The Unsung Heroes and Silent Partners of the Educational World

Gillian Schneider

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The Unsung Heroes and Silent Partners of the Educational World

A Dissertation by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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The Unsung Heroes and Silent Partners of the Educational World

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Twenty years ago, I said, “I do” to an incredible and amazing human being; my soulmate, my best friend, and husband, Tim. Your enduring love, encouragement, wisdom, humor, and belief in me, has enabled me to be the proud wife, mother and educator I am today. Together we are the two peas in a pod, the peas and the carrots, we are inseparable and ultimately a force not to be reckoned with. I am lucky to be able to journey through this life with you. Thank you for your endless patience, advice, and reassurance to help me reach this academic peak. I love you.

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ABSTRACT

The Unsung Heroes and Silent Partners of the Educational World
by Gillian A. Schneider

Purpose: The purpose of this mixed method study was to identify and describe what paraeducators perceive as factors that lead to effective and sustainable engagement in special education special day classes, and identify what strategies are effective for encouraging discretionary effort as perceived by paraeducators.

Methodology: The participants in the study were 69 paraeducators employed by a Southern California County Office of Education. Participants partook in two research instruments: (a) a 37-question survey and (b) a semi-structured interview.

Findings: Data based on the mixed method analysis revealed that paraeducators are highly committed employees who want to know that they are making a difference. They want to be acknowledged, trusted and shown respect. Paraeducators are eager to be considered a teaching partner and leader given effective strategies and tools to sustain their engagement and increase discretionary effort.

Conclusions and Recommendations: To be respected, paraeducators need to be empowered by: having opportunities for growth, be connected with positive emotions, be part of the decision-making process, have ownership, receive positive feedback, acknowledge initiative, and be able to communicate opinion with teachers being open to suggestions. This study can be used to inform the education field on how transformational leaders can transform special education: by elevating special education paraeducators, providing a voice for paraeducators and providing strategies that sustain engagement and increase discretionary effort.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

“Remove price tags from people. Everyone has worth; the excitement lies in the discovery of their value”

Leo Buscaglia

With a population of more than 300 million, approximately three quarters of Americans could end up with an obituary that will include the following descriptors; unappreciated, disrespected, unthanked, undervalued, disengaged, unrecognized and under-empowered. Can you imagine an existence of where our personal value goes unappreciated? Is that a life that individuals wish to personify for future generations? According to Rath and Clifton (2004) 65% of Americans are going unrecognized every day in their workplace. There is also an absence of literature that examines the impact of over-recognition (p.41). Additionally, 70% of people are not engaged in their work, which is defined as a psychological construct based on a lack of deep rooted emotional commitment to the organization, and an unwavering inconsistency in organizational pride (Gallup (2002), Kruse (2013) and Marciano (2010). John Gibbons of the Conference Board suggests a universal definition of engagement which “is a heightened emotional and intellectual connection that an employee has for his/her job, organization, manager or coworkers that in turn, influences him/her to apply additional discretionary effort to his/her work” (as cited in Marciano, 2010, p.57). Discretionary effort is a product of engagement; when employees feel engaged they are more willing to contribute more. “They simply feel like real members of the team. They feel like they belong, that they are trusted to make important decisions relating to their work, and that their contributions to
the organization are recognized and celebrated” according to Scanlan (2013). Researchers further add that discretionary effort is the difference between the required or the minimum level of effort to complete their work and the maximum amount of energy that employees are willing to contribute (Brandau, n.d. & Reed, 2012 & Aubrey Daniels International, 2013). However, the spillover effects on personal life, family and societal life are dire when workers are disengaged. Disengagement, as used in this hypothesis, is not the opposite of engagement – but is a generation of workers who think, act and feel differently and are toxic to an organization. They view their employment as ‘just a job’; they are in the ‘wrong position/place’, or they are ‘happy being unhappy’ (Gallup (2002), Kruse (2013), Marciano (2010).

According to researchers’ transformational leadership has a significant impact on organizational outcomes because it is an inspiring leadership style, that enables followers to be more motivated and have a higher sense of self-worth (Burns (1978), Bass (1985), Fitzgerald (2003), Boyatzis (2009), Anderson and Anderson (2011), & Cherry (2012). The value it will provide to 21st Century organizations and especially education will be sought after. How will transformational leaders create the conditions for employees to give their maximum effort and remain engaged? In the midst of America’s priority in implementing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in education, it is vital that transformational leaders ensure that all educators have the required skills to achieve results. Cherry (2012) explains that, “transformational leaders through the strength of their vision and personality…are able to inspire followers to change expectations, perceptions and motivations to work towards common goals.” Ann (2012) also confirms
that, “…what matters is that…leaders seize the moment, inspire us all to greater things and continue to do so consistently and with a purpose…”

The priority of the Common Core State Standards further reflects the nation’s interest in students with special needs and the opportunity for them to be college and career ready (McNulty and Gloeckler, 2011). For students with learning disabilities, and those who are intellectually and developmentally delayed or autistic, or who have speech and language impairments (including health impairments such as being deaf and/or hard of hearing, or otherwise disabled), to be successful; the International Center for Leadership in Education has identified five elements that will need to be in place. Educators will need to be more accountable and responsible for achievement of the CCSS; uphold high expectations, have intervention systems in place, increase engagement with a collaborative teaching model and ensure that all staff have access to professional development (as cited in (McNulty and Gloeckler, 2011 p.7). Consistent with this model, as Lentz (2012) confirms, “a transformational leader is one who is committed to the individual outcome of every student receiving special education services” (p.5). Whilst Horn- Turnpin (2009) further elaborates that transformational leadership has the potential to meet the needs of special educational practitioners in the 21st Century through engagement as team members and shared ownership of ideas (p.6).

Dyvbik (2004), Hayward (2009) and York-Barr (2009) argue that it is the special education teachers who are undeniably the outstanding teacher leaders in education and they reiterate in their studies that high quality programs cannot exist without them. These teachers are the leaders in education as they have to build bridges not just with families, communities and across cultures but within the education system itself; if these teachers
remain isolated then their students will be too, furthering the prejudice and discrimination
with individuals who have disabilities. Furthermore, special education teachers are
required to devise individual unique learning programs ensuring that they use a range of
instructional methods to meet the needs of all abilities and learning styles. Special
education teachers are advocates for their students and families and engage in continuous
communication with service providers and others to ensure needs are met. Finally, special
education teachers have to direct and supervise paraeducators so that they too are
rehearsed in the array of evidence-based teaching practices.

Hayward (2009) states that special education students need outstanding educators,
but there is a growing number leaving the profession or transferring away from special
education. As more and more students are requiring special education services there
appears to be a nationwide shortage of ‘on fire’ special education teachers and
paraeducators (Engel, 2011 as cited in Friedman and Mandelbaum, 2011, p.114). One
Southern California County Office of Education further supports that, “with a nationwide
shortage of special education teachers, recruitment for these scarce individuals will
continue throughout the school year” (2012). Benjamin and Black (2012) and Ruble,
Usher, and McGrew (2011), have also concluded in their research on special education
teacher retention and self-efficacy that there needs to be more recognition and
appreciation from administrators, in particular, to provide more leadership opportunities
for this marginalized group of teachers. Ledesma (2011) and York-Barr (2009) correlate
recognition with special education teachers and an increase in teacher and student
performance. Moreover, Ledesma (2011) points out that there is not much difference in a
teacher’s career path between a first-year teacher and a veteran teacher. The Department of Education (2012) has also launched an initiative entitled the RESPECT Project (Recognizing Educational Success, Professional Excellence and Collaborative Teaching) to reinvent the teaching profession and to express the need for teacher leaders and how they impact results in schools. Arne Duncan (2012), Secretary of Education highlights that, “teachers need and deserve more autonomy and respect—and they must become real participants and partners in reform if outcomes for children are to dramatically improve.”

Given that paraeducators in special education are now increasingly becoming acknowledged as viable team partners in educating students per the inclusion in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) and Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 2004) it is important to identify the factors that contribute to effective and sustainable engagement of paraeducators in special education. It is also necessary to identify how discretionary effort is applied in practice, especially as 56% of paraeducators are expected to remain in this role until retirement (National Education Association, 2005). Researchers in the field of human resources indicate that identifying what employee engagement is, adds far more significance to the field, as it will contribute to developing measures and interventions to transform future workplace conditions (Marciano, 2010, p.61). Instead of leaders insisting on “that’s the way it has always been” whilst donning service pins, plaques and trophies; transformational leaders in education will need to truly appreciate the contributions of their employees. According to the literature, educators need to consider that organizations are a “people infrastructure” (Harvey and Drolet, 2006) and to engage their employees, particularly special education paraeducators, effective leaders will need to understand that employee expectations and loyalties are
different today than they were with previous generations in the workplace. The adage “carrots and sticks” is no longer effective in capturing the complexities of the human mind and the responsibilities that 21st Century workers must carry out.

**Background**

**Organizational Environment**

The mindset of employees is in a state of flux as increasing numbers of workers begin to take stock in their commitment to family life rather than organizational loyalty, by progressively sacrificing income for ‘feel good’ activities (Marciano, 2010; Pink, 2009; Gallup, 2002; & Gardner, 2008). The evolution of this changing relationship will no doubt impact society and its future generations, as organizations begin to rethink their expectations and how they will strategize in order to engage their employees. Gardner (2008) states that, “They [offspring] see whether their parents take pride in their work, how they speak of their supervisors and their colleagues, whether work is simply a resented or barely tolerated means of putting food on the table or also embodies intrinsic meaning and sustenance” (p.131). This shift in mindset is thus inaugurating a new generation of employees who have a desire to commit to lifelong learning which extends their repertoire in relevant life skills that are applicable to the future workplace (Laburm, 2011; Gardner, 2008 & Kruse, 2013).

**Organizational Vitality**

Harvey and Drolet (2006) believe that, “…the future will call for leaders who can build teams and build people, because only through strong teams and strong people or a “people infrastructure”, will these organizations survive” (p.9). Therefore, organizations
will need to cast aside carrots and sticks and begin to rethink engagement and assist
employees in realizing their potential and their value. On the one hand there is literature
that states that organizations need to reexamine hiring practices making sure to only hire
individuals with talent and help their hires capitalize on their strengths (Gallup, 2002).
On the other hand emerging theories insist on a completely new approach. Pink (2009)
defines this as individuals having autonomy (directing their own lives), mastery (improve
at something that matters) and purpose (contributing to something larger than ourselves).
Sinek (2009) refers to this as individuals and organizations needing to identify the ‘why’ –
the cause behind inspirational actions whilst still others in the field conclude that
organizational vitality depends on engagement and discretionary effort (Marciano, 2010;
& Kruse, 2013).

Organizational Culture

Organizations will thrive when everyone is involved in the system and where
links are made between employee values as well as organizational values (Senge,
Cambron-McCabe, & Luca & Smith & Dutton & Kleiner, 2012; McNally & Speak,
2011). In order to create these connections organizations will need to create favorable
conditions (Wlodkowski, 2008) that create energy and enthusiasm which in turn leads to
creativity and innovation and a new-found energy (Harvey and Drolet, 2006). Gallup
(2002) further elaborates that organizations will need to encourage these abilities in order
to meet organizational outcomes and thus leaders will need to build relationships with
employees, getting to know their strengths and talents and provide tools for them to be
successful and grow (Maxwell, 2007; & Marciano, 2010; & Kar, 2013 & Anderson &
Anderson, 2010). Leaders will need to encourage risk taking (Marciano, 2010) and
provide opportunities for employees to have shared ownership in the decision making process (Jobs, 2010; & Lencioni, 2002; Wilhelm, 2013; & Harvey and Drolet, 2006). The best leaders will ultimately give their power away because they believe in empowering their team (Harvey and Drolet, 2006; Maxwell, 2007; White, Harvey & Kemper, 2007; George, 2007 & Maxwell, 2008). In essence, transformational leaders in education will ultimately be required to tap into employee’s discretionary effort if educational outcomes for students are to meet the criteria for CCSS.

**Engagement**

Educators will need to shift their mindset and embrace transformational change and be prepared to re-engage. Engagement is defined in literature as a psychological construct because it is based on emotional and intellectual connections; it is intrinsic and has deep roots. Engagement is a driver for communication, growth, recognition and trust; and it’s being loyal, taking pride and having a deep sense of commitment (Marciano, 2010; & Kar, 2013; & Kruse, 2013). When employees are engaged it is believed that they have a stronger focus on organizational outcomes; increased self-direction; increased productivity; are safer in the workplace; more successful and organizations have higher quality customer satisfaction (Marciano, 2010; & Pink, 2009; & Gallup, 2002; & Kruse, 2013). However, engagement is not always related to motivation as people can be motivated but not engaged. Neither is it necessarily related to job satisfaction, as people can be satisfied and only give their minimum and people can be happy but not be focused on the organization (Kruse, 2013). Good leaders in education can create a link between employee engagement and motivation by sharing their enthusiasm, knowledge and power (Marciano, 2010; & Gallup, 2002; & Kruse, 2013). Organizations who assist employees
in helping them realize their own discretionary effort are those that effectively communicate the mission and vision of the organization (Marciano, 2010; & Kar, 2013), truly value their employee’s contributions and acknowledge their above and beyond commitment (Lencioni, 2002; & Wilhelm, 2013 & Scanlan, 2013).

Disengagement

Research shows that it is not always the responsibility of the organization for its employees to feel engaged (Gallup, 2002). In 2013, an International Data Research Group (IDG) study revealed that 57% of how people feel about their jobs comes from external factors that are beyond their control and 43% comes from intrinsic motivation (as cited in Kruse, 2013, p.12). Organizations will also need to be aware of disengaged employees; those individuals who act, think and feel differently about their job (Marciano, 2010) or are in the wrong place or just happy being unhappy (Kruse, 2013). In fact both engagement and disengagement has a snowball effect on personal lives and consequently on society (Gallup, 2002). Negativity can destroy workplaces, relationships, families and careers (Rath & Clifton, 2004). Regardless, these employees are toxic and organizations will need to hold these individuals accountable if they are to pursue a positive and productive culture as reflected by Marciano (2010) who further believes that, “culture drives behavior and behavior reinforces culture” (p.34). Organizations will struggle to thrive in a mediocre environment.

Motivation

Motivation has historical roots beginning with Skinner who believed in operant conditioning that posited that behavior would be repeated with meaningful reinforcers and, if not, would be punished (Marciano, 2010). Of course, this worked for animals at
the time and ironically is what some organizations continue to use, which is probably why 70% of Americans are not engaged in their work (Gallup, 2002)! So, if carrots and sticks no longer work and are actually harmful then what can organizations do to motivate its workers? Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs was born from the tug of war between human feelings (Figure 1).
Figure 1. A Comparison of Maslow’s Heirarchy of Needs and Herzberg’s Motivation Hygiene Theory, retrieved from ichun-chen.com

Maslow believed that humans had to feel a sense of self-worth and have a desire to do the work they like. Herzberg’s Motivation Hygiene Theory followed suit but found
that only money led to weak performance and related hygiene factors were not clear motivators (Pink, 2009) whereas individuals were clearly more motivated by utilizing strengths and pursuing meaningful tasks etc. (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Herzberg’s Hygiene and Motivation Hygiene Theory retrieved from http://www.facilitif.eu/user_files/file/herzburg_article.pdf

This theory leads to studying whether employees who know they are making a difference will likely lead them to being more intrinsically motivated in offering deep rooted engagement and apply discretionary effort? The answer lies in the degree to which
an organization will foster individual values, hobbies and talents, and provide choices. Leaders should consider and be willing to discover their employees “sweet spot” between motivations and capabilities (George, 2007). Nevertheless, motivation may be seen as a starting point but is not enough to sustain an enthusiastic workforce (Marciano, 2010; & Wlodkowski, 2008; & Farson, 1996).

**Praise and Recognition**

Organizations often resort to using praise to acknowledge commitment because it is easy, effortless and demands less (Farson, 1996). Praise comes in different forms and is a very powerful form of acknowledgement as long as it is sincere, specific, sufficient, properly attributed, praiseworthy and preferred (Wlodkowski, 2008; Marciano, 2010). However, literature reveals that praise is not as effective in contributing to employee engagement. Praise can be patronizing, not credible, does not help adult motivation, is sinister, can be misconstrued and is not related to exemplary achievement (Wlodkowski, 2008). Praise can be negative, create winners and losers, deplete energy, characterizing, formulaic, non-transformational, threatening, increase defensiveness among teams, seen as an evaluation, seen as a change therefore increasing resistance, allow leaders to gain status over people, be controversial, constrict creativity, distance people and disestablish communication (Farson, 1996). In addition, recognition programs also have the same effect as praise and are harmful in that they create winners and losers and those who do not receive a reward, and yet have done the same work, begin to do less. When recognition programs work it is when leaders recognize achievements rather than people and “…facilitate implementation of creative ideas” (Harvey and Drolet, 2006) as well as communicate success consistently (Lepsinger & DeRosa, 2010). People genuinely want
to feel recognized and praised because it connects to their emotions. In 2004, it was reported that 65% of Americans received no recognition for their contributions (Rath and Clifton, 2004). As suggested, engagement and discretionary effort are considered emotional constructs and if people don’t get emotionally fed demotivation gets hungry!

Acknowledgement

If knowing motivation gets individuals ready for engagement and praise and recognition is needed, but not effective, what do researchers believe is effective in sustaining engagement? Researchers believe that acknowledging people is far more powerful than praise and is about creating positive emotions (Rath & Clifton, 2004; & McNally & Speak, 2011). Acknowledgement also known as gratitude and ongoing regard provides hope (McKibben, 2013), shows a genuine appreciation of one’s value and is transformational (Kegan & Lahey, 2011) because it highlights who the sender sees, highlights a specific value and acknowledges internal strengths (Kimsey-House & Kimsey-House & Sandahl & Whitworth, 2011). If acknowledgements are inspiring to others why does John Templeton’s 2013 Survey find that only 10% of adults thanked their peers (as cited in Kruse, 2013, p.63)? The need is then for organizations to increase peer to peer relations and build a foundation of respect (McKibben, 2013; & Mendes, 2013; & Marciano, 2010).

Respect

For peers to appreciate one another they need to know each other and respect one another. Successful teams are built upon results, accountability, motivated by task, are committed, are engaged and embody trust (Lencioni, 2002). The latter factor – trust is the foundation of respect (Marciano, 2010; & White, & Harvey & Kemper, 2007) and
consequently of all engagement (Kruse, 2013). According to Marciano (2010) respect is “the lynchpin of motivation” and has identified seven drivers including recognition, empowerment, supportive feedback, partnering, expectations, consideration and trust. He argues that when individuals feel respected they are engaged and will work harder to achieve organizational goals but if employees don’t feel respected they won’t offer discretionary effort, and this consequently leads to hidden agendas. We see a general decline in respect in the workplace and in society and as the economy continues to crumble teams are more likely to break down. It is our duty as transformational leaders in education to find creative ways to share the cookies (Harvey and Drolet, 2006).

In summary, transformational leaders in education will need to create conditions in the workplace that allow employees to collaborate, feel they belong, promote their growth through professional development and ensure their contributions are being valued by celebrating and recognizing them. In addition, for educational organizations to thrive transformational leaders will need to effectively engage their employees and tap into their discretionary efforts. This in turn, will result in positive outcomes for students with special needs and potentially provided the skills and conditions necessary for students in the Common Core era to succeed as they transition to college and/or career readiness.

**Statement of the Research Problem**

There are approximately 770, 000 paraeducators in public school systems in America who are now taking an increased role in working as equal education partners in the classroom and going beyond the historical days of isolated paraeducators (National Education Association (NEA), 2005). Paraeducators are no longer required to work in isolation as expectations of specific roles and responsibilities increase, especially for
those working in the special education field. It is imperative therefore, as outlined in the No Child Left Behind and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, that in order for paraeducators to fulfill these new expectations that this group of staff have access to professional development opportunities and fundamentally the opportunity to learn to work collaboratively as part of a multi-disciplinary team (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2012, NEA, 2005 and Giangreco, 2003). Despite these increased expectations literature suggests that paraeducators especially those in the special education field are the least trained employees who are working with the most significantly challenged students (Causton-Theoharis and Malmgren, 2005) and they continue to remain undertrained and untrained with little compensation (Giangreco, 2003). Ironically, it is these individuals who demonstrate a noteworthy commitment to their employment, “These folks have a significant impact on a kid’s life…It’s not like they’re doing it for a lot of money…” ((Dove, 2012, as cited in Schiavone, 2012).

According to the NEA membership in 2002, 151,000 of its members were paraeducators of which 81% worked full time and 71% of those worked in special education (Schiavone, 2012). Furthermore, the average time employed as a paraeducator exceeds nine years with 70% planning to stay in the field and 56% residing in their current job until retirement (NEA, 2005). The irony is that teachers are expected to facilitate a paraeducator by “…chang[ing] their role from gracious host to engaged teaching partner (Giangreco, 2003, p.50). Moreover, the Teacher Leader Standards specify that the teacher leader: “Uses group processes to help colleagues work collaboratively to solve problems, make decisions, manage conflict, and promote
meaningful change” (Retrieved from http://www.teacherleaderstandards.org/the_standards_domain_1#sthash.43ff9vuY.dpuf).

Nevertheless, the question that remains is what are the strategies that contribute to sustainable engagement? Research highlights that employees can be motivated but not engaged, can be satisfied but give the minimum effort, and can be happy but not focused on the outcomes for the organization (Kruse, 2013). Furthermore, the longer employee tenure is, the less likely employees are to be engaged coupled with the fact that 70% of Americans currently are not engaged in their workplace (Gallup, 2002).

Equally, leaders in education will need to be creative in providing opportunities for special education paraeducators to exhibit discretionary effort – that above and beyond emotional connection, as employee commitments to employment and employer are in a state of instability. In this transformational state of change with the nation’s focus for all students to achieve, it is imperative that teachers and paraeducators work collaboratively. Ultimately, success depends on the deep-rooted commitment and engagement supporting the discretionary effort of paraeducators.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this mixed method study was to identify and describe what paraeducators perceive as factors that lead to effective and sustainable engagement in special education special day classes.

In addition, it was the purpose of this study to identify what strategies are effective for encouraging discretionary effort as perceived by paraeducators.
Research Questions

The following research questions were used in this study:

1. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors that lead to effective engagement in special education special day classes?

2. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors that lead to sustainable engagement in special education special day classes?

3. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors that encourage discretionary effort in special education special day classes?

4. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the most effective strategies to increase discretionary effort and sustain engagement in special education special day classes?

Significance of the Problem

As the nation’s priority on an equitable education for all students’ proceeds with the implementation of the CCSS it will be necessary for transformational leaders in education to create conditions in the workplace that will effectively engage employees and consequently allow individuals to apply discretionary effort. As supported by Marciano (2010) it is of urgent importance that transformational leaders are provided evidence of what employee engagement is rather than the causes of engagement. The term engagement is known to be a subjective construct and thus research from this study will be far more credible and valuable to the field in identifying what engagement is rather than the reasons as to why it occurs.
By acknowledging the contributions of a paraeducators’ new expectations and roles as outlined in NCLB and IDEA it will be necessary for administrators and teachers to know how to engage this group of employees since minimal research indicates that even though paraeducators have strong levels of commitment, and are more likely to remain in their position until retirement their extensive tenure is more likely to lead to disengagement. In bridging the gap in literature between engagement, discretionary effort and paraeducator tenure with suggesting measures and interventions, leaders will be able to transform workplace conditions (Marciano, 2010, p.61). In doing so, leaders will elevate the importance of engaging paraeducators in special education and to appreciate them as equal partners in the classroom.

If organizations are deemed a “people infrastructure” (Harvey & Drolet, 2006, p.9) then it is necessary to identify and describe how effective praise and recognition strategies can contribute to the complexity of adult motivation and how it can positively impact organizational culture and student outcomes (Wlodkowski, 2008, p.366).

**Definitions**

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions were used:

**Discretionary Effort.** The difference between the required or the minimum level of effort to complete their work and the maximum amount of energy that employees are willing to contribute (Brandau, n.d. & Reed, 2012 & Aubrey Daniels International, 2013).

**Engagement.** “…a heightened emotional and intellectual connection that an employee has for his/her job, organization, manager or coworkers that in turn, influences him/her to apply additional discretionary effort to his/her work” (Gibbons, as cited in Marciano, 2010, p.57).
**Factors.** A circumstance, fact, or influence that contributes to a result or outcome (Oxford Dictionary)

**Paraeducator.** Education support personnel working with students in an instructional role; an employee who works alongside and under the supervision of certificated educators (National Education Association, 2005); can be referred to as paraprofessionals, classroom assistants, teaching assistants and instructional assistants.

**Special Day Class.** There is no legal definition of what constitutes a special day class, however, it is considered the most restrictive educational classroom placement serving students with severe disabilities who require a highly structured and intensive curriculum.

**Special Education.** “Specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability” (Retrieved from http://www.wrightslaw.com/links/glossary.sped.legal.htm).

**Delimitations**

The study participants were delimited to paraeducators in the special education unit of Student Programs and Services of a Southern California County Office of Education. The study included only those that matched the selection criteria established for this study. The criteria selection was based on the following: (1) one or more years of tenure with the Southern California County Office of Education and, (2) work in a self-contained special day class. The participants were delimited to one County Office of Education in Southern California. Therefore, the results may not be generalized to other geographic areas. The survey responses are self-reported and thus subjective in nature.
Organization of the Study

The study is structured into five chapters, references and appendices as follows. Chapter II is an expansive review of the literature of the major theories published by scholars in the field. Chapter III encompasses the methodology of the study including research design, research instruments, methods of data analysis, and limitations of the study. An analysis of the data is presented in Chapter IV. Chapter V presents a summary, conclusions, and implications of the study as well as recommendations for further study. The study concludes with extensive references and appendices.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

“Nowadays true job satisfaction and happiness is about fulfilling your full potential, tapping into your own creativity and feeling that you can make a difference”

Chris Humphries

A Review of Literature

The intent of this research study was to identify and describe what paraeducators perceive as contributing factors that lead to effective and sustainable engagement in special education. In addition, this study also intended to identify what strategies are effective for encouraging discretionary effort as perceived by paraeducators. This chapter focuses on the literature in the areas of engagement, disengagement, praise, acknowledgement and respect in the context of transformational leadership and paraeducators in special education in the United States. The first part of this chapter sets the stage for the importance of recognition and appreciation in today’s organizations. The second part of this chapter focuses on the historical context of paraeducators, special education paraeducators, the changing roles of paraeducators and barriers faced by paraeducators.

Organizational Environment

Pink (2009) calls for a new operating system, one that is based on autonomy, mastery and purpose. If employees are given the opportunity to have direction over their lives, improve their skills at things that matter and feel that they are contributing to something bigger than themselves then the increased drive will lead to increased intrinsic
motivation (p.45) and make for happier workplace conditions, family life and communities.

**Organizational Vitality**

Sinek (2009) refers to the importance of individuals and organizations identifying the ‘why’ – the cause behind inspirational actions. In order to make change it will be necessary to ‘flip the proverbial hierarchal triangle’ and get those at the bottom of the chain involved in the ‘how to’ so leaders can define the ‘what’ (Harvey, 2013). When individuals are given autonomy just like the ‘Fed-Ex’ days and the structures in place at Google, organizations will see productivity increase, engagement increase, satisfaction increase and staff turnover decrease (Pink, 2009). The bottom line is this; by providing the opportunity for employees to take “…educated risks, seek novel solutions, and treat mistakes as learning opportunities” (Marciano, 2010, p.103), it will enable employees to feel empowered. In education this means providing the necessary and appropriate resources for staff to be successful. The more empowered staff are the more valuable they are to the organization (Marciano, 2010; Jobs, 2010; & Harvey & Drolet, 2006). Why deport highly trained staff elsewhere when the return to the organization is priceless with a little empowerment? Still others in the field conclude that organizational vitality depends on engagement and discretionary effort (Marciano, 2010; & Kruse, 2013). One has to remember that it will require all in education to see things in a new light as in the metaphoric example of the table. There is more to a table than a flat top and four legs; “In the table are also a factory and workers, a tree, a forest, water and soil, and rain clouds” (Senge, & Scharmer, & Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004, p.27-28).
Organizational Culture

The theory related to learning organizations can be adapted to school systems and education can profit from adoption of tools from the entrepreneurial realms in order to meet 21st Century needs. In order to do so, Senge et al (2012) and Zeppos (2013) believe that schools will need to discard top down commanding hierarchies which means, “…involving everyone in the system in expressing their aspirations, building their awareness, and developing their capabilities together” (Senge et al, 2012, p.5). The cohesion in a team will demand unlike minds and perspectives coming together to offer diversity and multiple perspectives (Owens, 2012). Additionally, keeping communication channels open for all will further assist in increasing productivity and morale (Mobley, 2011, & Marciano, 2010, & Kruse, 2013). When people feel valued they become powerful, productive and invaluable instead of being powerless, pointless and invisible (McNally & Speak, 2011, p.4). This new culture will consequently lead to organizations selecting a workforce based on talent, holding individuals accountable for performance, challenging people to reach their potential and building careers by building on talents which could be a great way to promote the profession of a paraeducator (Gallup, 2002). When high expectations are set in place and people know what to expect from one another they are more likely to cooperate and trust each other (Lepsinger, & DeRosa, 2010, p.41). After all, “culture drives behavior and behavior reinforces culture” (Marciano, 2010, p.34).

Engagement

Within this construct, educators will need to shift their mindset and embrace transformational change and be prepared to re-engage. Engagement is defined in the
literature as a psychological construct because it is based on emotional and intellectual connections, it is intrinsic and has deep roots. Engagement is a driver for communication, growth, recognition and trust; and it’s being loyal, taking pride and having a deep sense of commitment (Marciano, 2010; & Kar, 2013; & Kruse, 2013). When employees are engaged it is believed that they have a stronger focus on organizational outcomes; increased self-direction; increased productivity; are safer in the workplace; more successful and organizations have higher quality customer satisfaction (Marciano, 2010; & Pink, 2009; & Gallup, 2002; & Kruse, 2013). However, engagement is not related to motivation as people can be motivated but not engaged. Neither is it related to job satisfaction as people can be satisfied and only give minimum and people can be happy but just not focused on the organization (Kruse, 2013). In essence when employees have a high level of engagement there is a consistency in motivation despite adversity and organizations will see individuals going the extra mile and apply discretionary effort (Marciano, 2010; & Gallup, 2002; & Kruse, 2013). Organizations who assist employees in helping them realize their own discretionary effort are those that effectively communicate the mission and vision of the organization (Marciano, 2010; & Kar, 2013), truly value their employee’s contributions and acknowledge their above and beyond commitment (Lencioni, 2002; & Wilhelm, 2013 & Scanlan, 2013). Gallup (2002) reported that 70% US employees are not engaged but where people were given the opportunities to use their strengths on a daily basis they were “…six times more likely to be engaged…” (Kar, 2013).
Disengagement

Administrators within this construct are responsible then in providing a platform to build capacity and structures (Anderson, & Anderson, 2010, p.95-98; & Boyatzis, 2009; & Ann, 2011; & Sinek, 2009; & Mendes, 2013). Transformational leaders as opposed to other models, do not thrive on suppressing other leaders and employees but conversely are responsible for building their people up (Maxwell, 2007, p.128).

Praise

Organizations often resort to using praise to acknowledge commitment because it is easy and effortless (Farson, 1996). Praise comes in many different forms. Table 1 presents a synthesis of the concept of praise. Praise can be misconstrued and is not related to exemplary achievement (Wlodkowski, 2008). However, people genuinely want to feel recognized and praised because it connects to their emotions. In 2004, it was reported that 65% of Americans received no recognition for their contributions (Rath and Clifton, 2004). As suggested, engagement and discretionary effort are considered emotional constructs and if people don’t get emotionally fed demotivation gets hungry!
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marciano, 2010, p.83</th>
<th>Recognition and acknowledgement for efforts and contributions</th>
<th>Social reinforcement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pittman as cited in Wlodkowski, 2008, p.366-368</td>
<td>Considered a verbal reward</td>
<td>Awkward praise – in the moment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tangible (money)</td>
<td>Mercy praise – feel sorry for people</td>
<td>Sincere reward</td>
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<tr>
<td>Symbolic (rewards, trophies)</td>
<td>Snob praise – want clear feedback</td>
<td>Specific/adapted</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jabber praise – interpreted as flattery/predictable</td>
<td>Terminator praise –</td>
<td>Sufficient/frequent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Puppet praise – manipulative</td>
<td>Praiseworthy</td>
<td>Properly attributed to accomplishment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Terminator praise –</td>
<td>Preferred</td>
<td>Based on criteria – personal effort, knowledge, capabilities</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Contingent on success</td>
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<tr>
<td>throw out a compliment to end a conversation</td>
<td>Steadies relationships between people relatively stable</td>
<td>Easy</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>To commend the worth of or to express approval or admiration</td>
<td>Constricts creativity</td>
<td>Demands less</td>
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<tr>
<td>Farson, 1996, p.67</td>
<td>Not motivating as it is used routinely</td>
<td>People want to feel valued</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Can be associated with criticism</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Distances people</td>
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<td>Disestablishes communication</td>
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<td>Threatening</td>
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<td></td>
<td>People react defensively</td>
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<td>Seen as an</td>
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<td>Source</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rath &amp; Clifton, 2004, p.42-53</td>
<td>Seen as changing people – change is resistance</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Considered gaining status over people and status being reinforced insulting</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Demotivating when people don’t get it</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Kohn as cited in Wlodkowski, 2008, p.366</td>
<td>Negativity can destroy a workplace, relationships and careers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Spreads positive emotions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kegan, &amp; Lahey, 2011</td>
<td>Bribery</td>
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<td>Misconstrued</td>
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<td>Creates winners and losers</td>
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<td>行动主义</td>
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Harvey & Drolet, p.2006, p.173-175

- 建立尊荣
- 建立人们
- 带来所有权
- 带来希望
People seek praise, even if it’s not rewarding, just to feel valued (Farson, 1996, p.67). Praise may work on students because it can increase motivation, but it is not shown to work with adults (Wlodkowski, 2008, p.366). Consideration should also be given to cultural groups as preferences of praise, as shown in studies with Chinese adults are reported to be based on private praise whereas US adults prefer to be praised as part of a group (Jones, Rozelle, & Change, 1990, as cited in Wlodkowski, 2008 p.369). People generally are resistant to change, and it takes time to show measurable results (White, & Harvey, & Kemper, 2007, p.27). Leaders have a tendency to shy away from change because of lack of recognition and superiority. The antidote according to Harvey (2013); & White, et al, (2007); & Wlodkowski (2008), & Harvey & Drolet, (2006) is to have celebrations of multiple recognitions to make changes which is a “powerful tool for developing superior teams” (Kinlow, 1991 cited in Harvey & Drolet, 2006, p.201). Not only do celebrations solidify the sincerity of relationships and create positivity, but sharing failures too establishes closer connections and interactions (Maxwell, 2008; & Gallup, 2002; & Rath & Clifton, 2004). Informal rewards are more likely to be powerful (Harvey & Drolet, 2006, p.201; & Brown & Moffett, 1999) than formal rewards, as these do not lead to sustainability (Marciano, 2010 p.12). What does lead to sustainability is having an engaged employee who becomes customer focused, an employee who feels safe and an employee who is likely to be retained (Gallup, 2002).

Recognition

There is no reason not to recognize (Marciano, 2010) but resorting to praise is really a cop-out for administrators to avoid “[getting] their hands dirty” (Farson, 1996,
When recognition programs work it is when leaders recognize achievements rather than people and “…facilitate implementation of creative ideas” (Harvey and Drolet, 2006) as well as communicate success consistently (Lepsinger & DeRosa, 2010). But recognition can leave the losers in the dust feeling somewhat punished (Marciano, 2010, p.15) and recognition programs can have a short shelf life and therefore, not viewed as being genuine (Marciano, 2010, p.19), since goals are seen as narrow, can be limiting, inconsistent, unfairly administered, misunderstood, stressful, and people may deliberately not work as effectively to avoid recognition since it affects overall teamwork (Marciano, 2010, p.23-27). Recognition programs, unless based on contingency, can stifle risks, creativity and innovation (Marciano, 2010, p.38) and decrease intrinsic motivation according to Deci (cited in Marciano, 2010, p.39). Programs also have a tendency to contradict the importance of teamwork by focusing on individuals. Additionally, people come to expect it and initiatives are not usually tailor made based on age, gender or years of service.

Moreover, if those at the top continually get rewarded, and those at the bottom do not, leaving those in the middle, who do try, not being rewarded, morale will deteriorate (Marciano, 2010, p.36-37). Some researchers believe recognition can be energizing and powerful (Stratford, 2010; Harvey & Drolet, 2006; & Lepsinger, & DeRosa, 2010; & Wlodkowski, 2008) and Heathfield (2012) believes that “Employee recognition is not just a nice thing to do for people. Employee recognition is a communication tool that reinforces and rewards the most important outcomes people create…When you recognize people effectively, you reinforce with your chosen means of recognition the actions and behaviors you most want to see people repeat”. Although rewards can be positive for
routine left-brain tasks, we are transforming into a world of right brain activities that require out-of-the-box thinking and rewards thus are limited (Pink, 2009).

Motivation

Much literature exists on the theories of motivation. This study adheres to aspects of motivational theory in relation to engaging employees. Marciano (2010) spends much of his research and findings referring to the term “carrots and sticks” which is based on philosophies of operant conditioning, a term coined by Skinner (Marciano, 2010, p.2) as a way to shape behaviors. It was based on the premise that if positive behaviors occur a reward is offered and if a behavior is inappropriate it’s either negatively reinforced or punished. Bearing in mind this idea was rendered on animals and so did not take into consideration human emotional constructs, one cannot assume that motivating employees is going to increase productivity. However, theorists like Taylor and Gilbreth (1911, as cited in Marciano, 2010, p.6) took time to focus on output of employees. In 1927, Mayo (as cited in Marciano, 2010, p.7) examined the correlation between attention given to employees and increased productivity. In 1938, Murray (as cited in Marciano, 2010, p.7) studied the idea of people being motivated by relationships and personal achievements which led to “Theory of Need” developed by McClelland. In 1943, Maslow shifted the paradigm to focus on people and following all physiological motivators being met only then could individuals reach the pinnacle of feeling a sense of personal growth and fulfilment (as cited in Marciano, 2010, p.8). Herzberg arrived at the conclusion that money as a motivator decreased motivation (as cited in Marciano, 2010, p.10). If extrinsic motivators are off the table such as money then it leaves room for organizations to foster the extrinsic motivators such as enabling people to make a difference, personal
growth and being true (George, 2007, p 106-107). When teams move from the “I’s” to the “we’s” we see the ‘sweet spot’ where people match their motivations (what they like to do) to their capabilities (what they are good at) by “[stepping] out of…comfort zone to take on new challenges…discover capabilities” (George, 2007, p.114).

Acknowledgement

If effective motivation gets individuals ready for engagement and praise and recognition is needed, but not effective, what do researchers believe is effective in sustaining engagement? Several researchers (Kegan, & Lahey, 2011; & McKibben, 2013; & Kruse, 2013) believe that ongoing regard also known as gratitude, defined as “…regular expression of genuinely expressing the value of coworker’s behavior” (Kegan, & Lahey, 2011, p.94) is understood as appreciation: is admirable, it creates energy, is direct, is specific about the speaker’s personal experience of their action, is non-attributive because it is about experience not the person, is sincere and transformational. Acknowledgement also is perceived as providing a sense of hope and trust in others. Similarly, giving back to others, is meaningful and more positive than praise. Also, it strengthens relationships, promotes self-control, is self-regulatory and promotes lifelong success (Bono, as cited in McKibben, 2013); as well as being seen affirmative (Zakrzewski, as cited in McKibben, 2013), and creating positive emotion (Mendes, 2013). Rath & Clifton (2004) refers to this as the “dipper and bucket theory”. If we use our invisible dippers to fill other people’s buckets with positive affirmations, we feel great and the other person feels great which increases positive emotions. When the bucket is full we feel great. However, we also have the ability to dip into others’ buckets in turn decreasing their positive emotions and ours. When the bucket is empty we feel awful
(p.15). This is also termed as a “lollipop” moment or paying it forward (Dudley, 2010). Ironically, in a survey conducted by John Templeton Foundation in 2013 only 10% of employees thanked a peer daily and only 7% expressed gratitude to a boss (p.63). Kruse (2013) suggests that organizations are in need of creating a “…culture of peer to peer appreciation” (p.63). Researchers believe that acknowledging people is far more powerful than praise and is about creating positive emotions (Rath & Clifton, 2004; & McNally & Speak, 2011). Acknowledgement shows a genuine appreciation of one’s value and is transformational (Kegan & Lahey, L, 2011) because it highlights who the sender sees, highlights a specific value and acknowledges internal strengths (Kimsey-House & Kimsey-House & Sandahl & Whitworth, 2011). Further research should examine that if acknowledgements are considered to be inspiring to others why John Templeton’s 2013 Survey discovered that only 10% of adults thanked their peers (as cited in Kruse, 2013, p.63). The need is then for organizations to increase peer to peer relations and build a foundation of respect (McKibben, 2013; & Mendes, 2013; & Marciano, 2010).

**Respect**

In terms of the United States trends towards globalization it is indeed imperative that transformational leaders extend respect to cultural differences. Where as in Eastern cultures respect is deemed and valued as a virtuous upbringing, the United States’ loose and casual approach to respect can be perceived as rude (Covey, 2006, p.1). For peers to appreciate one another they need to know each other and respect one another. Successful teams are built upon results, accountability, motivated with task, are committed, are engaged and embody trust (Lencioni, 2002). The latter factor – trust is the foundation of respect (Marciano, 2010; & White, & Harvey & Kemper, 2007) and consequently of all
engagement (Kruse, 2013). According to Marciano (2010) respect is “the lynchpin of motivation” and has identified seven related drivers including recognition, empowerment, supportive feedback, partnering, expectations, consideration and trust. He argues that when individuals feel respected they are engaged and will work harder to achieve organizational goals. However, if employees don’t feel respected they won’t offer discretionary effort, and this consequently leads to hidden agendas. We see a general decline in respect in the workplace and in society and as the economy continues to crumble teams are more likely to break down. The correlation that exists is that where there is disrespect there is also a decline in relationships. Consequently, lack of respect leads to toxicity in the workplace (Gardner, as cited in Laburm, 2011, p.116-117; & Patterson, & Grenny, & McMillan, & Switzler, 2012, p.79). Transformational leaders in education need creative ways to share the cookies (Harvey and Drolet, 2006) so that they can build people and enable them to “…take pride in knowing that they work for a company that cares about their people and their community” (Marciano, 2010, p.67) as well as to help people get to know each other, and work towards the common goal (Gardner, as cited in Laburm, 2011, p.116-117).

In summary, transformational leaders in education will create conditions in the workplace that allow employees to collaborate, feel they belong, promote their growth through professional development and ensure their contributions are being valued by celebrating and recognizing them. In addition, for educational organizations to thrive transformational leaders will need to effectively engage their employees and tap into their discretionary effort which in turn will result in positive outcomes for students with special needs and their achievement in the CCSS.
Paraeducators in Education – A Historical Context

It has been over half a century since the first paraeducator positions rolled out into the classrooms as a response to a teacher shortage following World War II (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2000, p.2). The expectations of paraeducators were to perform housekeeping duties and clerical tasks which was customary of women’s roles of the era. As educational law changed paraeducators were expected to continue these tasks in order to relieve teachers from increasing administrative work and in the 1970s it was decided that these positions would also fulfill bus aide and supervisory roles. During the 1990s paraeducators were further assigned the job of providing reading instruction to small groups of students (French, 1999). There are now approximately 770,000 paraeducators in public school systems in America who are now taking an increased role in working as equal education partners in the classroom beyond the historical days of isolated paraeducators (National Education Association (NEA), 2005). Today, paraeducators are considered to be key players in delivering instruction to students in settings from early childhood education to high school, students who are designated as English language learners and special education students. Furthermore, paraeducators are also expected to provide support to credentialed staff in the general education classes as a proponent for the inclusive classroom mandate (Ashbaker, & Morgan, 2001; & Mueller, 2002). Moreover, it is not uncommon that in small rural schools that the skills of paraeducators are exploited due to limited fiscal budgets and to fulfill numerous supportive and specialized positions such as computer laboratory technicians (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2001, p.1). In some cases, particularly in states where there is no clear criterion on paraeducator duties, they can be expected to plan for classroom instruction (Mueller,
2002, p.64). It is of no surprise then that the perceptions of the duties of the paraeducator is that of a credentialed teacher. In a small study conducted by Gessler Werts, Harris, Young Tillery, and Roark, (2004) even parents perceived paraeducators as one of their children’s “teachers” and were respected as a professional (p.237).

**Special Education Paraeducators**

Prior to 1997 there was no mention of paraeducators in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and IDEA 2004, coined the term paraprofessionals to refer to this group of staff providing services to students with disabilities (NEA, 2005, P.13). Remarkably, despite these landmark changes and the growth in the special education field, paraeducators remain the least studied group of educational professionals who have undergone the most significant transformation. The last piece of research conducted on the growth of paraeducators in special education was published in 1993 (Jones and Bender cited in Giangreco, & Edelman, & Broer, & Doyle, 2001, p.45). In 2001, Giangreco et al (2001) published a review of literature pertaining to paraeducators. Of the 43 pieces of literature examined approximately 58% of the sources focused on the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators and 42% of the literature focused on paraeducator training. Sadly, only one piece of work notably Palma’s published in 1994 (cited in Giangreco et al, 2001), concentrated on the importance of acknowledging paraprofessional work. Since the publication of Giangreco et al’s literature study in 2001 there has still been very little research in the field on paraeducators which, therefore, supports the very notion that paraeducators are an exploitable resource and continue to be viewed as such in the education field as, “…a permanent underclass” (Giangreco, 2001, p.59). Paradoxically,
despite the nation’s perceived attempt to break down barriers for individuals with special
needs, the very fact that little appreciation and respect is given to these kingpins of
special education is confirmation that special education yet again is a patron to mere lip
service. Until all professionals in special education are respected and truly valued for
their unwavering contribution to special education, the students, the families and the
communities served, the future of a harmonious and respectful acceptance of those with
exceptional abilities will remain bleak.

**Changing Roles of Paraeducators**

Despite increased expectations, paraeducators in the special education field
particularly, have fallen prey to being the least trained personnel working with the most
significantly challenged students (Causton-Theoharis and Malmgren, 2005) and continue
to remain undertrained and untrained with little compensation (Giangreco, 2003). Mueller
(2002) refers to this as the “paraeducator paradox” (p.64) and can also be referred to as
an “enigma” (Giangreco, & Suter, & Doyle, 2010, p.50). Before the conception and birth
of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the skill set required for 21st Century
learning it was expected that, “…students with the most complex challenges to learning
are exposed to “…the most ingenious, creative, powerful, competent, interpersonally
effective, and informed professionals” (Brown, Farrington, Ziegler, Knight and Ross,
(1999) cited in Giangreco, 2001, p.46). For paraeducators to be given the opportunities to
be creative, transformational leaders absolutely have a duty to create opportunities for
staff to realize their potential and to enable personal strengths to flourish, in turn creating
energy and enthusiasm (Harvey and Drolet, 2006, p.26). With this territory also comes
the expectation of establishing trust within classrooms, schools and organizations based
on open communication, commitment, accountability and a focus on collective results (Lencioni, 2002, p.189). White et al (2007) states, “…without trust, you can never have the kind of relationship with them that makes it possible for you to do your job effectively” (p.31) and educators must also realize that paraeducators are vested in their commitment to the students because they are the ones “in the trenches” and are the “doers” (Owens, 2012, p.105). Not only does trusting school staff empower (Brown and Moffett, 1999, p.118) but trust “…is the foundation for all engagement” (Kruse, 2013, p.72). By trusting staff, we build a sense of confidence, faith and reliability in their performance (Marciano, 2010, p.181) and trust effectively becomes a building block of respect (Marciano, 2010, pxxvii) as well as a factor in determining high performance and effective teams (Lepsinger and DeRosa, 2010, p.148 and White et al, 2007, p.32). In order to create these effective teams, it will be necessary for administrators to establish team building capacities during trainings, so that people have the means in which to network with others and become compassionate team members (Schwarz, 2006, p.30; & Mendes, 2013), ensure follow through, consistency and persistence with ideas communicated (McNally and Speak, 2011, p.3; & Lencioni, 2002, p.188-190; & Jobs, 2010; & Marciano, 2010). In doing so, it will not only improve a team’s effectiveness and build people bridges but also it will allow the teams to make significant impacts on the entire organizational system (Anderson, 2012, p.227). Given that autonomy is a significant factor in employee engagement it is necessary that paraeducators are given the opportunities to be successful in maximizing their talents and skills (Cain, 2012; & Gallup, 2002). Although it can be argued that fixating on strengths can lead to neglect of mastering skills in areas that are considered weak (Farson, 1996, p.137). In the end what
matters is that workplace conditions and opportunities must be provided to create a sense of self-worth (Maxwell, 2008, p.8).

What is evident today, during this era of transformation, is that there is a sense of urgency to equip credentialed educators with these skills to foster in students when paraeducators all along have been doing this; paraeducators are reported to spend at least 50% of their time providing instruction with no teacher present (Robelen, 1999 as cited in Ashbaker and Morgan, 2001, p.1) and special education students spend approximately 80% of their time with paraeducators (Vasa et al., 1982 as cited in Ashbaker and Morgan, 2001, p2). Some may argue that paraprofessionals are exercising so called autonomy, but it seems apparent that regardless of a paraeducator’s admirable tenure and extensive classroom experience (Ashbaker et al, 1998; & Stuska 1998 as cited in Ashbaker and Morgan, 2001, p.2), acknowledgement of paraeducators as professionals has yet to become a fact. The debate is not whether it is ethical for educators to allow students with significant challenges to receive instruction from non-credential staff (French, 1999, p.71, & Giangreco et al, 2001, p. 46) but why is the educational field, failing to provide the most effective resources to enable school districts, administrators and teachers the support they need to assist paraeducators and special education students?

**Barriers**

As outlined in the No Child Left Behind and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, that in order for paraeducators to fulfill these new expectations this group of staff will have to have access to professional development opportunities and fundamentally the opportunity to learn to work collaboratively as part of a multi-disciplinary team (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2012, NEA, 2005 and
Giangreco, 2003). The irony is that teachers are expected to facilitate a paraeducator by “…chang[ing] their role from gracious host to engaged teaching partner (Giangreco, 2003, p.50). Moreover, the Teacher Leader Standards specifies that the teacher leader: “Utilizes group processes to help colleagues work collaboratively to solve problems, make decisions, manage conflict, and promote meaningful change” (Retrieved from http://www.teacherleaderstandards.org/the_standards_domain_1#sthash.43ff9vuY.dpuf).

French (1999) suggests however, that teachers are not comfortable in giving away power and control. Salzberg and Morgan (1995) also add that teachers are literally not prepared in supervisory skills and collaborating with paraeducators in teaching preparation programs, “interpersonal relationships can also be problematic…especially in high pressure complex environments like special education programs” (p.50). Again, the fact that paraeducators do all these wonderful things in the classroom, have extensive hands-on experience in the classroom and are dedicated to the students, as reflected in their tenure among other factors once again without any professional recognition, suggests that paraeducators are given very little respect. In an analysis of literature examining the little preparation that some teachers may undergo in supervising paraeducators, Salzberg and Morgan (1995) identified 22 reoccurring themes that on which teachers may receive training. The researchers found that the majority of position papers, programs and research revealed that most teacher preparation programs focus on the roles of paraeducators (91%), followed by evaluation, and trainings but only one scholarly work highlighted the need for teachers to be prepared in basic aspects of teamwork. The researchers concluded that teacher preparation programs require a curriculum to learn how to supervise adults; a curriculum that meets current practices in education especially
in special education in which paraeducators are working in highly charged and complex situations as well as learning how to collaborate as a team.

As teamwork relies heavily on communication “…all members of the team must be willing to share their ideas, and their points of view with all members of the team” (Gallup, 2002; & Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2012). Moreover, “…educating students with disabilities greatly increases this focus” (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2012, p. 61) so trust, communication, respect, recognition and collaborative problem solving is necessary (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2012, p. 61). For this to occur, “Team leadership must be accepted and invited if paraprofessionals are to make optimal use of their strengths and resources…” (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2012, p. 61).

Furthermore, there are very few programs for paraeducators to attend and this is a barrier that many paraeducators face. Ashbaker and Morgan (2000) identified that paraeducators lack standardized requirements for the position, training is dependent on local initiatives and is presented as on-the-job format, lack formal job description, start position when students start, generally excluded from communication and work in isolation (Ashbaker and Morgan, 1999; & French and Pickett, 1997 as cited in Ashbaker and Morgan, 2000, p.2; & Salzberg and Morgan, 1995). Muller (2002) adds that job descriptions are out of date and roles such as “other duties as assigned” are unclear, assigned tasks that paraeducators are not qualified to do, rarely observed or given corrective feedback and on the job training or support from another paraeducator (Causton-Theoharis and Malmgren, 2005) Moreover, if training opportunities are available it is “…typically insufficient to prepare paraprofessionals to perform the
instructional duties that classroom teachers increasingly ask of them” (Giangreco, 2003). This laissez-faire approach as reflected in the absence of a standardized job description, fluidity in the discretion of expectations between states and regions in terms of requirements and trainings further suggests that the work carried out by paraeducators is not worthy of being considered important, further acknowledging the lack of respect faced by paraeducators in education.

A significant barrier faced by these workers can further be traced back to the historical roots of the paraeducator design. Paraeducators were born into an era where women were considered housewives and mothers and thus paraeducators were to provide the duties that the role of being a housewife and mother entailed in the classroom. It is not surprising then that paraeducators are still defined by researchers as, “typically long-term, local residents, mostly women, who work part-time for modest wages” (Ashbaker and Morgan, 2000, p.3). One paraeducator stated, “…paras are still thought of as housewives with part time jobs…” (Mueller, 2002, p.64). If paraeducators consist mostly of women and considered “housewives” then as Henry (2011) found that paraeducators are subject to disrespectful treatment because women are part of stigmatized group. The links to the historical view of paraeducators in a time of housework/housekeeping, clerical duties etc. therefore, results in “…respectful treatment in the workplace…more strongly related to job satisfaction for members of stigmatized groups…” (p.232). Henry (2011) also concluded that “…respect conveys information about social inclusion and value to the group” (p.237). This perceived lack of respect has been identified as one of the main culprits for paraeducators leaving the classroom (French & Cabell, 1991; French and Chopra, 1999; Hadadian & Yssel, 1998; Morehouse & Albright, 1991; Passaro et al.,
1994 as cited in Giangreco, 2001, p.55). With low pay aside, and off the table as a token of recognition, the reality is that, paraeducators do accept their positions and continue to stay while accepting little compensation and benefits. What is significant and undeniable, however, is that they never signed up for a position where there is just plain lack of respect (Tillery et al, 2003; & Giangreco, 2003).

Sometimes paraeducators may consider their role as insignificant to that of the teacher, and although talents may not change much over time it is essential to develop a growth mindset, identify and nurture the talents paraeducators possess in turn boosting motivation, productivity and relationships (Gallup, 2002; & Dweck, 2010). The benefits of acknowledging paraeducators in special education include reinforcing the delivery of quality education, supporting inter-disciplinary teams, reducing students to adult ratio, seeing parents appreciate individualization, and extending their functions and flexibility of the team (NEA, 2005).

There is inspiration, in that the minimal interest in paraeducators in special education, which is beginning to emerge, will ultimately raise the bar of the profession. Yet, much data is not empirical based, rather it is value laden. In education it is possible that praise and recognition for staff has a political edge (Bamberger, & Rugh, & Mabry, 2012, p.107) as it can be viewed as a political agenda, seen as bias and administrators may view praise and recognition from a different lens than a teacher. For example, some administrators may not see it as part of their responsibility to recognize paraeducators but more of the teacher’s role.

In one of three studies on paraprofessional respect and acknowledgement Chopra et al, 2004 (cited in Giangreco et al, 2010 p. 46) found that “…being respected and
valued members of a team was critical for them to work effectively”. Giangreco &
respected and valued paraeducators will appreciate non-monetary signs of appreciation,
such as being entrusted with important responsibilities, non-instructional responsibilities,
to be listened to, and included in orientation and support. When paraprofessionals are
included in collaboration Giangreco et al (2010) found in their inquiry that
paraprofessionals knew their job better, demonstrated paraprofessional morale, and have
increased awareness of their own value. Paraprofessionals knew and worked with
students more proficiently. Also noted was improved delivery of instruction and
increased home-school collaboration (p.48-49).

Conclusions

In summation, the literature that exists reveals that the longer the tenure the less
engaged, which is problematic since paraeducators tend to have long tenure and are
highly committed employees (Gallup, 2002). Therefore, educational systems need to
address alternative methods to engage paraeducators. Just as talents can be rechanneled,
how paraeducators view their employment should be recognized as a calling; really
knowing the impact of how they are making a difference rather than having a mindset of
fulfilling “just” a job may pose greater engagement (Wrzesniewski & Butler, as cited in
Kruse, 2013, p.93-94). Paraeducators especially need to know they matter (Kegan, &
Lahey, 2011, p.92; & Mendes, 2013). Let’s transform these unsung heroes and silent
partners of the educational world.
## Synthesis Matrix

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<td>Transformational changes in employee mindset and organizational loyalty</td>
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<td>Effective transformational leaders in education focus on effective teams of people including paraeducators</td>
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<td>Two strategies to build effective teams is focusing on employee engagement and discretionary effort</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engagement and discretionary effort occurs when employee values are connected with organizational values</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engagement goes beyond motivating, praising and recognizing employees</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Effective engagement is acknowledgement and respect</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employee engagement in education seems to lead to increased focus on student outcomes</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Overview

The focus of this research was to acknowledge the increasing expectations and roles of paraeducators in special education. The research that exists indicates that even though paraeducators have strong levels of commitment and are more likely to remain in their position until retirement, their extensive tenure is more likely to lead to disengagement. In bridging the gap in literature between engagement, discretionary effort and paraeducator tenure by suggesting measures and interventions, leaders will be able to transform workplace conditions (Marciano, 2010, p.61).

The major themes of this chapter originate with a reinstatement of the purpose statement and research questions. What follows is a comprehensive research design which includes a detailed description of a mixed methods approach to research, population and sample, procedures and data collection. The chapter concludes with limitations of the study and a summary of the chapter.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this mixed method study was to identify and describe what paraeducators perceive as factors that lead to effective and sustainable engagement in special education special day classes.

In addition, it was also the purpose of this study to identify what strategies are effective for encouraging discretionary effort as perceived by paraeducators.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used in this study:
1. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors which lead to effective engagement in special education special day classes?

2. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors which lead to sustainable engagement in special education special day classes?

3. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors that encourage discretionary effort in special education special day classes?

4. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the most effective strategies to increase discretionary effort and sustain engagement in special education special day classes?

**Research Design**

**Mixed Methodology**

The nature of this study required a mixed method study combining both quantitative and qualitative methods. This study utilized mixed methods as a more in depth understanding of the impact of appreciating employee value was provided using “…detailed descriptions and analyses” (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010, p.325). By combining surveys and interviews the data lent itself to triangulation producing results that are significant, credible and valid based on sound empirical research (Patton, 2002, p.247; Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach & Richardson (2005, p. 201).
Quantitative Methods

Quantitative designs are defined by Creswell (2003) as, “…one in which the investigator primarily uses post positivist claims for developing knowledge…employs strategies of inquiry such as experiments and surveys and collects data on predetermined instruments that yield statistical data” (p.18). The survey is one such method that can be used in non-experimental research and Patten (2012) believes that “The purpose of surveys is to describe the attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of a population” (p.9). By using the survey method, it is assumed that a small sample size would suffice so that results can be generalized to a larger population. Lester and Lester (2010) state, “Questionnaires can produce current, firsthand data you can tabulate and analyze…to achieve meaningful results…one must represent the whole population in terms of age, sex, race, education, income, residence and other factors” (p.90). The survey for this research was cross-sectional as the data was collected at one point of time with the instrument being self-administered (Creswell, 2003, p.155).

A pilot test was conducted with a small sample of paraeducators employed in similar special education assignments to check for validity, errors and to ensure that questions were designed to elicit information pertinent to this study and research questions. Modifications to questions that included unclear language and were considered loaded questions were rewritten based on the advice of knowledgeable and professional experts in the field from Brandman University. Marciano’s (2010) engagement diagnostic assessment (Figure 3) was incorporated into the survey design with permission (Appendix A). The instrument was utilized
because the tool specifically targets correlation between employee engagement and discretionary effort, based on Marciano’s research, thus contributing to further validity of the tool. By including additional questions, the researcher was able to identify measures and interventions that sustain engagement and increase discretionary effort. The engagement instrument incorporated a Likert scale with a range of agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree and disagree based on the research questions. It should be noted that the scale did not include a neutral or undecided option. The benefit of a “forced choice” ensures a more accurate response according to McMillan and Schumacher (2010, p.199). They also suggest that “Scales are used extensively in questionnaires because they allow fairly accurate assessments of beliefs or opinions. This is because many of our beliefs and opinions are thought of in terms of graduations” (p.198).
Employee Engagement Diagnostic Assessment

Directions: After reading each statement, indicate how strongly you disagree or agree with it by placing an “X” in the appropriate box. Clearly choose and mark one and only one box per statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am passionate about what I do</td>
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<tr>
<td>I find my work intrinsically motivating</td>
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<td>Outside of work I think about how I could be more productive and effective in my job</td>
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<td>I get absorbed in my work and lose track of time</td>
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<td>My work energizes me</td>
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<td>Time passes quickly while I am working</td>
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<td>I am committed to my job</td>
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<td>I find myself extremely focused and engaged at work</td>
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<tr>
<td>I find my work interesting</td>
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<td>I always give maximum effort in my job</td>
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*Figure 3. Marciano (2010) Employee Engagement Diagnostic Assessment, v3.12, © 2012 by Whiteboard, LLC*
Qualitative Methods

The benefits of descriptive research as stated by McMillan and Schumacher (2010) is that it “…[describes] achievement, attitudes, behaviors or other traits of a group of subjects. A descriptive study asks what is or what was. It reports things the way they are or were” (p. 217). The qualitative piece of this study took the form of interviews which Creswell (2007) states, “…begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (as cited in McMillan and Schumacher, 2010, p.320). Moreover, the study warrants a qualitative element because the “…topic is controversial…” (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010, p.325) and “…little is known about the topic” (Patten, 2012, p.21) in terms of special education paraeducator engagement and application of discretionary effort. Additionally, it is a critical study in nature because it has the potential to provoke action thus the “…researcher’s use of an advocacy role to respond to important themes of marginalized individuals or groups…and the data…gathered to change the status quo…” (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010, p.347) will support paraeducators to influence transformational changes in their schools and give a voice to the voiceless. Although, the interviews were designed to be semi-structured to elicit rich responses and add to the breadth of the study, the questions were specific in intent (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010, p.206).
Population

The population of a research study is described by McMillan and Schumacher (2010) as “…a group of elements or cases, whether individuals, objects or events, that conform to specific criteria and to which we intend to generalize the results of the research” (p.129). For the purpose of this research it was intended to utilize paraeducators employed by the Southern California County Office of Education in the Student Programs and Services Division. This organization served 467 school sites totaling 23 school districts and had access to at least 20,294 certificated staff, 4,465 paraprofessionals and 9,031 other staff inclusive of administrators according to the Southern California County Office of Education’s 2010-2011 statistics. For this study only paraeducators who worked in the special education division were eligible to participate in the study. There were 343 paraeducators employed in the special education division.

Sample

Defining a sample of the population is “…a process of selecting a number of individuals for a study in which they were selected” (Gay & Airasian, (1996) as cited in Roberts, 2010, p149). By using permanent employees of the Southern California County Office of Education, it was necessary to use the process of purposive sampling which is an example of a nonprobability sample method. Patten (2012) affirms that purposive sampling intends to use “…individuals who they [researcher] believe will be good sources of information” (p.51).

This study used purposive criterion to assist the Associate Superintendent of Student Programs and Services to gather participants from the large population
who were willing to participate. The criteria that was used to identify a quality sample was based on the following:

(1) One or more years of tenure and,

(2) Work in a self-contained special day class.

The criterion was selected to attract participants’ representative of tenure, age, gender, expertise and experience. The sample was a cultural homogeneous group indicative of similar focus, minimal variation and belonged to the same organization. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) further state that, “information-rich key informants, groups, places or events to study…are chosen because they are likely to be knowledgeable and informative about the phenomena…” (p.326). This study further included participants representative of early childhood, preschool, lower elementary, upper elementary, middle school and high school, serving students diagnosed with autism, deaf and hard of hearing, physically disabled, emotionally disturbed, visually impaired, trainable mentally handicapped and developmentally delayed.

Using a free sample size calculator from Raosoft it was expected that this study required a sample size of 182 paraeducators (Figure 4), to have a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%.
McMillan and Schumacher (2010) state that, “The general rule in quantitative research is to obtain as many subjects as needed or possible to obtain a credible result…” (p.140-141). Therefore, this study was limited to 182 full time Special Education paraeducators employed by the Southern California County Office of Education which is considered credible. Furthermore, this sample size was appropriate due to the methodology and purpose of the study as well as accessibility of locating participants across a geographically widespread area as supported by Patton (2002, p.228).
**Instrumentation**

Northern Illinois University has devoted a website to the Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) and defines data collection as, “the process of gathering and measuring information on variables of interest, in an established systematic fashion that enables one to answer stated research questions, test hypotheses, and evaluate outcomes” (http://ori.dhhs.gov/education/products/n_illinois_u/datamanagement/dctopic.htm, 2005). This research focused on the autopsy of an organization’s group of perceived marginalized staff and as such the mixed method approach of this study required a combination of two instruments to collect data. The rationale for this was to ensure that the research would provide a complete picture of the inquiry and it was assumed that the investigation warranted an in-depth methodology that would provide plausible insights into a less chartered territory and a “…descriptive picture of…a …program…organization…” (Patton, 2002, p.450).

It was imperative that questions for the survey and interview were grounded on the egis of engagement and discretionary effort in order to achieve responses appropriate to the research and that align with the current literature in the field (Table 2).
Table 2

**Alignment of Literature and Research Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alignment with the literature</th>
<th>Researchers</th>
<th>Alignment with Research Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy, mastery and purpose</td>
<td>Pink (2009); Marciano (2010)</td>
<td>1,3,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees realizing their own potential and value</td>
<td>Harvey and Drolet (2006), Gallup (2002); McNally &amp; Speak (2011)</td>
<td>1,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links between employee values and organization</td>
<td>Senge, Cambron-McCabe, &amp; Luca &amp; Smith &amp; Dutton &amp; Kleiner, (2012); McNally &amp; Speak (2011)</td>
<td>1,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorable work conditions</td>
<td>Wlodkowski (2008)</td>
<td>1,2,3,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building relationships with employees</td>
<td>Maxwell (2007); &amp; Marciano (2010); &amp; Kar, (2013) &amp; Anderson &amp; Anderson (2010)</td>
<td>1,2,4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shared ownership in decision making process</td>
<td>Jobs (2010); &amp; Lencioni, (2002); Wilhelm (2013); &amp; Harvey and Drolet (2006).</td>
<td>1,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High expectations</td>
<td>Lepsinger, &amp; DeRosa (2010)</td>
<td>1,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth, recognition and trust</td>
<td>Marciano (2010); &amp; Kar (2013); &amp; Kruse (2013).</td>
<td>1,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaders recognizing achievements rather than people</td>
<td>Farson (1996); &amp; Rath and Clifton (2004); &amp; Wlodkowski (2008) &amp; Harvey and Drolet (2006); &amp; Lepsinger &amp; DeRosa (2010);</td>
<td>1,2,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing regard</td>
<td>Kegan, &amp; Lahey (2011); &amp; McKibben (2013); &amp; Kruse, (2013); Kegan, &amp; Lahey, (2011)</td>
<td>1,2,3,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer to peer appreciation</td>
<td>Kruse (2013)</td>
<td>1,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgement</td>
<td>Rath &amp; Clifton (2004); &amp; McNally &amp; Speak (2011); &amp; Kegan &amp; Lahey (2011); &amp; Kimsey-House &amp; Kimsey-House &amp; Sandahl &amp;</td>
<td>1,2,4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Whitworth (2011)

Seven drivers of respect (recognition, empowerment, supportive feedback, partnering, expectations, consideration and trust) Marciano (2010); & White, & Harvey & Kemper (2007); & Kruse (2013); & Gardner, as cited in Laburm (2011); & Patterson, & Grenny, & McMillan, & Switzler, (2012)

This study not only focuses on employee engagement but specifically focuses on paraeducators in special education and this in itself brings to the table its own set of themes and thought-provoking questions. Table 3 is an additional alignment of key factors pertaining to paraeducator themes identified in the literature and the research questions (Table 3).

Table 3

Alignment of Paraeducator Themes Identified in the Literature and Research Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alignment with the literature</th>
<th>Researchers</th>
<th>Alignment with Research Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of paraeducator gender</td>
<td>Ashbaker &amp; Morgan (2000); &amp; Mueller (2002); &amp; Henry (2011)</td>
<td>1,2,3,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of paraeducator roles and expectations</td>
<td>Ashbaker &amp; Morgan (2000); &amp; French (1999); &amp; National Education Association (NEA) (2005); &amp; Mueller (2002); &amp; Gessler Werts, and Harris, and Young Tillery, and Roark (2004)</td>
<td>1,2,3,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraeducator opportunities, training, workplace conditions</td>
<td>Causton-Theoharis and Malmgren (2005); &amp; Giangreco (2003); &amp; Mueller (2002); &amp; Giangreco, &amp; Suter, &amp; Doyle (2010); &amp; Harvey and Drolet (2006); &amp; Cain, (2012); &amp; Gallup (2002); &amp; Maxwell</td>
<td>1,2,3,4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Paraeducator autonomy, trust and teambuilding


Paraeducator perception of lack of acknowledgement and recognition


A Likert survey that was modified from Marciano (2012) on engagement was designed to elicit preliminary responses regarding special education paraprofessional perceptions of their engagement and discretionary effort which produced initial results (Appendix B). The 37-question survey including 9 demographic questions was designed to be completed at paraprofessional trainings to collate as many responses as possible. Consequently, the instrument was formatted as a written survey rather than an online survey as paraprofessionals have apparent limited access to the organization’s email and technology during trainings. The survey was created in a manner that was appropriate for paraprofessionals in terms of constraints of time and comprehensibility. Table 4 shows the validity and reliability of the survey instrument by aligning the research questions and survey questions (Table 4).
Table 4

**Alignment of Research Questions with Survey Questions**

Directions: Read each statement, indicate how strongly you disagree or agree with each statement by placing an “X” in the appropriate box. **Clearly choose and mark only one box.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>RQs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Engagement</strong></td>
<td>1. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors which lead to effective engagement in special education special day classes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors which lead to sustainable engagement in special education special day classes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discretionary Effort/Empowerment</strong></td>
<td>3. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors which encourage discretionary effort in special education special day classes?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 1. I am passionate about what I do | 11. I am given ownership of tasks in the classroom |
| 2. I find my work intrinsically motivating | 12. I am part of the decision-making process in the classroom |
| 3. Outside of work I think about how I could be more productive and effective in my job | 13. I feel appreciated for the work I do |
| 4. I get absorbed in my work and lose track of time | 14. The organization connects my personal values with the values of the organization |
| 5. My work energizes me | 15. The work conditions are favorable |
| 6. Time passes quickly while I am working | 16. I am part of an effective |
17. I am given opportunities to utilize my own skills and talents in the classroom
18. The organization has high expectations of me
19. I am given opportunities to grow within the organization
20. The organization recognizes my achievements in the classroom
21. The teacher thanks me frequently for my commitment
22. My peers acknowledge me
23. I am given supportive feedback from my teacher
24. I am given supportive feedback from my supervisor
25. The duties assigned to me in the classroom are clear and fair
26. I participate in team building activities frequently
27. I intend to continue in this position
28. I intend to keep my employment with the organization

Measures and Interventions

4. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the most effective strategies to increase discretionary effort and sustain engagement in special education special day classes?

However, this first phase of the study produced objective statistics of perceptions. The second phase of this study therefore, employed a semi-structured interview to elaborate, explore and explain the quantitative findings (Appendix C). Although explanatory in nature, this study also applied a methodological triangulation approach so that the results together would be substantiated (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p.201).

Additionally, McMillan and Schumacher (2010) support that, “Triangulation is used when the strengths of one method offset the weaknesses of the other, so that
together, they provide a more comprehensive set of data” (p.25). Furthermore, the interview provided the opportunity for paraprofessionals to feel more comfortable in being transparent with their responses as interviews were conducted away from the workplace. The challenge is to ensure that transparency makes sense of the findings as it is the intention for those findings to be “useful” and “influential” (Bamberger, et al, 2012, p.152). The semi-structured interview also allowed the respondents to speak freely of their feelings without being provided choices and enabled the researcher to probe further if necessary (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010, p.206). Each interview was conducted individually and followed an interviewing protocol (Appendix D) and norms for each interview. The combination of these instruments provided authenticity and subsequently enriched the data. The table below shows the relationship between the research questions and interview questions (Table 5).

Table 5

**Alignment of Research Questions and Interview Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>RQs</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>1. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors which lead to effective engagement in</td>
<td>1. How do you define your role?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. I am passionate about what I do</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I find my work intrinsically motivating</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Outside of work I think about how I could be more productive and effective in my job</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>Discretionary Effort/Empowerment</td>
<td>Measures and Interventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I get absorbed in my work and lose track of time</td>
<td>special education special day classes?</td>
<td>4. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors which encourage discretionary effort in special education day classes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. My work energizes me</td>
<td>engagement in your role as a paraeducator?</td>
<td>6. What measures and interventions could the County Office take to make you feel empowered in your role as a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Time passes quickly while I am working</td>
<td>2. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors which lead to sustainable engagement in special education day classes?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I am committed to my job</td>
<td>3. What kinds of support are necessary to sustain your employment in special education?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I find myself extremely focused and engaged in work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I find my work interesting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I always give maximum effort in my job</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I am given ownership of tasks in the classroom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I am part of the decision-making process in the classroom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I feel appreciated for the work I do</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. The organization connects my personal values with the values of the organization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. The work conditions are favorable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. I am part of an effective team</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. I am given opportunities to utilize my own skills and talents in the classroom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. The organization has high expectations of me</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. I am given opportunities to grow within the organization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. The organization recognizes my achievements in the classroom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. The teacher thanks me frequently for my commitment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. My peers acknowledge me</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. I am given supportive feedback from my teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. I am given supportive feedback from my supervisor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection

A request to Brandman University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) was made to conduct this research study as well as with the Superintendent’s Office of the Southern California County Office of Education. Approval from the two institutions in writing was received by the IRB and by the Superintendent’s Office to conduct the study. A meeting was held with the Associate Superintendent of Student Programs and Services shortly after approval to acquire email addresses of eligible principals in the Southern California County Office of Education inviting voluntary participation. As paraeducators have limited access to email and internet access it was necessary to send out a hardcopy of the letter for principals to disseminate at staff trainings for paraeducators (Appendix E). A hardcopy of the letter was given to eligible participants meeting the purposive sampling criterion inviting voluntary participation and informed consent forms outlining the purpose of the study, participant rights, duration of participation, privacy and confidentiality rights, potential benefits of the study and the right to withdraw without ramification (Appendix F). A $25 gift card raffle was included on the survey and interview to increase response rate. Participants followed up with signed consent forms. A follow up email and hardcopy memo reminding
participants to complete the anonymous survey occurred two weeks prior to the completion of the written survey instrument via principals. Participants wishing to partake in a follow up interview were invited to consent on the survey and were contacted via phone to select a mutually agreed time and date for interviewing.

The interviews were based partly on a “Standardized, open-ended interview - the same open-ended questions are asked to all interviewees; this approach facilitates faster interviews that can be more easily analyzed and compared” (Valenzuela & Shrivastava, n.d.). Patton (2002) describes this approach as a “…interview guide…to ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each person interviewed” (p.343). However, it was necessary for me to “…explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject” (Patton, 2002, p.343). An interview agenda for the interviewees and a copy of the interview questions in advance were provided beforehand to inform participants of research intentions and objectives based on the research questions.

**Data Analysis**

The mixed method approach warranted a two-part approach to the analysis. The quantitative piece of the research design, the survey questions, required the analysis to describe the “what” of the study. In this case, descriptive statistics, defined as an approach to “…transform a set of numbers or observations into indices that describe or characterize the data” (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010, p.149) was employed. The first step in the analysis was to code each anonymous survey response with an identifying number (survey 1 = S1). Using an
Excel spreadsheet, the demographic questions were listed across the top from D1
to D9 and the corresponding survey respondent code was listed down the side.
The responses to the demographic questions were numerical and was inputted into
each cell to record the raw data. The second step in the analysis used a nominal
measurement scale that resulted in the categories of the Likert scale to be assigned
numbers. Based on Marciano’s (2010) rating scale and scoring, the category of
“strongly disagree” was converted to a zero and “strongly agree” to a five. These
indices were then added to the spreadsheet. A statistician completed the
computation of the data using a univariate descriptive analysis to identify the
mean (average) and mode responses (frequency); (Williams, 2004, p.375). Tables
were formulated to analyze the range of scores. The third step in the process was
to analyze the spread of the scores of the remaining survey questions. Using
standard deviation which “…is a numerical index that indicates the average
variability of the scores” (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010, p.161) a full
description of the data was acquired.

The second part of the methodology required interviews to be conducted
via phone. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) believe that interviews which are
conducted in their natural setting elicit the respondents own genuine viewpoints
of behaviors without “…external constraints and control” (p.323). The interview
responses were digitally recorded so that a digital file could be created for each
interviewee. The digital files were then sent to an outside transcription service.
Based on the voluntary response on the survey to participate in the interview, each
transcription was aligned to the survey respondent’s identifying number and
labeled with the letter ‘I’ to indicate interview. This identifying information further provided an additional layer of validity. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) testify that in qualitative methods, “…there is no one right way; to analyze the data, but it cannot be…limitlessly inventive” (p.369). Therefore, a coding system was used that started with aligning each interview question with responses from each participant. Each participant was then assigned a color. Straus and Corbin (1998) stated, “It is through careful scrutiny of data, line by line, that researchers are able to uncover new concepts and novel relationships and to, systematically develop categories in terms of their properties and dimensions” (as cited in Patten, 2012, p.159). Before proceeding to identify segments (one idea), then codes (participant perspectives relating to the segment) and finally categories according to McMillan and Schumacher (2010, p.370); the researcher must create a distance between the research and the data to further elicit meaningful insights (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007 as cited in McMillan and Schumacher, 2010, p.369). The data was then compared for common themes and frequency of categories were aligned with each research question. The final analysis to support reliability and validity of the data was implemented by triangulating the survey and interview responses by comparing the reoccurring literature themes with the survey and interview responses (Tesch, 1990, as cited in Roberts, 2010, p.160).

Limitations

The limitations of the study were as follows:

1. The research was limited to one County Office of Education based in Southern California and is not representative of paraeducators serving
in other special education programs within the United States.

2. The research was limited to the perceptions of paraeducators serving special education students in special day classes.

3. The results are based only on those who volunteered to participate in the research.

4. The written survey was completed during a paraprofessional staff training.

5. The analysis and interpretation of the data was conducted by the researcher working in education as a special education teacher.

**Summary**

Chapter III of this research study clarified the methodology, purpose of the study, research questions, and design of the research. This chapter also included the population and sample, the instrumentation, and data procedures. The chapter further explored the method of data collection and analysis, concluding with the limitations of the study. The next chapter focuses on the data of the study.
CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter includes an overview of the purpose statement, research questions, research methods, data collection procedures, population and sample of the study. This chapter also presents the findings of the quantitative analysis of survey responses aligned to the four research questions. Additionally, the chapter includes the presentation of the qualitative analysis of the study based on interviews with the study participants. The chapter concludes with a summary of the quantitative and qualitative analyses in order to bridge the gap in the literature between employee tenure and sustainable engagement of special education paraeducators.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this mixed method study was to identify and describe what paraeducators perceive as factors that lead to effective and sustainable engagement in special education special day classes. In addition, it was also the purpose of this study to identify what strategies are effective for encouraging discretionary effort as perceived by paraeducators.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used in this study:

1. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors that lead to effective engagement in special education special day classes?

2. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors that lead to sustainable engagement in special education special day classes?
3. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors that encourage discretionary effort in special education special day classes?

4. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the most effective strategies to increase discretionary effort and sustain engagement in special education special day classes?

**Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures**

In this mixed method study, surveys and interviews were used to investigate the perception of engagement and discretionary effort among special education paraeducators at a Southern California County Office. Surveys enabled the researcher to understand their perceptions of employment. Patten (2012) stated, “The purpose of surveys is to describe the attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of a population” (p.9). In addition, follow up semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow the researcher to gather a more in depth understanding of the impact of appreciating employee value by using “…detailed descriptions and analyses” (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010, p.325). A pilot test was conducted with a small sample of paraeducators employed in similar special education assignments to check for validity, errors and to ensure that questions were designed to elicit information pertinent to this study and research questions. Modifications were revised based on the advice of knowledgeable and professional experts in the field from Brandman University. Marciano’s (2010) engagement instrument (Figure 3) was utilized and combined with a Likert scale with a range of agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree and disagree based on the research questions. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) suggest that “Scales are used extensively in questionnaires because they allow fairly accurate assessments of beliefs or opinions. This is because
many of our beliefs and opinions are thought of in terms of graduations” (p.198). The 37-question survey including 9 demographic questions that were completed at paraprofessional trainings to collate as many responses as possible. Consequently, the instrument was formatted as a written survey rather than an online survey as paraprofessionals have apparent limited access to the organization’s email and technology during trainings. The survey was created in a manner that was appropriate for paraprofessionals in terms of constraints of time and comprehensibility. The interviews provided the opportunity for paraprofessionals who had volunteered to participated following the initial survey, to feel more comfortable in being transparent with their responses, as interviews were conducted by telephone away from the workplace. The challenge was to ensure that transparency makes sense of the findings as it is the intention for those findings to be “useful” and “influential” (Bamberger, et al, 2012, p.152). Each interview was conducted individually and followed an interviewing protocol and norms for each interview. An interview agenda for the interviewees and a copy of the interview questions in advance were provided beforehand to inform participants of research intentions and objectives based on the research questions. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy.

**Population**

This research used paraeducators employed by a Southern California County Office of Education in the Student Programs and Services Division. This organization served 467 school sites totaling 23 school districts and had access to 20,294 certificated staff, 4,465 paraprofessionals and 9,031 other staff inclusive of administrators according to the County Office’s 2010-2011 statistics. For the purpose of this study only
paraeducators who worked in the special education division were eligible to participate in the study.

**Sample**

There were 343 paraeducators employed in the special education division of the Southern California County Office of Education. The sample was a culturally homogeneous group indicative of similar focus, minimal variation and belonging to the same organization. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) further stated that, “information-rich key informants, groups, places or events to study…are chosen because they are likely to be knowledgeable and informative about the phenomena…” (p.326). This study further included participants representative of early childhood, preschool, lower elementary, upper elementary, middle school and high school, serving students diagnosed with autism, deaf and hard of hearing, physically disabled, emotionally disturbed, visually impaired, trainable mentally handicapped and developmentally delayed. Using a free sample size calculator from Raosoft it was expected that this study required a sample size of 182 paraeducators.

Of the 182 surveys sent out to eligible participants, 55 surveys were returned, for a response rate of 30%. A reminder asking the principals to encourage participation from their paraeducators was given. This generated a further 15 responses, totaling 70 returned surveys, for a response rate of 37%. One survey was considered incomplete thus only 69 surveys were applied to this study. Additionally, of the 69 completed surveys, 20 participants agreed to participate in a follow up interview, for a response rate of 28%, however, only 10 interviews were conducted as possible interviewees for the research were unobtainable, had transferred position or had withdrawn their employment from the
organization. It was also discovered that during the interviews no new pertinent topics had emerged thus revealing a point of saturation (Patten, 2012, p. 152).

**Demographic Data**

The following nine tables specify the demographics of the 69 research participants in the study. There were several demographic questions in which there was missing information as participants did not respond to those questions and this is noted in the table. Table 6 reveals the participant gender. The table shows that the majority of survey participants were female (89.3%) and 10.7% were male. Four participants (0.05%) did not respond to this question.

Table 6  
*Participant Gender (N = 65, number of participants who answered)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>89.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants age groups were varied as illustrated in table 7. The majority of participants were between 25-34 (37.6%), followed by 21.9% of participants answering between 55-64 years of age. Five participants, 0.07% did not answer this question.
Table 7

*Participant Age Groups (N = 64, number of participants who answered)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group (years)</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 - 24</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 - 34</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 - 44</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 - 54</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 - 64</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 65</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8 identifies the highest level of education among paraeducators. The largest group of respondents had some college (42.8%); the second largest group (36.5%) held a Bachelor’s degree. Those with an Associate’s degree represented 11.1% of the sample, 6.4% held a Master’s degree and 3.2% of the sample had a high school level of education. Six participants (0.08%) did not respond to this question.
Table 8

*Level of Education (N = 63, number of participants who answered)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School or GED</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>42.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate’s Degree</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>36.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral Degree</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9 represents the years of service participants had with the Southern California County Office. Over half of the participants had worked for them between 0-10 years (54.3%) and a further 20 respondents had worked over 15 years (31.2%). Five participants did not respond to this question (0.07%).
Table 9

*Years of Service with the Southern California County Office (N = 64, number of participants who answered)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Service</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The next table (Table 10) reveals the number of years that the participants had been employed as a paraeducator. Those with 0-2 years of paraeducator service represented the largest group (21.9%). The next largest groups represented are those who had 6-10 years of service (18.7%); 3-5 years (17.2%), 11-14 years (15.6%) and more than 20 years (15.6%). The smallest group represented employees with 15-19 years (11%). Five participants did not answer this question (0.07%).
Table 10

*Years of Paraeducator Service (N = 64, number of participants who answered)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Service</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11 illustrates that 75.8% of participants considered themselves as full time employees compared to 24.2% who answered part time. Seven participants did not submit an answer for this question (0.10).

Table 11

*Employment Status (N = 62, number of participants who answered)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full-Time</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>75.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-Time</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The types of special needs students served by the participants in the study are indicated in table 12. Twenty-two participants answered ‘other’ (multiple disabilities)
with a response of 34.3%; 26.6% of participants answered autism, 25% of respondents serve students who were intellectually disabled, 6.3% worked with students who were physically disabled, 4.7% of responses came from those who served the developmentally delayed population and about 3% serve students who were deaf and hard of hearing or emotionally disabled. No participants received represented visually impaired students. Five participants did not answer this question (0.07%).

Table 12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>26.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf and Hard of Hearing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physically Disabled</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotionally Disturbed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visually Impaired</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectually Disabled</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmentally Delayed</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>34.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants who worked in both the lower and upper elementary school classrooms accounted for the largest group of responses (37.2%) as shown in table 13. Participants who worked in high schools accounted for the next largest group (30.5%).
Middle school (11.9%), preschool (13.6%) and early childhood (6.8%) were the smallest groups of participants. Ten participants did not answer this question (0.14%).

Table 13

*Student Grade Level (N = 59, number of participants who answered)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early Childhood</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Elementary (K – 3)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Elementary (4 – 6)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>30.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The final demographic question regarded site location of participants and is presented in table 14. Over 80% of participants worked in a self-contained classroom on a District campus. Just fewer than 20% were located in a County Office building not on a District site. Seven participants did not respond (0.10%).
Table 14

*Site Location (N = 62, number of participants who answered)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District Campus</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>80.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Presentation and Analysis of Data**

The presentation of the statistical analysis consisted of two parts: analysis of the survey questions followed by analysis of the interview questions. Descriptive statistics were utilized to interpret the quantitative survey data (frequencies, means, and standard deviations). The survey consisted of 28 statements that utilized a 5-point Likert scale: *strongly disagree* (0), *somewhat disagree* (1), *slightly disagree* (2), *slightly agree* (3), *somewhat agree* (4), *strongly agree* (5). Participants were also presented with an option for further comments. Mean scores for the 28 statements were calculated and arranged in order of research question. The standard deviation shows the variation from the mean. A small standard deviation shows the participants had less variation in responses compared to a larger standard deviation showing that answers were more varied.

**Quantitative Data**

**Research Question 1.** *What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors which lead to effective engagement in special education special day classes?*

The first 10 questions of the survey were indicative of the perceived factors that paraeducators believe led to effective engagement and 3 of the top engagement factors that scored above somewhat agree, noted with a score of 4.00 on the Likert scale are as
follows: being committed to the job (mean score of 4.70), being passionate (mean score of 4.62), and giving maximum effort in their job (mean score of 4.61). These responses scored somewhat agree and strongly agree on the survey by all the respondents. S#52 commented, “Love for the kids keeps me engaged” and S#3 further stated, “I absolutely love working with preschool age children. I feel we are the ones who mold these children for future education at this age. We work very well together for many years. We are a little family.” There were two factors that paraeducators attributed to the lowest levels of engagement. The two factors and their responses follow: getting absorbed in their work and losing track of time (mean score of 3.68) and work being energizing (mean score of 3.70).
### Table 15

**Factors Leading to Effective Engagement in Special Education Day Classes (N = varied)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>SE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I am passionate about what I do</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I find my work intrinsically motivating</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Outside of work I think about how I could be more productive and effective in my job</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I get absorbed in my work and lose track of time</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. My work energizes me</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Time passes quickly while I am working</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I am committed to my job</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I find myself extremely focused and engaged in work</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I find my work interesting</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I always give maximum effort in my job</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Whilst respondents answered that they believed in the intrinsic motivational factors that lead to effective engagement in special education classes they also reported that what affected engagement was the lack of being absorbed or feeling energized by their work.

**Research Question 2.** What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors which lead to sustainable engagement in special education special day classes?

In order to address the second research question, the researcher elicited the responses of items 11-15 of the survey. As Table 16 shows, the most significant factors...
perceived by paraeducators which led to sustainable engagement was ownership of tasks in the classroom (mean score of 4.29) and being part of the decision-making process in the classroom (mean score of 3.81). This was further elaborated on by S#51 who remarked, “Being able to work in a classroom where the teacher allows our ideas and lets us use them is gratifying. Also working in a great school site is wonderful.” Although most respondents strongly agreed that connecting personal values to the values of the organization was a factor it rated the least significant factor in sustaining employee engagement (mean score of 3.56). The researcher also noted that there was a bigger standard deviation on item 13 which asked respondents to consider if they felt appreciated for the work they did (1.59).

Table 16

*Factors Leading to Sustainable Engagement in Special Education Day Classes (N = varied)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>SE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11. I am given ownership of tasks in the classroom</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I am part of the decision-making process in the classroom</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I feel appreciated for the work I do</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. The organization connects my personal values with the values of the organization</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. The work conditions are favorable</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question 3. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors which encourage discretionary effort in special education special day classes?

Items 16 – 21 on the survey pertained to the factors that paraeducators perceived encouraged discretionary effort. Table 17 highlights that being part of an effective team (mean score of 4.22) and being frequently thanked for their commitment by the teacher (mean score of 4.13) rated high as the factors that encouraged discretionary effort. This was also echoed by S#4 who said, “I feel strongly appreciated by my teacher and coworkers within the classroom. My teacher gives a lot of praise and allows us to make decisions as a team”. However, the same participant also added, “I don't feel appreciated by (the County Office) as a whole. I'm never recognized outside of my classroom.”

As in research question 2 although the responses for item 20 still scored in the strongly agree range there was a larger standard of deviation and thus being recognized by the organization for achievements was not considered highly as a factor for encouraging discretionary effort (mean score of 3.04 and a standard deviation of 1.69) Again, this was further reflected in the response from S#2, “Not trying to be a downer, but low pay, hurry up and wait work, no or little training and no opportunity to be promoted. Why would I stay? Ha! Why do I work here now?” And, S#65 “Love the students but can't wait to leave (County Office)! My class I enjoy, not the company itself.”
Table 17

Factors Encouraging Discretionary Effort in Special Education Day Classes (N = varied)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>SE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16. I am part of an effective team</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. I am given opportunities to utilize my own skills and talents in the classroom</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. The organization has high expectations of me</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. I am given opportunities to grow within the organization</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. The organization recognizes my achievements in the classroom</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. The teacher thanks me frequently for my commitment</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Question 4. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the most effective strategies to increase discretionary effort and sustain engagement in special education special day classes?

The most effective strategies for increasing discretionary effort and sustaining engagement in special education day classes were gathered from items 22 – 28 as presented in Table 18. Paraeducators perceive being acknowledged by peers was an effective strategy (mean score of 4.07) and being assigned clear and fair duties (mean score of 4.07). Strategies that were perceived as important but had a larger standard of deviation which resulted in being reported as not significant included participating in
team building activities frequently (mean score of 3.15) and being given supportive feedback from their supervisor (mean score of 3.21). There was a realization that paraeducators, despite varied responses to the survey, would remain in their employment with the organization (means score of 4.34) although may change positions (mean score of 3.71).

Table 18

*Effective Strategies Increasing Discretionary Effort and Sustainable Engagement in Special Education Day Classes (N = varied)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>SE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22. My peers acknowledge me</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. I am given supportive feedback from my teacher</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. I am given supportive feedback from my supervisor</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. The duties assigned to me in the classroom are clear and fair</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. I participate in team building activities frequently</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. I intend to continue in this position</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. I intend to keep my employment with the organization</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the additional comments participants highlighted compensation not being commensurate with local districts and classroom experience, limited training and lack of appreciation outside the classroom as being issues. Additional comments also pointed to
longevity with the class increased teamwork, being entrusted by the class teacher to make
decisions and working with children increased engagement. It is also worth noting that
the one survey respondent who commented that, “We are a little family” was also the
only respondent that was located at a county standalone school site and has remained as
an instructional assistant at that site for 20+ years. Table 19 below highlights the
demographics and additional comments.

Table 19

Additional Comments on Survey (N = 11, participants answered additional comments)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Id #</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Ed. Level</th>
<th>Years of Service</th>
<th>Emp. Status</th>
<th>Type of Student Served</th>
<th>Grade Level of Student</th>
<th>Site Loc.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>MD</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>0-2</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>PD</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>0-2</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>UE</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>PS</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“I feel that as an Instructional Assistant with years of experience and education, the duties and skills expected of me is not commensurate with my salary = disrespect.”

“Pay is not competitive with the local surrounding districts.”

“Compensation for position gives impression that position is not as highly valued in comparison to positions like custodians.”

“(County Office) is a great place to work.”

“We are underpaid for the work required of us. I feel as if any extra money in the budget gets taken Downtown and not passed to the classroom for supplies or compensation.”
The researcher also ran a comparison based on Marciano’s employee engagement diagnostic assessment tool that formed the basis of the survey to analyze levels of engagement. Scores between 0-10 indicate actively disengaged, 11-20 = disengaged, 21-30 = opportunistic, 31-40 = engaged and 41-50 = actively engaged. Table 20 below reveals the raw score of the participants, the total number of participants per engagement level and levels of engagement using the raw score of the 10 ten questions survey. Of the 69 participants, 60% scored actively engaged compared to 3% of participants who scored at the opportunistic to actively disengaged levels of the tool.

Table 20

*Levels of Engagement Based on Marciano’s Engagement Tool (N=69, number of participants who answered)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels of Engagement</th>
<th>Raw Score</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actively Disengaged</td>
<td>0-10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengaged</td>
<td>11-20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunistic</td>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actively Engaged</td>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The researcher paralleled the age group and levels of engagement and found that the highest levels of engagement were associated with employees that were best described as being in the 25-34-year-old range. Moreover, those best described in the age range of 55-64 years scored the third highest score of 12% being actively engaged (Table 21). Furthermore, both these age groups were also the only groups that scored in the
actively disengaged to disengaged levels. Five participants did not provide answers to the age group demographic question.

Of the 3 participants who scored in the actively disengaged and disengaged levels several similarities were noted:

- 2 participants were in the 25-34-year range and 1 participant was between 55-64 year range
- 3 participants had degrees, of which 1 had a teaching credential
- 2 participants had worked for the organization for less than 5 years and 1 had served over 20 years as a paraeducator
- 2 participants worked with students diagnosed with multiple disabilities and 1 participant worked with students with an intellectual disability
- 2 of the participants worked with students in elementary and 1 in a high school
- All 3 participants agreed that they did not feel appreciated for the work they did, did not participate in team building activities and would not continue in their position.
- 2 of the 3 participants agreed that they did not feel intrinsically motivated by their work or were interested in their work, were not given ownership, not involved in decision making, did not feel connections with their values and that of the organization, given opportunities to utilize their talents, that the organization did not have high expectations of them, were not given opportunities to grow, being recognized outside the classroom or given supportive feedback from the teacher.
- 2 of the participants slightly agreed to strongly agreed that they were committed to their job, gave maximum effort, felt part of an effective team, teacher thanked
them frequently for their commitment and was given supportive feedback from their supervisor.

Table 21

*Levels of Engagement and Age Groups (N = 64, number of participants who answered)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels of Engagement</th>
<th>Age Group %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Under 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actively Disengaged</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengaged</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunistic</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actively Engaged</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An analysis of levels of engagement and years of service with the Southern California County Office of Education was also conducted. Table 22 shows that although the highest levels of engagement were found with employees with less than 5 years of service there was also a significant percentage (13%) of those who had served the organization for over 15 years who were actively engaged thus refuting the literature that claims the longer the tenure the less engaged an employee is. Five participants did not provide an answer to this demographic question.
Table 22

*Levels of Engagement Compared to Years of Service (N = 64, number of participants who answered)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels of Engagement</th>
<th>0-2</th>
<th>3-5</th>
<th>Years of Service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>11-14</td>
<td>15-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actively Disengaged</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengaged</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunistic</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actively Engaged</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another point of analysis that was conducted was of those participants who were identified as being actively engaged and the students being served. The most prevalent student population was students with autism particularly those in grades 4 through 6 (0.06%) and multiple disabilities in grades K-3 (0.04%) where most employees were actively engaged as shown in Table 23. The student populations that show lack of active engagement were deaf and hard of hearing physically disabled and visually impaired classes. Eight participants did not provide an answer to this demographic question.
Table 23

*Student Population and Student Grade Level (N = 61, number of participants who answered)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Grade Level</th>
<th>Student Population</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf and Hard of Hearing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physically Disabled</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotionally Disturbed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visually Impaired</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectually Disabled</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmentally Disabled</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Disabilities</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Qualitative Data**

This study was designed as a mixed-methods study including both qualitative and quantitative data. The survey invited volunteers to participate in a follow up, anonymous interview. The follow-up telephone interview was designed to find out in-depth perceptions of engagement, discretionary effort, empowerment, measures and interventions. Twenty participants who completed the survey indicated they would participate in an interview with the researcher. Of the twenty interview participants only
10 interviews were conducted as possible interviewees for the research were unobtainable, had transferred position or had withdrawn their employment from the organization. Additionally, during the interviews no new pertinent topics had emerged thus revealing a point of saturation (Patten, 2012, p. 152).

The demographics of the interview participants are shown in Table 24. The interview participants were all female with 5 participants in the 25-34-year range. Half of the participants had degrees ranging from an Associates to a Master’s and the other 50% indicated some college level experience. The years of service with the county office ranged from less than 2 years to over 20 years with the most prevalent being in the 3-5 year range and 15+ years; furthermore, this was also associated with their longevity as a paraeducator with the county office. All but 3 employees considered themselves as full time, however, upon closer analysis 2 of those respondents were those with degrees working with preschool autism classes and those students had a shorter day. Additionally, the respondents may have had additional jobs and perceived themselves as part time employees, however, they did work a full 6 hours and were considered by the county office as full-time positions. Only 3 types of student populations were served with over 50% of those interviewed who worked with students with intellectual disability and 1 respondent who worked with multiple disabilities. The last point to highlight is that all students grade levels except for high school was included, of which only 1 participant worked at a standalone county office site as opposed to a district.
The researcher asked 7 questions to the participants. Table 25 summarizes the coding and categories that emerged from the semi structured interviews.

**Interview Question 1. How do you define your role?**

The overarching response from the participants was defining their role in the capacity of an assistant whether this was assisting the teacher ultimately or assisting other classroom staff. One participant (I#20) stated: “My role, is I'm an instructional aid for [Southern California County Office]. I believe that my role entitles me to work with kids with special needs.” Another (I#66) described her role as: “I am the teacher's right and
left hand. A teacher.” This supports the literature that teachers are expected to facilitate a paraeducator by “…chang[ing] their role from gracious host to engaged teaching partner (Giangreco, 2003, p.50). Three of the participants viewed their role as a helper or as a caregiver and listed examples of activities that pertained to student learning or helping with student physical wellbeing such as taking care of student, describing themselves as a “nurturer”. Two participants saw their role as being a role model for both students and staff or a “best influence” and one interviewee used the term “leadership” to define her role. She explained (I#19),

I would say leadership. My role is just to give the kids the best education they can get and just move them up, assisting the teacher, be here and just being a great role model for the other staff members and even the children. Let's see here, safety awareness, that's a main thing for me, too, just making sure everybody and the children are safe and there's no hazards in the classroom.

**Interview Question 2. How do you demonstrate your engagement in your role as a paraeducator?**

The participants described how they demonstrated engagement in their role as “being involved”, getting work done, coming to the classroom, engaging with the students and “…teaching them…not just standing there…watching them”. One interviewee (I#10) expressed their engagement as having the motivation to “give…[a] hundred per cent in what I'm doing for the children.” Another participant (I# 66) defined engagement as respect: “I come as a professional person. The rule and regulation of respecting everybody, respecting the kids. Giving everybody respect as a person.” These responses are supportive of the survey results that identified commitment, passion and giving maximum effort as factors perceived by paraeducators that lead to engagement.
Interview Question 3. What kinds of support are necessary to sustain your employment in special education?

Question 3 elicited a variety of answers. The support that four of the participants stated pertained to staff support, “Mak[ing] sure everybody's on the same page and on the same support system” (I#3). Two participants described the teacher as a support, “…the kind of support I believe…is leadership from the teacher. I also need a role model, you know, just so I could [have] an example of what I need to be doing in the classroom” (I#20). There were two participants who discussed the need for administrative support. One participant expressed the need for administrators to be more active in their role: “Most administrators that I've worked for, to me, are like used car salesmen. They tell you what they want to hear, but they don't actually do anything” (I#5). Another participant responded, “…just having a principal that's always supporting you … that makes me come to work every day. That's what keeps me employed” (I#19). Other supports mentioned included materials for the classroom, workshops in different educational areas to support them in obtaining a teaching credential, parent support and specific trainings on disabilities. Trainings for new paraeducators were considered a support. This is supported by the literature that the least trained personnel are working with the most significantly challenged students (Causton-Theoharis and Malmgren, 2005) and as echoed by a participant (I#20) who revealed that,

I would just hear a lot of the teachers not complain but kind of that a lot of instructional aides…don't do work, not that they're lazy, but they don't want to work. They came into this field and they don't want to … They come into the classroom, they refuse to do certain things like change diapers, or feed somebody. It's as if they're like, “Oh, I can't do this.” It just bothers me too, cause I'm like they need help, that's why you're here. This is what you do. This is your job. Yeah, they need to train them. They need to actually train them. I mean I know that when you throw someone in there, you can get … It's better training cause
that's how you learn. But I think at the same time, they freeze...and then they
don't come back, and they end up quitting. Because they don't know, they've
never got trained. In their head, they're so like, “Oh, I can't do this.” I don't think
that they think they could do it or they're capable of ... Yeah. It's hard, it's so hard.
It's hard for people and if they don't have experience, they're just...they're
overwhelmed. It's overwhelming, that's what it is. That overwhelming is what
makes them quit...and they wouldn't be so overwhelmed if they [got] trained
prior to actually coming to the classroom. It's the same for substitutes too.

Additionally, specific trainings for substitutes as highlighted by this example was
also considered by an interviewee (I#19) as a possible measure and intervention,

We have subs that come in that do not know what to do. It's hard when you have
11 preschoolers laying around and you're trying to get them in their areas and
you're trying to tell the substitute how to do centers and how to handle behaviors.
It'd really help if they did special trainings for substitutes.

**Interview Question 4. What kinds of opportunities would encourage you to go
“above and beyond” in your position?**

The major opportunities that was suggested by the paraeducators that would
encourage them to go “above and beyond” included: specific trainings on disabilities,
more job openings to encourage them to get to the next step in their career, tangible
rewards for school sites for perfect attendance, out of the box thinking and use of
initiative, feedback from all staff and everyday appreciation which was also supported in
the survey results. The one factor that was stated by three of the participants pertained to
intrinsic motivation, “I don't really need anything for me to go above and beyond my
position. For me, it's about the kids. I don't need anything extra. What I get out of
working with these guys is enough for me” (I#10).

**Interview Question 5. In what ways are you given opportunities to make
decisions, be creative and be part of the team?**
A major theme that stemmed from this question was for paraeducators to feel a sense of trust. This is also supported by the literature because trust empowers (Brown and Moffett, 1999, p.118) and “…is the foundation for all engagement” (Kruse, 2013, p.72). Paraeducators gave many examples of how they perceived trust from the ownership in creating lesson plans for summer school, devising art projects, designing weekly themes to implementing ideas. One interviewee (I#19) remarked,

…The teacher that we have, she's an intern. She's brand new. She was an instructional assistant in our classroom before, but she's an intern teacher now. She comes up to me all the time for pointers and just for, if she's stuck on something and she needs help with, she'll come and ask me for advice and what to do, like how to handle a situation with a parent. I feel really involved with the teacher. She really makes me feel like part of the classroom. I was a little hesitant at first, because it is an intern teacher, they're brand new. She does make me feel like I'm important and she knows that I'm her number one instructional assistant to go to when things get tough. When she's out of the classroom and absent, she leaves me in charge because she knows I could handle the classroom when she's not there. That makes me happy, that she trusts me.

Additionally, paraeducators felt that they were given the opportunities to advance their education in teaching by being given the experiences and opportunities in the classroom, having open communication in order to express opinions and explanations as well as having the teachers be open to their suggestions. The concept of being part of an effective team was also supported in the survey responses.

**Interview Question 6. What measures and interventions could the County Office take to make you feel empowered in your role as a paraeducator?**

Question 6 elicited the most responses and the most varied. The most common measure and intervention indicated was more acknowledgement including the administrators, “coming by and saying, "Your teacher said that all your aides have been on top of what they need to do, beyond and above." Like, "Here, we got you guys
Starbucks." Or, "Here, we got you guys milkshakes." Or whatever. Just something to show that what we do is appreciate[ed]” (I#PS) Gratitude was also another measure and “that they believe in our job as being important” (I#10). This was also supported by the survey responses. Interventions that were also suggested but not so prevalently were: mutual support from the staff, various trainings alongside the classroom teacher, having the opportunity to learn from, and work with, support providers, changing certain policies such as health protocols to allow staff to support sick students more freely to avoid long term sickness and absence among classroom staff. One intervention that was shared by a participant was, “letting the instructional assistants that work with the students have more of a voice in Individualized Education Plan meetings because it’s just not the teachers that work with them” (I#51). Only one participant (I#66) brought up the idea of a pay raise because it’s a “tough job” although this was not of significance in the survey except in “additional comments” in which 4 male paraeducators and 1 female respondent had reported that the pay was not comparable to other districts of a similar position or years of experience.

**Interview Question 7. How are you appreciated for your contributions to the classroom and to the County Office?**

There was an element of contradiction between the survey responses and the interviews. On the one hand the survey responses indicated that appreciation from the County Office is insignificant and yet both in the additional comments section and interviews, respondents commented on the lack of appreciation from the organization in general as supported by the following comments:
• I feel really separate from [County Office] as a whole. At [County Office], it's too big of an animal for me to ... I'm just a small little tiny cog.

• I don't know if I'm appreciated [by County Office]. I don't really hear anything from them.

• Really ... there's not much. I feel like...they glance over us, almost. Like we're just not really that much appreciated.

• I really don't feel as much appreciation through [County Office]

The respondents felt that most appreciation comes from the teacher with positive feedback (which contradicts the survey results), verbal praise, tangible goodies, remembering their birthdays and holidays, by listening to their ideas and that, “what we're doing is making a difference…our teacher makes us feel important in our self-worth, so I'm happy” (I#10). However, one participant (I#19) did reveal that her principal had empowered her with her appreciation,

My principal, she appreciates me as well. She wants me to get involved with trainings and helping other staff members, like brand new staff members. I feel really appreciated that my principal trusts me and she knows how a hard worker I am, that she'll let me be a leader. She tells me all the time she wants me to step up my leadership skills since she knows I want to pursue a career in education. I feel really appreciated when they ask me to step up and take roles that I know I would have trouble with, because I don't do well with the other kind of people. I know what she's preparing me for, so I do appreciate that.

One participant stated her positivity with localized site trainings in which there were appreciation events specifically for paraeducators. Similarly, a paraeducator also remarked on parent appreciation as being a source of appreciation, “…parents are very appreciative of what we do with the kids, and it just makes me feel good” (I#11).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Theme</th>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>Segments - Codes Major to Minor</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Patterns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>1. How do you define your role?</td>
<td>Assistant to the teacher</td>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>Educational leaders in the classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Children</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A leader</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A role model/best influence for students and staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Nurturer/caregiver/helper (activities with students), assist with student wellbeing, taking care of students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. How do you demonstrate your engagement in your role as a paraeducator?</td>
<td>Assistant teacher</td>
<td>Role model</td>
<td>· Difficulty with the concept of leadership, difficulty transitioning from “helper” to leader</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher/Educator</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Instructional Assistant</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Assist staff</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Manage</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Important</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Engaging students, working side by side, assisting the students, teaching the students, hands on</td>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>· The value of a team – to respect and be respected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Being involved</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Helping out other Instructional Assistants</td>
<td>Team</td>
<td>· Recognized as a profession and professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Helping the teacher out</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Respectful/Professional</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“We”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Motivated – right thing to do</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Jack of all trades”</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Being asked advice</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Asking questions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Getting work done</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Coming to the classroom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discretionary Effort/Empowerment

3. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors that encourage discretionary effort in special education special day classes?

4. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors that encourage you to go "above and beyond" in your position?

- "I do!" Motivated because of the students
- More job openings/getting to the next step in career
- Advancing own career through experience and training
- Raffles/rewards for sites (attendance, out of the box thinking, use of initiative)
- Specific trainings on disabilities
- Everyday appreciation, feedback
- Training
- Leader

Future educator

Tangible rewards

Training

Future educators

Tangible rewards

Ongoing system wide training system (collaboration)

In the classroom

Supporting the teacher as a leader and role model

The need for the teacher to be a leader and role model to advance paraeducators

Team

Having a voice, being noticed as a profession

Acknowledgement attends to specific actions and being noticed

System: Teacher support (specific trainings on disabilities, behaviors, programs, new instructional assistants and substitute teacher support)

The need to build a team and how to build a team

Teacher Leadership/role model

Support

Specific trainings on disabilities

Everyday appreciation, feedback

Raffles/rewards for sites

Advancing own career through experience and training

Future educator

Tangible rewards

Training

Future educators

Tangible rewards

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Acknowledgement attends to specific actions and being noticed

System: Teacher support (specific trainings on disabilities, behaviors, programs, new instructional assistants and substitute teacher support)

The need to build a team and how to build a team

Teacher Leadership/role model

Support
5. In what ways are you given opportunities to make decisions, be creative and be part of the team?

- Being independent
- Giving insight – “using my knowledge”
- Teacher being open to suggestions and experience
- Trust, teacher implementing ideas/being involved, taking charge in teacher’s absence, experimenting, “figure out different things”
- Given opportunities/responsibility/given parameters
- Being asked opinions
- Lesson planning for Summer School/art, projects, themes
- Teacher used to be an Instructional Assistant/asking for advice
- To be taken as important

6. What measures and interventions could the County Office take to make you feel empowered in your role as a paraeducator?

- More acknowledgement
- Gratitude
- Through actions – show appreciation
- Training – substitutes, real life situations, new staff
- Training – alongside teachers, alongside support providers
- Training: specific
- Support with issues in the classroom
- Policy/tools e.g. changing health policy and providing resources for a sick child if a child comes to school sick the aides get sick and have more time off
- Believing in our job as important
- Inclusion in IEP meetings
- Raise in salary – tough job

Measures and Interventions

4. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the most effective strategies to increase discretionary effort and sustain engagement in special education special day classes?

- Teacher who was a paraeducator
- Paraeducators who seek to become teachers
- Independence given in arts and crafts areas, but some have more opportunities in lesson planning
- Need for a voice is a measure

- Acknowledgement is an opportunity and a measure
- System change – to ensure ongoing training
- Gratitude provides opportunity
7. How are you appreciated for your contributions to the classroom and to the County Office

- By the teacher
- By coworkers
- Not from the County Office/“they glance over us”
- Gratitude
- Positive compliments
- Positive feedback/open communication
- Making a difference
- Self-worth
- Tangible goodies, remembering birthdays and holidays
- Listening to ideas
- Parents
- At localized site trainings e.g., appreciation events
- Principal
- Trust
- Ongoing
- Praise
- Raise

- Peer to peer gratitude
- Feedback and gratitude are measures and create opportunities
- Acknowledgement is tangible
- Feedback leads to engagement
- Not “in it” for the money but for self-worth
- Ongoing equals sustainability
- Voice – if parents are involved, hear it from the parents, how will the parents know?
Summary

The purpose of this mixed method study was to identify and describe what paraeducators perceive as factors that lead to effective and sustainable engagement in special education special day classes. In addition, it was also the purpose of this study to identify what strategies are effective for encouraging discretionary effort as perceived by paraeducators.

This chapter presented the findings of the quantitative analysis of survey responses aligned to the four research questions. Of the 182 surveys sent out to eligible participants, 69 participants completed surveys. Additionally, the chapter included the presentation of the qualitative analysis of the study based on interviews with the study participants. Of the 20 participants who agreed to participate in a follow up interview only 10 interviews were conducted for the research.

Tables 6-14 are indicative of demographic information. The majority of survey respondents were female (89.3%) in the 25-34-year age group bracket followed by 21.9% of 55-64 year old’s accounting for the second largest group of responses. Most had some college level experience (42.8%) or had a BA degree (36.5%). The majority of participants listed 0-15 years of service with the organization (85.5%) and 75.8% considered themselves as a full-time employee. Paraeducators working with students diagnosed with multiple disabilities (34.3%), autism (26.6%) and intellectual disabilities (25%) was most prevalent as was students in the lower and upper elementary grade level (37.2%). The 80% of paraeducators who responded to the survey were based on a district site.

Table 15 supported Research Question 1: What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors which lead to effective engagement in special education special day
classes? The results of the survey showed that, commitment to job, passion, (mean score of 4.62), and giving maximum effort (mean score of 4.61) led to effective engagement.

Table 16 addressed Research Question 2: What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors which lead to sustainable engagement in special education special day classes? The top two factors from the survey were ownership of tasks in the classroom (mean score of 4.29) and being part of the decision-making process in the classroom” (mean score of 3.81). Although most respondents strongly agreed that connecting personal values to the values of the organization was a factor it rated the least significant factor in sustaining employee engagement. In addition, it was also highlighted employees best described in the 25-34 and closely followed by those in the 55-64 age bracket scored significantly in being actively engaged. Although, of those actively engaged, had served for less than 5 years as a paraeducator with the organization there was no correlation with those with 15+ years of service being less engaged. Ultimately, the 3 participants who identified themselves as being in the disengaged to actively disengaged level showed that they were not intrinsically motivated and agreed that: they did not feel a sense of ownership, were not part of the decision process, did not feel that their values connected with the organization, that they did not feel the organization had high levels of expectations of them or felt a sense of growth. Yet, they did agree that they were committed to their job, provided maximum effort, were thanked by their teacher and had constructive feedback for the principal. Therefore, supporting the literature that engagement is not related to motivation or job satisfaction (Kruse, 2013) and that organizations should be aware of individuals who do act, think and differently about their job (Marciano, 2010) because disengagement is negative to a workplace culture (Rath & Clifton, 2004) and transformational administrators are thus responsible for providing a platform to build capacity (Anderson, & Anderson, 2010, p.95-98; &
Boyatzis, 2009; & Ann, 2011; & Sinek, 2009; & Mendes, 2013). Furthermore, it was noted that paraeducators teaching students in grades 4 through 6 diagnosed with autism and those in grades K through 3 with multiple disabilities were identified as highly engaged employees.

The interview responses to these two research questions ranged from paraeducators perceiving themselves on a spectrum from helper to leader and by engaging with students and considering themselves as a professional led to effective engagement. Significant factors that sustained their engagement were listed as support from teachers, coworkers, administrators as well as trainings for new staff and substitutes.

Table 17 addressed Research Question 3: What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors which encourage discretionary effort in special education special day classes? The factors identified were: being part of an effective team (mean score of 4.22), and the teacher thanks me frequently for my commitment (mean score of 4.13). Being recognized by the organization for achievements was not considered highly as a factor for encouraging discretionary effort. The factors identified in the interview that paraeducators felt encouraged discretionary effort included: specific trainings on disabilities, more job openings to encourage them to get to the next step in their career, tangible rewards for school sites for perfect attendance, out of the box thinking and use of initiative, feedback from all staff and everyday appreciation, being intrinsically motivated, being entrusted to create lesson plans for summer school, devising art projects, designing weekly themes and implementing ideas, opportunities to advance their education in teaching by being given the experiences and opportunities in the classroom, having open communication in order to express opinions and explanations as well as having the teachers be open to their suggestions.
Table 1 delivered the top factors that addressed Research Question 4: What do special education paraeducators perceive as the most effective strategies to increase discretionary effort and sustain engagement in special education special day classes? The most effective strategies for increasing discretionary effort and sustaining engagement in special education day classes was being acknowledged by peers and having clear and fair duties. Strategies that were perceived as important but had a larger standard of deviation that resulted in being reported as not significant was participation in team building activities and being given supportive feedback. The most common measure and intervention indicated in the interviews was more acknowledgement including the administrators, gratitude, mutual support from the staff, various trainings alongside the classroom teacher, having the opportunity to learn from, and work with, support providers, changing certain policies such as health protocols to allow staff to support sick students more freely to avoid long term sickness and absence among classroom staff. One intervention that was shared by one participant was, “letting the instructional assistants that work with the students have more of a voice in IEP meetings because it's just not the teachers that work with them.” Only one participant brought up the idea of a pay raise because it’s a “tough job” although this was not of significance in the survey except in “additional comments” in which 4 male paraeducators and 1 female respondent had reported that the pay was not comparable to other districts of a similar position or years of experience. There was an element of contradiction between the survey responses and the interviews. On the one hand, the survey respondents overall felt, that appreciation from the County Office was insignificant and yet both in the additional comments section and the interviewees commented on the lack of appreciation from the organization. The respondents felt that most appreciation came from the teacher with positive feedback (which contradicts the survey results), verbal praise, tangible goodies,
remembering their birthdays and holidays, by listening to their ideas, however, one participant did reveal that her principal had empowered her with her appreciation. One participant stated her positivity with localized site trainings in which there were appreciation events specifically for paraeducators. Similarly, a paraeducator also remarked on parent appreciation as being a source of appreciation.

Chapter V offers a summary of the study’s findings, key conclusions, implications, and suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of the Study

The focus of this research was to acknowledge the increasing expectations and roles of paraeducators in special education as it will be necessary for administrators and teachers to know how to engage this group of silenced employees. The research that exists indicates that even though paraeducators have strong levels of commitment and are more likely to remain in their position until retirement their extensive tenure is more likely to lead to disengagement. In bridging the gap in literature between engagement, discretionary effort and paraeducator tenure by identifying the factors that lead to effective and sustainable engagement as well as suggesting measures and interventions to encourage discretionary effort, educational leaders will be able to transform workplace conditions (Marciano, 2010, p.61).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this mixed method study was to identify and describe what paraeducators perceive as factors that lead to effective and sustainable engagement in special education special day classes. In addition, it was also the purpose of this study to identify what strategies are effective for encouraging discretionary effort as perceived by paraeducators.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used in this study:

1. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors which lead to effective engagement in special education special day classes?

2. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors which lead to sustainable engagement in special education special day classes?
3. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors which encourage discretionary effort in special education special day classes?

4. What do special education paraeducators perceive as the most effective strategies to increase discretionary effort and sustain engagement in special education special day classes?

**Methodology**

In this mixed method study, surveys and interviews were used to investigate the perception of engagement and discretionary effort among special education paraeducators at a Southern California County Office. Surveys enabled the researcher to understand their perceptions of employment. Patten (2012) stated that “The purpose of surveys is to describe the attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of a population” (p.9). In addition, follow up semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow the researcher to gather a more in depth understanding of the impact of appreciating employee value by using “…detailed descriptions and analyses” (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010, p.325). A pilot test was conducted with a small sample of paraeducators employed in similar special education assignments to check for validity, errors and to ensure that questions were designed to elicit information pertinent to this study and research questions. Modifications were revised based on the advice of knowledgeable and professional experts in the field. Marciano’s (2010) engagement instrument (Figure 4) was utilized and combined with a Likert scale with a range of agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree and disagree based on the research questions. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) suggest that “Scales are used extensively in questionnaires because they allow fairly accurate assessments of beliefs or opinions. This is because many of our beliefs and opinions are thought of in terms of graduations” (p.198). The 37-question survey including 9 demographic
questions were completed at paraprofessional trainings to collate as many responses as possible. Consequently, the instrument was formatted as a written survey rather than an online survey as paraprofessionals have apparent limited access to the organization’s email and technology during trainings. The survey was created in a manner that was appropriate for paraprofessionals in terms of constraints of time and comprehensibility. The interviews provided the opportunity for paraprofessionals who had volunteered to participated following the initial survey, to feel more comfortable in being transparent with their responses, as interviews were conducted by telephone away from the workplace. The challenge is to ensure that transparency makes sense of the findings as it is the intention for those findings to be “useful” and “influential” (Bamberger, et al, 2012, p.152). Each interview was conducted individually and followed an interviewing protocol and norms for each interview. An interview agenda for the interviewees and a copy of the interview questions in advance were provided beforehand to inform participants of research intentions and objectives based on the research questions. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy.

**Population and Sample**

This research used paraeducators employed by a Southern California County Office of Education in the Student Programs and Services Division. This organization served 467 school sites totaling 23 school districts and had access to 20,294 certificated staff, 4,465 paraprofessionals and 9,031 other staff inclusive of administrators according to the County Office’s 2010-2011 statistics. For the purpose of this study only paraeducators who worked in the special education division were eligible to participate in the study.

There were 343 paraeducators employed in the special education division of the Southern California County Office of Education. The sample was a culturally homogeneous group.
indicative of similar focus, minimal variation and belonging to the same organization. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) further stated that, “information-rich key informants, groups, places or events to study…are chosen because they are likely to be knowledgeable and informative about the phenomena…” (p.326). This study further included participants representative of early childhood, preschool, lower elementary, upper elementary, middle school and high school serving students diagnosed with autism, deaf and hard of hearing, physically disabled, emotionally disturbed, visually impaired, trainable mentally handicapped and developmentally delayed. Using a free sample size calculator from Raosoft it was expected that this study required a sample size of 182 paraeducators.

Of the 182 surveys sent out to eligible participants, 55 surveys were returned, for a response rate of 30%. A reminder asking the principals to encourage participation from their paraeducators was given. This generated a further 15 responses, totaling 70 returned surveys, for a response rate of 37%. One survey was considered incomplete thus only 69 surveys were applied to this study. Additionally, of the 69 completed surveys, 20 participants agreed to participate in a follow up interview, for a response rate of 28%, however, only 10 interviews were conducted as possible interviewees for the research were unobtainable, had transferred position or had withdrawn their employment from the organization. It was also discovered that during the interviews no new pertinent topics had emerged thus revealing a point of saturation (Patten, 2012, p. 152). The majority of survey respondents were female (89.3%) in the 25-34-year age group bracket followed by 21.9% of 55-64 year old’s accounting for the second largest group of responses. Most had some college level experience (42.8%) or had a BA degree (36.5%). The majority of participants listed 0-15 years of service with the organization (85.5%) and 75.8% considered themselves as a full-time employee. Paraeducators working with students
diagnosed with multiple disabilities (34.3%), autism (26.6%) and intellectual disabilities (25%) was most prevalent as was students in the lower and elementary grade level (37.2%). The 80% of paraeducators who responded to the survey were based on a district site.

**Major Findings**

**Research Question 1:** What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors which lead to effective engagement in special education special day classes?

**Finding 1.** The survey results indicated that the factors, perceived by paraeducators employed in special education, which lead to effective engagement was their personal sense of commitment, passion and motivation to give maximum effort. This supports many theorists view including Maslow’s theory that when individuals are motivated intrinsically by doing what they like and knowing that they are making a real difference they are more likely to be engaged (Marciano, 2010, p.8).

**Finding 2.** There was a spectrum of answers in terms of how the interviewees defined their role with some describing their role as a helper, a nurturer and role model to some paraeducators including the descriptor of ‘teacher’ or going even further to describe their role as being a leader, indicative therefore, of a possible shift from the historical paradigm and, transitioning towards realization and respect of paraeducators as revered educational professionals. This supports the literature that teachers are expected to facilitate a paraeducator by “…chang[ing] their role from gracious host to engaged teaching partner (Giangreco, 2003, p.50).

**Finding 3.** The analysis from the interviews revealed that: being involved, being hands on, engaging students, working side by side, assisting the students, teaching the students, asking
questions, getting work done and being a professional by respecting everyone is how they demonstrated their engagement in this role.

**Research Question 2: What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors which lead to sustainable engagement in special education special day classes?**

**Finding 1.** The data from the survey showed that paraeducators perceived having a sense of ownership and decision-making in the class as factors that lead to sustainable engagement. This supports the literature that indicated that transformational leaders will need to provide opportunities for employees to have shared ownership in the decision-making process in order to empower employees and sustain engagement in their organization (Jobs, 2010; & Lencioni, 2002; Wilhelm, 2013; & Harvey and Drolet, 2006). Pink (2009) further supports these findings and adds that individuals need a sense of autonomy, mastery and purpose. Of less importance the respondents shared is having a connection between their own values and organizational values which is contrary to the literature, which poses that engaged employees have a stronger focus on organizational outcomes (Senge, Cambron-McCabe, & Luca & Smith & Dutton & Kleiner, 2012; McNally & Speak, 2011).

**Finding 2.** Paraeducators highlighted in the interview, the factors that would lead to sustaining their engagement was: having resources available to further their career in the field, such as becoming a more advanced paraeducator or teacher, workshops in different educational areas, having the same support system and being on the same page, having a teacher as role model and leader, parental support, administrative support, having access to materials for the classroom, specific trainings on specific disabilities and trainings for new instructional assistants and substitutes.
Research Question 3: What do special education paraeducators perceive as the factors which encourage discretionary effort in special education special day classes?

Finding 1. The survey and interview data both recognized that paraeducators perceived being part of an effective team and gratitude were factors that encouraged them to go “above and beyond” and encouraged discretionary effort in their employment. Specifically, the interview respondents mentioned feedback, rewards for use of initiative, specific trainings but overall everyday gratitude was perceived to be the most prominent factor. Gratitude is identified in the literature as being one of the most significant and transformational factors that sustains engagement because it creates positive emotions which directly connects with levels of engagement which is also an emotional construct (Rath & Clifton, 2004; McNally & Speak, 2011; & Kegan & Lahey, L, 2011).

Finding 2. Paraeducators who were given opportunities to plan lessons, art projects and weekly themes, share that this experience provided opportunities for them to advance their career. Where paraeducators could express their opinions and where teachers were open to suggestions, paraeducators were more likely to apply discretionary effort which supports literature that states a correlation between being respected and being valued as being critical in working effectively (Chopra et al, 2004, as cited in Giangreco et al, 2010, p.46).

Finding 3. Being trusted was a significant factor perceived by paraeducators whether it was being left in charge of the classroom, by implementing ideas or “figuring out different things” according to the interview data. Marciano (2010, p.103) confirms the need for autonomy so that individuals can make educated risks, seek novel solutions and learn from mistakes but teachers need to identify their paraeducators strengths and talents and administrators also need to provide the tools and resources for this to happen. Additionally, the concept of trust is consistent

**Research Question 4:** What do special education paraeducators perceive as the most effective strategies to increase discretionary effort and sustain engagement in special education special day classes?

**Finding 1.** The factors that paraeducators perceived as the most effective strategies to increase discretionary effort and sustain engagement were acknowledgement and being assigned clear and fair duties. The findings support the research that acknowledgement has the power to instill a sense of hope and trust in others, giving back to others, is meaningful, is positive, strengthens relationships, promotes self-control, is self-regulatory, affirmative and promotes lifelong success (Bono & Zakrzewski, as cited in McKibben 2013). Ultimately specific acknowledgement is the foundation of respect and respect is the driver of engagement, Marciano (2010).

**Finding 2.** The interview participants also added that attending the same trainings as the teachers, working with and being trained by support providers and being included in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings were factors that paraeducators perceived as increasing discretionary effort and sustaining engagement. The latter factor supports the literature that not only do paraeducators spend at least 50% of their time providing instruction in the absence of a teacher but special education students are also reported to spend approximately 80% of their time with paraeducators (Roblen, 1999 as cited in Ashbaker and Morgan, 2001, p.1; & Vase et al., 1982 as cited in Ashbaker and Morgan, 2001, p.2), implying that paraeducators would be valuable in participating in IEP team meetings. The coming together of unlike minds is beneficial in offering multiple perspectives according to Owens (2012). Further, what also needs
to be addressed is the conflicting literature that states not only are teachers not prepared or taught in how to supervise adults or are comfortable in giving away perceived power and control, they are being expected to use processes to implement it according to the Teacher Leader Standards.

**Unexpected Findings**

**Finding 1.** The survey data showed that the 47% of respondents who were actively engaged were described as being in the 25-34-year-old range although there was significant engagement found in individuals also described as being in the 55-64-year-old range. This is an unexpected finding as it supports the literature that future generations are beginning to shift in their mindset from organizational loyalty by sacrificing income for “feel good” activities (Marciano, 2010; Pink, 2009; Gallup, 2002; & Gardner, 2008).

**Finding 2.** The survey results revealed that employees with less than 5 years of service with the organization were the most actively engaged employees, however, this does not mean that those with 20+ service years were less likely to be engaged as they scored third highest in the analysis thus refuting the literature that the longer the tenure the less engaged employees are. This is an unexpected finding because literature states that 70% are not engaged in their work (Gallup (2002), Kruse (2013) and Marciano (2010)).

**Finding 3.** The 3 participants who had scored in the actively disengaged to disengaged levels had degrees and, one participant added they had a teaching credential. Although all three commented on their unwavering commitment, they all agreed that did not feel a sense of ownership, were not part of the decision process, did not feel that their values connected with the organization, that they did not feel the organization had high levels of expectations of them or felt a sense of growth. This is consistent with the literature that possibly they are in the wrong
place, that they are happy being unhappy and that their disengagement needs to be accounted so that transformational leaders can build their people up (Kruse, 2013; & Maxwell, 2007, p.128).

Finding 4. Additionally, the data disaggregated that paraeducators working with grades 4-6 with autism and students in grades K-3 with multiple disabilities were also highly engaged employees. This is a surprising finding because it is perceived that working with students diagnosed with significant challenges would more likely lead to less engagement.

Finding 5. The data echoed a solid commitment of paraeducators to support the common goal of successful student outcomes, which was reflected in the personal interviews. Participants expressed that having access to materials for the class, wanting more trainings and the willingness to attend the same trainings alongside their teacher were all good indicators of increasing their discretionary efforts and sustaining their engagement. This is an unexpected finding as paraeducators showed that they are wanting to take initiative and were willing to commit to lifelong learning to expand their skills, reflecting attitudes that paraeducators are not in their position for the money. This supports the literature that there is a shift in mindset among a new generation of employees (Laburm, 2011; Gardner, 2008 & Kruse, 2013).

Conclusions

Based on the literature review and the findings of this research, that despite extensive tenure, paraeducators were actively engaged in their employment however, there must be structures in place to enable, increase, and sustain, effective engagement and discretionary effort. The 3 factors that led to sustainable engagement and discretionary effort and ultimately assisted in successful student outcomes were respect, trust and acknowledgement. To be respected paraeducators need to be empowered. They desperately need a voice in the field and to be recognized not only as a profession but as educational professionals. Paraeducators need
opportunities for growth and to be connected with positive emotions. Trust is the foundation of respect and this encapsulates being part of the decision-making process and ownership in the class. Although some paraeducators have opportunities to develop thematic lesson plans under the direction of the teacher; there has to be an advancement of duties beyond that of creating arts and crafts lessons – opportunities that are more rigorous and challenging for paraeducators seeking to enter the educational field or are more experienced and thrive on advancing their knowledge and experience. Part of trust building also involves stepping back as teachers and offering paraeducators an informed space to make educated decisions. Furthermore, teachers who have previously worked in the capacity of a paraeducator have a unique perspective to build their teams abilities, growth mindset and potential by becoming effective roles models and teacher leaders for potential future teachers.

Not only do teachers need support in in developing as teacher leaders but there is a need for a realization to occur within the education community that ends demoralization of paraeducators as mere “helpers” and more as equal partners. For this transition to occur it is necessary to implement a solid support system for paraeducators that is based on a collaborative model. Paraeducators want and need to know they are making a real difference in the lives of a child and engaging with parents as part of a multi-disciplinary team enables this to be a reality.

A significant finding of the research highlights a desperate need for comprehensive professional development. The research highlighted that paraeducators are thirsty to continue their learning, but very limited training is available. There were many areas of need that paraeducators identified: paraeducators receiving training prior to highly challenging assignments, training for substitutes, training in many aspects of job development/career
advancement to specific training on disabilities and classroom management. Paraeducators also stated the need for ongoing training throughout the year.

When paraeducators are part of an effective team, receive positive feedback, are acknowledged for their initiative, have opportunities to communicate ideas, implement ideas, problem solve and when teachers are open to their suggestions, it is then that paraeducators will feel the true sense of acknowledgement and gratitude. Figure 5 coagulates both the literature and research findings.
Figure 5. A Synthesis of Factors From the Literature and This Study That Leads to Sustainable Engagement and Discretionary Effort.

Implications for Action

Based on the results from the survey, interviews, and the conclusions regarding paraeducators perceptions of sustainable engagement and increasing discretionary effort in special education special day classes, the following implications are recommended to be put into action by educational leaders, administrators, teachers and educational systems:

1. Paraeducators must have a voice. To be heard paraeducators must be provided a seat at the table and given opportunities to partake in educational decisions. It must be mandated therefore, that a paraeducator advisory group is executed at both the school and district level.
2. Paraeducators need self-worth and to know that they are making a difference in the lives of students with special needs. In order for them to realize this, teachers need to be able to engage, trust and empower paraeducators as equal partners by facilitating opportunities for ownership, decision making opportunities, to work alongside support providers, to be open to suggestions regardless of tenure, experience or age and to offer feedback. Parents must be included in providing feedback and acknowledgement. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers not only set the expectation of trust but are also open to sharing with families the extent of paraeducator engagement and involvement in each student’s educational life.

3. Transformational leaders must begin to train teachers across the district in how to collaborate with staff and build teams using the Teacher Leader Standards and Teacher Performance Expectations as the foundation. Additionally, teachers must also receive coaching and training on an ongoing basis to improve capabilities as an effective leader and role model for paraeducators.

4. Districts must incorporate into Professional Learning Communities a component for sharing best practices of innovative practices led by paraeducators and showcase examples at staff meetings through various mediums. For example, sharing through video and data collated over the course of the school year how a paraeducator improved the posture of a non-ambulatory student by inventing a foot stool for use at a school desk.

5. Paraeducators must be provided with trainings alongside classroom teachers to ensure consistency across the district in the areas of the specific disabilities they are working with, instructional strategies, evidence-based practices, curriculum, classroom management and behavioral strategies. Furthermore, paraeducators must be given one
afternoon a month as part of ongoing supportive measures to collaborate with their peers, sharing their expertise and challenges in the classroom.

6. Administrators must make available, resources, trainings and provide tools to enable paraeducators to receive specific trainings on the student population they are serving alongside their classroom teacher, provide access and support for using materials for the classroom, support paraeducators in the classroom and to acknowledge initiative. Therefore, school districts must create job-alsike cohorts for paraeducators to increase their knowledge and for opportunities to earn credits towards a tiered instructional certificate program to help increase skills and responsibilities by being recognized as lead paraeducators for instance.

7. Administrators must also identify their role in supporting teachers and paraeducator collaboration and hold accountable paraeducators who are identified as being disengaged by building capacity and structures and not give in to mediocrity. Administrators can achieve this by facilitating team building exercises to build trust, be more visible in classrooms, actively listen and asking questions to get to know support staff, creating a safe place for honest conversations to occur and providing opportunities for paraeducators to increase and utilize their skill set. Teachers should also be accountable for paraeducators not exceeding standards as they are accountable for the students in the class on performance evaluations. Administrators must also hold paraeducators accountable for their actions by transferring and/or terminating employment of individuals who fail to make improvement on their actions based upon a periodic team review.
8. Newly hired paraeducators must undergo specific trainings alongside the teacher as part of the orientation process prior to their assignment in the classroom so that they are clear on expectations, duties and the student population. Districts must provide trainings therefore, as part of the orientation process and identify a “best-fit” placement.

9. Substitute paraeducators must undergo specific trainings prior to classroom assignment thus alleviating unnecessary responsibilities on full time paraeducators in a teacher absence. Districts must create workshops for substitutes that would allow them to identify classrooms that would be appropriate to their skill set and interest. Additionally, substitutes would need to shadow permanent employees as part of the training before taking on an assignment. Incorporating an element of earning credits towards more assignments by completing workshops would encourage sincere substitutes and also a tiered level of experienced substitutes would allow for more consistency in classrooms.

10. Teacher credentialing programs must incorporate into their programs strategies on effective teamwork, how to collaborate with adults in the classroom, strategies to best support and utilize paraeducators and to positively acknowledge paraeducators as a profession; not just provide information on their roles and responsibilities. Moreover, colleges of education must seize the opportunity and seek to create a comprehensive and rigorous paraeducator certificate program that is aligned and in partnership with local school districts to support and empower paraeducators and potential future teachers.

11. Educational leaders must reconsider the structures of special education by acknowledging the importance of paraeducator work and their role as part of the multi-disciplinary team including allowing their voice in Individualized Education Plan meetings.
12. Educational leaders must also review the current structures in place that enable the most significantly challenged students to receive the most instruction from non-credentialed staff. Paraeducators and teachers need to have more time to work together with students instead of increasing more testing and paperwork which detracts highly qualified personnel from working with students effectively.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Based on the literature and research findings there are several recommendations that should be done to expand the research.

1. Conduct a qualitative study to examine what makes paraeducators more actively engaged in elementary grade classes where students are diagnosed with autism and multiple disabilities.
2. Replicate this study with other school districts with special education departments.
3. Replicate this study nationally with paraeducators in both general education and special education.
4. Conduct a case study to compare high levels of paraeducator engagement and low levels of engagement.
5. Conduct a longitudinal study on the same participants who are actively engaged presently and see if their perception changes over time.
6. Conduct a case study to see if implementing implied actions sustains levels of engagement and increases discretionary effort.

**Concluding Remarks and Reflections**

“I'm very pleased to see someone is paying attention. Paraeducators desperately need a voice in our field” (S#43). This is the wake-up call that the education field needs to hear. As a
teacher in the trenches I know first-hand the disconnect that can occur and the many observations and discussions in the field of inequities and imbalance. Yet there are countless individuals who exceed standards, and complete tasks in an outstanding manner by using their skills and talents to be innovative. Quite simply these employees are working tirelessly, relentlessly and creatively to make a difference in the lives of some of the most profoundly challenging student populations. Paraeducators are seeking to be respected, trusted and acknowledged; most of all they are wanting to know they truly are making a difference. This work force is not “in it” for financial gain, neither are they seeking it, but the passion to make a difference and they need to feel that self-worth to sustain their engagement and increase discretionary effort. There is some hope on the horizon with the introduction of the California Classified to Classroom – Pipeline to Teaching (C3P2T), California Dashboard and the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which was signed into effect in 2015 by the Obama Administration. Not only are districts being driven to engage paraeducators in the planning process with collaboration and consultation, but parents now have the right to know if instruction is being provided by paraeducators. This can create a transformational opportunity for schools and districts to overhaul previous perceptions of paraeducators and issues over qualifications if they do not re-write their old ways. Have districts considered the benefits of being able to tell parents when they are questioned that their significantly challenged child is being taught by a paraeducator that their paraeducators hold a credible certificate in the field? One only has to recall the decision of the Supreme Court in Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District in 2017 that ruled in favor of the special education student that, “school districts must give students with disabilities the chance to make meaningful, “appropriately ambitious” progress.” Having a staunch workforce behind you is one less costly battle.
Teachers may have the pedagogy but many lack the real-life experience, especially young teachers who enter the profession. Some even lack the skills in knowing how to work with adults or what a team really is, and this is not necessarily their fault. It’s a system wide flaw that needs to be corrected. Teachers need to be open to suggestions from their counterparts, I know I have listened and implemented many ideas from paraeducators especially those who have a personal connection to the disability and have learned more from them than any text book could deliver. I have also worked in programs in which I have observed paraeducators undergo intense monthly training modules alongside the teacher, participated in team building trainings and have witnessed the positive impact it has on student outcomes. I have also observed ineffective measures and strategies that have failed to acknowledge trainings and the power of the para and this has had an impact on students – negatively. When I led paraeducator trainings and implemented ‘Project Innovate – Inspiring Innovative Aids’ © I was witness to some amazing innovative practices that were being conducted in classrooms that administrators and parents did not realize. This public acknowledgement of specific wonders that non-credential personnel were implementing with profound populations was impressive and applaudable. For the paraeducators it was a step in the right direction to getting their voice heard and to be recognized as a professional in an educational profession. Teachers should be proud of their staff and not to be afraid to give away their power, they must realize their power is in extrapolating leadership qualities in others and opening their doors of transformational change and empowerment. Teachers should not manage their classrooms but lead and facilitate by being change agents and negotiators of change. Maybe we need to apply principles from other industries such as the military and apply them to education. Ann Dunwoody is the first female Four-Star General in United States history and she offers several principles. First, don’t just meet standards, exceed
them. Second, never walk by a mistake. Third, what you do sets the tone for others. Fourth, do the right thing for the right reason. Fifth, address complexity by including diverse perspectives and lastly, do routine things in an outstanding manner. Just like when IEP meetings are held and paraeducators are not sitting at a seat at the table, parents miss a very unique perspective of their child. Ultimately, the culture that is created in any classroom will supersede. Detractors will argue that paraeducators are union employees and will not work beyond contract times regardless and not to be naïve but there are some paraeducators that do keep their eyes on the clock. However, there are so many more that will do whatever it takes and that is when the positive culture of the classroom team will always supersede. This supports the finding that people want to feel good; it’s not about the money. This limited research study focused on bridging the gap in literature between engagement and discretionary effort among paraeducators in special education special day classes. The purpose of this mixed method study was to identify and describe what paraeducators perceived as factors that led to effective and sustainable engagement in special education and to identify what strategies were effective for encouraging discretionary effort. The interest in this research stemmed from a lack of research on paraeducators in education and the assumption that the longer the tenure of an employee the more likely they are to be less engaged. According to my research paraeducators are selfless and are eager to be considered a teaching partner given the effective strategies and tools to sustain engagement and empower them. By providing these necessary supports the benefits for student outcomes and educational organizations are immense because positive workplace conditions create positive workplace culture. This study can be used to inform the education field on how transformational leaders can transform special education, by elevating special education paraeducators, providing a voice for paraeducators and providing strategies that sustain
engagement and increase discretionary effort. If not, special education will continue to have a bleak outlook. The question is how prepared and how willing are educational systems, to transform their philosophies, in discovering the sweet spot between motivation and capability?
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APPENDIX A APPROVAL LETTER

Tuesday, October 20, 2015

To whom it may concern;

Please accept this letter as written permission for Gillian A Schneider to use my employee engagement instrument. The instrument will be used as part of her research on engagement of special education paraeducators, towards completion of her Dissertation.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Dr. Paul Marciano
120 Main Street, Suite #1
Flemington, NJ 08822
**APPENDIX B SURVEY**

**Demographic Questions**

Directions: Read each question, indicate your answer by circling the appropriate response. **Clearly choose one response and answer all questions.** Completed survey enables you to be entered into a $25 gift card raffle (please add a contact number to be eligible for prize)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is your gender?</td>
<td>Which of these best describes your age group?</td>
<td>Which of these best describes your current educational attainment (if you are currently working toward completion of a graduate degree please specify below in 'other')</td>
<td>How many years have you been with RCOE?</td>
<td>How many years have you worked as a paraeducator for RCOE?</td>
<td>Do you work full time or part time?</td>
<td>Which of these best describes the students you serve?</td>
<td>Which of these best describes the grade level of students?</td>
<td>Are you located on a district campus?</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 – Male</td>
<td>1 – Under 21</td>
<td>1 – High School or GED</td>
<td>1 – 0-2 years</td>
<td>1 – Full time</td>
<td>1 – Autism</td>
<td>1 – Early Childhood</td>
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<td>2 – Female</td>
<td>2 – 21-24 years</td>
<td>2 – Some college</td>
<td>2 – 3-5 years</td>
<td>2 – Part time</td>
<td>2 – Deaf and Hard of Hearing</td>
<td>2 – Preschool</td>
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<td>3 – 25 – 34</td>
<td>3 – 6-10 years</td>
<td>3 – Associate’s Degree</td>
<td>3 – 6 –10 years</td>
<td>3 – Physically Disabled</td>
<td>3 – Lower Elementary (K-3)</td>
<td>3 – Other (please specify)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 – 35 – 44</td>
<td>4 – 11-14 years</td>
<td>4 – Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>4 – 11 – 14 years</td>
<td>4 – Emotionally Disturbed</td>
<td>4 – Upper Elementary (4-6)</td>
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<td>5 – 45 -54</td>
<td>5 – 15-19 years</td>
<td>5 – Master’s Degree</td>
<td>5 – 15 – 19 years</td>
<td>5 – Visually Impaired</td>
<td>5 – Middle School</td>
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<td>6 – 55 – 64</td>
<td>6 – Over 20 years</td>
<td>6 – Doctoral Degree</td>
<td>6 – Over 20 years</td>
<td>6 – Intellectually Disabled</td>
<td>6 – High School</td>
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<td>7 – 65 and older</td>
<td>*Other</td>
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<td>7 – Developmentally Delayed</td>
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<td>*Other</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Directions: Read each statement, indicate how strongly you disagree or agree with each statement by placing an “X” in the appropriate box. Clearly choose and mark only one box.

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<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>1</td>
<td>I am passionate about what I do</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>I find my work intrinsically motivating</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Outside of work I think about how I could be more productive and effective in my job</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>I get absorbed in my work and lose track of time</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>My work energizes me</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Time passes quickly while I am working</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>I am committed to my job</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>I find myself extremely focused and engaged in work</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I find my work interesting</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>I always give maximum effort in my job</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>I am given ownership of tasks in the classroom</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I am part of the decision making process in the classroom</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>I feel appreciated for the work I do</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>The organization connects my personal values with the values of the organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>The work conditions are favorable</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>I am part of an effective team</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>I am given opportunities to utilize my own skills and talents in the classroom</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>The organization has high expectations of me</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>I am given opportunities to grow within the organization</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>The organization recognizes my achievements in the classroom</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>The teacher thanks me frequently for my commitment</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Directions:
Read each statement, indicate how strongly you disagree or agree with each statement by placing an “X” in the appropriate box. Clearly choose and mark only one box.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22. My peers acknowledge me</td>
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<td>23. I am given supportive feedback from my teacher</td>
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<td>24. I am given supportive feedback from my supervisor</td>
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<td>25. The duties assigned to me in the classroom are clear and fair</td>
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<td>26. I participate in team building activities frequently</td>
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<td>27. I intend to continue in this position</td>
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<td>28. I intend to keep my employment with the organization</td>
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</table>

If you have further comments please add them below:

---

I am willing to participate in a follow up interview and provide the following contact information (interviews are anonymous and participants are eligible to participate in an additional $25 gift card raffle):

Contact number for prize eligibility:

---

Thank You!
# Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How do you define your role?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How do you demonstrate your engagement in your role as a paraeducator?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What kinds of support are necessary to sustain your employment in special education?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What kinds of opportunities would encourage you to go “above and beyond” in your position?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. In what ways are you given opportunities to make decisions, be creative and be part of the team?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What measures and interventions could the County Office take to make you feel empowered in your role as a paraeducator?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. How are you appreciated for your contributions to the classroom and to the County Office?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL GUIDE

STUDY: The Unsung Heroes and Silent Partners of the Educational World

Welcome:

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research study. I appreciate your time to share your experiences of employee engagement in your capacity.

Purpose:

It is hoped that this research will add to the educational field and to the County Office of Education by acknowledging the value of Paraeducators in Special Education and best practices to sustain engagement.

Confidentiality:

Before we begin the interview, I would like to review the Informed Consent and Research Participant’s Bill of Rights. The Consent to Participate in the research outlines the procedures. Please read it carefully before signing. Just to reiterate, this semi-structured interview is voluntary, there are no known risks, you can withdraw at any time without ramification. If you do please let me know and the interview and all its data will be destroyed.

In addition, I will be digitally recording the interview and then it will be transcribed and analyzed. All of your responses and the data collected will be confidential and any personal identifiers such as name, worksite etc. will be uniquely coded and/or removed. All transcriptions will remain in a locked cabinet and stored on my personal computer. Digital recordings will be deleted permanently once transcription has been completed.
The interview will last approximately 30 minutes.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

**Conclusion:**

Again, thank you for your time in contributing to this research study. Should you have any questions regarding the interview or research please do not hesitate to contact me at ….
APPENDIX E

INFORMATIONAL LETTER FOR RESEARCH SUBJECTS

Dear Study Participant:

I am a Doctoral student at Brandman University conducting a research study on what paraeducators perceive as factors that lead to effective and sustainable engagement in special education special day classes. In addition, this study aims to identify what strategies are effective for encouraging discretionary effort as perceived by paraeducators.

I am asking your assistance in the study by participating in a short survey which will take approximately 15 minutes. In addition, I am also seeking participants who will also be willing to participate in a short follow up telephone interview which will take from 30 minutes to 60 minutes at a time convenient for you. This is also anonymous, and you may be assured that it will be completely confidential. No supervisor will have access to the interview information. You will be free to stop the interview and withdraw from the study at any time. All information will remain in locked files accessible only to the researchers. This is an anonymous survey and interview, however, if you wish to be eligible for a $25 gift card raffle as compensation for your time you will need to include contact information. No names will be attached to any notes or records from the interview in the study.

The research director, Gillian Schneider, is available at …., to answer any questions you may have. Your participation would be greatly valued.

Sincerely,

Gillian Schneider, Brandman University Doctoral Student
APPENDIX F

PARTICIPANT CONSENT

INFORMATION ABOUT: The Unsung Heroes and Silent Partners of the Educational World

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY
16355 LAGUNA CANYON ROAD
IRVINE,
CA 92618

RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: Gillian Schneider

PURPOSE OF STUDY: The purpose of this study is to identify and describe what paraeducators perceive as factors that lead to effective and sustainable engagement in special education special day classes. In addition, it is the purpose of this study to identify what strategies are effective for encouraging discretionary effort as perceived by paraeducators.

This study will fill in the gap in the research regarding tenure of paraeducators and levels of engagement in special day classes. The results of this study may assist districts in the design of effective measures and interventions for school leaders charged with bringing about transformational change in schools to meet the demands of 21st century learners by empowering paraeducators. This study may also provide much needed information and data to school leadership regarding the factors that impact the engagement of paraeducators.

By participating in this study, I agree to participate in a survey and possibly a one-on-one interview. The paper survey will take about 15 minutes and will be completed in person.
during a staff training. The one-on-one interview will last between 30 – 60 minutes and will be conducted by phone.

I understand that:

a) There are minimal risks associated with participating in this research. I understand that the Investigator will protect my confidentiality by keeping the identifying codes and research materials in a locked file drawer that is available only to the researcher.

b) The possible benefit of this study to me is that my input may help add to the research regarding measures and interventions and the impact sustaining engagement paraeducators has. The findings will be available to me at the conclusion of the study and will provide new insights about tenure and engagement in which I participated. I understand that I have the opportunity to be compensated for my participation if I am willing to provide contact information.

c) Any questions I have concerning my participation in this study will be answered by Gillian Schneider. She can be reached by email at … or by phone at …

d) My participation in this research study is voluntary. I may decide to not participate in the study and I can withdraw at any time. I can also decide not to answer particular questions during the interview if I so choose. I understand that I may refuse to participate or may withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. Also, the Investigator may stop the study at any time.

e) No information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent and that all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. If the study design or the use of the data is to be changed, I will be so informed, and my consent re-obtained. I understand that if I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the
study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Executive
Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, at 16355 Laguna Canyon
Road, Irvine, CA 92618, (949) 341-7641.

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the “Research Participant’s
Bill of Rights.” I have read the above and understand it and hereby consent to the
procedure(s) set forth.

________________________________________
Signature of Participant or Responsible Party

________________________________________
Signature of Principal Investigator

________________________________________
Date