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Abstract: Paraprofessionals are used in a variety of ways in schools, but in many cases their contribution is limited to resource management or helping a struggling student "finish something off" in a small group or individual session. This paper will report on a project in which a university mentor worked with four paraprofessionals to support small groups of junior primary students who were struggling with basic literacy acquisition. They were taught to use "scripts" to move through carefully sequenced lessons, and to monitor student progress on a daily basis. The students made significant progress throughout the year, but the personal and professional stories of the paraprofessionals surprised all involved. This paper will focus on their stories as they grew in both skills and confidence. There was also wide recognition of their important contribution to the school by the staff and principal. Recommendations to maximise the input of these important members of the school community conclude the paper.

Keywords: Professional Development, Paraprofessionals in Schools

Introduction

MEETING THE DIVERSE range of student needs in primary schools in low socio-economic areas, and ensuring that all children develop essential literacy and numeracy skills represent continuing challenges for teachers. One way in which educational jurisdictions have sought to enhance learning opportunities for children is through the employment of paraprofessionals—untrained personnel who work under the guidance and direction of trained teachers to support educational goals in a range of areas. The roles paraprofessionals play varies enormously across different contexts, and the success of this model of support has been similarly variable in terms of student outcomes and satisfaction levels of the paraprofessionals.

This article focuses chiefly on the experiences of the four Education Assistants (EAs) as they delivered a reading intervention program to children in Years One to Three in a Junior Primary School. The program content and procedures are briefly described, and an overview of student achievement is reported to provide the context, but it is experience of the EAs that provides the foundation of this paper.

Literature Review—The Role of Paraprofessionals in Schools

Paraprofessionals perform a wide variety of roles within schools (Carter, O'Rourke, Sisco & Pelsue, 2009). In many cases, they are employed to work specifically with individual students with disabilities (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000, Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010; McKenzie, 2011), or with students with specific problems such as low literacy skills

COMMON GROUND

(Cobb, 2007; Miller, 2003; Vadasy, Jenkins, & Pool, 2000). In some instances, paraprofessionals work directly with students; in others, they conduct a range of clerical and administrative tasks to free teachers to maximise their instructional time with the students. Paraprofessionals are often those who spend most time with the students with the greatest personal, social, behavioural and emotional needs (Downing, Ryndak & Clark, 2000). As Giangreco et al. (2010) point out, "…we continue to assign the least qualified personnel to students who present the most challenging learning and behavioural characteristics" (p. 51).

Just as the roles of paraprofessionals vary widely, so do levels of effectiveness. Manning (1979) reported minimal improvements in student reading levels when paraprofessionals used materials they had compiled themselves. Almost three decades later, Vadasy, Sanders and Tudor (2007) reported variable results of paraprofessionals implementing reading programs, with most success reported in programs with younger able readers rather than with older struggling readers with more complex needs. Other studies have found that the greater the contact between aides and students, the greater the *adverse* effect on student achievement (Gerber et al., 2001; Broer, Doyle & Giangreco, 2005; Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren, 2005; Malmgren & Causton-Theoharis, 2006; all cited in Causton-Theoharis, Giangreco, Doyle, & Vadasy, 2007, p. 60). The lowered academic achievement is possibly because untrained paraprofessionals, without clear directions, do not know how to help students. They often complete student work themselves, resulting in no learning development in the students.

Giangreco et al. (2010) in their review of 32 studies, also found that the closer the paraprofessional's proximity to students, the more likely the students were to be disengaged from other students. This could reflect an overreliance on paraprofessionals for social interactions by some students. Indeed, an earlier study cited in the same article (Broer, Doyle & Giangreco, 2005) found that some students described the paraprofessional as like a "mother, friend, protector from bullying and primary teacher" (p. 48), each of which suggests a lack of connection between the target student and their regular peers, as well as with their class-room teacher.

These research findings reflect the need for paraprofessionals to be guided by trained teachers in their work with students if they are to be effective. There is ample evidence that training results in better outcomes. Miller (2003) found that training of paraprofessionals working with struggling Year 1 students significantly increased their reading skills. McDonnell, Johnson, Polychronis & Risen (2002) showed the positive effect of paraprofessional training when supporting teacher-planned instruction. Devlin (2005) reported on the positive effects of paraprofessional training when facilitating social interactions with students with severe disabilities; and Quilty (2007) reported successful outcomes when training paraprofessionals in the development and implementation of social stories for students with autism. Swann and Loxley (1998) reported that the lack of suitable training also meant that many paraprofessionals were greatly underutilised.

The issue of training is highlighted by research such as that of Riggs & Mueller (2001), who reported that paraprofessional responsibilities have become increasingly more instructional. Other researchers (see Giangreco et al, 2010 for review) highlighted the number of different tasks that paraprofessionals are expected to perform, and the fact that many paraprofessionals are operating at high levels of autonomy, making instructional decisions, and being the major deliverer of instruction for some students without the direction or supervision of a trained teacher.

It is clear from the research that issues around the initial and ongoing training of para-professionals have not yet been resolved. Related to this are questions of career development for paraprofessionals, of the ways in which other school personnel view paraprofessionals, and indeed, of how paraprofessionals view themselves. A consistent theme in research around the role of paraprofessionals is reported dissatisfaction with their status in schools, and a prevailing belief that their role in the school is not valued or respected (Chopra et al., 2004; Mackenzie, 2011; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). Unless these concerns can be addressed, not only will increasingly disaffected members of the school community continue to feel personally and professionally unfulfilled, but student outcomes will also continue to be affected by high turnover rates among paraprofessionals.

The study reported in this paper, if somewhat inadvertently, addressed many of the concerns reported in the literature. The study is now briefly described to provide a context for the discussion of outcomes relating to the role of the paraprofessionals involved.

The Project

Research Site

The research site was a junior primary school of approximately 280 students located in a low socio-economic area of a capital city in Australia. Many of the families in the area were new arrivals from African countries, and there was a significant proportion of indigenous families, thus many of the students spoke English as a Second Language (classified as ESL students) or second dialect (classified as ESD students). Many families lived in poverty. School-wide assessment had identified a significant number of students in Years One to Three who were struggling with reading. This provided the impetus for the collaborative project between the school and two University researchers who had worked with the principal and teachers over a number of projects, and had established a strong collaborative relationship.

Participants

Four Education Assistants (EAs) who were employed full-time at the school participated in the project.

The *principal* and the *school-based literacy specialist* were key personnel in the project and were involved in its design and implementation.

Two university researchers, also experienced teachers, contributed to the project team through involvement in discussions and by providing initial training. One of the university researchers led the program development and provided on-going mentoring and support.

The students targeted for the reading intervention were aged between six and nine years, with 13 males and 20 females. Of the 33 students, 12 were ESL and 9 Aboriginal.

Procedure

The principal, the literacy specialist, the teachers of the target students and the EAs attended professional development sessions conducted by the University researchers. The sessions outlined evidence-based research on reading, and explained the administration of two standardised assessments: the Astronaut Invented Spelling Test (AIST; Neilson, 2003) and

the Sutherland Phonological Awareness Test (SPAT-R; Neilson, 2003); and a criterion-referenced assessment of letter-sound knowledge, the Educheck (Neal, 1988). Class teachers administered the group AIST to all students to screen for those students who required further individual assessment. All school staff and university personnel were involved in test analysis and subsequent grouping of students.

All staff attended a professional development session about the program that was the basis of the intervention over three ten-week terms. *Letters and Sounds* (Department for Education and Skills, 2007), a synthetic phonics program, focuses on the development of phonological skills and letter-sound knowledge. Letters are taught explicitly and systematically in an order that promotes blending. Lessons incorporate continual repetition and close monitoring of students. It was modified to meet the specific needs of ESL/ESD students, with increased use of visuals, discussion of vocabulary, and the integration of words with students' prior experiences (Gersten & Baker, 2000). In addition, a repetition sequence was built into the program because it was considered that the students in this program would require more structured practice.

The EAs were trained to implement the lessons, each of which followed a particular format and incorporated a "script". Lesson plans included clearly stated aims, skills to be reviewed, and new target skills. The EAs were also taught how to monitor and record individual student progress in a detailed manner. Some lessons were videotaped to check for fidelity of implementation and for reflective sessions that were held every few weeks.

The EAs spent time in the mainstream classrooms to discuss student progress with the classroom teachers and to integrate practice of skills with the classroom literacy program. This process was aimed at increasing student learning and further building the skills of the EAs, therefore enhancing program sustainability.

Meetings between the EAs and the university mentor were initially conducted weekly; then, as the intervention progressed, on a fortnightly basis. The sessions were structured to reflect on lessons taught, to discuss the next step in program implementation, and to discuss individual student progress. Thus a great deal of ongoing support and training was provided to build the skills of the EAs. Unfortunately, teaching commitments meant that class teachers could not attend most of these meetings so they were not able to contribute to, or learn from the discussions.

Field notes were manually recorded during these meetings so some record could be made of the EAs' reflections on the project in terms of student progress and their own role in the process. These were manually coded to determine any changes in their perceived skill and/or confidence levels.

Overview of Intervention Results

The full results of this intervention are reported in another paper, which has been submitted for publication, but a summary of the key findings is provided here. Pre-and post-tests using the AIST and SPAT-R were conducted with all participants in the program, and also used to assess the non-intervention students in each of the three year levels involved. These did not form control groups, as the students were not in need of remediation, but it was considered that some comparison of student growth over the period of intervention between the groups would be useful.

Briefly, the AIST scores for the Year One students were significantly higher at post-test (mean=75.31) than at pre-test (mean=22.85, ES=.87). The growth as determined by the AIST was less dramatic for the Year Two students, although post-test results (mean=66.00) were still significantly higher than pre-test results (mean=35.80, ES=.56). The Year Three students also scored significantly higher at post-test (mean=81.67) than at pre-test (mean=64.78, ES= .50). The 21 ESL/ESD students across all year levels responded particularly well to the intervention, with an overall effect size of .7 as measured by the AIST pre-and post-assessments.

Line of Growth graphs of the results of the intervention students and other students within each year level revealed in each case much steeper growth for the students in the intervention group. The small sample size of the intervention groups, and the ceiling effect on some of the tasks may, however, have distorted these results to some extent.

The SPAT-R results indicated that the most substantial gains in phonological awareness were made by the Year One students. Of the 15 Year One students, five were below the 25th percentile before the intervention, whereas post-intervention only one was below the 25th percentile, and five were above the 75th percentile. Eleven of the 15 students improved their percentile rank by more than 25. The less dramatic growth in skills of the Year Two and Three students reflects the difficulties in remediation as problems become embedded as children get older, and highlights the need for effective intervention as early as possible.

Impact on the Paraprofessionals

As it became clear that the students were making considerable progress, the significance of their personal contribution began to be recognised by the EAs. They expressed great satisfaction at the achievements of the students and reflected on the role they had played in their development. In the words of one, "*I never thought I would have the confidence to do this*" and another, "*the improvement in some of the students has been amazing*". There was clearly a new confidence and belief in their own ability to make a difference in the critical area of literacy.

The students' results were considered by the principal to be so encouraging that he asked the four EAs to make a joint presentation at a staff meeting, to explain the program they had been following, and to present the results. After some initial reluctance, they did this. The principal publicly acknowledged their achievements, announcing, "Our EAs have become vital to the success of the literacy intervention". It was clear that this had been a landmark experience both personally and professionally for the four EAs, who reflected that they felt a new respect from the teaching staff, and an acknowledgement of the importance of the contribution they made to the educational outcomes of the most vulnerable students in the school.

In subsequent discussions, the principal referred to the presentation at the combined staff meeting as a 'breakthrough' moment for the EAs. He believed that the experience had added great professionalism to the role of the EAs, built their personal confidence, and increased the teachers' respect for the contribution they made. This resulted in their increased involvement in more targeted teaching in other classrooms as well, and thus a more effective deployment of this important school resource.

Discussion

This intervention was certainly seen to be successful in terms of student achievement. The unexpected "spillover effects" for the Education Assistants also warrant some analysis. What were the key elements in the process that resulted in such a significant impact on them?

First, the reading intervention was based on strong research evidence, and thus had a significant chance of success if implemented with rigour and fidelity. This increased the likelihood of the EAs being involved in a successful endeavour. It is important that paraprofessionals are not limited to routine administrative and clerical duties but have the opportunity to contribute in a very meaningful way to student achievement.

Second, the EAs participated in the initial professional development sessions along with the teachers, the literacy specialist and the principal. This accorded them a high level of professional respect. This was a deliberate decision on the part of the principal, not only to maximise the impact that the EAs could make on student achievement, but also to build the confidence and self esteem of these important members of the school community.

Third, the on-going training and mentoring through regular meetings with the University researcher meant that any questions regarding program implementation could be discussed and quickly resolved. Lacking the professional training of teachers, the EAs could easily have developed ineffective practices if left unsupported. Viewing themselves in action in a teaching situation with a supportive expert in the field promoted deep reflection on their performance, the opportunity to ask questions and to receive feedback. This resulted in great improvement of their skills over time. Opportunities to reflect on one's day-to-day practices have also been found to deepen the level of an individual staff member's involvement with, and commitment to, an innovation (Wheatley, 1992).

Fourth, the scheduling of time in the classroom with the teacher and students further developed their skills by helping them see the connections between the intervention and classroom activity. This also gave them the opportunity to reinforce learning that was occurring in the intervention sessions, and so further cement the learning of the students.

Fifth, the EAs' opinions on student progress were sought and valued, which increased their perception of themselves as effective and valued practitioners who could make a genuine contribution to student achievement. This may well have acted to increase motivation, and the persistence required to continue working with students who find learning basic skills very difficult.

Sixth, public recognition and acknowledgement of their achievements by the principal helped them view themselves in quite a different way—as competent and valued members of staff who were making a genuine contribution. Teachers too, made comments to the effect that they had learnt something new through the presentation.

These elements essentially meet the requirements put forward by Carnehan Williamson, Clark and Sorensen (2009) as necessary to meet the needs of paraprofessionals and maximise their effectiveness in educational settings.

Conclusion: Three Wins

This intervention resulted in multiple positive outcomes that came about through implementing an intervention that took heed of the research in terms of both the reading intervention and the ongoing support of the paraprofessionals involved.

1. The first "win" was that the students targeted by the intervention developed their reading skills. The results, although not fully presented in this paper, revealed that all students made gains, although these were more pronounced in the Year One and Year Two students. Paraprofessionals were able to contribute meaningfully to the educational outcomes of students who are characteristically the most difficult to teach. This was the result of both initial and on-going training and support for these important members of the school community.
2. The school community as a whole also won as a result of this endeavour. The EAs were involved in a program that responded directly to needs identified by the school. This gave their role a high level of legitimacy, and was thus valued by all members of staff. The increased skills and motivation of the EAs resulted in greater support for the teachers and a more effective learning environment for the students. These benefits will contribute to the longer-term sustainability of effective literacy practices.
3. The paraprofessionals were also "big winners" as a result of this project. Their increased skills brought about a new and well-deserved respect from their teaching colleagues, resulting in increased confidence in their own abilities to contribute to the educational outcomes of students most at risk.

Recommendations

The results of this small research project suggests several ways forward, many of which can be incorporated at the school level.

1. Schools should include paraprofessionals in as much professional development at the school level as possible. This is a cost-effective way to build the skills of paraprofessionals, even incrementally, and tailor the training to school-based needs. It also reflects a respect for the role they play in the school, and is likely to increase the effectiveness and motivation of these staff members.
2. School timetables need to accommodate regular meetings so teachers and paraprofessionals can collaborate and exchange information on student performance.
3. Paraprofessionals need to have clearly defined job descriptions to remove ambiguities over responsibilities. This should ensure that they have the skills to undertake their duties, and highlight areas where further professional development can occur to build skills and increase effectiveness.
4. Career development opportunities need to be incorporated into performance management processes to increase motivation and the likelihood of retention rates.

When people are valued and respected, they are motivated to perform. It is in all our interests to increase the effectiveness of paraprofessionals in our schools.

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Deslea Konza has experience teaching students of all ages with a range of special needs, including those associated with blindness, profound hearing impairment, intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, and mulitple disabilities. She currently coordinates undergraduate and postgraduate programs in special education at the University of Wollongong, including mandatory subjects that all preservice teachers must complete. She has published in the areas of special education policy, teacher education, hearing impairment, gifted education, and dual exceptionality. Her current research interests include reading disability, students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorders, students with dual exceptionalities (including gifted students with social and emotional problems), and effective teaching.

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Leanne Fried is currently employed in the Fogarty Learning Centre at Edith Cowan University, Western Austraia. Her fellowship involves working in a variety of projects with industry partners, focusing on student early literacy intervention in schools, value-adding to current literacy programs, and the training of pre-service teachers as proficient literacy developers. She is also pursuing her doctoral work on student motivation and emotion regulation strategies with a focus on classroom application.

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