

Running Head: Iceberg

The Tip of the Iceberg:
1:1 Paraprofessionals and the Dream of Inclusive Education

Barbara Cannon

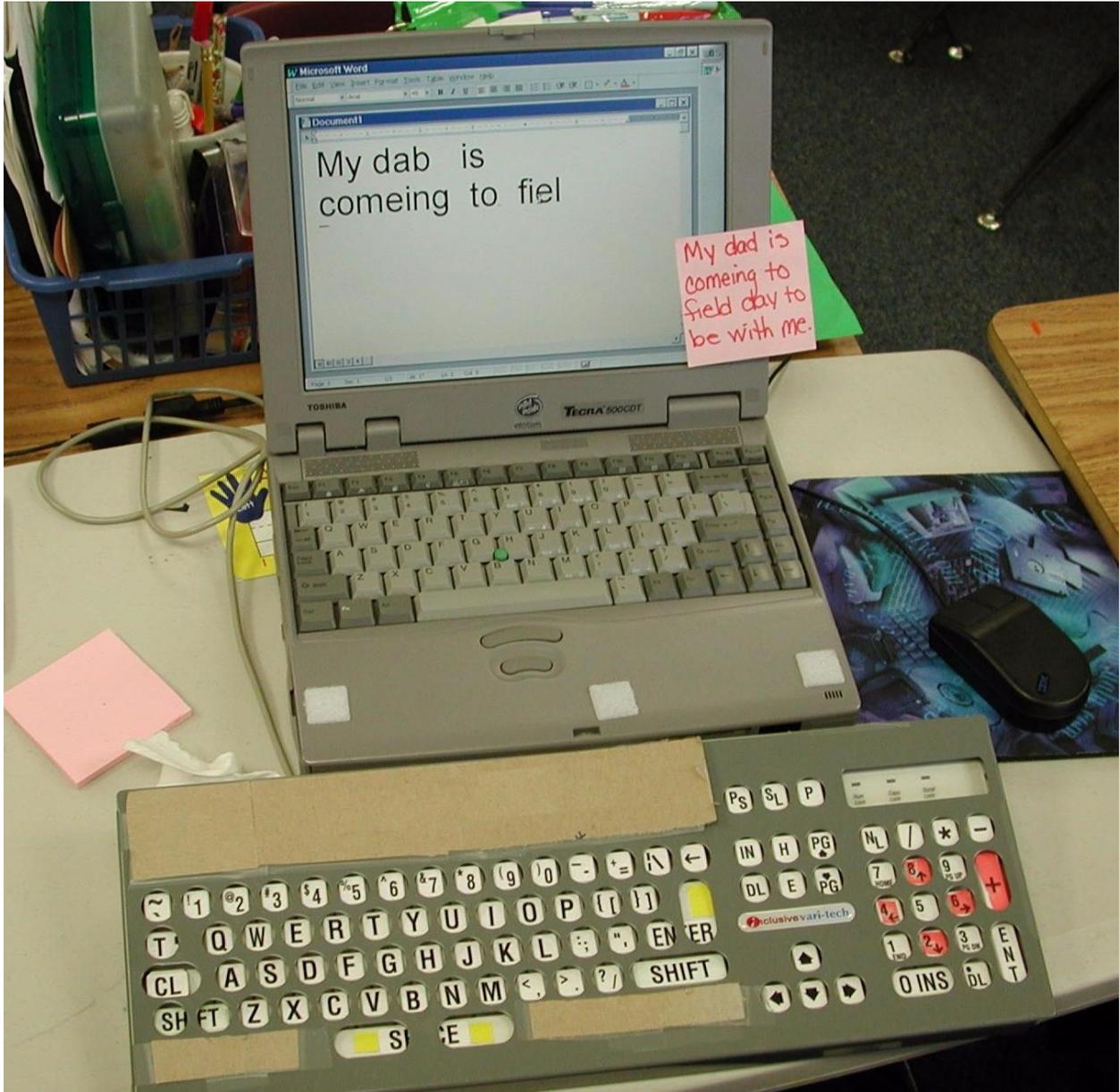
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Introduction



My desire to know more about the issue of paraprofessional support for students with disabilities began 10 years ago on the day this photograph was taken. I was new to the schools and as an assistive technologist had supplied a 1st grade student with a computer and adapted keyboard to accommodate his physical inability to write. Look closely and you will see several things. First you will see that the student is copying words written by his paraprofessional instead

of doing what the other students were doing which was composing words from their heads onto paper. Also you will notice that the paraprofessional has misspelled the word “comeing” on her sticky note and the student, following her lead, has misspelled the word as well..... I asked myself then and I ask myself now, is this good instruction? The answer, in my opinion, is a resounding NO.

But let us not look at the observations of someone in the field. Let us, instead, use the research to guide us as we enter the world of students with disabilities. We will hear the words of students and teachers, investigate the specifics of paraprofessional support, analyze the outcomes of this service delivery system, and ponder future possibilities based on what researchers tell us about the use of 1:1 paraprofessionals for students with disabilities in inclusive settings.

History of Research on the Use of 1:1 Paraprofessionals

Paraprofessionals have a long history in the schools. They have historically been used in support roles where they served teachers and entire classrooms of students. As special education became an important feature in American schools through IDEA, paraprofessional services to students with disabilities became important in supplying a free and appropriate public education. These paraprofessionals were used to serve students in a variety of settings, but they generally served classrooms instead of individual students. However, the numbers of paraprofessionals involved in special education has continued to rise due to the recent trend toward inclusion. (Etscheidt, 2005) It is therefore not surprising that the debate about the use of paraprofessionals begins to appear in the research starting in the late 1990s. At that time, Michael Giangreco from the University of Vermont and his colleagues published the seminal article, *Helping or Hovering? Effects of Instructional Assistant Proximity on Students with Disabilities*. (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997) Seven areas of concern were identified in this article

and later studies validated the basic issues. They all draw similar and negative conclusions as to the effect of 1:1 paraprofessional services on students. They also present models that might be used to more effectively meet student needs and optimally utilize school staff.

There is currently little research that supports the use of paraprofessionals as best practice for meeting the educational and social needs of students with disabilities. Positive outcomes have been documented in a limited number of studies in which paraprofessionals were used in supplemental roles and were explicitly trained and supervised. However, in general, researchers report that paraprofessional supports have been widely used but poorly conceived and implemented. (Suter & Giangreco, 2009)

The Issues

In *Helping or Hovering? Effects of Instructional Assistant Proximity on Students with Disabilities*, Giangreco et al. (1997) used qualitative data from 16 classrooms in 11 public schools where students with disabilities were educated in general education classrooms during the 1994-1995 and the 1995-1996 school years. The data was used to analyze the effects of the close proximity of instructional assistants on students with disabilities in general education settings.

Close proximity was defined as a situation in which the paraprofessional maintained physical contact with the student or the student's equipment (wheelchair, etc), sat next to the child, or accompanied the student in virtually all environments. While close proximity was considered necessary at times, it was also considered to be a smothering influence in many situations such as in the one described below.

At calendar time in the morning, she (the assistant) doesn't have to be right by his side. She could kind of walk away. She doesn't have to be part of his wheelchair.

That's what it feels like. I just think that he could break away a little bit (from the instructional assistant) if he were included more into all the activities with the regular classroom teacher. (p. 10)

Important findings from this research were grouped into seven different categories: interference with ownership and responsibility by general educators, separation from classmates, dependence on adults, impact on peer interactions, limitations on receiving competent instruction, loss of personal control, loss of gender identity, and interference with instruction of other students.

Perhaps the most important of these was the finding that when paraprofessionals were assigned to students, the general education teacher often did not take responsibility for the education of the student with disabilities. One quote about a classroom teacher sums this up. "She (the classroom teacher) doesn't take on direct instruction (of the students with disabilities). In fact, ... she stated at meetings that she doesn't see that as her role." (p. 10)

The vacuum of educational leadership was then filled mostly by the student's paraprofessional. The research showed that it was the instructional assistants, not the professional staff, who were making and implementing virtually all instructional decisions. These staff members were generally people who had only a high school education and no training at all in education let alone the specialized methods needed to support a student with disabilities. In the study, training for paraprofessionals was found to be mostly on-the-job training and was often supplied by other paraprofessionals. When training did occur it was given to paraprofessionals as a group and did not include the teachers who should have been overseeing their efforts. Perhaps the most ironic finding was that teachers felt that they did not

“have the training to work with these high needs kids” (p.12) and yet they were willing to hand those same complex children over to staff who had infinitely LESS training than themselves.

Another important finding concerned student dependence on adults. When untrained staff were in such close contact with students, they tended to provide too much prompting and too little fading of these prompts over time as the students gained independent skills.

Another area of concern was separation from peers. When paraprofessionals were involved, there was a tendency for students to be pulled away from the class to work on separate tasks that were often designed and determined by the paraprofessional in the absence of teacher leadership.

Peer interactions were also explored in the research and it was noted that some paraprofessionals with good instincts were helpful in getting their students included in peer to peer interactions. However, at times, paraprofessionals created barriers. A general finding was that when a paraprofessional was not in close proximity to the student, peers were more likely to come around.

Finally, Giangreco et al.(1997) found that students experienced a lack of personal control and sometimes even a loss of gender identity when paraprofessional support was provided. Often paraprofessionals made choices for students that the students could have made for themselves such as for foods and leisure activities. At times, paraprofessionals tended to think of their students as extensions of themselves. For example, a female paraprofessional might line up with the girls in gym even if the student they served was a boy.

Overall, conclusions from this research were that students would be better served if assistants were assigned to classrooms and not to individual students so that the assistants would have the responsibility for meeting the needs of a variety of students and would be less responsible for the primary instructional needs of the students they serve. Conversely, in the absence of

paraprofessional supports, trained teachers would be encouraged to take greater responsibility for all students in their care. In this situation, use of peers and other natural supports might be explored. Finally, instructional assistants need greater training in how to assist without smothering and how to fade assistance to support budding independence skills.

These findings were supported and expanded upon by other researchers including Egilson and Traustadottir (2009) in their study of the use of paraprofessionals in Iceland entitled, “*Assistance to Pupils with Physical Disabilities in Regular Schools: Promoting Inclusion or Creating Dependency?*”. In their study, observations and qualitative interviews of 49 participants including 14 students, 17 parents and 18 teachers were used to determine whether the use of paraprofessionals to support students with physical disabilities promoted inclusion or created dependency. Their research was unique in its inclusion of the voice of the students who had been assigned paraprofessionals.

All the students in this study had physical disabilities. This is a type of student very likely to be assigned a paraprofessional due to the needs for personal care that they present. Researchers found that there was great variability in the roles and responsibilities of the assistants and that there was no formal definition as to what their duties were and under which conditions they should work. Most received very little supervision and at times were responsible for all educational decisions for the student.

Dependence and autonomy were also issues that were in line with the issues expressed by Giangreco et al. (1997). Students either were overly possessive of their paraprofessionals and became angry when the paraprofessional worked with other students, or they thought that the assistant was the responsible party. In one case, a paraprofessional wrote an assignment word-

for-word and letter-for-letter as dictated by the student. When the paper came back with corrections, the student blamed the assistant for the errors although they were his own.

Egilson and Traustadottir (2009) also found that assistance was often supplied in instructional settings but withdrawn in other settings such as on the playground or in the lunch room. This situation affected social inclusion and access to peers. Additionally, students never had any input as to the type and extent of the help they received. One student when interviewed stated that

I would like to get less support and I would like to decide who supports me... and in which parts of my schedule... If I were allowed to use the computer more I wouldn't need so much help at school. It's not much fun having all those old ladies hanging around me all the time. (p. 27)

Egilson and Traustadottir (2009) also found evidence of difficulties with peer interactions and overall social stigmatization. Though many teachers and parents indicated a preference for invisible supports, this type of support was hard to come by. Paraprofessionals tended to stay in close proximity to their student charges and make peer interactions less probable. The students sometimes felt stigmatized by having an ever-present adult at their sides. One independent young lady apparently took exception to the help she received.

Maira is so independent and she has been very annoyed with having an adult constantly at her side. She wants to do everything just like the other kids. This woman (the assistant) is very conscientious and she constantly watches out that Maria does things the right way, such as that her sitting position is good. Sometimes she (Maria) gets infuriated and they fight just like a mother and daughter. (p. 28)

Overall finding from this research highlighted the need to consider social aspects and the views of students when deciding on student supports.

In summary, articles dealing with the role of paraprofessionals within the inclusive setting highlighted problems in the broad areas of the roles of teachers and paraprofessionals, the training of teachers and paraprofessionals to assume those roles, and the supervision of paraprofessionals by professional staff. All of these areas were problematic in a service delivery model that gives untrained workers the major responsibility for students within an inclusive setting.

Though there are certainly ways to improve within this model, researchers have begun to discuss the need to change that model to one that uses more teachers, less paraprofessionals and new paradigms for inclusive education. Since the law is an important factor in the provision of special education, a look at what has been considered in the courts concerning paraprofessionals is perhaps the next step in looking toward future options.

Legal Mandates

In 2005, Susan Etscheidt from the University of Northern Iowa undertook the task of analyzing the legal issues surrounding the provision of paraprofessional services for students with disabilities. Her article, *Paraprofessional Services for Students with Disabilities: A Legal Analysis of Issues* (2005) looked at disputes between the 1997 authorization of IDEA and the 2004 reauthorization. Disputes centered on the overall need and selection of paraeducators, their responsibilities and the adequacy of training and supervision.

The court cases showed that paraprofessionals are generally provided when it is proven that the support is necessary to achieve meaningful educational benefit. In deciding issues, courts have said that the benefit provided by the services must be more “ than trivial.... but need not be

optimal or maximum”. (p. 63) In some cases the need was established but in some it was not. Interestingly, non-academic benefit was also considered and services were withheld if it was determined that having a paraprofessional negatively impacted social goals. In one such case, the hearing officer in Waterbury Board of Education (2002) “... concluded that a 1:1 aide may be stigmatizing to the student and create unnecessary dependence.” (p.64)

In general, legal findings were that if the student could get meaningful benefit without a para or if having a para would have a negative impact on social benefits, requests for a 1:1 para were denied.

In the area of qualifications of paraprofessionals, the law clearly concluded that the hiring of paraprofessionals is at the discretion of the school system and that qualifications are determined by the school system unless specific qualifications were specified in the IEP. This means that generally there are no qualifications required of a paraprofessional hired to serve students with disabilities.

Cases dealing with the responsibilities of paraprofessionals clearly indicated the support role that paras are supposed to play. Etscheidt (2005) in discussing legal precedents in this area says, “... the legal responsibility for planning, implementing, and monitoring a student’s IEP remains with the IEP team. Paraprofessionals may not serve as the sole designer, deliverer, or evaluator of a student’s program.” (p.68) Additionally, in a recent decision from Iowa, the ruling stated that “The services of an associate may not replace special education services identified in the IEP. The educational and behavioral plans require development, implementation and evaluation by a trained professional.” (p.68) It is clear, then, from the legal history that paraprofessionals are meant only as support personnel who carry out plans specifically designed by professional teachers.

Lastly, legal decisions have made clear that paraprofessionals must be adequately trained and supervised by a credentialed, qualified professional teacher. This becomes important to teachers because they are held legally responsible for the supervision of those working under them.

Certain tasks may be delegated to paraprofessionals, but the legal and ethical responsibility for all services remain with the qualified teacher or service provider. Supervisors who fail to provide appropriate supervision of paraprofessionals may be in violation of their profession's code of ethics. (p.74)

Solutions

Clearly the use of paraprofessionals has been controversial and often inappropriate and unsuccessful. Students suffer when paraprofessionals are not trained and supervised properly and when teachers abdicate their responsibility for a student's educational attainment and personal well being. Additionally, teachers put themselves at risk when they allow paraprofessionals to work without proper training and supervision. Researchers have written about this situation and about alternative ways to serve students with disabilities within inclusive environments.

In an article entitled, *Numbers that Count* (2009), Jesse Suter and Michael Giangreco bring together information gained over time to examine service delivery models. They begin by summarizing the research from the past 20 years as it pertains to our current service delivery model that is heavily dependent on the use of paraprofessionals to provide support in inclusive settings.

Although there is undoubtedly a place for well-conceived paraprofessional services in special education service delivery, the literature during the past two decades is replete with evidence that many paraprofessional supports are not well

conceived or implemented. Through no fault of their own, too many paraprofessionals remain inadequately trained and supervised to do the jobs they are asked to undertake. Far too often, they are asked to assume teacher-type curricular and instructional duties for which they are neither compensated nor necessarily qualified. (p.82)

In addition to the practical matters (lack of training and supervision) that help to make this service delivery model unsuccessful, there appears to be no theoretical, research-based rationale for the proliferation of paraprofessionals or for the important role they play in the education of students who have the most difficult time learning. Suter & Giangreco (2009) say it this way:

The literature offers no sound conceptual or theoretical rationale supporting the notion that students with disabilities should receive primary or extensive instruction from the least trained, lowest paid staff – namely, paraprofessionals. In fact, it has been persuasively argued that because of their complex learning challenges, students with disabilities need access to the most highly qualified, competent, and creative teachers, special educators and related services. (p.83)

Suter and Giangreco (2009)'s research was conducted at 19 schools in Vermont during the 2006-2007 school year. They used interviews and surveys to analyze current service delivery models for inclusive settings. From their surveys, they proposed changes that could be used by school systems to improve services to students with disabilities in inclusive settings.

Findings from this qualitative study showed that special educators had case loads that were high, and paperwork that took up significant amounts of time. They were left with an average available time to work on supervision of paraprofessionals of 2% - certainly not enough time to

design good programming for the students served by the paraprofessionals. Suter & Giangreco (2009) comment as follows:

What can we reasonably expect special educators to accomplish when they are spread this thin? How many paraprofessionals can we reasonably ask them to supervise? What is a reasonable and appropriate caseload for a special educator? These questions are at the heart of ensuring that students with disabilities receive a free, appropriate public education. (p. 90)

The researchers also found that in schools where the percentage of special educators per total student enrollment was high, services tended to be better. These schools tended to be better able to handle all students and to keep students from being labeled as disabled. In schools who were using a lower percentage of licensed special educators but filling in with paraprofessional services, it was found that paraprofessionals were providing 83% of the instruction given to special education students and the schools were less able to handle day to day issues and changes that arise within any public school.

Overall, the recommendations to improve outcomes for students with disabilities were targeted towards increasing the use of special educators and giving them the time to be the instructional leaders they should be. The research also supports changing the role of paraprofessionals to place them back into the support roles they were designed to assume. Suggestions from Suter & Giangreco (2009) include the following:

1. Maintain a ratio of special education teachers to total student enrollment of close to 1:50 students. Doing so helps teachers feel positive about service delivery and it helps schools absorb changes and crises as they occur.
2. Lower the case loads of special educators to workable numbers.

3. Restrict the range of general education settings a single special educator will support.
4. Reduce the number of paraprofessionals special educators are responsible for.
5. Build the capacity of general education teachers to work with students with disabilities.
6. Reallocate resources to hire more special educators instead of adding paraprofessionals.
7. Reassign paraprofessionals to situations where they can supply clerical support to special educators.
8. Involve students in decisions about their own support needs.
9. Provide peer supports.

Conclusions

My survey of research has taught me that the issues surrounding the use of paraprofessionals are, as the title of this paper says, the tip of the iceberg. It appears that paraprofessionals are not helping students in the ways we had hoped and that they have been just a “finger in the dyke” against the rising tide of students in inclusive settings.

What is needed is for us, as a nation, to do the incredibly complex job of revamping special education: of training and hiring enough skilled educators to take care of the needs of students with disabilities in inclusive settings, of making sure general educators are prepared to work with ALL students in their care, and of using paraprofessionals in appropriate ways to support students.

Given the culture of the schools and the national budget situation, I do not see big change on the horizon. However, once again, I will go to the researchers to clarify, and in this case, to give some hope.

We began this journey with Michael Giangreco and we will end with him as well. In a study entitled, *Alternatives to Overreliance on Paraprofessionals in Inclusive Schools*, Giangreco,

Halvorsen, Doyle, & Broer (2004) presented a three component model for change that gives the role of instruction back to teachers and the role of support back to paraprofessionals for the good of all.

Though the model represents future best practice in the field, he and his colleagues seem to know that such a change of paradigm will be difficult. It is fortunate that, regardless of the many barriers, change is always in the hands of IEP teams whose mission within the law is to have decision-making authority for the students they serve. These teams have great, though individual, power to help the dream of REAL and well-designed inclusion come true for students with disabilities.

I will end with this quote from Giangreco et al. (2004) who describe what may be the only real option at the moment for fulfilling the dream of inclusive education. It requires what so many things require: personal commitment.

By deferring judgement, sticking to ethical principles, adhering to the guiding values embedded in our laws, and doing what we think is appropriate for students, each of us has the potential to affect some real change in our schools and communities. If we don't do it, who will? (p. 89)

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