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The Paraprofessional Conundrum: Why We Need Alternative Support Strategies

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“It’s an explosion!” That’s the way one administrator described the rapidly increasing numbers of paraprofessionals who support the special educational needs of students with disabilities. Assigning paraprofessionals to classrooms or individual students has become a dominant and growing model of support, especially for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Increasing the numbers of paraprofessionals sounds like a good idea to many parents and professionals. Families are pleased to know that an additional person will be watching out for their child. Busy teachers and special educators are pleased to have an extra person to share the workload. Administrators often agree to hire paraprofessionals in an effort to be supportive of parental and teacher requests and because it is a seemingly lower cost option than hiring professionals or sending students to more restrictive and expensive educational placements. Add to this the fact that all of us know paraprofessionals who are worth their weight in gold! Their ranks include some of the most talented, dedicated, hard-working individuals in public schools today. Everyone is happy, so what’s the problem?

Although paraprofessional supports may relieve some pressures in schools and be supported by parents and professionals, serious questions remain. Is the model effective? Under what circumstances are paraprofessional supports appropriate to meet the needs of students with disabilities? Neither research nor common sense provides support for assigning the least trained personnel to provide primary instructional support for students with the most significant learning and behavioral challenges; yet that is exactly what is happening across the country.

Paraprofessionals often report feeling unprepared, under appreciated, and under compensated. Current research suggests that the roles of paraprofessionals have steadily expanded to include teacher-type activities (e.g., planning, modifying curriculum, instructing), yet their roles remain unclear. Some paraprofessionals are left to make daily curricular and instructional decisions without the benefit of appropriate training, planning, or supervision from qualified professionals. Some students with disabilities spend the majority of their instructional day with paraprofessionals. These

practices are double standards that likely would be unacceptable if suggested for students without disabilities.

On the surface, the solutions to under qualified, inadequately supported, or inappropriately utilized paraprofessionals seem obvious: hire more qualified individuals, clarify roles, implement appropriate training, provide professionally prepared plans, ensure supervision, demonstrate appreciation, and improve compensation. These are all reasonable actions worthy of being pursued. Herein lies the *conundrum*, (i.e., “anything that puzzles”). No matter which way you fit together the pieces of the puzzle, something about paraprofessionals playing a dominant role in teacher-type activities just doesn’t fit.

Consider the six variations presented in Table 1; each has an undesirable result. For example, if we don’t adequately train and support paraprofessionals, the IDEA is being violated and students are less likely to be appropriately supported. However, if paraprofessionals are trained for teacher-type roles and not compensated accordingly they feel taken advantage of. If, in recognition of their low wages, paraprofessionals are not asked to engage in teacher-type roles they report feeling disrespected. The combination of these variations generally results in a dissatisfied paraprofessional workforce characterized by low morale and high turnover. This compromises quality and continuity and wastes resources. Yet when paraprofessionals are paid at a level approaching teachers’ wages, it raises budgeting and resource utilization questions for schools. Although in most cases pay differences between professional educators and paraprofessionals are substantial, a story in the *Seattle Times* (9/18/02) reported that paraprofessionals with more than 8 years of experience in the Seattle Public Schools actually earned more than first-year teachers.

While strengthening paraprofessional supports is necessary, it is *not sufficient*. We must be vigilant to ensure that we are not inadvertently perpetuating a double standard whereby students with disabilities receive the bulk of their instruction from paraprofessionals, while students without disabilities have ongoing access to qualified professional educators. Simultaneously, we need to focus on the factors that have contributed to the expanded and inappropriate use of paraprofessionals, namely the attitudes, skills, roles and working conditions of general and special educators to plan for and teach students with a full range of disabilities in inclusive classrooms. The following list includes service delivery options that have emerged as alternatives to overreliance on paraprofessionals or their inappropriate use. Although currently not in widespread use, these alternatives represent promising possibilities for increasing instructional contact between students with disabilities and qualified professionals.

Table 1 The Paraprofessional Conundrum

Asked to Implement Teacher-Type Instructional Roles	Trained/Supported to Implement Teacher-Type Instructional Roles	Paid Commensurate with Teacher-Type Instructional Roles	<i>Result</i>
1. YES +	YES +	NO =	Ambivalence Paraprofessionals report feeling taken advantage of when asked to do teacher-type work for low pay.
2. YES +	NO +	NO =	Inconsistent with the IDEA IDEA requires training and supervision of paraprofessionals; without it the likelihood of inadequate instruction increases. Ambivalence
3. NO +	NO +	NO =	Disrespect Paraprofessionals feel disrespected if their abilities are not utilized, resulting in low morale and high turnover. Inconsistent with the IDEA
4. NO +	YES +	NO =	Frustration If paraprofessionals are trained (e.g., some are certified teachers), they report feeling frustrated if they are not expected to do higher-level tasks. Ambivalence
5. YES +	YES/NO +	YES =	Ineffective Budgeting of Resources Schools do not want to pay higher wages unless employees are engaging in higher-level roles.
6. YES +	YES +	YES =	Questionable Personnel Use Why hire paraprofessionals at near teacher wages when schools could hire qualified professionals instead?

- **Resource Reallocation**
Trade paraprofessional positions for special educators (e.g., replacing three paraprofessionals with a special educator four days a week).
- **Co-Teaching**
General and special educators share teaching duties and work together.
- **Dual-Certified Teachers**
A classroom teacher is also certified in special education and case manages for a couple of students with disabilities in his or her classroom, possibly with a reduced class size.
- **Reassigning Roles**
Consider a “Paperwork Paraprofessional” whose role is to take care of paperwork and scheduling duties to create more opportunities for special educators to teach.
- **Differentiated Teacher Roles**
Hire certified teachers, as “Learning Resource Teachers”, to carry out instruction planned by a lead teacher. They work fewer hours and have fewer responsibilities than a classroom teacher; they don’t plan lessons, serve on committees, or conference with parents.
- **Building Capacity of General and Special Educators**
Provide training and supports for educators to support students with disabilities in general education (e.g., curriculum modifications, differentiated instruction, universal design).
- **Improving Working Conditions of General and Special Educators**
Address issues such as general class size and composition or the special educator’s caseload size and composition.
- **Peer Supports**
Explore peer-tutoring and identify other ways for peers to provide natural supports.
- **Self-Determination**
Explore ways for students with disabilities to play an active role in making decisions about their own supports through the IEP process and ongoing teamwork.

Project EVOLVE (Expanding and Validating Options for Learning through Variations in Education) is a new project at the University of Vermont that will be collecting information about these alternatives and will develop and study planning tools to assist schools support students with disabilities in general education classrooms. For ongoing information check out the project web site at <http://www.uvm.edu/~cdci/evolve/>

