

News and Notes



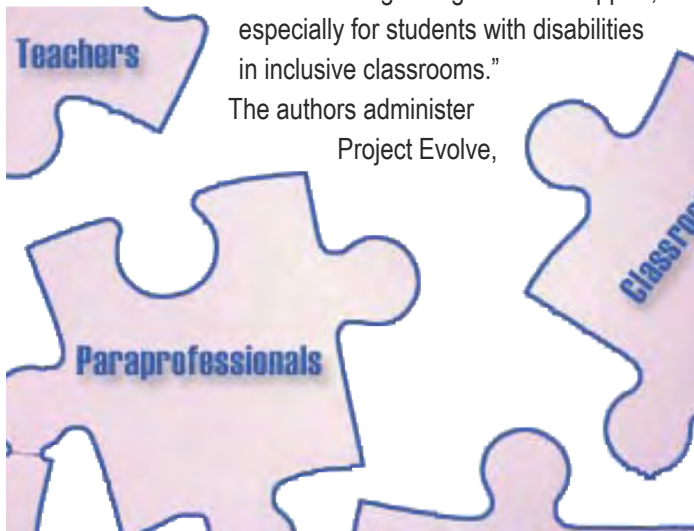
Family Center
on Technology
and Disability

Paraprofessionals and AT: Refitting the Puzzle Pieces

In this Issue...

“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,” write Michael Giangreco, Ph.D. and Stephen Broer, Psy.D. of the University of Vermont in their essay, *The Paraprofessional Conundrum: Why We Need Alternative Support Strategies*. They add, “Assigning paraprofessionals to classrooms or individual students has become a dominant and growing model of support, especially for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms.”

The authors administer
Project Evolve,



which investigates the role of classroom paraprofessionals and advocates changed roles for “paras.”

Is this model effective? The authors think not. “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.”

While they advocate strengthening supports for a profession highly regarded for its skilled, enthusiastic and dedicated practitioners, they also urge vigilance “to ensure that we are not inadvertently perpetuating a double standard whereby students with disabilities receive the bulk of their instruction from [unlicensed] paraprofessionals while students without disabilities have ongoing access to qualified professional educators.”

This issue examines the changing role of paras in the nation’s schools, and the influence of assistive technology in refitting the pieces of the paraprofessional puzzle.

1 Mary Beth Doyle, Ph.D Speaks

2 Paraprofessionals and AT: Interdependence Is the Goal
An Interview with Mary Beth Doyle, Ph.D., Paraprofessional Specialist

9 Resources

12 Knowledge Network Members

Mary Beth Doyle, Ph.D Speaks

She suggests that the traditional goal of independence as a desired outcome for children with significant disabilities is off the mark. Instead, she declares that interdependence ought to be the goal for children with disabilities. Inclusion-oriented schools provide the ideal settings to teach students to be interdependent. "It is within these contexts that children and youth learn that we do, in fact, need each other in order to live full and interesting lives. Interdependence affords us the opportunities to have relationships that matter."

"General education and special education teachers, paraprofessionals, foster grandparents and other volunteers can provide a sense of community that is palpable and real. True experiences of needing each other- after all, isn't that the ultimate goal of each of our lives?"

In this issue we are focusing on the roles and responsibilities of the unlicensed paraprofessionals whose roles are changing to accommodate new teaching, technological and budgetary realities. Their work in relationship to supporting students who use AT devices is critical.

Regarding the role of AT in the evolving relationships between paras, students with significant disabilities and general and special education teachers, Dr. Doyle insists that questions about AT's role in this equation are "the wrong questions." The better question, she declares, is "What is it that kids with significant disabilities need in order to enhance or improve the quality of their lives, their relationships, their life outcomes and support them in attaining their IEP goals?"

She adds, "If we look at kids' needs first, particularly those with significant disabilities, it is not unusual for AT to be one of the things kids most need in order to meet their education and life goals."

If AT is identified as a facilitator to help children with disabilities achieve their objectives, she continues, the next question is, "in order to maximize and use their AT, what additional support do they require?"

From that question, she explains, others flow, such as:

- Are there ways for their peers to help them with their AT devices?
- Are there ways the classroom educator and special educator can help with their devices?

- Do I, as a classroom teacher, require an extra pair of hands in my classroom in order to facilitate a child's use of his/her AT device?

If the response to those questions is affirmative, she concludes, paras may be required. "However, if I as a classroom teacher need trained, licensed hands in order to make instructional decisions about the use of AT, then I'd choose licensed personnel. If however, it is a cluster of issues that can be handled with an extra pair of hands, then a para would be appropriate. That being said, I'd be very reluctant to train a cadre of paraprofessionals just to be AT experts."

Now an associate professor of education at Vermont's St. Michael's College, Dr. Doyle began her long attachment to children with significant disabilities during her high school years, as a volunteer. Her first teaching position after earning her bachelors degree in elementary and special education from New York's Buffalo State University was in a self-contained upstate New York classroom where she worked with students with profound disabilities.

Following a subsequent stint as a general education teacher, she returned to her first love: teaching children with significant and profound disabilities in a classroom environment.

Soon, however, she became frustrated with the constrains of a self-contained classroom and returned to Buffalo State to earn her Masters in special education and then a doctorate from the University of Minnesota in Educational Psychology. During her decade in Vermont, she has taught at Trinity College and was employed by the state's Department of Education before joining the St. Michael's faculty three years ago.

Supporting our interview with Dr. Doyle are resources to assist teachers, paraprofessionals and parents of children with significant disabilities in gaining further understanding of the para puzzle and how its pieces, including the AT piece, are being refitted to accommodate early 21st century realities. We also feature members of our Knowledge Network. The members spotlighted this month focus on various aspects of the role of assistive technology in the evolution of the paraprofessional. We invite you to contact these members for further information.

Please share this newsletter with other organizations, families and professionals who may benefit from it. We invite you to contact us at <http://www.fctd.info>. We welcome feedback, new members and all who contribute to our growing knowledge base.



Paraprofessionals and AT: Interdependence Is the Goal

An Interview with Mary Beth Doyle, Ph.D., Paraprofessional Specialist

It's an iconoclastic view she admits, but Dr. Mary Beth Doyle, Associate Professor of Education, St. Michael's College does not regard it as heresy.

"For so many years, the disabilities field has promoted independence as the desired outcome for children with disabilities. In my opinion, independence is such a limited outcome. It produces educational and social isolation at school and near total isolation later, in adulthood. Instead, I would suggest that a clear focus on interdependence whereby children, youth and adults assume from the beginning that we need each other in order to live healthy and productive lives. We could begin this journey by creating truly inclusive classrooms schools. Within these spaces, adults (i.e., teachers and paraprofessionals) would have clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Within these classrooms children with disabilities, even those with significant disabilities, would be active members of the community, not shielded from its potential for the enrichment of all kids. As for AT, it wouldn't be an end in itself, rather the use would facilitate connection and interdependence."



Yes, to AT Training for Paras, No to Isolation

For paraprofessionals (known to those in the field as "paras"), a move toward interdependence might require fewer one-on-one relationships with children who have significant disabilities, more reliance on assistive technology and more training for the general education and special education teachers as well the paraprofessional. Training would assist all to understand the use and benefits of AT as part of a community-oriented approach to truly inclusive teaching.

According to Dr. Doyle, the potential downside of more intensive training in AT for paras is that paras may become perceived only as AT experts who will remain attached to the same child for years, increasing the child's isolation. It would be more beneficial and efficient for all the children and adults in an inclusive classroom, she says, to become familiar and comfortable with AT use.

Attaining a higher level of AT cooperation in a classroom, she says, is more achievable today than ever. "Many people, par-

ticularly children, are comfortable with computers, whereas 15-20 years ago we were all nervous about them. An AT device is just like a computer or a notebook and therefore is not to be feared."

A community approach to AT use by children with disabilities is especially apt in inclusive classrooms, she says, where there are so many supports in addition to, or instead of, paras. In inclusive classrooms, "Kids who do not have significant disabilities can help students with disabilities with their AT devices." However, in a special education classroom, "where all the children have limited mobility and limited communication, the kids are less likely to have the skills to help each other. They are less likely to develop the skills of interdependence. Therefore, their isolation, and their dependence on adults, including paras, is more significant."

The Paras' Changing Role

In an inclusive classroom, given the acceleration of assistive and education technology options, the role of the paraprofessional is changing fast. "In the best case scenario, they're in the classrooms to support a range of students without being velcroed to individual students." Now paras view themselves as members of the teaching team "and are supposed to help support and facilitate the participation of specific children, but not to the exclusion of other children."

In the best-case scenario, says Dr. Doyle, licensed personnel – the classroom teacher and the special ed teacher – are responsible for the design of the instruction and for teaching the para what to do in order to follow through with those instructional decisions in the inclusive context.

The most challenging scenarios, however, are those in which paras "are given either the explicit or implicit message that they are the teachers of and responsible for the student with the disability. The para can then become isolated in that role."

This isolation is more likely to occur, Dr. Doyle explains, if the para is the only one in a classroom who knows how to use the AT. "That situation defeats the purpose of the AT and the purpose of inclusive ed because both paras and students become much more isolated within the regular classroom."

AT as a Community Connection

AT can be used as a connection among members of the classroom community "if multiple members know how to use it, if the para is trained in how to be the AT facilitator." Recent research, she notes, "says that if paras are specifically trained around the community concept the outcomes are much better."

AT training for the classroom team, she says, "needs to be both on-the-job training and then separate training for members of the

team, including the para, so that all team members are familiar with the equipment and are at ease with it. Such training also allows for the members of the team to communicate clearly about adult role expectations.”

As a special educator, Dr. Doyle explains, “In a general education classroom where I would be consulting, I would demonstrate for the general educator and the para how to use an AT device within the context of the activities in the inclusive classroom. Next, I’d have a series of short – 30-60 minutes – training sessions once a week for the first six weeks of school, during which we would do some rehearsal on how to use and on how to direct instruction around the AT.”

For those training sessions, “I’d include paras who are not in classrooms using AT devices as well, so that other paras in the school are also familiar with the equipment [and can serve] as a back-up. When the child goes on to the next grade level, the paras who will have him/her next will have already been exposed to the AT and won’t fear it.”

“Paras are among the best training audiences I’ve ever had,” Dr. Doyle emphasizes. “They are hungry for information. They are willing to do what it takes because they want to do a good job.”

Paras Are Not – and Should Not Be -- Teachers

Paras, she declared, “are not teacher wanna-bes, belying a common misperception that all paras aspire to be classroom teachers.” Paras, she adds, are told, “‘You’re such a good para, you ought to be a teacher.’ Well, we also need really good paras, and that’s what they have chosen to be.” However, she warns, “We must take care not to make them do others’ jobs. Often they are given the message that doing the jobs of others is part of their unofficial job description. That’s just not respectful.”

Although paras are not directly coerced into assuming a classroom teaching role per se for students with disabilities, they may as well be. “If a child is in a one-on-one situation with a para and no one has provided the para with the direction as to how to support and instruct, as well as what needs to be taught, then the para is put in the position of having to make it up.”

What’s shifting now, she notes, is that there is a developing awareness of how teachers’ and paras’ roles differ, and teachers are beginning to acknowledge that difference.

Paras, she adds, “are often given a student and special educators have caseloads that are huge. So if you have a special educator with a caseload that’s larger than that of a general educator, how do you provide the instruction students need, especially to students needing intense specialized instruction?” The model is flawed when that happens, she states. As a result, “paras’ anxiety is off the charts because they are trying to figure out what to do – and are held accountable as well – but they are not the teachers.” Ultimately, though, the teachers are responsible, not the paras, Dr. Doyle says. “The kids are the ones who are meeting – or not meeting – the IEP goals, depending on the quality of the instruction they’re receiving.”

What’s shifting now, she notes, is that there is a developing awareness of how teachers’ and paras’ roles differ, and teachers are beginning to acknowledge that difference.

Teachers now say, “If it would not be OK for one of my students without a disability to receive all his/her support and direction from an unlicensed person, then it’s not OK for my children with disabilities.” That’s the rule of thumb Dr. Doyle employs with her teacher education undergraduate and graduate students. “I tell them, ‘Every decision you have to make you have to ask yourself, ‘Would it be okay if my non-disabled 15-year-old spends all of her/his time with a para?’ And the answer is, of course, it would not be okay.”

The Solution: Teaming

The solution, she says, is improved teaming. “Teaming is the simple solution to how we determine the way adults can best collaborate to create a classroom that’s inclusive.” One of the ways to achieve the needed level of collaboration is through differentiated instruction and universal design, she explains.

Says, Dr. Doyle, “We need to be asking, ‘What are the instructional outcomes? What are the goals for all the kids in the class? If a child has severe disabilities, what are his/her goals? How will we meet them?’”

The explicit conversation, she says, is the place to start. “Then we determine how we’ll meet those goals.” For example, “Say a student is using a voice output device to meet a communication goal. If the classroom teacher is aware of that, and least intrusive prompts are being used to support the child, then we can be much more explicit about telling the para, ‘In this reading group, this is how I want you to support Johnny.’” Some of that support, she notes, might be one-on-one but other support may not be one-on-one. “The point is, teachers are providing and designing the instruction, and the paras follow through.”

In Dr. Doyle's experience, "We're past trying to determine the roles and responsibilities of individual paras. There's much more teaching and training now around paras, so refining the team concept is the logical next step. I'm hopeful about the direction in which teachers are going."

Disquieting Research Results: Isolation – and No Inclusion at All

Recently, Dr. Doyle participated in conducting a qualitative study with Dr.s Broer and Giangreco. The focus of the study was to ask young adults (i.e., 19-29 years of age) with moderate intellectual disabilities about their experiences of having had a one-to-one paraprofessional throughout their public school years. The reference for the study is: Broer, S.M., Doyle, M.B., & Giangreco, M.F. (2005). Perspectives of students with intellectual disabilities about their experiences with paraprofessional support. *Exceptional Children*, 71(4), 415-430.

"It was the most heartbreaking research I've ever done," she remarks. "These young adults with moderate mental retardation all talked about the isolation they felt in school, that they had no other friends, that the para was in charge."

The research, she notes, had four themes: The young people identified the paras as their 1) teacher, 2) mother, 3) friend and 4) protector. "This was because professionals (i.e., teachers and administrators) and parents at that time weren't aware of other ways to create inclusive communities. What they thought was, 'If my kid is in a general ed class, I'll have a para assigned to her/him. As long as we have the para, that para will buffer and protect the student.'"

The outcome of the research: "These young people felt that they were isolated within the school experience. Certainly that wasn't the intention of the school personnel and family. There was no inclusion at all. These young people didn't know how to be interdependent."

Those who were interviewed "told us that when they had interactions with kids without disabilities the paras would interrupt. When these kids were in trouble, or something happened, the para would be right there. These young adults told us that they were never allowed to get into trouble because the paras' job was to keep them on the straight and narrow. The young people did not have the chance to get away with things. It was pretty disturbing."

Dr. Doyle continues, "Think what adolescents get away with where adults turn a blind eye because these things are part of being an adolescent. The young adults that we interviewed never had that opportunity. Now as adults who have exited from a system where the goal was to make them as independent as

possible, we have found that the focus was on exactly the wrong goal."

Independence, she emphasizes, "isn't a goal for anybody. Most of us without a disability live with someone else. We have jobs where we work with others. We have friends. The folks in our study had no friends. Most live at home. There were a couple of young people who did not live at home, but they were very isolated. Only one had a full-time job, and he hated it. So the outcomes weren't good for these young people who were each very competent, nice young people."

Like Groundhog Day

Dr. Doyle says she regards teaching as akin to throwing a birthday party. "When you're an elementary school teacher you have 25-30 students all day. If you're a high school teacher you have 125 students passing through your classroom daily. With each group you're having a birthday party. Most of us with children would never have a birthday party involving 25 children. Yet during a school day, every teacher needs to keep all 25 or 125 happy, fed, hydrated, rested, and get them outside for recess, and they have to meet the standards, right before we test all of them. One adult will be responsible for that from 8 AM until 2:30 PM. When that party's over, they go home and prepare for the next day – forget, for the moment that they have their own family – when they'll have a party all over again. It's like the movie, *Groundhog Day*, in which the same day is replayed over and over non-stop. How many of us would choose that?"



She continues, "We keep putting these pressures on teachers to do more and differently but we never change or examine the fundamental structures of schooling. What do we really want for kids? And how do we make that happen? I think in this era we have asked them to do so much that they're exhausted."

For children with disabilities and the paras who assist them, AT is part of the solution, not part of the problem. Acquiring the AT, however, is part of the problem.

"In one school district I work in now, I can easily get AT devices that are necessary and relevant. In a rural school, however, where there is extreme poverty, getting those same devices would be much more difficult, thanks to property tax-related funding issues. There's no consistency, district-to-district."

"We Need Each Other"

Declares Dr. Doyle, with tongue only partly embedded in cheek, "Achieving world peace is at the top of my personal agenda. One

of the ways we get there is by acknowledging that we need each other and we actually teach our children to be interdependent. For independence to be the goal, “to make it on your own, that has to be one of the saddest outcomes for any of us – when you’re so independent that you don’t have an impact on someone else’s life, what good is it?”

Interdependence, of course, is her antidote. “If it was my classroom, I would have a frequent phrase: ‘Teach kids to ask someone else for help before asking the teacher.’ We do that with kids without disabilities. We need to generalize that concept to include kids with disabilities as well, to be able to say, ‘Johnny, ask Joe to help you program your device.’”

She gazes at a photo of a former student who has significant disabilities. “He was using a Mac Switch as an output device. His goal was to activate the switch, not necessarily to learn the content. Somebody had to program the switch to have voice output related to the content. The other kids did that, his non-disabled classmates. We didn’t need the paras to do that. We needed a middle school boy who had a voice similar to Eli’s voice if Eli could speak.”

“We’d say, ‘Shannon, this is your responsibility. Put in three answers to these questions so Eli has something to contribute.’ We don’t need a classroom teacher to do that. What we need are paras and classroom teachers who can remind the kids that they can help each other and to make it no big deal.”

Children Are Eager to Help

Children, she has found, are eager to help, if they know how. “A general or special educator can teach them how to use the devices. If paras have been taught to do it, they can fulfill that teaching task as well. But the paras would have to be taught by a licensed professional.”



Research has taught her, she says, that if children use AT devices without any fanfare, adults step away. “We’ve learned from research that as long as adults are around kids with disabilities, other kids shy away. As adults, we need to back off and allow kids in, expect them in and, in fact, invite them in, so that they know there is a place and a role for them. Then let the kids figure it out for themselves.”

Getting children to work together on their own “wouldn’t be at all difficult.” In fact, she remarks, “it would be a huge relief for teachers and adults and would give kids the opportunity to step up to the plate on their own. Kids want to do that.”

With AT devices, she points out, “kids are so interested in technology anyway, that if we used AT devices in a more inviting manner they would respond positively. For example, if kids are doing a group project on volcanoes, part of their demonstration of mastery might involve an AT device. That would be very cool.”

The Coolness Factor of AT

The coolness factor of AT makes devices increasingly attractive to all children, those with disabilities and those without, enhancing AT’s familiarity. The University of Vermont’s Center on Disability and Community Inclusion, she says, is beginning its second summer of a project called Camp Gizmo. The project’s goal is to help people become much more familiar with AT.

Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs) around the U.S. can also be effective. “The centers are great places to have AT lending libraries. That is a concept that ought to be much more widespread. It would be fantastic if schools had lending libraries where there are different types of devices. I know of no schools that do this, but I think that is the way to go. Teachers need to have these devices at their fingertips so that they can experiment. These devices in a lending library would be another teaching resource. Nothing I’m suggesting is rocket science. We’re not talking about making huge shifts, except when we talk about how schools are organized and teachers are supported.”

“You Are This Child’s Shadow”

An article entitled *Be Careful What You Wish For: Five Reasons to Be Concerned About the Assignment of Individual Paraprofessionals* (http://journals.sped.org/EC/Archive_Articles/VOL_37NO.5MayJune2005_TEC_Giangreco37-5.pdf) decries the increasing use of paras as one-on-one aids. “When we assign one adult to one child, we give something up,” Dr. Doyle asserts. “Part of what we give up is the opportunity to create interdependence. I would much prefer that in a general ed classroom, when there is a child with significant disabilities, that we make the most judicious and efficient use of paras.”

She adds, “If we look at the entirety of a classroom and determine, that by the nature and characteristics of all of the children, that the teacher needs an extra pair of hands to facilitate learning here.” In that classroom, she declares, “we’re going to have a para.”

Such an approach, she claims, would help decrease the over-reliance on paras. “It would decrease the assignment of one-on-ones, because after we assign the one-on-ones, the paras want to do the best possible job. Part of doing the best job they can is doing everything they can for that one student. Through the research, we know that they then can get in the way of interdependence. Unintentionally, they’re getting in the way of relationships.”

In some instances, she says, paras have been told, 'You are this child's shadow.' 'We're setting paras up for the wrong outcome,' Dr. Doyle insists. "Instead we ought to assign them to clusters of kids or classrooms and give them more freedom. Paras appreciate that approach, but only if it is made clear to them who is responsible for what." The approach, she adds, "provides them with more diversity throughout their day. It keeps them more engaged and more interested."

She expects that this approach will be implemented throughout Vermont. "One of the things that's different about Vermont is that when kids here have disabilities, the question is never whether or not the student can be in a general ed school. That's the starting point, which, according to the law, is what should happen." From the beginning, she adds, "there's an assumption of belonging, of being a member of the community who is entitled to attend the community school. Kids here go to their neighborhood school. In terms of support and creating a sense of community, teachers have been effective at creating one." In situations where students do need a more restrictive setting, Vermont teachers then step in with families to make these important decisions.

The Over-Reliance Phase

Like many other states, Vermont also experienced a phase during which paras were over-relied upon. "It seemed that every student with significant disabilities in a general ed classroom was assigned a one-on-one para," Dr. Doyle recalls. Now, however, that approach is being regarded much more critically. "What's being examined more closely is whether or not a student or teacher actually needs a para and then answering that question very directly."

"Vermont teachers are becoming much more thoughtful about the role and training of paras," she says. "Paraprofessional training in this state has exploded. Marvelous work is being done here. That can happen nationwide as well.

When a teacher requests a para, she notes, the following question is often asked, "To do what? What exactly will the para do that will move the student toward his/her goals and value-life outcomes?" That approach, she asserts, can be taken in every classroom, in every district not just in Vermont but also throughout the country.

"Vermont teachers are becoming much more thoughtful about the role and training of paras," she says. "Paraprofessional training in this state has exploded. Marvelous work is being done here. That can happen nationwide as well. No Child Left Behind almost

mandates that approach." In Vermont, she adds, para training is relevant to the actual work of paraprofessionals.

"I did training a couple of weeks ago in one of our school districts," she remembers. "I was delighted and surprised by how well the paras were trained. There are no more one-shot training sessions anymore in Vermont. Training for paras is ongoing. Training, combined with taking a more defined approach to the para's role, has kept the paras' numbers under control in Vermont."

For kids using AT devices, a para may be required only on an intermittent basis. For instance, you might assign a para who knows how to use a certain type of device to a student who is generalizing his use of that device – meaning that he uses it well in one class but not so well in another class, or he used proficiently in the cafeteria but not in the classroom. In that case, you might want a para in a particular classroom to help the student generalize his use of the device." She notes, one of the para's main goals should be to help the kids without disabilities support [the student who needs the AT] in a general ed classroom.

Vermont Turns a Corner

In Vermont, the use of paras has become more judicious and efficient, Dr. Doyle asserts. "We think we've turned a corner in the past couple of years. Critical, thoughtful questions are being asked by special ed administrators and teachers about the use of paras."

At the most basic level, she continues, "teachers here in Vermont and around the nation want what's best for kids and are asking the right questions." However, she cautions, "depending on the pressures of outside influences, teachers may or may not be able to ask those questions because whatever the most pressing issue is has to get their attention first."

Regarding AT, she adds, "it's important that AT devices not be viewed only as specialized devices, bought through catalogs, that are always very expensive. Once these devices become more commonplace in our communities, people can begin looking around their communities for ubiquitous low- or no-tech devices that serve the same function."

She cites talking photo albums as an example. "They're fantastic. Initially I thought they would be great for use with people who have Alzheimer's. The next obvious link was using them in a classroom. Kids can easily record their own voices, and their voices can be around the content they've been learning. That's an AT device that kids can use in a classroom that would facilitate parents being informed of what happened in class." In science class, for instance, "you can present five concepts with five matching photos. The kids without disabilities program this in.

The idea is to look at everything that can be used as classroom material that can support and include a variety of kids." Within this framework, AT devices become vehicles for communication, connection and interdependence.

Don't Eliminate Paras; Employ Their Skills More Effectively

This concept, she insists, can induce paras to begin to look much more creatively at how they perform their jobs. "If we talk to paras about curriculum and instruction, if we provide them with the teaching, paras become actively engaged with higher level thinking and teaching because we are giving them those skills." This, she says, provides teachers with another person on the team who is always engaged.

"I'd never advocate eliminating paras," Dr. Doyle emphatically concludes. "I believe they can be a very important part of the classroom team. Their enthusiasm, dedication and skill are infectious and vital – but we need to more effectively determine how they can most efficiently fit into the teaching team and what exactly their specific function will be in a changing and more challenging classroom environment."

we were in so far over our heads. We were so scared. And then after 9/11, the world changed. Travel habits changed. We changed too. We rejiggered our numbers and our bank loans. There were a couple of instances during that period when I said to Tucker, 'Why don't we just sell it all and I'll go get a 'real' job and your dad will get a real job and we'll start over.'

Tucker, however was adamant in his desire to keep going. He replied, "But Mom, what about all the kids who need this camp?"

"I hope we're making a difference," she concludes. "You have to have a passion for that to make these camps work as they should, for the kids."



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RESOURCES

Articles

Paraprofessionals in the Classroom: What Role Can They Play?

By Patti McVay

Disability Solutions - May/June 1998

Although written eight years ago, the article describes the basic roles that paraprofessionals continue to play in the classroom, even after the profusion of assistive technology that was unanticipated in 1998. According to the author, paras commonly assist with the following tasks:

- Leading small group instruction designed by the teacher
- Gathering materials
- Providing assistance for personal care and other physical needs
- Assisting students in completing directions given by the teacher
- Facilitating interactions between students
- Adapting lessons under teacher guidance
- Executing other, often unseen, but very important tasks for the classroom community

By law, paras are not permitted to:

- Write programs without supervision of certified personnel
- Create new, alternative instruction without direction from the teacher or other certified personnel
- Implement "behavior" ideas without teacher direction
- Take complete responsibility for any students

The author concludes, "If a student can be successful in the classroom once peer supports are developed, the role of the paraprofessional changes. For some students, the paraprofessional will continue to be a necessity. However, their direct interaction with the student should lessen over time as natural supports and accommodations are developed and the student learns the classroom routines."

<http://www.disabilitysolutions.org/pdf/3-1.pdf>

Forum: Software for Special Needs

By Roger Rachow

Scholastic Administrator - March 2003

Often educators do not consider children with learning disabilities who are reading below grade level to be eligible for AT, but eligible they are. For the past five years, according to author Roger Rachow, several school districts in southwestern Iowa have been using AT to help learning disabled students grades 5-12 reading two or more years below grade level to.

He writes, "We're not using specially-designed keyboards or chairs; we're using software. And we've found it exceedingly helpful." Previously, these students were removed from general education classes and placed in self-contained resource rooms with paraprofessionals who would read aloud textbooks and tests to them, "but it wasn't working as successfully as we had hoped. Instead of the students gaining more understanding of the reading process, they were becoming frustrated, exhibiting behavioral problems at school or, in the case of high school students, dropping out of school altogether."

An AT grant helped acquire Kurzweil 3000 software, "which allowed us to digitize textbooks that could be placed on a CD for teachers to use in their classrooms with students." Once the CD was opened on a computer, the software was designed to bring a textbook page up on screen the same way students would see it on their desks. Teachers and paras helped the students refine their study skills to become active readers and reengage in core-content text. The author suggests that this solution has enabled these students and the school to adhere to NCLB standards, with children reading at or above grade level.

<http://www.scholastic.com/administrator/march03/articles.asp?article=forum>

Perspectives of Paraprofessionals Working with Children Using Augmentative and Alternative Communications (AAC)

By Julie Rebelowski

University of Southern Connecticut - 2002

This study investigated paraprofessionals' perceptions of their own roles with students who used alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) systems in schools. The paraprofessionals were surveyed via email regarding their evaluations of and use of various AAC systems. Surveyed questions measured level of training, feelings, barriers and facilitators for AAC involvement. Results indicated that while paras perceive AAC to be efficacious, functional daily use of AAC is minimal. Survey respondents reported feeling responsible for AAC implementation and that current training trends ought to be revised to better serve paras and students.

http://www.southernct.edu/departments/graduatestudies/fel-lows/rebelowski_julie.doc

Fewer Paraprofessionals and More Teachers and Therapists in Educational Programs for Students with Significant Disabilities

By Lou Brown, Kim Farrington, Tracy Knight, Charlotte Ross, Michele Ziegler

University of Wisconsin - 2000

The authors write, "As more students with disabilities function in integrated settings, they will need less of the services provided by paraprofessionals and more of those provided by highly trained teachers and therapists. Thus it is reasonable to assign a paraprofessional to a school, a team or a class, but only in the most extreme circumstances should one be assigned to a student." The authors conclude, "The quality of education a student with disabilities receives should not be dependent on the effectiveness of those who have the lowest status and the least training of any professionals in the school system."

<http://www.education.wisc.edu/rpse/faculty/lbrown/workingrtfs/Para.rtf>

Guides

The Virginia Paraprofessional Guide to Supervision and Collaboration with Paraprofessionals

Virginia Department of Education
June 2005

"We believe that the climate and quality of a school and the success of its students is greatly affected by the relationships among the adults who work in and operate the school." Those are the opening words of a 69-page document that provides a working framework describing the role of paraprofessionals in the Virginia public schools with the hope that the information it contains will help create programs for training, preparation and recruiting of high-quality professionals and enhance the Commonwealth's paraprofessional workforce. The report states, "the increasing use of instructional support staff and other paraprofessionals and the corresponding expansion of their duties and responsibilities have created the need for increased professional development of these critically important members of the school community."

The report estimates that there are 500,000-700,000 paraprofessionals nationwide performing a variety of instructional and non-instructional roles, from helping students in classrooms, supervising playgrounds and acting as health assistants. This guide may be used by paras as a tool for self-assessment and identifying professional development needs. A suggested schedule for implementation includes an initial review of relevant competencies at the beginning of the school year and updating them regularly to reflect professional development opportunities, continuing education courses and on-the-job experiences.

<http://www.vak12ed.edu/VDOE/sped/paraprofessional-guide.pdf>

The Paraprofessional's Guide to the Inclusive Classroom: Working as a Team, Second Edition

By Mary Beth Doyle, Ph.D.
Brookes Publishing - 2002
\$29.95

This accessible and jargon-free, updated handbook for training paraprofessionals includes strategies for building inclusive classrooms as well as current information on legislation and the family's role in education. There are new chapters on classroom management and behavioral supports. The second edition includes:

- Field-tested activities and guidance on differentiating roles, developing schedules, planning lessons and routines, creating IEPs and curricular adaptations, and encouraging positive behavior
- New case studies in which paraprofessionals and educators reflect on how good communication and teamwork help them create successful inclusive classrooms
- Improved forms that help paraprofessionals and educators clarify responsibilities, generate student profiles, reach consensus on crucial classroom issues, and rate student participation in daily classroom routines

<http://www.brookespublishing.com/store/books/doyle-5389/index.htm>

Roles for Educational Paraprofessionals in Effective Schools: An Idea Book

2003

This resource is provided by the U.S. Department of Education, both online and in hard copy. The short "idea book" provides information and offers thoughtful ideas to educators on the role that can be productively played by paraprofessionals in schools. It can be viewed online at <http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/e-resources/ebooks/records/edg0503.html>

Blogs

Special Education Law Blog: Analyzing the Role of Paraprofessionals

By Charles P. Fox
2006

Written by a Chicago attorney who is the parent of a child with disabilities, as well as guest authors, this blog is a special education legal resource dealing with practical advocacy advice as well as developments in state and federal statutes and regulations.

Mr. Fox writes, "Paraprofessionals play an essential role for many children with disabilities under IDEA. Personally, my son has had a great paraprofessional for many years. She has had

just the right balance of being supportive and backing off. She has been an advocate for him and a team player (in the non-negative sense) with other school personnel. In a word, she has been crucial and a wonderful part of my son's education.

http://specialedlaw.blogs.com/home/2006/04/analyzing_the_r.html

Research Projects

Project Evolve

Center on Disability and Community Inclusion
University of Vermont

The Project Evolve model is a team-planning process that evaluates service delivery practices supporting students with disabilities in general education classes. According to Project Evolve, "the need for a model builds on recent research that has described significant problems with existing service delivery support strategies that relay heavily, sometimes inappropriately, on paraprofessionals to deliver educational services."

Despite the absence of efficacy data, Project Evolve continues, the increasing utilization of paraprofessionals has become a prominent delivery model for students with disabilities. "Although recent studies have highlighted numerous concerns about this approach, viable service delivery alternatives have not been described in the literature, implemented on a broad scale or adequately evaluated." Project Evolve aims to help fill that void by contributing descriptive, practical, and evaluative information and strategies for school personnel, policy makers, parents and self-advocates to use in tailoring supports and building capacity to educate students with disabilities in general education settings. The project's findings will be shared nationally and statewide through a coalition of advisory and dissemination partners.

<http://www.uvm.edu/~cdc/evolve/abstractobjectives.html>

Books

Making Connections

By Peggy Locke and Jackie Levin
AbleNet, Inc. - 2000

This book provides educators, paraprofessionals, parents and others with basic information on voice output communication. Making Connections features tips on for choosing a communication device, selecting messages, creating communication opportunities and providing outcomes. To order Making Connections, contact:

AbleNet, Inc.

1081 10th Ave. SE

Minneapolis, MN 55414-1312

<http://www.ablenetinc.com/cart/Expand.asp?ProductCode=2-MC>

Videos

The Training Video Series for the Paraprofessional
National Professional Resources - 2001

Price: \$399

Consisting of three tapes, this series focuses on the role of the paraprofessional in an inclusive setting, suggestions for the responsibility of monitoring student progress and providing optimal, appropriate support and ways for paraprofessionals to best relate to general education teachers.

<http://www.nprinc.com/parapro/vtvk.htm>

FCTD tiene una nueva sección de recursos en Español.

Se pueden encontrar recursos sobre la tecnología asistencial incluyendo:

- La Guía Familiar sobre la Tecnología Asistencial
- Informativos sobre la Tecnología Asistencial
- Historias de Éxito

Visite:

http://www.fctd.info/resources/index_es.php



The FCTD website (www.fctd.info)
has a new **SPANISH** section.

Many AT Resources are available in Spanish including:

- The Family Information Guide to Assistive Technology
- AT Fact Sheets
- AT Success Stories

Visit:

http://www.fctd.info/resources/index_es.php

KNOWLEDGE NETWORK MEMBERS

National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals

NCRP's mission is to provide technical assistance and share information about policy questions, management practices, regulatory procedures, and training models in the paraprofessional field. The goal is to help administrators and staff-developers improve the recruitment, deployment, supervision, and career development of paraprofessionals.



Founded in 1979 on the campus of Utah State University by Anna Lou Pickett, NCRP connects "paras" by organizing an annual, national conference. The organization has long maintained a newsletter, "New Directions," as well as a database of issues, models, programs and people. Technical assistance and training are available through the center on a fee-for-service basis.

The National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals is now under the direction of Dr. Marilyn Likins of Utah State and Dr. Teri Wallace of the University of Minnesota.

For more information, please contact:

Utah State University
6526 Old Main Hill
Logan, Utah 84322-6526
Phone: (435) 797-7272

<http://www.nrcpara.org/>

Contact: Dr. Marilyn Likins, Co-Director

Partners in Assistive Technology Training and Services

The Partners in Assistive Technology Training and Services (PATTs) program addresses the continuing education needs of professionals and paraprofessionals in assistive technology related disciplines, including physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech and language pathology, special education, and rehabilitation counseling.



PATTs is offered by Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute, accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. It offers state and nationally accredited programs in nursing, occupational therapy assistant, physical therapist assistant and speech language pathology assistant. PATTs provides

distance learning courses through the Blackboard course software utility.

PATTs is a collaborative endeavor of Western Carolina Center's Comprehensive Assistive Technology Services and Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute. The original development was funded by a grant from the Kate B. Reynolds Ability Program II of the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust.

For more information on PATTs, contact:

Partners in Assistive Technology Training and Services
Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute
Hudson, NC

Phone: (828) 726-2241

Contact: Elaine Lockhart, Vice President, Corporate and Continuing Education

<http://www.patts.org/>

Center on Disability and Community Inclusion (University of Vermont): Paraeducator and Supervisor Training Project

This project of the CDCI addresses ways to improve training of paraeducators to meet the needs of children with disabilities in general education classrooms. The project provides model pre-service and in-service programs, aimed at both paraeducators and the teachers who supervise them. The project's training model offers entry-level and advanced training for paras and supervisory training for teachers to be field-tested and evaluated in three delivery formats: distance learning, internet, and group instruction.

Project design includes:

- Development and field-testing of entry-level paraeducator and supervisor curricula
- Development and field-testing of advanced paraeducator training curricula
- National validation of all curricula
- Final field-testing and revision of all curricula and delivery formats to develop a "blueprint" for paraeducator and supervisor training that can be effectively replicated nationally within a state's own planning efforts

For more information, contact:

Paraeducator and Supervisor Training Project
Center on Disability and Community Inclusion
University of Vermont
Burlington, VT 05405

Phone: (802) 656-3131

<http://www.uvm.edu/~cdcip/paraprep/>

The Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium

Founded 15 years ago, the consortium advises the Minnesota Department of Education on



activities that prepare, support and recognize the state's paraprofessional workforce. The group consists of about 40 professionals, including teachers and paraprofessionals from Minnesota school districts as well as officials from state agencies, unions, and institutions of higher education.

The organization's website provides resources that contain advice about working with students with disabilities and how to help them feel included within the general education classroom. A section on the website is dedicated to information for paraprofessionals about the No Child Left Behind Act. The website also features a variety of professional development tools, including:

- Minnesota Professional Guide, which provides teambuilding advice and strategies
- Strategies for Paraprofessionals Who Support Individuals with Disabilities, a booklet providing information for paraprofessionals who teach children with special needs

For more information, please contact:

1500 Highway 36 West Roseville, MN 55113

<http://ici2.umn.edu/para/>

Phone: (651) 582-8659

Contact: Barbara Stahl, Barbara.stahl@state.mn.us

American Federation of Teachers: The Paraprofessional and School-Related Personnel

The Paraprofessional and School-Related Personnel (PSRP) division of the American Federation of Teachers represents more than 300,000 school support staff in K-12 districts, colleges and universities. This group includes any employees who work in a school, not including administrative staff and teachers. Special education assistants can be members of this professional organization.



AFT: PSRP provides guidance and advice on new programs and services for their members. Their website offers many resources related to being a paraprofessional and information on the various types of paraprofessional positions in the school system. They also sponsor events and conferences.

For more information, please contact:

555 New Jersey Avenue, NW Washington, DC 20001

Phone: (202) 879-4400

<http://www.aft.org/psrp/index.htm>

Contact: Tish Olshefski, Director, psrp@aft.org



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