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Perspectives of Students with Intellectual Disabilities about their Experiences with Paraprofessional Support

Researchers Stephen Broer, Mary Beth Doyle and Michael F. Giangreco interviewed sixteen young adults who were all supported by paraprofessionals in general education classrooms for some period of time while they were in public school.

This study is interesting because, as the authors note, there are no other studies that have sought the perspectives of students with significant disabilities themselves. All of the young adults who participated in the study were verbal and were able to recall and describe events that had happened in the past and what their feelings had been.

All but one of the study participants had completed school within the five years of the study; the other participant was in the last 2 months of school. The majority of the sixteen participants had attended different high schools; the three who attended the same high school were enrolled in overlapping years. The paraprofessionals that supported nine of the former students were different individuals. Seven of the study participants were supported by the same paraprofessional in the two different high schools attended, but in different years.

Researchers report that four themes emerged from the work of the study. Each is interrelated with the others, but all suggest that the relationships between the students and the paraprofessionals assigned to support them were one of their prime and sometimes exclusive relationships while they were in school.

FINDINGS

1. "It felt a little weird. It felt like having, like a mother"

Nearly all the paraprofessionals described by the study were women and many were, in fact, old enough to be the parent of the student in question.

Feeling like the paraprofessional was acting as a mother was comforting for some, "she was like a mother to me," but discomfoting as well. Study participants believed that having a mother was not appropriate in school and that this dynamic did interfere with developing friendships.

2. "She's my friend now. She has been for a long time"

Study participants perceived themselves as very isolated from the regular activities and relationships in their schools. They shared a keen recognition that they were different and often commented that when they were in school they felt like they "didn't belong". They remembered desiring to belong and "fit in" but recalled instances of peer rejection and resignation that other students with disabilities were "my kind of people".

These feelings and experiences contributed to the notion that paraprofessionals were *friends* as participants explained the ways in which paraprofessionals filled the companionship void they often felt at school. Most noted that they typically interacted with their paraprofessional more often than with peers. This was especially true of the times when students without disabilities would be interacting primarily with each other.

The young adults in the study were able to recognize that their relationships with paraprofessionals did interfere with making conversation and casual opportunities for developing friendships.

3. Protection from Bullying

Eleven of the young adults in the study reported significant levels of bullying while they were in school. Several of the participants wept while recounting their experiences – still feeling very keenly the hurt experienced as a result of the words and actions of their peers.

There was consensus among the study participants that the adults were not only unaware of the amount of bullying experienced by students with disabilities, but that they were also not effective in dealing with bullying. In those instances, participants remembered feeling that in some instances they were teased because of having a paraprofessional, but also that the paraprofessional would often act as a protector and as an advocate on behalf of the students when they were bullied in school.

4. "The classroom teacher, she didn't know me very well"

The young adults who participated in the study reported that most often it was the paraprofessional who interacted with them and was their primary teacher in the general education classroom.

Participants also related in many instances that they were not important enough to receive the teacher's attention, a perception that was communicated to them by both teachers and paraprofessionals. They were told that there were too many other kids in the classroom, or that the teacher was busy with other tasks, or that the teacher couldn't spend much time with them because "they have a class to teach". This reinforced both their feelings of isolation as well as their reliance on the paraprofessional for instruction. They were grateful, in many instances, for the help they received, "She taught me a lot" and that the paraprofessional "helped me understand what they're trying to say". Others acknowledged that they needed the extra behavioral support as well.

There were few instances of participants describing the curriculum modified to meet their individual needs. Several participants indicated that often the paraprofessional "intervened" while the student was still working on the tasks. *But the most common recollection among all of the young adults in the study was that the paraprofessional actually did the work for them, "I didn't have to do anything. She pretty much did it for me."*

THE BOTTOM LINE

The themes that define the relationship between the students with intellectual disabilities and the paraprofessionals assigned to support them should be of concern to advocates and parents. This is despite the often positive characterizations the former students recalled in describing the experiences where the paraprofessional was remembered as a parent, a friend, a protector and a primary instructor.

Negative implications include:

- The reinforcement of stereotypes about students with intellectual disabilities as child-like and not capable
- A support situation that invites bullying despite the ability of the paraprofessional to intervene
- Students are isolated from the instructional content and interactions among the students and with the teacher in the classroom
- Students are unlikely to be receiving adequate instruction when paraprofessionals are doing some or all of the work assigned
- The lack of adequate instruction may also be seen as a lack of individualized instructional supports from the special education teacher as well.

DISCUSSION

Most students do not need or have a mother figure in school. To have a mother figure is to invite what the authors conclude will be almost universally negative perceptions and treatment of students with disabilities. "Mother supports" reinforce stereotypes that individuals with intellectual disabilities are child-like and that they need mothering rather than high expectations, effective instruction and supports.

Beyond the stereotypes are the equally troubling concerns about fairness and equal treatment of students who may be perceived *and may come to perceive themselves* as somehow less worthy of instructional time and effort as clearly demonstrated in this small, but well designed study.

As important as educational progress is the opportunity to mature socially and emotionally. This study reaffirms previous observations from the field that the use of paraprofessional support can increase isolation from peers and decrease the opportunity to experience and learn from the natural "flow" of everyday events and socialization, which is part of the public school experience for all students.

Advocates may also conclude that the provision of a paraprofessional support person did not provide the students who participated in this study with the individualized services and accommodations they required. Rather, the provision of the paraprofessional can *become* the sole attempt at individualization – and, as we have seen, for some students it can become a barrier to socialization and high quality instruction.

Indeed, the authors concluded that the extent to which students perceive paraprofessionals as *mother, friend, protector and primary teacher* can serve as a significant indicator of the overall "health" of a school's delivery of educational services both in general and special education.

The Research: **Perspectives of Students with Intellectual Disabilities About Their Experiences with Paraprofessional Support.** Stephen M. Broer,, University of Vermont, Mary Beth Doyle, St. Michael's College, and Michael F. Giangreco, University of Vermont. Published in *Exceptional Children*, Vol.71, No. 4, pp. 415-430.

Alternatives to Overreliance on Paraprofessionals

Researcher Michael Giangreco and his colleagues have done extensive field work and research to identify the issues that contribute to the effective use of paraprofessional supports in general education classrooms. Working with paraprofessionals, they have identified critical issues for the field that include:

- Paraprofessionals report feeling unprepared.
- Paraprofessionals report being under-compensated for the work they are expected to do as their role expands to doing “teacher type” activities.
- Paraprofessionals are often the staff members who spend the most time with students who have the most significant and complex disabilities.

While Giangreco respects the field and supports strengthening paraprofessional supports, he maintains that this will not be sufficient to avert a “double standard” that resigns special education students to receiving the majority of their instruction from paraprofessionals rather than qualified special and general education professionals.

Additional research informs us about alternatives which Giangreco et al recommend:

- Shifting existing funds from the hiring of paraprofessionals to the hiring of special educators. Schools that reallocate resources in this manner increase the number of highly qualified faculty without increasing cost and improve working conditions for special educators by reducing their caseloads.
- Establish teacher attitudes that are welcoming toward the inclusion of students with disabilities and the building of professional capacity to support the educational needs of mixed-ability groups.
- Establish a pool of trained paraprofessionals that can be centrally deployed by a principal or special education administrator.
- Peer support strategies are a natural support that have a solid record in the literature. This could include a “Learning Lab” where all students who need extra support can get individual or group tutoring.

Research: *Alternatives to Overreliance on Paraprofessionals in Inclusive Schools* and *The Paraprofessional Conundrum: Why We Need Alternative Support Strategies* are both available from Michael Giangreco at: <http://www.uvm.edu/~cdci/evolve/alternativeinfo.html>



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P.O. Box 565 ♦ Marshall, Virginia 20116 ♦ Phone 540.364.0051
www.AdvocacyInstitute.org ♦ Email: info@AdvocacyInstitute.org