

Rapid progress in research is helping make inclusive education not only a reality for many students with significant disabilities, but a meaningful and successful endeavor for everyone involved. During the initial development of inclusive education, a primary focus of research and an important rationale for this educational approach was the social benefits that students with significant disabilities would accrue. Given the long history of social isolation experienced by many people with disabilities this was, and certainly still is, an important goal.

Indeed, remarkable progress has been made during the last decade in structuring inclusive education to improve the social lives of students with significant disabilities (e.g., Kennedy, 2004; Salisbury, Gallucci, Palombaro, & Peck, 1995; Schnorr, 1990). With the success that advocates, practitioners, and researchers have had in socially including students with significant disabilities into general education settings, it is not surprising that a second emphasis area would emerge: access to the general education curriculum.

Helping students with disabilities access the same curriculum as other students in a general education classroom is important for several reasons.

- ☉ First, it aligns what is being taught so all students in a classroom are working on a common set of themes.
- ☉ Second, accessing the general education curriculum promotes belongingness and membership because it emphasizes similarities among students, while minimizing differences.
- ☉ Third, this area is challenging how adults think about the capabilities of students with the most significant disabilities.

This latter point is just emerging as an issue and is forcing us to think deeply about literacy, academic content, state testing standards, and what students with significant disabilities can achieve if adults allow them the opportunity.

## Peer Supports and Access to the General Education Curriculum

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These trends are coalescing into an emphasis on how to promote general education participation for students with disabilities so that educators can help maximize social and academic benefits. Because of the intensive support needs of students with disabilities, a primary research focus is the development of assistive strategies in general education settings.

Initially, this marshalling of support strategies has stressed collaboration among general educators, special educators, related-services professionals, and paraprofessionals. However, as we will discuss below, researchers are learning that an over-reliance on adults in inclusive educational settings may have as many limitations as it does benefits. In an attempt to promote even greater success in general education settings, we continue to learn about how to most effectively and respectfully provide support in inclusive settings.

*An Over-reliance on Paraprofessionals*  
In order to provide students with meaningful experiences in general education environments, many schools have come to rely on paraprofessionals to deliver ongoing support to students with significant disabilities. For example, a paraprofessional may accompany a student to an American government class and

assist her by modifying the curriculum, providing behavioral support, and delivering instruction. What might seem at first glance to be an effective resource for supporting inclusive practices, however, may actually turn out to be counterproductive. An over-reliance on paraprofessionals to provide direct support to students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings may inadvertently hinder students' academic and social growth (Giangreco & Doyle, 2004).

An unintended effect of paraprofessionals may be limiting interactions between students and their general education teachers. Seeing that another adult is working with the student with a significant disability, a general education teacher may defer primary responsibility for providing instruction to the paraprofessional.

Unfortunately, most paraprofessionals have not been provided adequate training on curricular modifications or instructional techniques. It may, therefore, be unrealistic to expect paraprofessionals to effectively perform these tasks. As a result, it is not uncommon to find paraprofessionals in many classrooms working with students on completely different instructional activities than the rest of the class. In addition to hindering academic progress, over-reliance on paraprofessionals can have a collateral effect of causing students to be overly dependent on adults for their instructional needs.

General education classrooms also provide important opportunities for students to get to know their peers and develop friendships.

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*Continued on page 9*

## Peer Supports and Access to the General Education Curriculum

*Continued from page 8*

The close presence of paraprofessionals, however, may restrict students' access to these benefits. It is not unusual to see paraprofessionals "attached at the hip" to the students they are supporting. Despite good intentions, the constant presence of an adult can stifle peer interaction, causing undue attention to students with disabilities.

Peers are often reluctant to approach their classmates with significant disabilities if they must always "go through" the paraprofessional. Moreover, this arrangement can be embarrassing for the students who are receiving paraprofessional support, particularly as students approach adolescence, a time when hanging out with adults becomes less "cool." It seems unlikely that the first choice of most students, with or without significant disabilities, would be to eat lunch, spend breaks, and sit in class with adults such as paraprofessionals.

Although paraprofessionals can play a valuable role in supporting general education participation, it seems that paraprofessionals may not represent either the most natural or the most effective source of support available. Instead, paraprofessional support should be carefully coupled with other sources of support. In particular, the use of peer supports offers a promising alternative for creating meaningful inclusive educational experiences for all students.

### *Peer Support Strategies as an Alternative to Paraprofessionals*

Stemming from class-wide peer tutoring, cooperative learning, and other peer-mediated techniques, peer support strategies involve one or more peers without disabilities working alongside a student with disabilities to provide academic and social support (Cushing & Kennedy, 1997). Students without disabilities may assist in adapting in-class materials in ways that are meaningful and motivating to student with disabilities. Additionally, peer

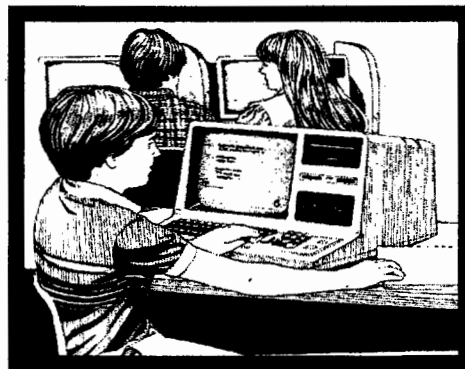
supports serve as the primary social facilitator, engaging in social interactions with the student with disabilities, as well as encouraging interaction with other peers within the class.

Peer supports are not intended to wholly replace adults in providing educational assistance to students with disabilities. Rather, peer support strategies operate under the ongoing supervision of general educators and paraprofessionals. General educators continue to assume responsibility for teaching the course curricula and standards to the entire class. The paraprofessional makes sure that the curricula and standards are accessible to the student with disabilities in a way that allows him or her to be academically and socially successful.

The primary responsibilities of paraprofessionals in peer support strategies include:

- (a) Teaching the peer supports how to interact with the student with disabilities and adapt in-class materials;
- (b) adapting the course curricula, assignments and projects (under the guidance of the special educator); and
- (c) supervising and monitoring the peer group to ensure that the student with disabilities is fully participating as an active member of the general education class.

Peer support approaches are proving to be an effective strategy for supporting the inclusive general education experience. What might such an approach look like in a general education classroom? Consider the following



example of how peer supports can promote both social and academic success.

Eli is a seventh grader at Roberts Middle School. He uses a dynamic display communication device to communicate basic wants and needs. Due to the severity of his cerebral palsy, he also uses a motorized wheelchair.

In order to promote his social and academic participation in general education classrooms, Eli is paired with several peer supports throughout the school day. He works with Sarah in English, Matthew in science, and Terry in social studies. All of his peers have been taught by the paraprofessional to make adaptations and modifications to class activities/assignments, provide instruction, and promote positive social interactions for Eli.

Once the peers demonstrated their ability to support Eli academically and socially, the paraprofessional took on a more supervisory role, checking on the peer support group a few times each class period, rather than hovering over the students for the entire class period. Sarah, Matthew, and Terry understand that if they have a question regarding supporting Eli, the paraprofessional is close by and ready to assist. This way, the peer supports are assured that they always have access to any help that they may need. At the same time, the paraprofessional is able to assist other classmates who may need extra support, as well as provide support to the general educator.

In English, Sarah assists him to complete in-class work, take notes, and record homework assignments. In addition, Sarah actively involves other peers in the class in modeling appropriate social interactions with Eli. She encourages Eli to use his communication device to ask for assistance or attention rather than screaming to make requests or comments. When transitioning to his next class (science), Sarah and her friends walk with Eli to the science classroom, introducing him to peers in the hallway, talking about the upcoming weekend, and assisting him with carrying his books and materials.

*Continued on page 10*

## Peer Supports and Access to the General Education Curriculum

*Continued from page 9*

### *Increasing Success for All Students*

The appeal of peer support approaches for facilitating general education access is clear -- benefits accrue for everyone. Research findings indicate that peer support strategies:

- (a) promote the general education participation of students with disabilities;
- (b) maximize the social and academic benefits of all students; and
- (c) are relatively easy to implement and integrate into general education classrooms.

The previous description of Eli's peer support system demonstrates just how the social and academic participation of students with severe disabilities in general education classrooms can be maximized.

As a result of increased peer interaction with and modeling by his classmates, Eli has become more socially competent. He is currently learning how to communicate his wants and needs in a manner that is socially acceptable.

For example, Eli's peers remind him to use his communication device as an alternative to screaming. Throughout his school day, he has numerous opportunities to practice newly acquired communication skills. Moreover, Eli's friendship network is expanding with the help of his peer supports. The peer supports serve as liaisons between Eli and other students. They model for other peers how to interact with Eli. Sarah encourages other peers to assist and socialize with Eli. Currently, some of Sarah's friends have begun to hang out with Eli and new relationships are beginning to develop. Most importantly, Eli is a full-fledged member of his seventh grade classes.

With the combined effort of the paraprofessional and peer supports, Eli is also able to

access the general education curriculum in a manner that allows him to be academically successful. Adaptations and modifications are made prior to class through a collaborative effort between the special and general educators and paraprofessional. The materials are then provided to the peers who are instructed in how to use them with Eli. Ultimately, the peers directly support Eli in daily class activities. Such activities may include, reading sections aloud to Eli, asking him comprehension questions to test for understanding of the material, clarifying instructions on in-class assignments, and paraphrasing lectures in a way that is geared to Eli's learning abilities.

Eli is not the only one who benefits from peer support arrangements. In fact, social and academic benefits also accrue for his classmates who serve as peer supports. Peer supports are provided with opportunities to interact with and get to know an individual with significant disabilities whom they might not otherwise meet. Sarah, Matthew, and Terry have found that although Eli may talk, act and learn differently, he is still a seventh grader who likes to hang out and laugh and do things other seventh graders do.

As a result of their support role, peers without disabilities also receive extra attention from the paraprofessional and general educator. Academically, the peers have found that their grades have either maintained or actually improved as a result of working with Eli. Sarah, who is a straight "A" student, continued to perform strongly on her school work (Shukla, Kennedy, & Cushing, 1999). But for Matthew, who is a "C" student, and Terry, who is at risk for school failure, the experience of serving as a peer support has raised their grades (Cushing, & Kennedy, 1997).

Matthew and Terry found that the skills they learned as a result of being a peer support assisted them with their own learning. The paraprofessional taught them how to paraphrase information, clarify instructions, and attend to the academic task at hand in order to assist Eli. As a result, the peers' access to the general education curriculum has increased.

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Teachers and paraprofessionals also benefit from peer support strategies. Peer support strategies are easy to implement and naturally fit into general education classrooms. Students within the class volunteer to serve as peer supports. The paraprofessional, who already accompanies a student to class and assists her by modifying the curriculum, providing behavioral support, and delivering instruction, now takes on the role of supporting the peer group.

As the peer support learns how to communicate and adapt in-class materials, the paraprofessional is able to use her time to support other students who are failing or at risk for school failure. The general educator assumes the role of teaching everyone. The use of peer supports does not take time away from other peers or require the educator to directly work with the student with disabilities. Rather, the general educator is encouraged to support the peer group and actively engage the student with significant disabilities while teaching the entire class.

For example, in Eli's English class, the general educator makes sure to ask Eli at least one "yes/no" question concerning the daily lecture. Peer support strategies have been implemented successfully across age groups and course content (Dugan et al., 1995; Salisbury et al., 1995; Shukla et al., 1999).

Peer support strategies can be used in elementary, middle, and high school class-

*Continued on page 11*

**Peer Supports and Access to the General Education Curriculum**

*Continued from page 10*

rooms and are appropriate for a wide range of academic (e.g., mathematics or ecology) and nonacademic classes (e.g., music or art). In addition, using peers as supports for students with disabilities is far less intrusive than the use of paraprofessionals. As discussed earlier, paraprofessionals can isolate the student with disabilities from his peers and from the general educator. The use of more natural supports seems to encourage belongingness and membership within the general education classroom.

**Conclusion**

A primary focus of current research efforts is the development of effective, practical strategies that will assist all students in general education classrooms. Currently, paraprofessionals are used almost exclusively to support students with significant disabilities in general education classrooms. We are not suggesting that paraprofessionals should not be used to provide support to students. Rather, we are concerned that an over-reliance on adults may limit the benefits associated with general education participation for students with significant disabilities.

In this article, we described the use of peer supports as a promising strategy for supporting inclusive educational experiences for students with significant disabilities. Still, there remains much more to learn about how to most effectively and respectfully implement such approaches in inclusive classrooms. For this reason, we are currently involved in Project ACCESS, a three-year project funded by the U. S. Department of Education, designed to evaluate the academic and social impact of peer support arrangements on students with significant disabilities, their peers serving as supports, and the educators who serve them. We hope that with the accumulation of this new knowledge, that we

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can add to the research base and demystify strategies that support students academically and socially in inclusive education.

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