

# “Be Careful What You Wish for ...”: Five Reasons to Be Concerned About the Assignment of *Individual* Paraprofessionals

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You have heard the saying “Be careful what you wish for; you just might get it.” It is a wise adage both school personnel and families might want to keep in mind when considering whether students with disabilities who are placed in general education classes should be provided with individual paraprofessional support. Virtually everyone having any connection with special education can tell you about dedicated paraprofessionals who are worth their weight in gold, so one might ask where the problem lies. In reality, the story of paraprofessional supports has many facets.

Some parents understandably request individual paraprofessional support for their child with disabilities because of their concerns or fears about how their child will be accepted, treated, supported, and instructed in general education classes. Yet parents seeking inclusive education through the assignment of an individual, full-time paraprofessional may be working at cross-purposes with themselves. Having an adult by a student’s side for all or most of the school day can actually interfere with a student’s inclusion as a participating member of the classroom community.

In other situations, parents have been told that the assignment of a full-time, individual paraprofessional is the



required admission ticket for their child’s entry into the general education classroom. A school’s request for an individual paraprofessional as a condition of placement is often rooted in the concerns of classroom teachers. Even highly competent and willing teachers may experience some anxiety when they are unclear about the expectations people have of them in relation to a student with a disability placed in their class. Teachers who feel stretched thin

by issues such as class size and ever-expanding requirements wonder how they will find the time to meet the various needs of students with disabilities and special needs other than disability.

Meanwhile, principals often experience ambivalence about hiring more paraprofessionals. Although they may want to be supportive of parent and teacher requests for paraprofessional supports, simultaneously they may be compelled by their central administra-

### **Beth's Story: "I don't want an aide!"**

When my daughter, Beth, started high school, the school personnel insisted she have a full-time paraprofessional, presumably because she has Down syndrome. It was a battle I wasn't willing to fight, so I agreed to it even though I felt it wasn't needed. Freshman year this arrangement worked out reasonably well. The paraprofessional was a young woman, not much older than Beth. She was skilled at giving her room and knowing when to back off.

During Beth's sophomore year, this paraprofessional was replaced by one who was on her like Velcro®! She was always telling Beth what to do, insisting she leave class early, and generally making a spectacle of their interactions. It wasn't long before Beth reacted uncharacteristically. She ran away from the paraprofessional, called her names, even left school and went home.

Though Beth's communication wasn't socially desirable, her intent was clear; but no one seemed to be listening. A month or so into the year, after this second paraprofessional quit, Beth's team met to decide what would happen next. Beth said she "...didn't like being bossed" and "... didn't want an aide." Her request was honored; Beth didn't have an individual paraprofessional for the rest of high school. The problem behaviors disappeared, and with no intermediary between her and the teachers, Beth was more academically connected. It made me feel even more strongly that we need to involve students in determining their own [need for] supports.

may provide cultural perspectives or speak the primary language of non-English-speaking students (Ashbaker, 2000). Many paraprofessionals provide thoughtful, creative input as valued educational team members.

### **Five Reasons to Be Concerned About Individual Paraprofessional Supports**

In self-contained special education classes, special education teachers and paraprofessionals work together in the same classrooms throughout the school day. This arrangement provides natural and ongoing opportunities for special educators to train, supervise, and mentor paraprofessionals. With the advent of more inclusive models of delivery of special education services, new issues are emerging regarding the training, utilization, and supervision of paraprofessionals, in part because special educators and paraprofessionals often spend much of their day in locations separated from one another. Listed below are five reasons, based on recent research regarding paraprofessionals in inclusive schools, that professionals and parents alike should be concerned about the assignment of individual paraprofessionals.

### **Parents seeking inclusive education through the assignment of an individual, full-time paraprofessional may be working at cross-purposes with themselves.**

#### **Reason 1: The least qualified staff members are teaching students with the most complex learning characteristics.**

No strong conceptual basis can be cited for assigning the least qualified staff, namely, paraprofessionals, to provide the bulk of instruction for students with the most complex learning characteristics, nor does a research base suggest

tion or school board to closely scrutinize services, given the dramatic increase in the numbers of special education paraprofessionals and associated costs.

This article attempts to illuminate paraprofessional issues by pursuing three primary purposes. First, we briefly summarize the potential benefits of providing paraprofessional supports. Second, we discuss five research-based reasons why school personnel and parents should be concerned about the assignment of individual paraprofessionals and illustrate them with three real-life vignettes (see Beth's Story, Erin's Story, Micah's Story). Third, we offer a set of considerations for educational teams as they attempt to link paraprofessional research with effective practice. We hope this article spurs constructive dialogue between parents and school personnel about the carefully crafted utilization of paraprofessionals, as well as about alternatives designed to reduce overreliance on individual paraprofessionals as a primary mechanism for supporting students with disabilities in general education classes.

### **Potential Benefits of Paraprofessional Supports**

The benefits of paraprofessional support have long been considered common sense. Busy teachers and concerned parents often appreciate the availability of a second adult to provide an extra set of helping hands, eyes, and ears in the classroom (Daniels & McBride, 2001; French & Chopra, 1999). Under the direction of qualified professionals, trained paraprofessionals can serve a variety of valued roles:

- Doing clerical tasks that free teachers to spend more time instructing students.
- Engaging in follow-up instruction, tutoring, or homework help.
- Providing supervision in group settings (e.g., cafeteria, playground, bus boarding).
- Assisting students with personal care needs (e.g., bathroom use, eating, dressing).
- Facilitating social skills, peer interactions, and positive behavior support plans.

For decades special educators have relied on paraprofessionals to help them teach their students with disabilities. Since paraprofessionals often live in the communities where they work, they

**Table 1. Inadvertent Detrimental Effects of Excessive or Unnecessary Paraprofessional Proximity**

| <i>Category of Effect</i>               | <i>Description</i>   |
|---|--|
| Separation from Classmates              | Student with a disability and paraprofessional are seated together in the back or side of the room, physically separated from the class.       |
| Unnecessary Dependence                  | Student with a disability is hesitant to participate without paraprofessional direction, prompting, or cueing.                                 |
| Interference with Peer Interactions     | Paraprofessional can create physical or symbolic barriers that interfere with interactions between a student with disabilities and classmates. |
| Insular Relationships                   | Student with a disability and paraprofessional do most everything together, to the exclusion of others (i.e., teachers and peers).             |
| Feeling Stigmatized                     | Student with a disability expresses embarrassment/discomfort about having a paraprofessional; makes him or her stand out in negative ways.     |
| Limited Access to Competent Instruction | Paraprofessionals are not necessarily skilled in providing competent instruction; some do the work for the students they support.              |
| Interference with Teacher Engagement    | Teachers tend to be less involved when a student with a disability has a paraprofessional because individual attention is already available.   |
| Loss of Personal Control                | Paraprofessionals do so much for the students with disabilities that they do not exercise choices that are typical for other students.         |
| Loss of Gender Identity                 | Student with a disability is treated as the gender of the paraprofessional (e.g., male student taken into the female bathroom).                |
| May Provoke Problem Behaviors           | Some students with disabilities express their dislike of paraprofessional support by displaying inappropriate behaviors.                       |

that students with disabilities learn more or better with paraprofessional support (Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001). Recent research indicates that not only are special education paraprofessionals playing a prominent role instructing students with disabilities, they are engaging in roles for which they are questionably prepared (French, 1998; Minondo, Meyer & Xin, 2001; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). In some cases, individual paraprofessionals are left to fend for themselves, functioning as the primary teachers for students with disabilities and making the majority of day-to-day instructional and curricular decisions (Downing, Ryndak & Clark, 2000; Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Marks, Schrader & Levine, 1999). Having paraprofessionals assume such high levels of responsibility presents a double standard that likely would be considered unacceptable if it was applied to students without disabilities.

**Reason 2: Paraprofessional supports are linked with inadvertent detrimental effects.**

Although paraprofessional supports are undoubtedly offered with benevolent

intentions, recent studies have linked excessive or unnecessary paraprofes-

sional proximity with inadvertent detrimental effects, such as unnecessary

**Erin’s Story: Coming Full Circle**

Erin began kindergarten fully included without an aide. By the end of first grade, the school decided to provide part-time paraprofessional support, which continued through grade school. As if the transition to middle school wasn’t traumatic enough, the new teachers decided the best way to support Erin was to place her in a class for students with developmental disabilities. Though Erin stayed in the general education class, to appease the teachers, a full-time aide was assigned. Again, this wasn’t an IEP team decision based on Erin’s needs; it was school politics. After receiving reasonably unobtrusive support in sixth grade, seventh was a different story. The new aide had the attitude that she could teach better than any general or special educator. Ironically, it was this aide’s success in alienating the teachers that opened the door to discussions about using less paraprofessional support, in just three classes. That was Erin’s best year in middle school; finally we were going in the right direction!

High school arrived, and again the school wanted Erin to have a full-time aide attend general education classes with her. Fortunately, or maybe unfortunately, they hired the “best aide ever!” All of us depended on her, as it turned out, a bit too much. When the “best aide ever” left, as they often do, our [over]dependence on her became all too clear. Finally we began to explore natural and alternative supports that reduced the need for paraprofessional time in several classes. Almost immediately, the teachers commented that Erin was interacting more with her classmates and taking responsibility for her own learning; they were surprised at how much she could do. This year Erin has her best grades ever and loves being a “cool senior”!

dependence and interference with peer interactions (see Table 1; Giangreco, Broer & Edelman, 2001; Giangreco et al., 1997; Hemmingsson, Borell, & Gustavsson, 2003; Skar & Tamm, 2001). Even studies that have reported positive aspects of close proximity (Werts, Zigmond, & Leeper, 2001) or mixed data on the effects of proximity (Young, Simpson, Myles, & Kamps, 1997) have raised concerns about whether students are unnecessarily dependent on individual paraprofessionals.

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**The least qualified staff members are teaching students with the most complex learning characteristics.**

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**Reason 3: Individual paraprofessional supports are linked with lower levels of teacher involvement.**

The attitude of a classroom teacher toward, and level of involvement with, his or her students who have disabilities is arguably one of the single most crucial variables affecting the success of inclusive placements. An observational study of three primary grade children with autism in inclusive classrooms reported teacher initiations with those students were more frequent when their individually assigned paraprofessionals were not in close proximity to them (Young et al., 1997).

Understandably, busy teachers tend to work with other students when they know the student with a disability already has individual attention. Recent research has documented that the assignment of an individual paraprofessional to a student with a disability often co-occurs with lower levels of teacher engagement, whereas the use of a classroom paraprofessional, under the direction of the teacher, more often co-occurs with higher levels of teacher engagement (Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2001).

**Micah's Story: The Power of Peers**

Over the years, our son Micah has benefited from the support of several talented paraprofessionals. Yet as he moved through school, we felt ambivalent. We knew Micah needed some extra help in the classroom, but we also knew the more he was surrounded by adults, even well-meaning ones, the harder it would be for peers to connect with him. Adults encircled him and often, though unintentionally, became a wall separating him from his peers—a wall most teenagers would not easily climb over.

We were fortunate to learn about a program where peers without disabilities received credit to serve as mentors to support some of the learning needs of their classmates with disabilities. Under the direction of a special educator, a skilled paraprofessional provided coaching to peer mentors. This coaching allowed the paraprofessional to step back, which resulted in several of Micah's classmates moving closer and interacting with him in new and unexpected ways. During a team meeting, Beth, one of Micah's peers, mentioned she sometimes had a hard time helping him focus on a particular teacher's lectures. She blurted out, "You know what! Sometimes this teacher can be boring—a lot of us have a hard time paying attention in her class. The real difference is that Micah doesn't know how to act as if he's paying attention." Laughter filled the air. Beth blushed and quickly apologized for revealing something negative about this well-liked teacher. The next step for Micah was practicing "paying attention" behaviors, and who better to teach him than genuine inhabitants of the teen world—his peers? Working together strengthened the new bonds they were developing. It also gave the teachers some food for thought.

A real turning point was the day an insensitive substitute teacher mimicked the way Micah said his name in front of the class. Oliver, Micah's peer tutor, leapt out of his seat, rushed to the teacher's desk, and demanded that he stop! This call for respect was much more powerful coming spontaneously from a friend than it would have been coming as feedback from an adult. This incident helped Oliver realize, somewhat to his own surprise, just how much Micah's friendship meant to him. Equally as important was the impact that Oliver's actions had on others. Afterward, several students began approaching Micah in more engaging ways. Oliver nurtured these interactions and demonstrated how to keep a dialogue going with Micah beyond "Hey, what's up?" Oliver was truly a link between Micah and his other classmates.

**Reason 4: Teachers, parents, and students may not be getting what they deserve and expect.**

Are classroom teachers, parents, and students getting what they deserve and expect? Do they have access to paraprofessionals who are appropriately trained, supervised, and operating under the direction of a qualified special educator or teacher? Too often the answer is "No." Data indicate that too many paraprofessionals are inadequately trained and supervised (Downing et al., 2000; French, 1998; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). Some are unskilled or under-skilled in the academic subjects in which they are asked to support students (Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman,

2002). In French's (2001) study of 321 special educators, 81% of them reported that they do not plan for their paraprofessionals; among the 19% that did so, the planning was primarily through oral instruction rather than written plans. This study also reported that teachers who typically were not trained in supervision of adults were reluctant to supervise paraprofessionals. This finding was extended in a more recent study on the competence of teachers to direct the work of paraprofessionals (Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl, 2001). Although participants agreed that the extensive set of supervisory abilities presented in the study were important, "the competencies were not observed as



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JOEY NOTICED A MYSTERIOUS FORCE FIELD  
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COULD NOT BREAK THROUGH.

frequently as their perceived importance” (p. 520) because of lack of pre-service preparation or professional development of teachers on supervisory practices.

Although the expectation that students with individual paraprofessional support would receive more intensive instruction than peers may seem logical, a recent study (Giangreco & Broer, in press) presents contrary findings. In this study individual paraprofessionals reported spending less time in instruction (37%) than did group paraprofessionals (50%). These same individual paraprofessionals reported spending 24% of their time self-directed, without professional guidance. In part, this study suggests that this situation exists because many special education teachers who are responsible for supervising paraprofessionals have less than optimal working conditions (e.g., large caseloads, extensive paperwork, several paraprofessionals to supervise across multiple classrooms and grade levels).

### Reason 5. Providing paraprofessional supports may delay attention to needed changes in schools.

Although shifting more responsibilities to paraprofessionals may seem advantageous because it relieves certain pressures on teachers and special educators, in and of itself, this relief should not be confused with effective education for students. Having paraprofessionals assume ever-increasing levels of responsibility for student learning may actually delay attention to needed changes in general and special education.

The findings of Marks et al. (1999) highlight these concerns by indicating that paraprofessionals (a) bore the “primary burden of success” (p. 318) for included students with disabilities; (b) felt part of their role was not being a “bother” to teachers; (c) provided daily

Recent studies have linked excessive or unnecessary paraprofessional proximity with inadvertent detrimental effects.

curricular modifications, sometimes “on-the-spot” with little or no support from teachers; and (d) sensed being solely responsible for inclusion of the students with disabilities. Will more teachers have opportunities to shift their roles from gracious host to engaged teacher if paraprofessionals continue to function as primary instructors? Will schools be as motivated to address the capacity of classroom teachers to differentiate instruction for mixed-ability groups if paraprofessionals continue to make many day-to-day curricular decisions? Will the working conditions of teachers and special educators be addressed soon enough or sufficiently if the pressure on them is kept just below the boiling point by shifting more responsibilities to paraprofessionals? Too often the ways we currently use paraprofessionals make too easy the tendency to delay important actions and changes that could benefit students with disabilities as well as their peers without disabilities.

### Considerations for Educational Teams

As schools continue their positive and appropriate efforts to improve the training, support, and supervision of paraprofessionals, we think it would be a mistake to believe that such changes alone will address the fundamental concerns that have led to their burgeoning and sometimes inappropriate utilization. Additionally, we think that to simply change from advocating for more paraprofessionals to advocating for fewer of them would be a mistake. Rather, we need a shift to advocate for exploring different supports that focus on strengthening collaboration between general and special education, building capacity in general education, and placing more reliance on natural supports. Listed below are five initial ideas for educational teams to consider.

1. Extend the conversation in your school community about the support of students with disabilities in general education. Ask teachers what they need to shift from primarily hosting students with disabilities to being engaged teachers of those students. Ask special educators what they

need to better support students in general education classrooms (e.g., narrowing the range of grades supported, attention to caseload issues, assistance with paperwork). Ask both constituencies who should be supervising paraprofessionals and how. This conversation can occur informally among colleagues or more formally at faculty or community meetings, through teacher study groups, or by establishing a cross-constituent schoolwide task force.

2. Scrutinize current roles and practices of paraprofessionals, and consider whether they are truly appropriate. This examination can be accomplished by having teachers, special educators, and paraprofessionals (a) analyze the tasks they engage in, (b) determine whether their respective training and/or skills match the tasks, and (c) make a plan for addressing any discrepancies between their skills and the tasks. In some instances this scrutiny may result in additional training for any of the team members or may lead to a shifting of responsibilities. In considering any shifts in responsibilities, teams are encouraged to limit the utilization of paraprofessional supports to only those specific situations in which, after exhausting more natural possibilities, it makes the most sense. For example, if providing homework support or being accompanied between classes can be appropriately accomplished with peer supports, it should not be delegated to a paraprofessional. Individualization and accounting for unpredictable events will require ongoing teamwork. In reference to existing practices, ask the following question to help identify double standards: Would the practice be acceptable if the students did not have disabilities?
3. Collaborate with families by seeking to understand their concerns that lead to their requests for paraprofessional supports. This collaboration can be accomplished through group meetings at which parents are invited to participate in conversations about paraprofessional issues with

school personnel or on an individual basis, one family at a time. When a family has requested individual paraprofessional support, be direct in asking parents why they believe this level of support is needed. Their responses will allow the school to tailor supports in an effort to meet a student's needs. For example, if a parent is concerned that the classroom instruction will be too difficult for their child to comprehend, then merely assigning a paraprofessional may not address that concern. A forum for parental input will give the teacher and special educator an opportunity to explain how they intend to collaborate on curricular and instructional accommodations. Sharing written information with parents about the pros and cons of paraprofessional supports can be helpful, as can working with them as full team members in an effort to reach consensus on the array of options for supporting their child's education in the general education classroom.

4. Explore ways to involve students with disabilities in contributing to, and making decisions about, their own supports. In instances in which students have limited language skills, the involved adults and peers need to pay close attention to whatever forms of communication the students use in an effort to understand their meaning. We should not assume certain students need paraprofessional supports merely because of their looks or labels; this assumption presumes that the need for paraprofessional support is embedded in the characteristics of the student. A more appropriate approach might be to first consider modifying the characteristics of the school, classroom, and staff (e.g., attitudes, teaching formats, student groupings, resource distribution) in an effort to build a stronger classroom community for all types of students.
5. Consider alternatives to paraprofessional supports (e.g., peer supports, resource reallocation, building capacity, and ownership of profes-

sional educators to support students with disabilities) in ways that benefit a wider range of students with and without disabilities (Giangreco, Halvorsen, Doyle, & Broer, 2004). One way to accomplish this outcome

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**The ways we currently use paraprofessionals make too easy the tendency to delay important actions and changes that could benefit students with disabilities.**

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is using a schoolwide planning tool that guides school teams to examine their own status in regard to paraprofessional issues, self-assess on a set of schoolwide practices, and select individualized priorities for action (Giangreco & Broer, 2003).

### **Final Thoughts**

Collectively, the five aforementioned actions are meant to affirm the expectation that all students deserve access to highly qualified teachers and that collaboration among professionals and families is essential. The stories of Beth, Erin, and Micah serve as additional reminders of the importance of (a) listening to our students' verbal and non-verbal communication, (b) providing opportunities for self-determination, (c) encouraging normalized experiences, and (d) exploring natural supports (e.g., peers). Working together, school personnel and families hold the keys to finding the individualized balance between judiciously determined paraprofessional supports and emerging alternatives.

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