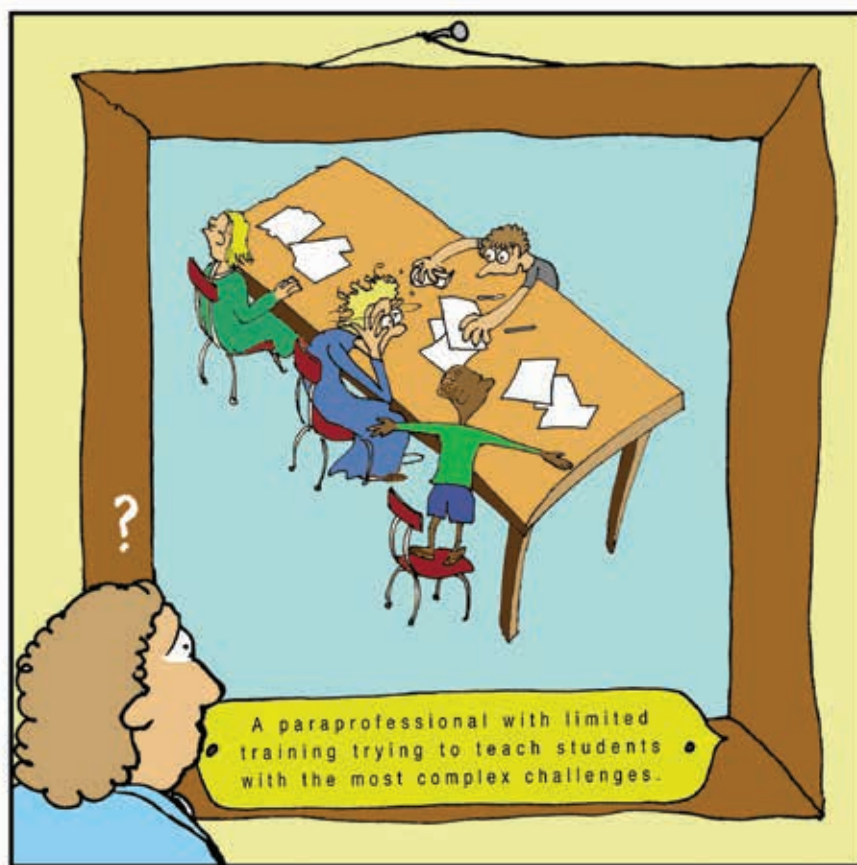


Are Paraprofessional Supports Helpful?

by Michael F. Giangreco, PhD
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IN SHEL SILVERSTEIN'S WHIMSICAL COLLECTION, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, the final stanza of his poem *Helping* reminds us, "Some kind of help is the kind of help that helping's all about, and some kind of help is the kind of help we all can do without." When students with ADHD are placed in regular classrooms a common question that arises is whether a paraprofessional should be assigned. Yet less frequently do we ask whether paraprofessional supports actually help.



WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?

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Undoubtedly, when paraprofessional support is offered it is with benevolent intentions. Many of us know of hardworking paraprofessionals whom we consider worth their weight in gold, and conventional wisdom suggests providing more individual adult support should be a positive action. Yet research documents that providing such support, especially the assignment of a one-to-one paraprofessional, is fraught with a host of inadvertent detrimental effects, several of which are outlined in Table 1. Although current research on the use and impact of paraprofessionals includes some students with ADHD, existing studies are not focused exclusively on this group; so the information included here crosses special-needs categories.

Teacher versus paraprofessional instruction

Despite good intentions, the assignment of a paraprofessional may represent a mismatch between student need and the nature of the support. The professional literature on paraprofessional utilization has not offered a logical, conceptual, or theoretical argument for assigning the least qualified personnel, namely paraprofessionals, to provide a substantial amount of academic or social support to students with the most complex learning profiles; yet nationally we continue to do so with increasing frequency. For example, if a student with ADHD is having difficulty in math, it doesn't make sense to provide extra support from a paraprofessional who may not be skilled in math. Rather, additional instruction with a highly qualified

Table 1. Inadvertent detrimental effects associated with excessive paraprofessional proximity

CATEGORY OF EFFECT	DESCRIPTION
Separation from classmates	A student with a disability and paraprofessional are seated in the back or side of the room, physically separated from the class.
Unnecessary dependence	A student with a disability is hesitant to participate without paraprofessional direction, prompting, or cueing.
Interference with peer interaction	Paraprofessionals can create physical or symbolic barriers interfering with interactions between a student with disabilities and classmates.
Insular relationship	A student with a disability and paraprofessional do most everything together, to the exclusion of others (e.g., peers).
Feelings of stigmatization	A student with a disability expresses embarrassment/discomfort about having a paraprofessional because it makes him/her stand out in negative ways.
Limited access to competent instruction	Paraprofessionals are not always skilled in providing instruction. Some do the work for the students they support in an effort to keep up; this is a sign that instruction has not been adequately adapted.
Interference with teacher engagement	Teachers tend to be less involved when a student with a disability has a one-to-one paraprofessional because individual attention is already available to the student
Loss of personal control	When paraprofessionals do too much for the students with disabilities they may not exercise choices that are typical of other students
Feelings of persecution	Some students report that because they are constantly being watched by adults, their behavior is scrutinized differently; minor infractions that might not be noticed or addressed when done by other students result in consequences for them.
Provocation of problem behaviors	Some students with disabilities express their dislike of paraprofessional support by displaying undesirable behaviors (e.g., running away, foul language, aggression).
Risk of being bullied	Some students are teased or bullied because they are assigned a paraprofessional.

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teacher, special educator, or math specialist may better match the need.

Researchers from the Institute of Education at the University of London recently reported on a large-scale, longitudinal study called the DISS Project (Deployment and Impact of Support Staff). Much to their surprise, they found primarily negative relationships between the assignment of paraprofessionals and the academic achievement of students, including those with special needs, in math, English, and science. In other words, students who received additional academic support from paraprofessionals generally performed worse than those who did not, even when students' special needs were accounted for in their analyses.

Based on recording and analyzing the behaviors of teachers and paraprofessionals instructing students, the researchers were able to provide an explanation for their somewhat counterintuitive findings. They noted substantial quality differences between instruction provided by teachers versus paraprofessionals.

Teachers' interactions with students were more likely to promote linguistic and cognitive engagement because they linked current tasks to students' prior knowledge, spent more time explaining concepts, and provided appropriate feedback. Conversely, paraprofessional interactions with students tended to be more focused on task completion, often without ensuring that learning and understanding had occurred. Paraprofessional interactions with students were further

compromised because they were more likely to offer inaccurate or confusing explanations, unnecessarily prompt students, and supply answers. In other words, paraprofessionals should not be expected to function interchangeably as if they were teachers or special educators.

These UK researchers also replicated a variety of findings consistent with US-based research:

- Paraprofessionals were asked to undertake roles for which they were underqualified or inadequately prepared.
- When paraprofessionals were assigned to students who have special educational needs, classroom teachers tended to be less engaged with those students.
- Teachers were inadequately prepared to supervise paraprofessionals.
- Planning time between teachers and paraprofessionals was inadequate.
- Paraprofessionals inappropriately became the primary instructors of some students with disabilities.

A small amount of research indicates that paraprofessionals can be trained to implement academic and social interventions under specific conditions.

- Instruction provided by paraprofessionals should be supplemental, not primary or exclusive.
- Paraprofessionals should work from plans developed by teachers or special educators based on evidence-based approaches. This ensures that paraprofessionals are not put in the inappropriate position of



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- making curricular or instructional decisions.
- Paraprofessionals should be trained to properly implement these teacher-developed plans.
- Paraprofessionals should be trained to constructively manage and respond to challenging student behaviors that might arise during instruction.
- Paraprofessionals should receive ongoing monitoring and supervision from qualified professionals—not be left to fend for themselves (as they too often are).

The problem is that these logical conditions for the successful use of paraprofessionals are not the rule, more typically they are the exception. For decades the US literature has repeatedly reported three persistent problems related to paraprofessional utilization: lack of role clarity, inadequate training, and insufficient supervision. Standard ap-

proaches to these problems have not always yielded desired outcomes.

Role clarification efforts have sometimes resulted in paraprofessionals being inappropriately assigned tasks that are more properly the responsibility of teachers and special educators (for example, planning, adapting, primary instruction, communication with families). Contemporary role clarification efforts acknowledge that schools can consider appropriate roles for paraprofessionals only after the roles of teachers and special educators have first been appropriately established.

Others have fallen prey to the training trap. This occurs when paraprofessionals receive virtually any, even a scant, amount or level of training, and then professionals unadvisedly relinquish ever more instructional responsibility for students with disabilities to them based on the questionable reasoning, "Now they are trained!"

Table 2. Alternatives to overreliance on paraprofessionals

CATEGORY OF ALTERNATIVES	BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF ALTERNATIVES
Resource Reallocation	Trading in paraprofessional positions to hire additional special education teachers provides increased access to more highly qualified personnel.
Co-teaching	Teachers and special educators work together in the same classroom. To maintain a naturally occurring number of students special needs, it may be necessary to share a special educator across three or four classes.
Building Capacity of Teachers	Teacher capacity can be built in a variety of areas (e.g., expectations of teacher engagement with students with disabilities, differentiated instruction, universal design, response to instruction, positive behavior supports, assistive technology, information about current evidence-based practices).
Paperwork Paraprofessionals	Paraprofessionals may be assigned clerical paperwork duties that free time for special educators to collaborate with teachers and work directly with students.
Improving Working Conditions for Special Educators and Classroom Teachers	Special educator conditions can be improved by reducing caseload size, the grade range covered, and the number teachers with whom special educators interact. Explore changes in class size, increase availability of special educator and related supports, schedule coordinated meeting times, and provide access to adapted materials, to improve conditions for teachers.
Peer Supports	Encourage peer support strategies that provide natural ways to support students with disabilities and may also benefit students without disabilities.
Self-Determination	Teach self-determination skills and provide opportunities for students with disabilities to have a voice in determining their own supports.
Paraprofessional Pools	Establishing a small pool of skilled paraprofessionals (or one floating position for a small school) allows for their temporary assignments to address specific, short-term needs.
Fading Plans	Developing a plan to fade paraprofessional support as much as possible can lead to greater student independence and more natural supports.
Dually Certified Teachers	Hire teachers who are certified in both general and special education to provide enhanced personnel capacity for all students

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Providing appropriate supports

Many busy teachers and special educators report finding paraprofessionals helpful; what remains questionable is whether paraprofessionals are the most appropriate support to help students. In too many schools paraprofessionals have become the primary mechanism for supporting students with disabilities in the classroom, rather than one among an array of potential supports that are more deliberately matched to meet students' needs.

By shifting some of the responsibility for students from teachers to paraprofessionals, schools may experience a false sense of accomplishment that a service delivery challenge has been solved. Even though some pressure on teachers may have been relieved, inadvertently this relief too often delays attention to addressing the real root problems in regular and special education service delivery. Project EVOLVE and Project EVOLVE Plus at the University of Vermont's Center on Disability & Community Inclusion have been addressing these issues by exploring alternatives to overreliance on paraprofessionals (see Table 2) and researching practices designed to develop coherent models of inclusive special education service delivery.

So, as an educational team member considering potential supports for students with a variety of special educational needs, be careful not to jump too quickly to adding a paraprofessional as a solution. Yes, clarify their roles, train them better, and provide adequate supervision—but don't expect these steps to solve the problems—for they

are necessary but not sufficient.

While assigning a paraprofessional might provide temporary relief, more often than not the perceived need for a paraprofessional is merely a symptom of more foundational issues in how general and special education services are provided. The team needs to examine its school and classroom level practices and consider alternatives to overreliance on paraprofessionals that are individually suited to each school, classroom, and student.

Be wary of decision-making models that promise to help your team decide if paraprofessional support is needed. Often these tools focus too extensively, often exclusively, on the characteristics and behaviors of the student who has special needs and less so, sometimes not at all, on the characteristics of the school, classroom, curriculum, instruction, and home-school collaboration. It is often adjustments in these aspects of schooling that can help students with ADHD, and a wider range of students with special educational needs, succeed in regular classes. Ultimately educational teams need to make sure they have worked together to provide the kind of help that helping is all about! **A**

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