

The Paraprofessional Role

By Stacy Hultgren

Courtesy: PDD NETWORK

Newsletter

Cathy Riggs, PhD, recently presented a workshop through the Special Education Resource Center (SERC) about the role of paraeducators. The workshop was not intended to provide suggestions for daily service provision, but to look at the expectations and realities of paraprofessional responsibilities in general and how those have changed over time. A follow up article will appear in the next issue on interventions for kids on the autism spectrum that would be helpful to paras.

Dr. Riggs asks us to keep in mind...

Children with disabilities are children first. Sometimes we forget that all children share some similarities, and that we are, after all, teaching a child, not teaching a disability. She reminds us all that any goals and interventions need to be "child appropriate".

Children grow up. Select what you teach carefully, and teach with a longitudinal perspective. What goal do we have in mind for them when they grow up? The answer is independence. "You need to look long-term," Dr. Riggs says, "What are we going to need to do to help this child in terms of skills - social, behavioral and academic - so that he or she can move on to being as independent as possible."

Children have families. She asked the paraprofessionals in the room how many attend parent-teacher conferences, and the response was very low. "We need to respect parents' choices for what they would like their child to do or to know; we need to be able to provide them with information and support," she says. With a behaviorally difficult child in particular, paraprofessionals should remember that they only have them a few hours a day, a few days a week. Imagine what it takes to handle that child all the other hours of the day and year - year after year. "We need to respect that and take it into account."

Children live in communities. The very purpose of inclusion revolves around a sense of community. Friends are important. Educators, she says, need to be working on developing relationships, and also to use the community resources that exist.

The role of a para

The definition of a paraprofessional, according to the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in MN and UT, is an employee:

- 1.) *"Whose position is either instructional in nature or who provides other direct or indirect services to students and/or their families.*
- 2.) *Who works under the supervision of a teacher or another professional staff member who has the ultimate responsibility for the design, implementation, and evaluation of education programs and related services."*

This definition has been around for about 15 years, Dr. Riggs tells us. She adds that research shows paras spend about 80% of their time doing instructional tasks. Instructional tasks can include anything from social studies to using a Kleenex. Paras can provide direct or indirect services such as learning new skills using lessons the teacher has prepared, practicing learned skills, providing a variety of assistance from organization to physical mobility, translation, even job coaching. They are ALWAYS meant to work under the supervision of a qualified staff member who has responsibility for the instruction design and evaluation. The job of the paraeducator is not intended to be described as, "here's the kid, take him and go and do," Dr. Riggs says, "You should always be working under the direction of a teacher or another certified staff member. Somebody should be telling you what to do. You shouldn't be having to create the individual program for the child by yourself. That is somebody else's responsibility." This, she adds, has nothing to do with ability; it is simply not in the job description. Teachers have the sole responsibility to assure that the child is making progress, and so they should certainly be involved with giving information to the paraprofessional implementing the instruction, and also to be receptive of feedback from the paraprofessional as well. Paras, especially those who work one-to-one with a student, know that student better than anyone in the building, and that makes them an important member of the teaching team.

The IDEA law says –

"Such standards shall.....allow paraprofessionals and assistants who are appropriately trained and supervised, in accordance with State law, regulations or written policy,to be used to assist in provision of special education and related services to children with disabilities....."

Unfortunately, the phrase 'appropriately trained and supervised' is not defined, and this allows for a lot of misperceptions and multiple definition standards. Dr. Riggs tells us that the national associations relating to speech/language and occupational/physical therapy have guidelines for providers of these services, but, "we don't really have, at this time in the state, guidelines, regulations or policies that comes from a state level. We're working on it." (Ed. note: there is a working group at the State Bureau of Special Education that is developing a set of guidelines for paraprofessionals. However, it should be mentioned that 'guidelines' are not legally binding, and they are more or less recommendations, not requirements. Districts can choose not to follow them.) For right now, the guidelines of paraprofessional responsibility come from

the individual district. Sometimes, she says, that can be a good thing, because it can lead to creativity in designing what works for that district, but sometimes they can be unclear and people don't know what they're supposed to be doing. Dr. Riggs asks, "How many of you know your district's policy for paraeducators? How many have seen something in writing about what paras should and shouldn't do?" It is not unusual she says, for most paras to have never seen a job description. "We would hope that, pushed a little bit by the federal law, districts will begin to feel it's necessary to look at what exactly, in our district in general, are paraprofessionals going to do; not do; what responsibilities will they have; not have?" She adds that it would not be advantageous to make the job description too narrow. For instance, when it's tied to a particular child or a particular program – if the child moved, the para would be in danger of losing his/her job. More specific information about the job's responsibilities would be helpful (in fact, most people in most professions are given a job description when they go for the job interview – it would be expected). Surprisingly, when Dr. Riggs asked how many in the group knew who their supervisor was, there were many in the group who didn't even know who they are supposed to report to - was it the special ed teacher, the director, or the principal? This can make it awfully difficult to perform well if you do not know whom to get assistance or advice from, or even who is doing your yearly performance evaluation.

What do we know

The job of the paraprofessional is not new, it has been around since the 1940's, though we used to call the position an 'aide'. They were often involved with classroom assistance or helping kids with reading, etc. They were seen mostly in larger districts, and were introduced in response to the baby boom to free teacher time from non-teaching tasks like taking attendance, clerical duties, school banking, etc. She remembers having seen a job description from the 1950's that included watering plants and taking care of class pets. This was, of course, before the IDEA law was passed, and they had worked mostly in regular education settings. Upon the passing of IDEA, it was decided that more help would need to be directed towards the 'special ed kids', as they were largely known at that time. So, in the '70s and '80s they worked mostly in secluded special education rooms with special education teachers. The numbers of paraprofessionals is growing steadily even today, since there are more kids in their local schools than in the past, and more in the general education settings because of the push toward inclusion. Consequently, the role of the para has become quite diversified, especially with many kids who are in need of one-to-one assistance. So what should paras expect? "Sometimes," Dr. Riggs tells us, "we're not clear on what the job really is going to entail. Part of it is the nature of special education, and that has to happen because your children grow and develop and change day by day, and part of it is just that the role is usually undefined." Generally, paraprofessionals assist with: classroom organization, informal assessment, implementing objectives, behavior management, carrying out lesson plans, and building classroom partnerships, and they do it by working with individual children, small groups and whole classes. Quite often, they are asked to collect information on skill acquisition, and may be asked for that information at a PPT (*Ed. note: many districts do not even ALLOW paras to attend PPTs since they are not considered to be responsible for programming. Unfortunately, the result is that a good deal of useful information is not shared by the para who knows the*

child best, nor can he/she hear useful insight from parents or attending outside professionals that might help him/her deliver services more appropriately. This situation serves no one, least of all the child.)

Dr. Riggs continued by asking how many of the paras in the room had seen the written IEP of the kid they are working with? In fact, very few of them had. More hands were raised when asked if they knew the goals and objectives for the child, but not all. "There are districts where paraeducators do not see the IEP," she says. District policy in this regard prevails though, she tells us, because there is no federal law to say otherwise. Unfortunately, the IEP itself is often not even in the same building as the classroom, because student's files are kept in an administrative office. "How can you possibly be assisting in implementing goals and objectives if you don't know what they are?" How will a para know whether or not they are on track? (Ed. Note: the IDEA law does specify that staff be made aware of goals and objectives that they will be responsible for, however, since paraeducators are working under the supervision of certified teaching staff, it is not actually the para who is considered responsible, it is the teacher they are working under. Therefore, although it certainly would be advisable and preferable that paras know the goals and objectives as well as how to implement them, this is not actually spelled out in the law.)

Behavior management

Typical kids, we sometimes forget, are very inappropriate, and that is taken for granted – they are not expected to live up to a written set of expectations and we do not measure their social competence. If we did, Dr. Riggs tells us, typical kids probably couldn't live up to an IEP plan. She also points out that it is often a good idea to have the child work with more than one para for a number of reasons. First, in order to prevent dependence on one person or their teaching style, and to help them generalize skills when asked to perform them by different people. Additionally, she says, "Think about your own job, if you had to work with the most difficult person all day long, every day, all alone, it's no wonder there is a lot of turnover in the paraeducator field." 'Burnout' might be reduced and paras might stay in their jobs longer if, for instance, they are allowed work with a highly intensive preschool kid in the morning, but in the afternoon they are assisting a child with reading in the fourth grade. Research supports that there is less turnover if paras work with different children on all ability levels, and that they would actually acquire more skills if given a variety of responsibilities in their job.

Sometimes, especially because the job is so hard to define, it becomes easy for supervisors to expand the role, even when it's not appropriate, especially if you're competent. The old adage, 'if you want something done, ask a busy person' is a true one. Sometimes paras are thrust into the role of liaison between special and regular education systems, even though it certainly isn't part of their job description. Unfortunately, paras are often the ones who know the child best, especially in a variety of settings, and may be the one to realize that the regular education teacher, for instance, doesn't know how to modify work for the child. They may then feel the need to go back to the special education teacher for advice. Sometimes disagreements arise about the child's needs or abilities, and paras can find themselves in the position of advocate for the child. (Ed. Note: Paras may also have the opportunity for a better relationship with the parent because they are not seen as being in an 'authority' role, which can be off-putting. Parents may feel more comfortable speaking freely and asking more questions of someone who is not 'in charge' and less

likely to judge them.)

Inclusion

What does 'inclusion' mean, anyway? There is no universal definition. In fact, inclusion is not defined in IDEA law, and the term itself is not even used. According to IDEA, schools are required to provide an education in the 'least restrictive environment' (or LRE), and to only use more restrictive settings (like a special ed classroom) when, "*education in the regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.*" Paraprofessionals, according to IDEA, are considered to be a supplemental aid. In addition, students with special needs must be educated with non-disabled peers to their maximum ability. For children age birth to three, the home is the place where non-disabled peers would be, hence most Birth to Three programs are set within the home. For ages 3 and 4, it would typically be preschool, and so many schools offer preschool programs for kids with special needs. For ages 5 and up, the typical setting is the neighborhood school. While not every child with special needs can function in a typical classroom, "for most children most of the time," Dr. Riggs tells us, "general education is the least restrictive environment if, and only if, you are bringing supplemental aids and services to that child in the classroom." That can mean speech, OT, PT, modified curriculum, adaptations of physical space, etc. "For some children, the regular ed classroom becomes very, very restrictive. They can't function at all in regular ed. There are some children." A continuum of services (resource room, special needs classroom, etc.) needs to be made available for them. She acknowledges that the majority of the kids in special ed are in regular classrooms, but that is taking all ranges of disabilities into account, learning disabled, emotionally disturbed, physical impairments, health impairments, etc. Some kids, and some disabilities, are easier to include than others.

"Inclusion is recognizing our universal 'oneness' and interdependence. Inclusion is recognizing that we are 'one' even though we are not the 'same'."

Shafik Abu-Tahir, New African Voices, Philadelphia, PA

The goal of inclusion is not 'we 're one big happy family.' That is an unrealistic goal, Dr. Riggs says. "The goal of inclusion really ought to be, '*we're all different, and that's OK*.'" By being in that classroom, he/she is standing up for their right to be there. "it is their right," she reminds us.

Inclusion used to mean, once a student was deemed ready for the mainstream classroom, the self-contained special ed teacher would send him/her out to the regular class, that teacher would call when a problem arose, and he/she would be returned to the secluded room. The model was, "Fix 'em up, and send 'em out without support and expect them to do what everybody else does, and if they don't they go back for more fixing." It was very hard for these children to return to the special ed room as if they failed, and it was not a good model.

Paras have only recently been in the role of assisting kids to participate in included settings. Dr. Riggs suggests that paras assigned to these roles need to have a sense of what the district's philosophy of inclusion actually is. "Inclusion looks different in each of your districts," she says. For some districts, it

might mean 'letting' the LD kids go to the regular classroom, in some others it might mean that all the kids are included for at least part of the time. Some districts include all kids all of the time (*Ed: but by law, they have to offer other options to kids for whom inclusion would not be appropriate*). Paras need to find out when starting work in a district what the philosophy is, in other words, what are they trying to accomplish? Why is the kid in general ed – what is it expected that he/she will get out of it? That philosophy should be reflected in the goals and objectives set for that student. "Why are you killing yourself to try to maintain that kid during fifth grade math?" The reasons need to be fully understood by all staff working with that child. Even within a district or a building there may be disagreement about why the kids are included, and sometimes they are included in preschool or kindergarten, and then not included in second grade. Is it because the child wasn't successful in that setting even with supports, or because the required changes to the new setting would be troublesome and/or expensive? Perhaps teachers have had some training and expertise in including preschool children, but really don't know what is involved in including an older child. Paras also need to ask why they are being assigned to the child. Is it for help in academics, behavior, processing material, as an escort to therapies or because of a volatile situation with the parents? Sometimes it's even harder for the teachers themselves to understand why paras are there, especially in middle and high schools. They may not be clear on what the para's role is vs. their own role. In a team taught class (a class with both a regular ed and a special ed teacher), it may be even harder to identify roles among so many adults. For many kids, there will be times when the para is not really needed in the room, but it is important for him/her to be familiar with what is going on there socially as well as in the curriculum (you just may be assisting him on his homework later).

What is good about inclusion?

Research shows that there are benefits to both students with special needs, and to their typical peers. They are:

"For Children with disabilities:

Realistic preparation for adult life

Presence of appropriate role models

Opportunities to learn in natural settings

Raised expectations and increased challenges

Equal opportunities

Possibilities for diverse friendships

For so-called typical children:

Increased acceptance of and respect for human diversity

Access to curricular modifications and instructional supports that meet their individual needs

New skill acquisition

Increased variety of settings and opportunities for learning and success

Possibilities for diverse friendships"

Linda Rammler (1992), modified by Kirker-Stewart (1997)

Typical children are role models, even though they do not always have good behavior. Kids with special needs need to learn some of the behaviors others are doing nonetheless. "We don't want to create in special ed, a bunch of kids who act like adults," Dr. Riggs tells us. Instead, they need to have some of the same interests, and their interactions need to be seen as similar to their peers. They need, for instance, to learn to do a 'high five', and not to focus on a handshake. While the friendships they make may not be the same as friendships between typical kids, they are nonetheless "life enhancing". These friendships are likewise beneficial to typical kids – they can become less afraid of anyone who is a little different. It is important for all staff to work on developing age appropriate friendships, and the understanding of the concept of friendship and what it means to be a friend. All staff should encourage kids to work together, and emphasize an attitude focusing on empathy, not pity.

It is often forgotten that there are typical kids in the regular ed classrooms that struggle with material and could benefit from the same instructional supports given the kid with special needs. Lots of typical kids, for instance, would benefit from visuals being added to the lecture in social studies, or from a student planner to remember homework. One problem that has existed in segregated special education classrooms is that the teacher, because of the seclusion, can lose track of what the typical kids are doing. While special educators are experts at adapting material to meet needs, it is the general educators who are the experts on what kids need to know within the curriculum. Inclusion allows the curriculum experts to be more directly involved with what the child with disabilities is learning.

The problems with paras

Michael Giancgreco's research in 1997 showed that there are many problems that can arise related to 'para proximity'. These are:

"Interference with ownership and responsibility by general educators". Because of the intensity of the relationship between the child and para, teachers may become dependent upon them for more than they should. Dr. Riggs gives the example of a third grade teacher who doesn't know the student, had only one course in special education, and doesn't understand the disability, but here comes the para that knows him, and has worked with him successfully. The teacher is relieved that she will not now have to worry about this child. In fact, Dr. Riggs has seen situations where the teacher rarely speaks directly to the child, but instead directs her comments to the para. Dr. Riggs emphasizes the difference, "That is not inclusion. That is '*I'm letting him sit in my classroom*'."

"Separation from classmates". This is especially true if there are medical or behavioral needs, because the job is perceived to involve sitting close enough to that child so that nothing disrupts learning. Paras may in fact be afraid to leave the side of a student because something dangerous could happen. Unfortunately, they can sometimes look like a 'mother figure', and what kid wants to have mom come to school with them? It can result in resentment and an uncooperative attitude from the student with special needs as well as creating a barrier between him/her and peers.

"Dependence on adults". Prompt dependence is a real concern. Especially if the para has no training in 'prompt fading', there is a tendency to always be telling the student what to do next, which does not foster independence.

"Impact on peer interactions". Peers can sometimes find it hard to initiate a conversation, even if their own verbal skills are intact. So like the teacher described above, they may find themselves asking the para questions, or looking to her for interpretation.

"Limitations on receiving competent instruction". "There is talk, a lot of it, about paraeducators not having enough training to work with the intense needy kids that you are currently working with. If the teacher is not supporting you, helping you, guiding you, working with lesson plans, working closely with you then you are left, without a formal teaching certificate in most cases, to teach the most intensely needy kids in the district. It doesn't mean that you're incompetent. What it means is you've been given the kid that nobody knows how to deal with, and you haven't necessarily had the training."

"Loss of personal control". When the para steps in and makes decisions for the child they work with, the child will not learn how to do this on their own. This can even become a problem with sexual abuse for socially-challenged children, because they become dependent on adults to make their choices for them, assume all adults are helpful, don't understand the limits and boundaries, and may follow the directions of ANY adult. We teach them to 'do as their told,' and that is not always a good lesson.

"Loss of gender identity". There are, unfortunately, gym locker room issues when a male student has a female paraprofessional. In extreme cases, boys have been asked to change in the girls' locker room, or play on the girls' team. The resulting loss of self-esteem could be devastating.

"Interference with instruction of other students". Sometimes paras unintentionally draw attention to their child over others, for instance, insisting that their child answer the teacher's question to the class. Even though they may have the best of intentions in trying to make their child appear included and capable, this might only draw attention to the fact that they are a 'special needs' student.

Dr. Riggs says that paras can remind teachers - as gently as they can - that they are not there to make sure the student never fails. In fact, all kids should have goals involving independence, but no one can succeed at independence if they are never allowed to fail or struggle or to make some wrong choices. Independence is so important to adulthood, and every child has to learn some things through trying and failing sometimes. If the child never fails at school, he/she will be unlikely to know how to handle it outside of school.

And then there is the reality....

The day- to-day reality of inclusion is that there remain many hurdles to doing it successfully. They are:

"No universally accepted definition

No one way to achieve it

Emotions run high

Civil rights are central to the issue

*Challenging to accomplish
Not inexpensive to sustain
Success is teacher-dependent
Impacts every aspect of the school experience
Requires role redefinition
Not every parent wants an inclusive program
Time to collaborate is at a premium
Attitude is the most significant variable"*

Beth Kirker-Stewart, PhD, 97

The most critical factor in whether inclusion will work or not is the teacher. "80% of the issues around inclusion have nothing to do with the kids, it's about the adults. It's about working with the adults," Dr. Riggs states, "It is very challenging to accomplish good inclusion, and it's not cheap either. Done correctly, inclusion is quite expensive. It shouldn't be the cheap option."

Time to collaborate with teachers is often a nightmare in schools. Dr. Riggs asked, "how many of you have half an hour a day to meet with one of the teachers who supervises you? 15 minutes? 5 minutes? How many of you get any paid planning time? I was talking to a para and a teacher team a few weeks ago who said that they used 3 minutes at the beginning of the language arts period. That's all they had." But, she stressed, what can you do in 3 minutes, especially for the really challenging children? "We need to find little pieces of time to work with the teachers and with the special educators, and that IS a problem." So is work space, since many paras do not have a desk or even a place to keep their things, which can be very difficult if you have to carry everything from class to class in middle or high school.

Inclusion becomes complicated when there are different needs in the same room, and those needs may even conflict. And let's not forget that 'typical' students often have needs as well. "Look at your particular learner," Dr. Riggs tells us, "and the other learners in that classroom, 'cause you know what? There's not your kid, and then everybody else is on 4th grade level, and they're all just perfect norms of behavior, right? That's not the way it works. You've got your kid and then you've got the two ADHD kids, the four LD kids, the three foster care kids, and then two non-English speaking kids. It's not like everybody else is in a perfect box and then there's your kid." It all comes down to attitude – "We all have it in our power to make inclusion succeed or fail."

Thank you Dr. Riggs for a lesson in the strengths and weaknesses of the critical role paras play in our schools. In the next issue, there will be many helpful suggestions for paras who are, or will someday, be working with our kids.