

Paraprofessionals and Students With Visual Impairments: Potential Pitfalls and Solutions

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ABSTRACT: The use of paraprofessionals in all areas of special education has grown tremendously in the past decade (N. French, 2003). For the student with a visual impairment in the general education classroom to receive 1-to-1 assistance from a paraprofessional has become almost automatic (E. Forster & C. Holbrook, 2005). Although well-intentioned, this 1-to-1 assistance has had negative effects on the educational and social independence of students. The author discusses the pros and cons of assigning paraprofessionals to work in the general education classroom with students who are visually impaired and presents training, supervision, and peer support models as potential solutions to the problems that may arise from overreliance on paraprofessionals. The author also provides resources for further information.

KEYWORDS: paraprofessionals in education, teaching children with visual impairments

Paraprofessionals in education are known by many titles, including *para-educators*, *educational assistants*, *instructional aides*, and *teacher assistants*. Their job is to assist students with disabilities, under the supervision of a trained educator. This practice follows the medical field's shift to using lesser-trained assistants to carry out specific duties outside the presence of a physician (French, 2003). Increasing responsibilities and demands on teachers have led school districts to use individuals who have less training than teachers have to perform specific support services (Pickett, 2003).

Peers begin to address the adult rather than the student as the student may or may not give a response, and the adult typically answers for the student who is visually impaired. Often, the student with visual impairment is hesitant to participate without paraprofessional direction, prompting, or cuing. This may lead to a loss of personal control because the paraprofessional may do so much for a student that the student does not make choices that are typical for other students. As a result, the student who is visually impaired may develop learned helplessness and no longer be able to make choices.

In rural areas it is not uncommon to have the same paraprofessional for many years. This can create difficulties with “ownership” that affect the willingness of the classroom teacher to take initiative in working with the student with a visual impairment. There is also the risk that the emotional attachment between child and adult will interfere with the blind or visually impaired student’s motivation to interact with peers.

Potential Solutions

Researchers, including Giangreco et al. (2004) and French (2003), have studied ways to improve paraprofessional supports for students with disabilities. School administrators should examine these findings when considering the use of paraprofessionals with students who are visually impaired. Researchers have suggested addressing the issues of training, role definition and clarification, and supervision as key to improving the performance of paraprofessionals. Educators need to do a better job of determining when paraprofessional supports are needed and are appropriate. Resources exist to help educational teams work through these challenges (see Appendix A).

Provide Training

Research conducted by French (2001) and Lasater, Johnson, and Fitzgerald (2000) has consistently identified the need for paraprofessional training. The role of the paraprofessional has become so important that the Council for Exceptional Children (2004) identified 10 areas of specialized training of paraprofessionals. These are (a) foundations of special education, (b) development and characteristics of learners, (c) individual learning differences, (d) instructional strategies, (e) learning environments and social interactions, (f) language, (g) instructional planning, (h) assessment, (i) professional and ethical practice, and (j) collaboration. Paraprofessionals want training specific

to the students with whom they work, but in the past, incentives for them to get this training have not existed (Pickett, 2003).

To address this training issue, school districts would benefit from providing training as part of a thorough professional development system on regularly scheduled in-service days, on topics that are important to paraprofessionals and are competency based. School districts need to use good trainers, personalize the curriculum, provide orientation to newly hired employees, and ensure that teachers and principals are aware of the content of the paraprofessional training (Russotti & Shaw, 2001).

Provide Supervision

Supervision refers to directing the work of paraprofessionals because teachers do not hire, fire, or conduct performance evaluations. Those functions are traditionally the responsibility of administrators, who must therefore have a comprehensive understanding of the pros and cons of paraprofessionals in the classroom and be creative problem solvers in structuring the implementation of this educational model.

Teachers are critical to directing the work that paraprofessionals do with students. Increasingly, legislation has strengthened the role of teachers in providing this type of instructional supervision to paraprofessionals to ensure that paraprofessionals are assisting and supporting teachers in facilitating student learning (Keller, Bucholz, & Brady, 2006). Directing the work of paraprofessionals is an important component of an effectively run classroom and student educational program. As the role of teachers has changed and practices have evolved, the role of paraprofessionals has also changed. Paraprofessionals were once responsible for preparing materials, monitoring the lunchroom and playground, and taking attendance. Now paraprofessionals are members of instructional teams, assisting teachers to help students receive the support necessary for learning. Consequently, supervision of paraprofessionals has become more important.

French (2001) maintained that paraprofessionals have been mostly unsupervised because many special education teachers do not have the necessary supervision skills. She found that on-the-job experience is the major source of the supervisory special educator's knowledge. To supervise effectively, teachers need strategies for on-the-job training; understanding of role distinctions; and skills of communication, interview, conflict resolution, meeting facilitation, and task delegation (French). These skills are not typically taught in

teacher education programs, but teachers can develop them if they receive specific training in supervision skills.

Systems Change

Although focusing on training and supervision may improve the skills of paraprofessionals, questions still arise about the efficacy of using paraprofessionals with students who are visually impaired (Forster & Holbrook, 2005). Using paraprofessionals as a support to students with disabilities in the general education classroom has become the primary way, rather than one way, to support a student with visual impairments in the general education classroom. Because of the potential limitations associated with the use of paraprofessionals that I have noted, there is a need to consider alternative ways of structuring classrooms so that all students have access to highly trained general educators and the general education curriculum.

It is understandable that many general education teachers do not feel qualified to meet the diverse instructional needs of students with visual impairment in their classrooms. Providing a paraprofessional to help with the needs of an individual student may seem to be the easiest way to ensure adequate instruction. However, educators should consider the long-term possible benefits and consequences for the student and identify ways to use differentiated learning strategies to meet the needs of all learners in the general education classroom.

Peer support interventions are one effective alternative to traditional paraprofessional models for supporting students with disabilities, including those with visual impairments, in accessing the general education curriculum. These interventions originated from classwide peer tutoring, cooperative learning, peer-assisted learning strategies, and other peer-mediated techniques and involve one or more peers without disabilities providing academic and social support to a student with disabilities. Peers are taught to (a) adapt class activities to facilitate student participation, (b) provide instruction related to the goals of the Individualized Education Plan, (c) implement relevant behavior intervention plans, (d) provide frequent feedback to the student, and (e) promote communication between the student with disabilities and others (Cushing & Kennedy, 2004).

Peers receive ongoing monitoring, feedback, and assistance from paraprofessionals and general education teachers as they assist their classmates. Thus, paraprofessionals shift from a one-to-one role to a broader support role

in which they monitor students with disabilities and their peers, provide help as needed, and assist other students within the general education classroom. Appendix B contains resources on peer support interventions.

Researchers have used different forms of peer-mediated support models in a range of settings in educational and noneducational environments with positive outcomes in each (Maheady, Harper, & Mallette, 2001; McMaster, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2006). It is important to note that they have found peer support strategies to be successful in general education, special education, and inclusive classrooms. McMaster et al. (2006) identified the following characteristics as central for successful implementation of peer support models:

Expectations for student learning. Teachers should establish high expectation levels. They should not expect any student to fall below the level of learning needed to be successful at the next level of education.

Careful orientation to lessons. Teachers must clearly describe the relation of a current lesson to previous study and remind students of key concepts or skills previously covered.

Clear and focused instructions to participants. Teachers should give clear and focused instructions to participants.

Close teacher monitoring of student progress. Teachers should frequently conduct formal and informal monitoring of student learning and require students to be accountable for their product and learning.

Reteaching. If students show signs of confusion, misinterpretation, or misunderstanding, the teacher should teach the material again.

Class time is for learning. Students must pace themselves and should be monitored for task completion.

Positive and personal teacher–student interaction. Cooperative learning and peer support models are instructional methods of choice in many classrooms because they can prevent and alleviate many social problems related to children, adolescents, and young adults.

Conclusion

Meeting the educational and social needs of a student who is in the general education classroom and curriculum and is visually impaired can be challenging for an educational team. Assigning a one-to-one paraprofessional to help the student complete activities and participate in the curriculum has become a common way to handle these challenges. Too little research has focused on

the specific training needs of paraprofessionals who work with students who are visually impaired, but it is clear that if they are to provide appropriate support services for these students, paraprofessionals must have training in the unique needs of the students with whom they are working, as well as proper supervision. Providing students who are visually impaired with structured support through peers is a way to avoid the potential problems associated with using paraprofessionals and move from the one-to-one paraprofessional model to a model in which all students in the general education classroom, including students with visual impairments, receive the benefits of support from a paraprofessional.

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