not considered.

Ebony's experience echoes Ruby's in that by training together with teachers and paraeducators, they were able to collaborate on a plan to roll out new curriculum and later during the implementation they could share with each other what they had taken away from the training. For Ebony this was a critical benefit of the professional development—training together. In past experiences, when paraeducators were not included in professional development with teachers, Ebony felt it was like playing the game *Telephone*. The teacher would go to the training and then try to remember what they heard and repeat it back to the paraeducators. In a worst case scenario, according to Ebony, “you’ve also got some certs that just like, ‘oh yeah, this is what we did.’ And that’s it, like, they don’t want to go into full detail.”

As seen in the descriptions of these five paraeducators, an increase in confidence and a greater sense of purpose in their role, are closely related to collaboration they experienced during and after the professional development they participated in.

Transformational and Situated Learning: Communicative Learning and Agency

Research question three stated: How are elements of transformative learning indicated in the descriptions of paraeducators receiving professional development? As the primary theoretical lenses being applied to this study, transformational learning (Mezirow, 1991) and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) offer one more way to understand the experiences of the paraeducators participating in the professional development.

Communicative Learning. Mezirow (2003), describes communicative learning as the “capacity to engage in critical-dialectical discourse involving the assessment of assumptions and expectations supporting beliefs, values, and feelings” (p. 60). This section will look closely at the

paraeducators' communicative interactions that shaped their experiences participating in the professional development. As seen in previous sections the paraeducators described meaningful communicative learning experiences, both in person and in virtual meetings. Conversely, with few exceptions, online learning modules did not appear to result in the same depth of learning experience as the other two learning methods.

Sapphire captured the power of interactive communication in learning. While the opportunity for question and answer times was described as being beneficial, Sapphire focused in on the opportunities of "hearing stories that you have not had to experience but always wondered what would happen if I was in that spot, how would I handle, how would I handle as a bus aide, a violent student on the bus?" In other training sessions, Sapphire described similar types of interaction where a question would be asked and there would either be a role play of how to address the issue being questioned, or there would be an open discussion of how people in other classrooms or programs might have handled a similar issue.

Although Sapphire asserted that in-person learning is always going to be better, their experience in virtual Zoom meetings were comparable in interaction through the use of the chat feature and break out rooms. An important piece to this was what Sapphire referred to as a "fluidity of conversation" where "comments and ideas or thoughts or concerns were being answered live in the moment." This fluidity of conversation was what they described as an important piece of their learning experience both in person and in a virtual setting.

One final part of Sapphire's observations of the learning experience was seeing new paraeducators learning alongside more experienced paraeducators and benefiting from their knowledge and experience supporting students and staff in their work environments. Stating that they "really don't know where their role guidelines are. They're watching what everybody's

doing and they're going, 'okay, I think I can do this,' but they don't really." Although this was an eye opening experience, according to Sapphire, for the newer paraeducators, Sapphire also observed more experienced paraeducators with their own eye opening experiences. Not realizing what they already knew, doing it "instinctively but didn't even know they were doing it, and didn't know that they could have even helped someone else, cuz they thought it was just common knowledge."

Ruby expressed similar experiences in both their in-person professional development as well as the virtual Zoom meetings. Describing the in-person format as "kind of nice because then you had that engagement, that feedback, you know, they would have, in-class discussions." During break out group "topic talks," learning from the experiences of others, they described having the realization of "oh, it's just, it's just not me or it's just not happening in my building." Ruby contrasted this interaction with some of what they experienced in Zoom meetings. Recounting that "when we went to Zoom, you know, you had the people that interrupted the instructor or didn't really want to talk." Expressing frustration that they wouldn't share their stories for everyone to learn from. But then there were also experiences in Zoom meetings that did provide the level of interaction Ruby was looking for. Hearing people share passionately, as Ruby described it, about their experiences and observing new paraeducators respond with "this is so cool, or I never even thought about that."

There was one Zoom meeting experience that stuck out for Ruby, leading them to reflect on the benefits of being together with paraeducators they wouldn't typically be around with training sessions limited to those they directly work with. In this particular case it was a male paraeducator sharing stories of his experiences and making suggestions on how to handle specific situations. Ruby realized that "we get so hyper focused on our students' diversity

without thinking of our own paras' diversity;" concluding, there are benefits of having "different paras from different buildings, besides having all the paras in that building, be connected in a breakout."

Violet, on the other hand, described a different experience when it came to having a mixed group of paraeducators learning together. According to them, at each school, "each principal or admin gets to make the culture how they want. That makes it a very different climate." Violet described it as "not talking apples to apples," feeling that this made it difficult to have a close-knit learning experience. They were careful to clarify that it was not the virtual meeting format that was the issue, it was that they "weren't pulling from the same community and couldn't talk the same." Further claiming, "if we had been just zooming with our group of paras at our school, I think it would have been just fine." Restating, "I don't think Zoom's a problem."

Ebony and Jade echo many of the same learning experiences described by the other three participants. Ebony in particular, highlighted an opportunity they had being in the same training with their supervising teacher. By being there together, they were able to draw from each other's experience to come up with a plan to implement new teaching strategies they were learning. Once they returned to the classroom, they were able to support each other when they were uncertain about some part of the strategy. Ebony contrasted this with past experience when they were wholly dependent on teachers coming back from a training being able, or willing, to share what they had learned. Often feeling they were provided information missing key pieces. Sharing in the learning experience with their teacher left Ebony with the sense they were better prepared to support both the teacher and the students.

Jade had similar experiences participating in training alongside teachers and learning from their experience and expertise. One training in particular was about IEPs and the teachers discussion about all that goes into creating an IEP for a student in a special education program. Jade did mention that learning alongside teachers is not common in their district and in this case they found it helpful to understand the laws and processes it takes to create an IEP that later becomes the plan paraeducators are partially responsible to help implement. As stated previously, this provided Jade with more assurance they would be able to provide the assistance necessary for student success. They especially appreciated the in-person trainings because of the personal interactions through the conversations around the table and being able to move around and talk with different people during a training. Jade felt that this dynamic was lost during virtual meetings being restricted to looking through a small screen and people not showing up during breakout sessions.

Agency. Agency, as described by Barbalet (1996) is “the ability to make a difference in the world” (p. 77). In the context of this study, the participants described experiencing a sense of greater responsibility in supporting their students and other staff. As well as feeling a newfound resistance to being treated as though they are less-than when it comes to being part of the education team.

A concise example is Ebony’s contrast between what they call “cert knowledge” and “para knowledge.” Creating the feeling, expressed previously, that training in the past was incomplete because it was filtered through a supervisor who either forgot the details or was resistant to new ideas. The new professional development they participated in led to a realization that increased the expectations in their role, or, as they described it, “you realize your lane needs to be a little bit wider than what you thought.” Raising the question of why would paraeducators

receive the training if “they [referring to the state] didn’t want you to: A, know about it; B, take care of that; or C, be involved with it?” Feeling a sense of agency in their role by claiming “you can’t tell me I’m overstepping because this is why the state gave me this training, because you are not the only person who can do this.”

Violet also described a realization that, with the professional development they have received, there was an expectation they would take on more responsibility in the classroom to provide specific programs, freeing up the teacher to be more hands off, even though the teachers may not have a complete understanding what is expected. Violet also acknowledged that participating in the professional development led them to realize they are able to have a greater impact on the class as a whole, not just with the one to four students they may be assigned. Giving them a sense of a stronger connection to, and increased role in, their classroom and the school itself.

Jade described an experience where due to the professional development they had “come out of my shell a little bit” and now felt empowered to recognize when a student needed work modified and to go ahead and “tweak it a little bit” to help the student. In addition, Jade admitted, that prior to receiving professional development like what the state provides, that they had been overwhelmed with all that is required to support students in special education. Now they feel better prepared to recognize a student is struggling and take the initiative to offer appropriate support on their own.

Ruby described being conflicted about the increased level of responsibility that came along with the professional development. On one hand they claim that “to have more responsibility on me, I think it’s great.” While on the other hand, they also feel that there needs to be a balance between the new responsibilities they have and the feeling that teachers are

“stepping away from everything.” Ultimately, Ruby observed paraeducator peers, having received the professional development, expressing the realization that “I can make a difference.” In Ruby’s case, they experienced the feeling of getting their confidence back, along with a reminder of why they are in this field and a better understanding of the path forward.

Along these same lines, Sapphire described an experience learning alongside their coworkers where, through a series of discussions, there was a growing realization of the importance of their work and the impact they are having. According to Sapphire this led to a “cherishing every new thing now instead of taking it as ‘oh, okay;’” dismissing it without giving it any serious thought. They also believe the professional development had a significant impact across the district, claiming “it opened up the District’s eyes,” and it “opened up a lot of paras’ eyes.” Evidenced by hearing “a lot of chatter after the next morning in the buildings,” and how it “brought a unity in our building, like we’ve never seen.”

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This study adds to paraeducator professional development literature by including the voices of paraeducators describing their experiences participating in professional development. The opportunity to explore professional development from the paraeducator perspective rose out of my interest in, and involvement with, a new paraeducator certificate program initiated during the 2019-2020 school year in Washington State. While existing literature on professional development and, more specifically, paraeducator professional development demonstrates the efficacy of providing ongoing professional development for all educational staff, my review of the literature revealed a significant gap when it came to including the voices of paraeducators. In addition, paraeducator voices that were included focused primarily on what they learned—new skills or knowledge they gained—as opposed to how the learning experience impacted their understanding of their role as a paraeducator and, by extension, as a member of the education team.

Because of this focus on paraeducator experience participating in professional development I chose a phenomenological approach to understanding their experiences. I also believed that studying experiences would provide a unique opportunity to explore elements of two adult learning theories: transformational adult learning (Mezirow, 1991), and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). I chose these two theories due to their foundation in communicative learning's emphasis on the social aspect of learning—sharing thoughts, ideas, and creating a new understanding together—in contrast to instrumental learning's emphasis on merely transmitting information to perform a task (Mezirow, 1991).

As part of the state's requirements for the paraeducator professional development program, a minimum of seven hours of the trainings had to be completed in person. This left up to 21 additional hours of professional development that could be provided through asynchronous methods such as online, click and view, learning modules. I wanted to determine if paraeducators described different experiences between the two modes of learning. What was unforeseen prior to beginning data collection was that the COVID-19 pandemic would eliminate the ability to hold in-person trainings beginning in the Spring of 2020. This led to permission being granted by the state for in-person professional development being moved to synchronous online learning modes, such as virtual meeting platforms like Zoom. Adding this new element to the paraeducator learning experiences offered insights that had not been anticipated at the outset of this study and added an entirely new factor to the literature on paraeducator professional development.

Paraeducators' Experiences

Research question one stated: What is the experience of paraeducators participating in state mandated professional development? In order to open up this line of questioning I began each interview by asking "Describe your experience(s) receiving the FCS professional development?" My expectation was that I would hear experiences specific to topics of learning, how the learning was delivered, and possibly something related to the individual(s) providing the training. What I did not expect was for each participant to begin with a lengthy description of how their district implemented and managed the delivery of the professional development. I made a determination in the moment that rather than redirect their description I would let them continue. I based this decision on two things. First, at the beginning of each interview I told them that there were no wrong answers. Second, I did not want to unintentionally communicate that I

was looking for something specific, causing them to second guess their responses to my later questions. The bracketing exercise I performed before beginning the interview process was beneficial in helping me be conscious of experiences they brought up—which may have resonated with my personal experience—and caused me to follow a line of off-topic questioning. In the end, during the description of their district’s implementation, I was able to identify personal, subjective, experiences specific to their participation in the professional development itself, that I could explore with them further. Ultimately, while outside of the intended parameters of this study, these district implementation descriptions did provide useful context for understanding some of the other experiences they shared.

Modes of Learning: Asynchronous Online, In Person, and Synchronous Online

When it came to the mode for presenting the professional development to paraeducators, the experiences of my participants focused primarily on in-person and synchronous online. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as mentioned previously, synchronous online learning through the use of virtual meeting tools became a more common way for districts to deliver the professional development. In March of 2020, all schools across the state were closed, and all classes moved to remote, online learning. Along with this came the need for paraeducators to quickly gain proficiency in using online learning tools, both to continue supporting their students and coworkers, and to participate in professional development.

Asynchronous Online

On the whole, the participants had little to say about the asynchronous online learning experience. An example of an asynchronous learning opportunity was the prepackaged modules developed by the state entitled, *Paraeducators: What we do matters* (PESB, 2022a). A participant did talk about one specific asynchronous training having to do with the history and

laws of special education in the United States, that the information they learned struck a chord with them, and they took it back to their class team to share. However, based on the description of the experience, it was the sharing and discussing in person [pre-COVID-19] that had a noticeable impact on the participant and their coworkers. This led them to having a deeper appreciation for their profession and the role each has in supporting student success. On the other hand, a participant expressed a common concern, one I have heard often over the years, regarding the ability to click through the modules without having to really interact with the information. Whether that took place was not evident in the descriptions provided by the participants.

In Person

Most of my study participants were able to receive some of their professional development in person before the pandemic closed things down. From the descriptions they provided, the participants experienced significant interaction with coworkers and presenters while receiving their in-person professional development. This provided them the opportunity to learn from each other's experience and knowledge. Often feeling like this helped fill in a missing piece of the puzzle when it came to understanding their roles and responsibilities better. One participant in particular stated that being in person worked better for them because they needed to get up and move around from time to time, and the trainings when they changed table groups periodically helped meet this need and kept them engaged. In contrast, their experience receiving their training through a synchronous virtual meeting was less satisfying due to staring at a computer screen and not feeling like they could move around for fear of missing something.

However, as one participant described from their experience, and experiences they observed of coworkers, one factor made in-person learning difficult. Often their in-person

professional development was offered after normal work hours or during shortened workdays when students were not at school, conflicting with mealtimes or needing to be home for their own school aged children. As an employee group, paraeducators are one of the lowest paid employees in schools, and a high percentage are women balancing work duties with family duties, or in some cases a second job. From their experience, these factors presented barriers for paraeducators to fully participate in the recognized benefits of in-person learning opportunities.

Synchronous Online

Based on the experiences described by the participants, synchronous online learning appeared to offer benefits parallel to in-person professional development with the possibility of addressing some of the concerns raised. The flexibility of being able to participate from your own home while also attending to family needs could address some of the barriers raised previously. While there were concerns with some experiences using synchronous online as a mode for learning—specifically access to the technology, reliable internet connections, poor virtual meeting etiquette, and presenters not experienced in a virtual setting—most of the participants described experiences that aligned with their in-person learning experiences. Primarily, the opportunity to experience a similar level of engagement with coworkers both within their building and from other worksites in the District.

A common theme in the experiences described was being in breakout sessions with people they might not normally interact with and sharing their experiences with each other and gaining new understandings through those experiences. Another way engagement was facilitated was through the use of the live chat feature where participants could respond to questions raised by the presenter or bring their own questions forward for the presenter to address with the group. Like the in-person table group discussions, the virtual breakout rooms and live chats created the

environment of being in person and learning through the experiences of other. However, it was mentioned more than once that the professional development presenters were an important part of achieving effective engagement with and between the participants. One participant pointed out that they noticed that some presenters that were very skilled at leading in-person training but struggled to maintain the same level of engagement in the synchronous online setting.

Themes Revealed Through Experiences

While the participants' experiences described in the previous section offer useful comparisons and contrasts between the three modes of learning that the professional development was presented in, it is the impact that participating in the professional development had on their understanding of their roles as paraeducators that was important to them. This section provides a summary of themes revealed through the descriptions of the participants' experiences that answer research questions two and three.

Impact on Practice: Confidence, Purpose, and Collaboration

Research question two stated: In what ways has the professional development experience impacted paraeducators' experience? Three themes became evident in the participants' experiences, the themes include confidence, purpose, and collaboration.

Confidence. Confidence is understood as a person's certainty about the outcome of a prospective event or "assured expectation," leading to a "willingness to act" (Barbalet, 1993, pp. 229, 231; 1996, pp. 76–77). Increased confidence was evident in the participants' descriptions after having experienced the professional development. Ebony's use of the metaphor of a lane being widened captures the essence of gaining confidence. After participating in the professional development, they came to the realization that the "lane" they had been in as a paraeducator was wider than they originally thought. Gaining a confidence to be able to speak up more and take

initiative in places when they would have sat back and waited for the teacher to give direction. Also realizing that, if the state was requiring this training, then the expectation was that paraeducators would have increased responsibilities as a member of the team in the classroom. Violet echoed this experience of increased confidence, stating that they felt better prepared to support in the classroom, even if the teacher was not available.

Similarly, Jade experienced more confidence after receiving the trainings, describing it as coming out of their shell; being willing to ask more questions, taking initiative when they see a student struggling and offering them accommodations to help them through the struggle. As a newer paraeducator, Jade claims that the training they received has helped to decrease a sense of being overwhelmed and gain a better understanding of their role in the classroom.

Ruby and Sapphire both described experiences, after participating in the professional development, of gaining confidence in situations they had experienced in the past but were not sure how to handle. Through their training experience they were exposed to the ideas of others and updated information that they were able to take back with them and see it work in their specific circumstances. Leading Ruby to declare “I can make a difference.”

Purpose. Purpose is defined as “when a person’s work actually contributes to the sense of meaning experienced in life” (Duffy & Dik, 2012, p. 12). Gaining a greater sense of purpose in their role, through their experience participating in the professional development, was a common theme for several of the participants. The “I can make a difference” sentiment, as declared by Ruby, was expressed through the experiences of other participants as well. Violet described feeling a sense of being more a part of the team and in a position to have a greater impact on the classroom through their participation in the professional development. This expression of purpose is evidenced in Violet’s sense of feeling “bonded” to the classroom as a

whole, not just a single student. That their sense of purpose as a paraeducator has grown to include “supporting my school.”

Sapphire described a similar experience when they and their coworkers took time to explore further the history of special education after participating in a training on the topic. As a result of this experience, they expressed having a greater appreciation for their role as a paraeducator supporting students with special needs in the schools. Sapphire reported hearing coworkers express the realization that “we are really doing something amazing.” As well, Sapphire described feeling a new sense of unity in their building unlike what they had experienced before.

This sense of purpose was not without some elements of tension as described by the participants in their interactions with teachers and supervisors. Ruby described the new expectations regarding their role as a paraeducator as a “new tradition,” explaining that in this new tradition they moved from needing to go to their supervisor before doing something to just doing it. However, Ruby recognized this has caused tension between the expectations of the teacher’s role and the paraeducator’s role, causing some teachers to question why paraeducators are performing duties reserved for teachers. Ruby identifies sources of tension as primarily due to new teachers, or teachers new to a specific program, not aware of or familiar with the program of professional development being provided to paraeducators. Pickett and Gerlach (2003) explain that teachers and paraeducators share the same six functions of responsibility, with the exception that, for paraeducators, five functions include *assist* in the description. With the potential of paraeducators participating in the same professional development training as their teacher colleagues, and the paraeducator certificate program still in the initial stages of implementation,

there are bound to be growing pains as paraeducators and teachers learn to navigate a new sense of confidence and purpose experienced by paraeducators.

Ebony describes this as what could be called a dichotomy between “cert knowledge” and “para knowledge” [Cert referring to a certificated or licensed teacher]. Ebony related this to experiences in the past when a teacher returning from a training would either share only parts of what they learned, because they had not retained it all, or they would dismiss the training because the teacher had been doing it a different way for years and it was working for them. Then, with the new training, Ebony and their coworkers had been participating in—being exposed to some of the same new strategies and curriculum as the teachers—and bringing it back to implement in the classroom, teachers began to take notice, according to Ebony, that the paraeducators’ role in the classroom was taking on new purpose and responsibilities. As Ebony stated previously, their lane was “a little bit wider.”

Although, feeling tension, as paraeducators go through the experience of gaining confidence, leading to a greater sense of purpose in their role, is not to be unexpected. The participants also described interactions where they experienced meaningful and productive collaboration working with their teacher and paraeducator coworkers.

Collaboration. Gray (1989) defines collaboration as a process where “parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible” (p. 5). Descriptions of the participants experiences sharing in learning together, being able to talk through each other’s experiences, and identifying common problems and their solutions, demonstrate that this was integral to the benefits they gained from participating in the professional development. Ebony described the experience of being able to provide better support in the class after they attended a

training with their supervising teacher. As they prepared for and carried out implementation of new curriculum, they were able to rely on each other as a resource to remember and understand the specifics of their plan. Working together collaboratively they created an environment where it was not just the teacher with all the information, or at least what they could remember, and the paraeducator left to try and pick it up will the teacher ran the program.

Ruby and Jade described experiences of collaboration during online synchronous trainings. Ruby found it helpful to be able to hear from paraeducators in different buildings or programs discuss how they handled specific situations. According to Ruby, one opportunity in particular impacted them; a group of paraeducators were in a breakout room online when a male paraeducator shared his experience handling a particular situation with a student. Ruby recognized that hearing from someone new, and in this case from a male perspective, was critical to them gaining a better understanding of how to handle a situation similar to what was being discussed. Jade experienced this same collaborative dynamic during online breakout rooms when they were put together with a mix of paraeducators, teachers, and the meeting hosts. Being able to hear a diverse perspective of roles and experiences, as the group discussed how to best support students, left Jade with a stronger sense of confidence that they were better prepared to provide the support their students needed.

A common thread of the impact on practice themes could be traced to this collaboration piece. The thread that ties all the experiences together is the communication and interaction between paraeducators, teachers, administrators, and trainers. The collaboration they experienced was the foundation that led to the experience of feeling more confident and opened the door to recognizing a bigger purpose for their role as paraeducators.

Transformational and Situated Learning: Communicative Learning and Agency

Research question three stated: What elements of Transformational Learning were evident in their experience? Evidence of communicative learning and agency were emerging themes identified in the experiences described by the participants.

As the primary theoretical lenses being applied to this study, transformational learning (Mezirow, 1991) and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) offer one more way to understand and apply the findings of this study. Both theories were chosen due to their shared foundation in communicative learning. This was critical because much of the literature around paraeducator professional development has an instrumental learning focus, related to how information is being transmitted and whether the participants are able to perform the tasks of their duties effectively. Cranton (1996) makes the claim that “technical interests and instrumental knowledge are not adequate to understand our practice” (p. 24). If this is true for adult educator practitioners, then it should apply to paraeducators as well.

Communicative Learning. Mezirow (2003), describes communicative learning as the “capacity to engage in critical-dialectical discourse involving the assessment of assumptions and expectations supporting beliefs, values, and feelings” (p. 60). In addition to Mezirow’s theory, Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theory of situated learning provides another element to communicative learning through what they call legitimate peripheral participation.

While more exploration is warranted to fully identify communicative learning in the paraeducator experience receiving professional development, and with the understanding that transformation takes place over a series of events not one single event, and over time, the experiences of my participants indicate that the transformation of perspectives is possible. More importantly, it is through highly social and interactive learning that this will be accomplished.

There was also evidence of legitimate peripheral participation in that just being in the same space, in person or virtual, and experiencing the interaction and discourse of others, while not being directly involved in the discussion, had an effect on my participants' perspectives and understanding of their roles and duties.

Agency. Agency could be described as an outgrowth from two of the previous themes: confidence and purpose. Described by Barbalet (1996), agency is "the ability to make a difference in the world" (p. 77). Participants that described an increased sense of confidence and by extension a clearer sense of purpose, also described experiences of realizing that they can make a difference. While transformation does not occur as the result of a single event, as mentioned previously, the theory does support that an initial single event, termed a disorienting event, can lay the groundwork for the transformation process to begin (Mezirow, 1991). These experiences described by my participants, what I identified as a sense of agency, indicate what could be nascent evidence of the transformation process beginning.

Violet described the realization that they could have a greater impact on the class as a whole and not just the one to four students they typically supported, and not just the classroom, but the school as well. Ruby described hearing coworkers who received the professional development expressing the realization that "I can make a difference." Ebony expressed agency in a slightly differently way, using the metaphor of realizing their lane had become a little wider, but taking it a step further when they felt that someone was trying to make their lane narrower again. Claiming that they cannot be accused of overstepping their role because if the state wanted them to have the training, they must be expected to use it. Jade described their experience as feeling empowered to recognize when a student needs help and taking the initiative to determine

how to support the student. For some of the participants this represented a meaningful change in their thinking about their role as a member of the education team.

Implications for Practice

As a paraeducator who has both participated in receiving professional development and served in a capacity of creating and approving policy for a new statewide professional development program, I was interested in hearing from other paraeducators how, or if, their participation in professional development had an impact on their understanding of their role as a paraeducator. Based on the findings in this study I would encourage state policy makers and agency staff, district administrators, and providers of professional development to regularly seek out paraeducators to hear directly from them if the professional development they are receiving is having an impact on their role as a paraeducator and, if so, in what way. This will require more than the end of course survey that is often required in order to receive credit for participating in the professional development. Follow up a month after the professional development experience, for example, could inform administrators of ways needed to encourage those receiving professional development to continue processing and applying their learning.

When it comes to the modality of learning, in-person and synchronous online formats appeared to have equally effective impact on the paraeducators. The one caution that could be made is that, just like with in-person learning, it is as important, if not more, that the presenter of a synchronous learning event be skilled in engaging the learners in a virtual environment. As was evident from the experiences of the participants, a virtual learning presenter who was not skilled with the technology, or classroom management in a virtual setting, made it difficult for the paraeducators to fully engage with the class.

Like in-person learning, synchronous online learning provided the opportunity to engage in question and answer or small group discussion opportunities like might be experienced in an in-person learning environment. Being able to capitalize on virtual learning as a viable mode for paraeducators creates more options for how they will be able to access learning opportunities. For some paraeducators, in person comes with unintended barriers when professional development is provided outside normal work hours. A significant piece in all the experiences of the participants of this study was the opportunity to interact with other paraeducators as well as teachers or administrators during their professional development, and both in person and synchronous online offered these opportunities.

One final implication is for the district administrator tasked with managing the paraeducator professional development program. While how a district offered the professional development to their paraeducators was not part of the experience this study set out to explore, it became evident that for my participants it was an important part of their experience. What was evident from the descriptions provided by the participants, was when a district had in place a well-established professional development system, it appeared to communicate to the paraeducators that professional development was a priority and should be taken seriously. However, in the case of one district where the administrator did not place much importance in having a well-designed plan in place, or implementing the plan that had been developed, this also appeared to communicate to the paraeducators that professional development was not a priority and of little importance. If a district prioritizes professional development for paraeducators, then it will lead to paraeducators taking it more seriously and potentially experiencing more benefit from the learning opportunities. Conversely it stands to reason the opposite would be true as well.

Even with a moderate sample size of five paraeducators, this study should give those responsible for providing the professional development reason to understand they are in a position to have a significant impact on the experience of paraeducators participating in professional development, and that experience may lead paraeducators to a greater sense of confidence and purpose performing their role supporting students and teachers.

Recommendations for Future Research

There is a substantive library of research in the area of adult learners and specifically the transformation of adult learners (Cranton, 1996; McKenzie, 2011; Mezirow, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Pickett & Gerlach, 2003). This study began the process of adding paraeducator voices to the literature in the area of professional development for adult learners. As a method, the phenomenological approach provided an important perspective by specifically foregrounding the experiences of paraeducators participating in professional development. With thousands of paraeducators employed by school districts all across the United States and countries around the world, the opportunity to include more diversity of voices, and perspectives across race, gender, and cultures, has significant untapped potential. Eventually the voices of paraeducators, and others that serve in similar roles in different professions, could enjoy a more prominent place at the table of research on the transformation of adult learners.

Undoubtedly different themes will come to the front as this research is developed and expanded to include other theoretical perspectives, as well as other research methods, including mixed methods. With adequate resources, studies that include focus groups and direct observations, in addition to individual interviews, could provide more robust results to better inform professional development developers and practitioners in how to provide learning opportunities that will lead to transformed perspectives of paraeducators. At some point a

longitudinal study may prove beneficial to provide deeper insight into the long-term effects of paraeducator experiences participating in professional development.

Conclusion

I set out on this project with the intent to foreground the experiences of paraeducators participating in professional development, through the voices of paraeducators. As a framework to approach this study I chose two adult learning theories based on communicative learning. Communicative learning is foundational to the principles of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and provided the lens to evaluate the descriptions of the paraeducators' experiences participating in a state-mandated professional development program. About 18 months before beginning to collect data on the experiences of my participants, in the Spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of all schools and moved learning online, including the required professional development for paraeducators. This created an opportunity to explore multiple modalities of learning that had not been anticipated at the outset of this study. I had expected to be exploring their experiences participating through in-person and asynchronous online learning modalities. With the onset of the pandemic, synchronous online learning became an option as well. In recounting their experiences while participating in the professional development, asynchronous online learning did not come up very often in the descriptions. On the other hand, both in person and synchronous online learning shared similar amounts of attention as they described their experiences. From the description of their experiences, several shared overarching themes became apparent: confidence, purpose, and collaboration. Building on these themes I was able to

identify evidence of communicative learning, and elements of transformation through a sense of agency the participants gained in their roles as paraeducators.

As evidenced in the literature, professional development has a long history in many professions, with K-12 education being a major consumer of professional development for teachers and administrators. My hope with this study is twofold, first, that it will bring attention to the paraeducators whose responsibilities have increased significantly over the last several decades, and consequently need professional development that not only teaches them how to do their job, but also the purpose and significance of their work. Second, that future researchers will expand on this work and explore additional ways to capture a broader cross section of paraeducator voices describing experiences from their participation in the professional development they received.

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Appendix A: PESB Paraeducator Certificate Standards of Practice

Standards of practice: Fundamental Course of Study (FCS) and general paraeducator certificate



STANDARD 1		STANDARD 2		STANDARD 3		STANDARD 4		STANDARD 5	
Support educational outcomes		Demonstrate professionalism and ethical practices		Support a positive and safe learning environment		Communicate effectively and participate in the team process		Demonstrate cultural competency	
1.1	Knowledge competencies	2.1	Knowledge competencies	3.1	Knowledge competencies	4.1	Knowledge competencies	5.1	Knowledge competencies
A.	Proficiency in basic reading, writing, and math skills	A.	Knowledge of the Code of Professional Conduct for Education (WAC 181.87) and applicable district policies and procedures	A.	Knowledge of child and adolescent developmental milestones/stages and potential early warning indicators (e.g. attendance, behavior, and academic progress)	A.	Knowledge of how multiple communication methods contribute to collaborative teamwork	A.	Knowledge of and respect for different ethnic, cultural, abilities, and linguistic backgrounds of students, families, staff, and community being served
B.	Knowledge of basic computer applications (Word, PPT, Excel), data collection, assessments and software applications to support K-12 education	B.	Knowledge of the distinctions in the roles and responsibilities of teachers, paraeducators, administrators, families, and other team members	B.	Knowledge of strategies to create an equitable learning environment which fosters the unique strengths and abilities of students being served	B.	Knowledge of collaborative team strategies and decision making	B.	Knowledge of strategies to support and maintain a culturally inclusive learning environment
C.	Knowledge of one's own cultural identity and how it influences perceptions, values, and practices	C.	Knowledge of the need to protect civil and human rights pertaining to all students, families, and staff	C.	Knowledge of behavioral support systems/strategies that create inclusive and safe learning environments	C.	Knowledge of the need to respect individual differences among all students, families, and staff	C.	Knowledge of student cultural histories and contexts, as well as family norms and values in different cultures
		D.	Knowledge of the importance and purpose of confidentiality of student information	D.	Knowledge of how to consider the well-being of others and a desire to contribute and support students, school, and community	D.	Knowledge of the importance of giving and receiving feedback regarding student learning and/or personal performance		
1.2	Skill competencies	2.2	Skill competencies	3.2	Skill competencies	4.2	Skill competencies	5.2	Skill competencies
A.	Demonstrate ability to assist in reviewing, preparing, delivering, and reinforcing district/school/classroom instructional outcomes (e.g. tutoring, individual and small group instruction) as directed by certificated/licensed staff	A.	Adhere to code of professional conduct and applicable district policies, and procedures	A.	Demonstrate ability to assist students at appropriate developmental stages and report student concerns or risk factors to certificated staff or supervisor	A.	Demonstrate the ability to utilize various communication methods, problem-solving skills, and collaboration strategies with staff, students, families, and community	A.	Demonstrate the ability to assist in implementing educational material which represents and supports various cultures and abilities of students being served as directed by certificated/licensed staff
B.	Demonstrate the ability to assist in recording and maintaining data as directed by certificated/licensed staff	B.	Pursue and participate in staff professional development and learning opportunities	B.	Demonstrate ability to implement behavior support systems/strategies as directed by certificated staff or supervisor	B.	Demonstrate the ability to initiate and provide relevant feedback regarding job duties, performance tasks, and student learning outcomes	B.	Demonstrate the ability to foster a culturally inclusive environment as directed by certificated/licensed staff or supervisor
C.	Demonstrate ability to assist in administration of assessments and monitoring student progress as directed by certificated/licensed staff	C.	Adhere to and follow district's mission, policies, procedures, and personnel practices	C.	Adhere to district prescribed health, safety, and emergency policies and school guidelines	C.	Demonstrate ability to apply feedback regarding student learning outcomes and/or personal performance		
D.	Demonstrate ability to utilize technology to support educational and safety outcomes as directed by certificated/licensed staff	D.	Adhere to confidentiality as consistent with all applicable laws, regulations, policies, and procedures	D.	(When assigned to CTE classes) Demonstrates ability to follow and assist in monitoring Career and Technical Education (CTE) program/class safety procedures as directed by district and/or instructor				
				E.	Demonstrate an awareness of student emotion, and the skill to help direct or express a student's emotions, thoughts, impulses, and stress in constructive ways				
				F.	Demonstrate the ability to assist students to access family, school, and community resources of support				
				G.	Demonstrate the ability to assist in the development of a student's sense of social and community responsibility				

Adopted November 15, 2017 by the Washington State Paraeducator Board.

Amended January 15, 2020

(PESB, 2020b) *Paraeducator Certificate Standards of Practice.*

Appendix B: Participant Solicitation Introduction

Seeking paraeducators to participate in a research project.

Hi _____,

My name is Loren Sickles and I am a fellow paraeducator in the [school district name]. You were recommended to me by a couple of your [Union] leaders, [names removed for confidentiality], as a leader of your ESP local. I am enrolled in a doctoral program at George Fox University and for my dissertation I am looking for a few paraeducators that would be willing to participate in my research.

My research topic is the experience of paraeducators participating in the PD provided for the Fundamental Course of Study required by the State of WA. As an [district name] employee you are probably aware that I am a member of [Union]. While I could certainly recruit participants from my own members I am hoping to explore the experience of paraeducators from as broad a population as possible and would like to include [Union] members as well.

I am not asking you to personally recruit any of your members on my behalf. What I am asking is if you would be willing to send out a request for participants using your method of communication with your members—email, social media, etc. I have prepared an introduction to my research, along with a link to a brief survey, that can be sent out using the communication tool of your choice. My intent is that this will connect me with paraeducators in Southwest WA who would voluntarily choose to participate in my study.

I want you to be assured that, under the guidance of George Fox University, I am following all the required protocols to protect the confidentiality of any person that participates in my research, even if it is only taking the survey. No personally identifying information will be collected unless a participant voluntarily chooses to provide it and even then it is maintained under strict confidentiality and security requirements.

I know this is a lot to consider without warning and I am happy to answer any questions or concerns you may have at this time. If you would be interested I can provide a copy of the Informed Consent that all prospective volunteers must review before they may continue as a participant.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

Appendix C: Demographic Survey

The results of this demographic survey will not include personally identifiable information. If you choose to you may have the opportunity to participate further in this study. The purpose is to help the researcher achieve a higher degree in diversity of perspective and experience of participants to assure a representative cross-section of the paraeducator population in the state. Beyond helping the researcher to select potential participants for this study, any use of this information will only be in a combined, or aggregate, form.

- 1) Are you employed as a paraeducator in Washington State K-12 public schools?
☐ Yes ☐ No
- 2) Have you completed a minimum of 14 hours of the Washington State Paraeducator Fundamental Course of Study (FCS)? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 3) Were any of the FCS hours you received in a face-to-face setting (does not include any that took place online via ZOOM, Google Hangouts, or similar)? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 4) Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female
- 5) Age: 18-29 ☐ 30-39 ☐ 40-49 ☐ 50+ ☐
- 6) Post-Secondary Education Level Attained: ☐ Some college, no degree
☐ Bachelor's degree ☐ Graduate degree
- 7) Ethnicity: ☐ Asian/Pacific Islander ☐ Black/African-American ☐ Caucasian
☐ Hispanic/Latinx ☐ Native American/Alaska Native ☐ Other/Multi-Racial
- 8) Number of years in the role of paraeducator _____.
- 9) Number of years as paraeducator with current school district _____.
- 10) Grade levels you have worked in [check all that apply]: ☐ K-2 ☐ 3-5 ☐ 6-8 ☐ 9-12

If you would like to participate further in this study please include a first name and an email and/or phone number where you may be reached.

Name _____

Email and/or Phone Number _____

Appendix D: Additional Survey Questions

The following questions ask you to rate your experience related to participating in the Fundamental Course of Study (FCS) professional development. You will rate your responses on a scale of 1-5.

****Reminder**:** There is not a right or wrong response to these questions, it is based solely on your personal experience.

1. What is your level of agreement/disagreement with the following statement: “My participation in the FCS caused me to question the way I normally act while performing my paraeducator duties.” [1–5]
2. Please select how much you agree or disagree with the following statement: “Participating in the FCS caused me to question my ideas and understanding about my role as a paraeducator.” [1–5]
3. On a scale of 1 to 5, how strongly would you agree or disagree with the following statement: “My participation in the FCS led me to realize I no longer agreed with my previous role expectations.” [1–5]
4. Please select the option which most accurately reflects your agreement/disagreement about the following statement: “By participating in the FCS, I have realized that other paraeducators have questioned their previous roles expectations.” [1–5]
5. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “Participating in the FCS has caused me to feel uncomfortable with my traditional paraeducator role expectations.” [1–5]

Appendix E: Interview Transcript

Opening statement

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this project. I am a graduate student at George Fox University and this study is in partial fulfillment of my degree requirements. In addition, I am also a paraeducator and a former member of the Washington State Paraeducator Board. My interest in this study stems partly from my direct involvement in the rollout of the paraeducator Fundamental Course of Study (FCS) and having participated in the FCS professional development as a paraeducator. All of the questions in this interview will focus on your experiences participating in some, or all, of the FCS PD.

Your confidentiality will be maintained throughout this project; no real names will be used when participant comments are referenced in this research project. This research is being conducted independent of any school district, union, or state agency. You have had time to review and sign the consent form, as a reminder, your participation is voluntary and can be withdrawn partially, or in total, at any time without penalty to you. When the recording has been transcribed I will provide you a copy to review and approve its accuracy. Do you have any further questions at this time?

***** Start Recording *****

There are no right or wrong answers to the questions you will be asked. What is important is the description of your experiences on this subject. The interview will take up to one hour and will be recorded for clarity and accuracy.

Starting Prompts:

1. Describe your experience(s) receiving the FCS professional development?

Follow up Prompts:

1. Tell me more about your experience
2. Would you describe a specific time you experienced that?

Transformational Prompts:

1. Describe experience that caused you to reconsider the way you normally act while performing your paraeducator duties?
2. Was there an (What) experience caused you to reconsider your understanding of your role as a paraeducator?
3. Describe a time when you experienced a new understanding of role expectations for paraeducators.
4. Have you experienced a realization that other paraeducators have questioned their previous role expectations?
5. Describe an experience that caused you to question your traditional paraeducator role expectations.

Closing Statement

Thank you for your time today. Your participation is invaluable in helping to gain a clearer understanding of paraeducator experiences participating in the Fundamental Course of Study professional development. You will find my contact information on your copy of the consent form, if you have further questions please email or call me. As the study progresses I may need to follow up with a few participants on a case-by-case basis. If contacted your participation remains voluntary and is not mandated by your participation now.

***** End Recording *****

Appendix F: Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Loren Sickles, Doctoral Student, from GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY School of Education. I am doing a study of paraeducator experience participating in Washington State mandated Fundamental Course of Study (FCS) professional development. You were selected as a potential participant in this study because your position as an instructional paraeducator meets the requirement to receive the mandated professional development.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in one face-to-face interview of up to one hour in length. Interviews will be conducted in a neutral setting that is conducive to a relaxed dialogue. For accuracy of information all interviews will be recorded by an audio digital recorder and later transcribed.

There are no identifiable risks that should cause the participant emotional, psychological, or physical harm. With the exception of finding a suitable location for an interview, it is not expected the participant will be inconvenienced. There is not any expected cost to the participant associated with this study. The benefit of this study will be to gain the paraeducator perspective of participating in the FCS professional development. However, there is no guarantee that you personally will receive any benefits from this research.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Unless requested otherwise, the participant's identity will be kept confidential by employing the use of a pseudonym or a non-specific reference. If an **online video conferencing** tool is used to conduct the interview **only audio files will be retained** for the purpose of transcription and analysis. All **video files will be destroyed** immediately after the conclusion of the interview. All data will be maintained in a password protected file and destroyed upon completion of the study.

Your participation is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with your employer or the State. If you decide to participate, **you are free to withdraw your consent** and discontinue participation **at any time** without penalty.

If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Loren Sickles at lsickles19@georgefox.edu, [phone number & address provided in original]. My George Fox University advisor is Dr. Linda Samek, Professor of Education in Residence, lsamek@georgefox.edu or 503-554-2866. You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.

Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty, that you will receive a copy of this form, and that you are not waiving any legal claims.

Participant Signature

Printed Name

Date

Appendix G: IRB Approval

GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY HSRC INITIAL REVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

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2202037

Title: A Phenomenological Perspective: Paraeducator Experience Participating in Professional Development

Principal Researcher(s): Loren Sickles

Date application completed: 3-20-21

(The researcher needs to complete the above information on this page)

COMMITTEE FINDING:

For Committee Use Only

☒ (1) The proposed research makes adequate provision for safeguarding the health and dignity of the subjects and is therefore approved. **Exempt #2**

☐ (2) Due to the assessment of risk being questionable or being subject to change, the research must be periodically reviewed by the HSRC on a _____ basis throughout the course of the research or until otherwise notified. This requires resubmission of this form, with updated information, for each periodic review.

☐ (3) The proposed research evidences some unnecessary risk to participants and therefore must be revised to remedy the following specific area(s) on non-compliance:

☐ (4) The proposed research contains serious and potentially damaging risks to subjects and is therefore not approved.



3-23-21

Chair or designated member

Date