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Working with Paraprofessionals

To make the most of paraprofessional support, teachers must change their role from gracious host to engaged teaching partner.

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Relief—that is how many teachers describe their initial reaction after learning that a paraprofessional will support a student with a disability in their class. Such help is generally a welcome prospect for the overworked classroom teacher. "The paraprofessional and special educator will handle most of the planning, adapting, supervision, and instruction," many teachers think to themselves. "All I need to do is be a gracious host." After all, other students in the classroom have special needs of their own that require the teacher's time and attention. And students with identified disabilities—autism, developmental delays, multiple disabilities, or behavior disorders, for example—have more intensive needs associated with those disabilities.

Providing paraprofessional support for a student with a disability may seem like an obvious way to facilitate inclusion in the general education classroom. Paraprofessional support can ensure that students with disabilities receive an appropriate level of attention and prevent these students from "falling through the cracks"—both worthy aims. Apparently many school leaders agree. The number of special education paraprofessionals has increased dramatically over the past 15 years, coinciding with greater access to general education classes for students with a wider range of disabilities.

Although schools undoubtedly provide paraprofessional support with the best of intentions and in the belief that it will help students, little evidence suggests that students do as well or better in school, academically or socially, when they are taught by paraprofessionals (Gerber, Finn, Achilles, & Boyd-Zaharias, 2001; Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001; Jones & Bender, 1993). Sometimes relying on paraprofessionals may feel effective because it relieves, distributes, or shifts responsibility for educating a student with specialized needs, but educators should not confuse this outcome with effectiveness for students. Effective inclusion of students with disabilities requires concerted effort and collaboration among the Individualized Education

Program team: teachers, special educators, families, and administrators (Doyle, 2002; French, 2003; Gerlach, 2001), and sometimes this team can benefit from carefully designed paraprofessional support.

Teacher Engagement

The extent and nature of interaction between a classroom teacher and his or her students who have disabilities—or *teacher engagement*—is one of the most important contributors to the success of general education placements for students with disabilities (Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2001). Teachers who are instructionally engaged with students with disabilities express responsibility for educating all students in their class, regardless of disability. They know the functioning levels and anticipated learning outcomes of all of their students. They instruct and communicate directly with students who have disabilities. They collaborate and participate in instructional decision making with special educators and paraprofessionals. They direct the work of paraprofessionals in their classroom—for example, planning lessons that match the skill level of the paraprofessional. They mentor paraprofessionals and maintain an instructional dialogue with them, and they phase out paraprofessional support when their students no longer need it.

Unfortunately, teachers often become less engaged with students who have disabilities when those students receive paraprofessional support. Given the importance of teacher engagement to the success of inclusive education opportunities for students with disabilities, educators must take care not to inadvertently compromise that engagement. The most obvious points to consider include

- Hiring the most talented, caring, and competent paraprofessionals available;
- Demonstrating appreciation and respect for their work by treating them well;
- Orienting them to the school, classroom, and students;
- Clarifying their roles and assigning them tasks that align with their skills;
- Providing initial and ongoing training that matches their roles;
- Giving them professionally prepared plans to follow;
- Directing their work through ongoing, supportive supervision; and
- Providing opportunities for them to be contributing team members.

Beyond these basic points, however, are several considerations for educators who hope to direct paraprofessional support that facilitates—rather than compromises—both the inclusion of students with disabilities and teacher engagement with these students (Giangreco & Doyle, 2002; Giangreco et al., 2001; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997; Riggs & Mueller, 2001).

The Training Trap

The training trap is twofold. First, teachers often relinquish instruction of students with disabilities because they assume that paraprofessionals are specially trained to work with such students. But the literature suggests that many paraprofessionals continue to be undertrained or untrained. In other words, students with disabilities—usually the students with the greatest learning challenges in the classroom—often receive their primary or exclusive instruction and support from the least qualified staff members. Although some paraprofessionals are highly educated, and recent federal legislation requires others (for example, those working in Title I environments) to be more educated, most have far less education, skill, or experience than certified classroom teachers—especially when it comes to curriculum and instruction.

The second part of the training trap involves teacher engagement. Unfortunately, once paraprofessionals receive virtually any amount of training—at best, usually equivalent to a single college-level course—many teachers feel even more justified in relinquishing instructional responsibilities to them. These teachers, many of whom have graduate degrees and years of experience, are uncomfortable instructing students with disabilities because they are "not trained." Nevertheless, they feel confident handing over the bulk of such instruction to a paraprofessional. Although paraprofessional training certainly is a step in the right direction, it is typically insufficient to prepare paraprofessionals to perform the instructional duties that classroom teachers increasingly ask of them. Most teachers are far better trained to educate a student with a disability than are most paraprofessionals.

Although teachers and special educators can certainly benefit from training in such areas as modifying curriculum and differentiating instruction for mixed-ability groups, teachers should not underestimate the importance of their existing skills and repertoire for educating students with disabilities. The principles of teaching and learning do not change when a student is labeled with a disability. Teachers can be

successful by stretching, individualizing, and intensifying many of the same approaches that they have used for years.

The Role of Special Educators

Teachers often assume that paraprofessionals operate from plans prepared by a special educator, which is not always the case. Across the United States, special educators are among the most thinly stretched professional educators—especially those working in inclusive schools. The special educator's job is a difficult one: extensive paperwork, large caseloads of students with a wide range of disabilities, and numerous teachers and paraprofessionals with whom to collaborate at multiple grade levels. Many competent, caring special educators have difficulty delivering all that is expected of them. Improving the working conditions of special educators is vital to ensuring that students with disabilities receive appropriate education services and that teachers and paraprofessionals have necessary supports. Inadequate working conditions for too many capable yet overwhelmed special educators can lead to inappropriate autonomy for paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals may be left to make curricular and instructional decisions on their own, often without adequate training, professionally prepared lessons, sufficient knowledge of the student's individualized plan, or supervision.

But even if teachers are fortunate enough to work with special educators who have adequate working conditions and work effectively with paraprofessionals, they should not relinquish instructional responsibilities to the paraprofessionals assigned to their classrooms. Effectively educating students with disabilities who are striving to meet individual learning outcomes (for example, Individualized Education Program goals) while participating in the general education curriculum requires the integral involvement of the classroom teacher—who is likely to be the only certified educator in the classroom throughout the day—in the teaching team.

Realistic Expectations

The 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act allow for appropriately trained and supervised paraprofessionals to assist in providing special education under the direction of qualified professionals. Deciding what constitutes appropriate training and supervision requires clarity about the scope of a paraprofessional's duties. Recent literature has raised questions about whether educators are asking too much of paraprofessionals in the classroom, given their skills and typically low levels of compensation.

For example, imagine a paraprofessional asked to observe a large group lesson and then follow up with a student who has a disability by reteaching the lesson to match the student's needs, adapting the teacher's assignment, or assisting with homework—all accomplished "on the fly." These would be high-level curricular and instructional tasks for an experienced special educator, much less a paraprofessional. Particularly at the middle and high school levels, the well-meaning paraprofessional often faces academic content that he or she may have found challenging as a student. We don't expect secondary school teachers to be fluent across the curriculum—yet that is exactly what we ask of paraprofessionals as they move between several academic disciplines. Consequently, many paraprofessionals feel pressured to try to instruct students with disabilities in the regular classroom, even when they are unsure of the intended learning outcomes. They reteach, they complete assignments, and they do homework for these students for fear that they will be perceived as not doing their job; a flurry of activity may take place without quality instruction or genuine learning.

Instead, the classroom teacher, special educator, and paraprofessional should meet to plan how to include the student with a disability in group lessons and to identify individually appropriate learning outcomes that are clearly understood by all team members. Next, the teacher and special educator can determine the student's need for differentiated expectations, instruction, materials, and assignments, as well as ways in which the paraprofessional can help implement such differentiation. Educators may also consider modifying their school's service delivery practices so that paraprofessionals, especially in secondary schools, are assigned to a limited number of subjects in which they can gain content proficiency.

Unintended Effects

Paraprofessional supports can sometimes have unintended, undesirable effects (see *Would It Be OK . . . ?*). Enter an inclusive classroom, for example, and you may easily identify the student with a disability—seated on the periphery of the classroom with a paraprofessional close by his or her side. Separating students with disabilities within the classroom isolates them from their peers and may encourage insular relationships between these students and the paraprofessionals assigned to them. Overdependence on paraprofessionals can adversely affect the social and academic growth of students with disabilities, resulting in their inadequate instruction

and peer interactions. In some cases, students with disabilities feel stigmatized because they receive targeted paraprofessional support. For students with behavior problems, the paraprofessional support put in place to assist them may actually provoke behavioral outbursts.

Would It Be OK . . . ?

Sometimes it is difficult to know when providing paraprofessional support is appropriate and when it might cause problems. When in doubt, team members should ask themselves, *Would this situation be acceptable if the student didn't have a disability?* Consider the following examples:

- A paraprofessional provides the student's primary literacy instruction.
- The student is removed from class activities at the discretion of the paraprofessional rather than the teacher.
- The student spends 80 percent or more of his or her time with a paraprofessional.
- The student spends the majority of his or her social time (lunch, recess) with a paraprofessional rather than with classmates.
- The paraprofessional, rather than the teacher or special educator, makes the majority of day-to-day curricular and instructional decisions affecting the student.

These examples highlight a double standard: Most educators would consider these situations unacceptable for students without disabilities, yet these situations occur all too frequently for those with disabilities.

Team members can minimize the unintended, undesirable effects of paraprofessional support by seating students with disabilities in the midst of the class, among their classmates—encouraging ongoing access to both teacher and peers—and by avoiding unnecessarily close proximity to the paraprofessional. In addition, team members can include students with disabilities in determining the nature and extent of the paraprofessional support that they need. They can use paraprofessionals for whole-class support, or assign them in ways that

free up the teacher to spend time with students who have disabilities. Finally, team members can establish a classroom culture that encourages peer-to-peer support through such strategies as cooperative learning groups and peer tutoring.

Alternative Supports

Although carefully designed paraprofessional supports will continue to play a valuable role in the education of students with disabilities, teams should explore alternative supports that facilitate increased teacher engagement with these students. Such alternatives might include creating smaller classes, training teachers to differentiate instruction and teach mixed-ability groups, providing peer supports, encouraging coteaching with a special educator, and improving working conditions—for example, reducing caseloads—for special educators.

Whether the student with disabilities is pursuing the bulk of the grade-level curriculum with instructional accommodations or a substantively individualized set of learning outcomes, one fact is certain: He or she needs an engaged teacher. Teacher engagement is not just important for students with disabilities. Teachers who are highly engaged with students who have disabilities are poised to improve their overall teaching. Students with disabilities provide teachers with opportunities to model many characteristics that we seek to foster in all students: an appreciation for human diversity and the unique value of each person, the ability to respond to change, and a talent for creative problem solving. When teachers embrace the challenge of making the classroom a welcoming and instructionally vibrant place for all of their students, they often report that it has transformed and invigorated their teaching.

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