Paraprofessional Support in Inclusive Schools: Research, Practices & Alternatives

Student Services Administrator’s Association of Manitoba
Portage la Prairie, Manitoba
April 27, 2018
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If Paraprofessionals are Used for Instruction, the Research says:

1. Supplemental Instruction (not primary or exclusive)
2. Work from professionally prepared plans using research-based approaches (not to make pedagogical decisions)
3. Trained to implement with fidelity
4. Trained in responding to behaviors
5. Ongoing monitoring & supervision
6. These are rare; the opposite is more common.
Vital Non-Instructional Paraprofessionals Roles Allow Teachers & Special Educators Opportunities to Work Together and Directly with Students:

- clerical tasks, materials prep
- personal care supports
- supervision (e.g., cafeteria, bus)

Parapro Use is Up in the USA & Beyond

- Steady increases for the past two decades:
  - Australia
  - Canada
  - Finland
  - Germany
  - Iceland
  - Ireland
  - Malta
  - UK
  - USA

VT FTE of Aides Employed for K-12 Special Education and Percentage of Students with Disabilities in General Education (US DOE, 1990-2012)

Adjusted for Child Count, the ratio of special education paraprofessionals has increased from approximately 1:9 to 1:4 students on IEPs

Percentage of Students with IEP Spending 80% or More Time in General Education Classrooms
What the literature says:

- 1975-2017 repeats the same themes (clarify roles, train, supervise); new themes emerged around 1997 (e.g., helping or hovering)
- Limited student outcome data:
  - A few single-subject studies report effectiveness of assistants teaching new skills, facilitating interactions, increasing engaged time on task.
  - A small set of literacy studies with “at risk” students report positive results under very specific/intensive conditions.
  - Assistants can learn if we make the effort.

Recent Data Questions
Instructional Use of Paraprofessionals

- Deployment of Instructional Support Staff (Blatchford et al., 2009); > 6,000 schools (England & Wales)
- Teachers reported parapro use worked for them, but data indicated it didn’t for students.
- Students engaged with Teacher Assistants get less teacher engagement/instruction
- Across 7 grade levels there was a negative relationship between TA Support and achievement in English, Math & Science (16 of 21 comparisons) and no difference in the other 5
- Qualitative differences in Teacher:Pupil Talk vs. TA:Pupil Talk (e.g., conceptual vs. task completion)

NTC Data Set: Distribution of Paraprofessional FTE

\[ n = 88 \text{ (VT, CT, NH, MA, CA)} \]
NTC Data Set: Special Education Time Use (n = 452 Special Educators)

- Instruction: 41%
- Paperwork: 15%
- Planning: 12%
- Collaboration: 10%
- Behavior support: 9%
- Supervision of paras: 6%
- Working w/families: 6%
- Other: 1%

SPEDs supervised an ave. of 3.1 Paraprofs, leaving ≈ 2% time available to supervise each paraprofessional.

NTC Data Set: Percentage of Out-of-Class Instruction for Students with IEPs (n = 256 SPEDS)

Mean = 73%

NTC Data Set: Special Education Paraprofs Time Use as Reported by 398 Special Educators

- Instruction: 51%
- Behavior support: 21%
- Self-directed: 10%
- Supervision: 7%
- Personal care: 5%
- Clerical: 4%
- Other: 2%

SPEDs supervised an ave. of 3.1 Paraprofs
Range = 0 to 20
Total reported on = 1363 Parapro (FTE)
In your school...
- What percent of SWD are included 80% or more?
- How many of your students are sent elsewhere?
- What is the SPED Teacher:Parapro ratio?
- What percent of parapros are 1:1?
- How do SPED Teachers spend their time?
- How much SPED Teacher time is in pull-out?
- How do parapros spend their time?
Data-Based Issues & Inadvertent Detrimental Effects Regarding Assistants In Inclusive Classrooms

Least Trained Adults Assigned to Students with Most Challenging Characteristics

NTC Data Set: Instructional Time Provided to Students on IEPs by Special Educators and SPED Paraprofessionals ($n = 457$ Special Educators)

Because so many more Parapros than SPEDs and more Parapro % of time in instruction
Excessive Proximity

Research Documents Unintended Detrimental Effects Excessive Assistant Use & Proximity

- Separation from Classmates
- Unnecessary Dependence
- Interference with Peer Interactions
- Insular Relationships with Paraprofessionals
- Stigmatization
- Limited Access to Instruction from HQT
- Interference with Teacher Engagement
- Loss of personal control
- Provocation of behavior problems
- Risk of being bullied
89% of ParaPros report that they make curricular or instructional decisions without professional oversight.
45% of ParaPros agree that some SWD communicate that they find ParaPro support offered to them unwanted.

**Special Ed Caseload Challenges**

- Large IEP caseload size
- More students with special needs
- Equivalent or more students than typical class
- Across multiple grade levels/curricula, locations, and teachers
- Service disruptions due to TA absence, behavioral crises, lack of layered structures

**Ratio of Special Educator FTE to Total Enrollment**

*Special Educator School Density*

\[
\text{Ratio} = \frac{1}{224} \quad \text{Mean Ratio} = 1:91
\]

\[\text{Ratio} = \frac{1}{37} \quad n = 87 \text{ (VT, CT, NH, MA, CA)}\]
Relationship Between Special Educator School Density & Special Educator Ratings of Work Responsibilities (Giangreco, Suter, Hurley, 2013)

\[ t(32.98) = -2.9 \ (p = .006) \]

Increase in school density of 33 is expected to lower special educator rating by a full point.

Most recent data retains “large” effect size

\[ n = 74, r = -0.58 \ (p < .001) \]

Why Special Educator Caseload Numbers Don’t Tell the Whole Story

Example where Schools Serve All Students:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ave. SPED Caseload</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPED School Density</td>
<td>1:131</td>
<td>1:69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% on IEPs</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% IEP &amp; SEN</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Implications SPED School Density

- Easily calculated and actionable variable correlated with special educator self-efficacy
- National & international implications to compare across states/countries with SPED roles
- Assigning special education teacher resources to schools based on identification/certification of students as disabled, often leads to more identification in order to access services.
- Build school structures, practices, and capacities to account for the full range of student diversity with layers of support for qualified personnel
- Giving teachers the supports to bridge the research to practice gap

Let’s Talk About SPED Density

Can you calculate the SPED Density in your school?
Total Enrollment/SPED FTE = SPED Density

Where does this put you on the SPED Density chart in terms of potential system health?

How does your SPED Density impact your school (positively or adversely)?

The focus on strengthening paraprofessional supports is predicated on the assumption that we have identified the root need of appropriate educational supports for students with significant disabilities as: paraprofessionals need to be more skilled to do what is asked of them. Is this correct?
Though training is vital, training alone is not the answer -- if applied in isolation it can actually make things worse if it leads to less teacher engagement.

Is there a double-standard?

Would it be OK if the student did not have a disability?
A team assigns a paraprofessional, rather than a qualified teacher, to provide 75% to 100% of the daily instruction to a student.

At progress reporting time the teacher and special educator defer to the paraprofessional because she knows more about the student’s educational performance than they do.

*Would it be OK if the student didn’t have a disability?*

Teachers and special educators spend time doing clerical tasks while paraprofessionals teach reading and math lessons for students with disabilities.

When a student is having difficulty in algebra she is assigned a paraprofessional as her tutor. The paraprofessional is unskilled in algebra and is uncomfortable with the subject matter.

*Would it be OK if the student didn’t have a disability?*

**What Schools Can Do!**
1. Improve Existing Paraprofessional Supports

#1: Acknowledging & Respecting
#2: Orienting & Training
#3: Hiring & Assigning
#4: Interactions w/ Students & Staff
#5: Roles & Responsibilities
#6: Supervision & Evaluation

“This is the old stuff – you can’t stop here!

Free online as a pdf

http://www.uvm.edu/~cdci/parasupport/?Page=guide.html

2. Shift Paraprofessional Decision-Making Away from Justification Models (which student needs an assistant) toward Developing Coherent Models of Inclusive Service Delivery
**Justification Models are Problematic**

1. Acting from a reactive posture
2. Inattention to proactive models of service delivery to support full range of students leads to add-on rather than systemic change
3. Brink of capacity perceptions are relative
4. Restricts potential solutions to a narrow, pre-determined set of options focusing on parapros as the answer

**Justification Models (continued)**

5. Sets up unintended messages and unhealthy dynamics; hurdle to be cleared or game to be played to access only available support
6. Substantial and inappropriate focus on student characteristics and concerns
7. Asking to approve or disapprove the request is the asking the wrong question
8. Focus needed on team, class, school, and system-level issues
Myth of the Prototypical Student who “Needs” a 1:1 Parapro

- Illogical and problematic for any students identified (detrimental effects)
- Variations across and between schools suggest prototypes are socially constructed (similar students with widely varying supports)
- Nothing inherent about a student’s characteristics that necessitates a 1:1 parapro as opposed to other supports
How are decisions made about parapro supports in your school?

- Is a “justification” approach, based primarily on student characteristics, utilized?
- Is there a formal tool or process?
- Does the approach fall prey to any of the concerns discussed today?

3. Pursue Alternatives to Overreliance on Paraprofessionals
   A. School/District Level Actions
   B. Classroom/Team Level Action
      (The more these are done, the less likely the school will be reactive and unnecessarily use parapros)
      See RASE article for specifics
      (Giangreco, Doyle & Suter, 2012)

School/District Level Actions
1. Shared Understanding about Inclusive Education and LRE
2. Guiding Principles: Support Services
3. Clarifying Roles of All Team Members
4. Understanding Service Delivery Data
5. Self-Assessment of General and Special Education Practices
6. Building a Service Delivery Model to Account for the Full Range of Student Diversity
Classroom/Team Level Actions

1. First 3 school actions (e.g., Inclusion/LRE, Guiding Principles, Roles)
2. Inclusive Environments (settings/physical arrangements and people poised to facilitate belonging, participation & learning)
3. Individualized Curriculum
4. Purposeful Instruction
5. Necessary Supports (VISTA model)

#1 Resource Reallocation: Trading Places

As I share these, rate their desirability (1-10) and jot down any ideas for When we break into groups.

#2: Co-Teaching: Special Education & General Education
#3: Building Capacity of General Education Teachers

#4: Paperwork Paraprofessionals

#5: Improving Working Conditions for Special Educators
#6: Improving Working Conditions for General Educators

Placement of a child with a disability in a general education classroom is not enough to be included. It's just a foot in the door.

#7: Peer Support Strategies

MRS. HOPE FOUND THAT SOME OF HER BEST INSTRUCTORS WERE STILL IN SECOND GRADE.

#8: Self-Determination

JUDY'S BRAND OF "IN YOUR FACE" SELF-ADVOCACY FIRST SHOWED ITSELF AT AN EARLY AGE.
Student Perspectives

➢ Self-Advocate Study (EC 2005):
➢ Paraprofessional as:
  ✓ Mother
  ✓ Friend
  ✓ Primary Instructor
  ✓ Protector (Bullying)

#9: Information Sharing Among Families & Professionals

Emerging Alternatives

➢ Paraprofessional Pools
➢ “Temporary Support Assistants”
➢ Fade Plans/Independence Plans
➢ More activity-based instruction
➢ Differentiated Teacher Roles
➢ More Dual Certified Teachers
GSA Planning Tool
Field-Tested in CA, CT, KS, NH, VT, WI

- Cross stakeholder team
- Screening & Clustering
- Learn About Alternatives
- Self-Assessment
- Prioritize Greatest Needs
- Adopt, Adapt, Invent
- Action Plan
- Evaluate
- Communicate with the School Community

Three-Class Service Delivery Model
(Primary/Middle School)

Whole School Inclusive Service Delivery Model
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Over use of parapros is a symptom, not a cause. We need to address special and
general education practices.