

From the Field: Practical Applications of Research

Special Educator at the Helm: Tips for Training and Supervising a Team of Assistants

By Meghan Guard and Diana Baker

Introduction

I¹ began my career as a special educator teaching students with autism in an urban public school. Having just graduated from a teacher education program, I was ready to creatively modify lessons, design effective behavior intervention plans, and to create a tranquil and orderly learning environment for my students. But I realized quickly that there was one skillset I lacked.

In addition to the ten students in my classroom, I also had two experienced teaching assistants (TAs)² on my team and it had never occurred to me that my job description included training and supervising them. One interesting twist was that when I started teaching, the TAs had been working together for a couple of years and they already knew several of our students. In the beginning, I leaned on them a lot: they knew so much about the students and the school. They knew that Mary was a super smeller and that certain scents, like the tuna fish sandwich that Greg had every day for lunch, would drive her crazy. By simply assigning lunch seats with Greg and Mary at opposite ends of the lunch table we were able to head off mealtime chaos. And they knew that when Ali said "Elmo" she was asking to play a computer game. Knowing this allowed me to immediately build on her existing requesting skills rather than starting from scratch.

But the flip side of having an experienced team was that they were used to using certain default behavior management techniques and it was hard to get their buy-in when I wanted to change things. Time outs, for example, were one

of their strategies. At first glance the practice of using time outs seemed to be working: the problem behavior did decrease in the moment. But when I took a closer look, it was clear that the changes were short lived.

I had started learning about applied behavior analysis (ABA) and wanted to introduce proactive interventions, like token systems, to teach new skills to my students rather than simply punishing unwanted behaviors (Matson & Boisjoli, 2009). But these kinds of interventions were a hard sell: they were time-consuming to implement, and change was slow. Additionally, it was difficult to find time during the day for staff training in order to create buy-in or to give constructive feedback to staff in a setting that was on public display.

I needed help and I was not alone. Biggs and colleagues (2019) found that, across the board, special educators report needing more guidance and support working with the TAs in their classrooms. Our article responds to that call by providing effective strategies for improving collaboration between special educators and TAs that are grounded in firsthand experience and supported by empirical evidence.

Research on Supporting Paraprofessionals

Teaching assistants play a large role in the delivery of special education services for students with disabilities in the United States (Brock & Carter, 2015; Stockall, 2014) and "there is undoubtedly a place for well-conceived paraprofessional supports in special education" (Suter & Giangreco, 2009, p. 82). The sheer number of TAs in U.S. classrooms has increased dramatically in recent years (Reddy et al., 2020): their ranks now outnumber special educators (Suter & Giangreco, 2009). Alongside the boost in numbers, TAs have also experienced a shift in terms of their responsibilities largely moving away from non-instructional and clerical tasks to teaching, implementing behavior plans, recording data, and other complex assignments that require specialized training and knowledge (Sauberan, 2015 and Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl, 2001).

¹ In this article we use the first-person singular to convey to readers that the suggestions presented are drawn directly from firsthand experience. The classroom anecdotes, while grounded in everyday experiences do not depict individual students, staff members, or schools and draw on both authors' experiences in various settings. This is designed to protect the anonymity of all involved.

² Many terms are used to describe the teaching assistants who work in special education settings, including paraprofessional, paraeducator, aide. We use the term teaching assistant (TA) which we believe has a more positive connotation than paraprofessional (e.g., Appl, 2006)

Moreover, although TAs are often tasked with educating the students with the most complex learning needs, the majority are not trained in "evidence-based" strategies (Brock & Carter, 2013, p. 39). Researchers like McGrath and colleagues (2010), thus conclude that TAs do not receive adequate guidance and that the nature of the tasks they are asked to do often is not appropriate given their level of preparation (p. 2).

Research also suggests that paraprofessionals, themselves, feel ill-equipped to carry out their duties (Brown & Stanton-Chapman, 2017). Essentially, "through no fault of their own, too many paraprofessionals remain inadequately trained and supervised to do the jobs they are asked to undertake" (Suter & Giangreco, 2009, p. 82).

As for the special educators who are charged with supervising TAs, the majority (88%) report relying on real life experiences rather than pre-service training or district-level support to make decisions about how to work with paraprofessionals and many wish more formal training was available (Biggs, Gilson, Carter, 2018). The problem is two-fold: TAs themselves tend to be insufficiently trained and the special educators who would theoretically be positioned to provide supervision and training don't have the knowledge or resources to do so. This article addresses the second part of the equation, providing practical suggestions for special educators who have TAs in their classrooms.

Tips For Becoming a Leader and Manager in your Classroom

Productive Team Meetings

As Stockall (2014) points out, open communication and a good rapport with TAs in your classroom are essential for learning. My experience reveals that one of the biggest challenges for nurturing those relationships is simply carving out time and space in a fast-paced classroom. Holding regular team meetings is a best practice but schools and districts really set the tone in terms of extent to which paraprofessionals are involved in planning outside of official school hours: contract hours and compensation for after school meetings varies significantly from one district to the next (French, 2001).

If your school or district does not compensate paraprofessional staff for attending team meetings, there are things you can do within your own classroom to create a routine. One way to do this is by setting aside a time within your weekly schedule when students can be self-sufficient. I chose to use "choice time" on Friday afternoons. There were occasionally interruptions, but I found that my team and I got pretty good at tuning out background noise and squeezing in substantive conversations.

Because my team meetings were infrequent and time was always at a premium, I also wrote up weekly team notes to reinforce what we had talked about in the meetings and either e-mailed these to staff members or compiled

them in a "team notes binder" for staff to reference. I also used a spare white board for staff memos (e.g., times I would be out of the room for meetings, special school events, and professional development opportunities). In between our meeting times, TAs could post questions or comments for me, and I could respond and leave reminders and motivational notes or little tidbits of praise.

Even though our meetings were brief, I always included time for what I refer to as "glows" and "grows" in my agenda. Sometimes I strategically highlighted a "glow" that could encourage other staff members to engage in the same effective behavior. As for "grows," I found it important to be specific and provide a rationale so that staff understands why you're invested in tackling this issue. Introducing the "glow" first, keeps the tone positive and provides a platform for delivering the constructive feedback or "grow."

Finally, team meetings provide an opportunity to release responsibilities to your staff. I use a version of the "I do, we do, you do" approach to increase staff responsibility over the course of the school year (Stockall, 2014). For example, at the beginning of the year I will lead with the "glows and grows" and team discussions. As the year progresses, I let my TAs know that the following week I want them to think of "grow" or "glow" for themselves and later in the year, I ask them to give feedback to one another. This "I do, we do, you do" approach can be used for modeling and teaching other skills that are important for TAs as explained in the next section. I also point out that they can apply this same kind of approach when they're teaching new skills to students.

Teaching Your Teaching Assistants

Just as you set aside time during the first days and weeks of the school year to establish routines and procedures for your students (Wong et al., 2005), the beginning of the school year is instrumental for staff training. This means that I unroll the curriculum more slowly. But, in the long run, the investment is well worth it. By planning easier activities for students, and providing time for me to observe and assist, I can give hands-on directions to help ensure staff understand what is expected.

Scholarly literature affirms my own observations that TAs benefit from high quality training opportunities (Hall et al., 2010). Giangreco (2003) posits that special educators should move away from merely being gracious host[s] to the TAs in their classrooms and reimagine themselves as "engaged teaching partner[s]," (p. 50). In fact, although many districts provide large-scale professional development opportunities, research shows that individual coaching within the classroom context is a more effective process.

Teaching assistants acquire the skills they need for their particular jobs more easily in the actual context where they will be using those skills. Indeed, special educators are essentially expected to be "leaders of on-going daily professional development for paraprofessionals" (Stockall, 2014, p. 204).

I tend to use in-the-moment modeling paired with opportunities to practice and targeted feedback. Just as we would model desired behaviors for our students, we can model the type of language, behavior strategies, organizational and teaching skills we want our TAs to use. For example, I might start by having one of my TAs watch me implement a token system with a student. Next, I would explain how each component of the process works (e.g., when to give a token, procedures for trading in) as well as the rationale for the technique (i.e., why token systems lead to enduring behavior change). And then I let the TA ask any questions and take a turn implementing the strategy with me observing and offering feedback (Ledford et al., 2017). Sometimes I question the investment of time in those first busy days of the school year. But when my classroom is running smoothly by Thanksgiving break, I remember that systematic training leads to consistency and when it comes to working with students with autism, consistency is key.

Cultivating a Productive Classroom Environment

Each school has its own code of conduct and cultural norms. As the leader of your classroom, you have a lot of power in establishing a positive culture within your own classroom. (When I have worked in schools with less healthy cultures, I always reminded myself that I could close my classroom door and create a sort of sanctuary). Research suggests that teachers who approach the relationship with their TAs with "patience, empathy, and thoughtfulness" and who are also professional, skillful, and knowledgeable about their jobs are most likely to foster positive classroom environments (Biggs et al., 2016, p. 262).

It is critical that you lead by example. You gain the respect as the leader of your team if you adhere to the same rules that you are asking everyone else to follow, for example, refraining from using your phone during school hours and minimizing non-work-related conversations during instructional time. By modeling these behaviors, you set a professional tone for your classroom, and you can still find ways to connect with staff on a personal level without disrupting the learning environment. For example, you might organize a potluck before a school break, or a gift exchange for the holidays.

Additionally, creating a well-organized classroom environment helps staff to keep the classroom in order and running smoothly. I use visuals, not only for my students but also to remind myself and other staff members about important classroom information or expectations. For example, I assign each staff member (including myself) to a different pair or small group of students each day and I keep these assignments prominently posted within the classroom, which is also helpful to therapists and other classroom visitors.

Finally, when working with a team of educators, I always remind myself that each of us brings unique strengths to the classroom. As the team leader, it is your job to recognize this, and foster a culture in your classroom that draws

upon individuals' strengths in order to establish the most productive support team for your students. I have sometimes found it humbling to realize that one of my TAs has an easier time establishing a good rapport with a particular student or family member than I do. Chemistry can be hard to explain but I always have more luck when I give these natural alliances room to breathe rather than working against them.

On a more mundane level, if someone shares that they are creative or enjoy making crafts, assigning them responsibilities for decorating bulletin boards or cutting out materials for crafts increases their commitment to the class objectives. If someone finds hands-on-work soothing, I assign them to cut and laminate pieces for new projects, assemble student work folders, or record and graph behavioral data. And once we have carved out our areas of expertise, I often ask each TA to take on a particular leadership role within the classroom, providing support and training to other staff members in her area of expertise. Having designated roles empowers staff members and gives them authentic roles in the classroom. It also fosters a deeper understanding of classroom or student decisions.

Conclusion

The field of special education is evolving in terms of the expectations of both teachers and TAs. My personal experiences along with research literature suggest that teachers need better preparation in how to be leaders and managers in their classrooms in order to harness the skills of their TAs and to maximize student learning. Since special educators come with specific training and dispositions already, we are well positioned to support the staff in our classrooms. We are trained to teach, individualize our instruction, and give feedback, all of which can be applied to training staff. Therefore, future special educators should have confidence that they already possess many of the skills needed to lead and manage a team of staff members.

However, there is still a need for specific management and leadership training to prepare teachers for this role both in teacher preparation programs and for in-service or professional development training. Providing teachers with this training can also help overcome some of the obstacles teachers in these leadership positions encounter in general lack of time or private space to train staff or give feedback. In suggesting tools and strategies that are easy to incorporate into the classroom culture or routine, we hope to help teachers minimize classroom stress and create more effective teams.

Research suggests that some teacher preparation programs, and school districts are offering courses "on how to manage and train paraeducators" (Trautman, 2004, p. 134). Our experience is that this type of coursework remains fairly rare, which is one of the reasons we are keen on sharing the lessons that we have learned with other educators in this article.

Another approach for sharing knowledge at the school or district level would be for administrators to create formal opportunities for teachers to collaborate and exchange strategies that educators already have established as their own sets of best practices. This additional training will better prepare teachers to support their staff, benefitting, in turn, the students in their classrooms.

References

- Appl, D. (2006). First-year early childhood special education teachers and their assistants: "Teaching along with her". *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 38(6), 34-40.
- Biggs, E. E., Gilson, C. B., & Carter, E. W. (2019). "Developing that balance": Preparing and supporting special education teachers to work with paraprofessionals. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 42(2), 117-131. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08888406418765611>
- Brock, M. E., & Carter, E. W. (2015). Effects of a professional development package to prepare special education paraprofessionals to implement evidence-based practice. *The Journal of Special Education*, 49(1), 39-51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466913501882>
- Brown, T. S., & Stanton?Chapman, T. L. (2017). Experiences of paraprofessionals in US preschool special education and general education classrooms. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 17(1), 18-30. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12095>
- Devlin, P. (2008). Create effective teacher-paraprofessional teams. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 44(1), 41-44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451208318874>
- French, N. K. (2001). Supervising paraprofessionals: A survey of teacher practices. *The Journal of Special Education*, 35(1), 41-53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002246690103500105>
- Giangreco, M. F. (2003). Working with paraprofessionals. *Educational Leadership*, 61(2), 50-54.
- Hall, L. J., Grundon, G. S., Pope, C., & Romero, A. B. (2010). Training paraprofessionals to use behavioral strategies when educating learners with autism spectrum disorders across environments. *Behavioral Interventions*, 25(1), 37-51. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bin.294>
- Ledford, J. R., Zimmerman, K. N., Chazin, K. T., Patel, N. M., Morales, V. A., & Bennett, B. P. (2017). Coaching paraprofessionals to promote engagement and social interactions during small group activities. *Journal of Behavioral Education*, 26(4), 410-432. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10864-017-9273-8>
- Matson, J. L., & Boisjoli, J. A. (2009). The token economy for children with intellectual disability and/or autism: A review. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 30(2), 240-248. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2008.04.001>
- McGrath, M. Z., Johns, B. H., & Mathur, S. R. (2010). Empowered or overpowered? Strategies for working effectively with paraprofessionals. *Beyond Behavior*, 19(2), 2-6. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2008.04.001>
- Reddy, L. A., Lekwa, A. J., & Glover, T. A. (2020). Supporting paraprofessionals in schools: Current research and practice. *Psychology in the Schools*, 58, 643-647. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22457>
- Sauberan, A. (2015) Room to grow: Supporting the role of paraprofessional. *Voices of Practitioners*, 52-66. https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/pubs/VOP_Winter%202015-compressed%20file%20%281%29.pdf
- Suter, J. C., & Giangreco, M. F. (2009). Numbers that count: Exploring special education and paraprofessional service delivery in inclusion-oriented schools. *The Journal of Special Education*, 43(2), 81-93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466907313353>
- Stockall, N. S. (2014). When an aide really becomes an aid: Providing professional development for special education paraprofessionals. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 46(6), 197-205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040059914537202>
- Trautman, M. L. (2004). Preparing and managing paraprofessionals. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 39(3), 131-138. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10534512040390030101>
- Wallace, T., Shin, J., Bartholomay, T., & Stahl, B. J. (2001). Knowledge and skills for teachers supervising the work of paraprofessionals. *Exceptional Children*, 67(4), 520-533. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001440290106700406>
- Wong, H. K., Wong, R. T., & Seroyer, C. (2005). *The first days of school: How to be an effective teacher*. Mountain View, CA: Harry K. Wong Publications.

Meghan Guard is a Special Education Teacher at Midlakes Education Center in Phelps, NY and also a BCBA who graduated from Hobart and William Smith Colleges with her Bachelor's in Psychology and Masters of Arts in Teaching.

Diana Baker's special education career started in a classroom where she taught eight students with autism and supervised four teaching assistants. She is currently an Associate Professor of Education at Hobart and William Smith Colleges where she prepares future teachers and engages in research related to multilingual students with disabilities among other topics.