A TEACHER’S EXPERIENCE WITH PARAPROS AT AN OHIO COUNTY BOARD OF DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES SCHOOL

The Ohio County Boards of Developmental Disabilities (CBDD) schools provide services to students who have multiple disabilities. Gilbert DeVille is an intervention specialist at a CBDD school located in a rural area of southern Ohio. The school serves approximately 35 students from ages 3 through 21. Gilbert and his team of four paraprofessional educators work with six to ten students in the high school through young adult range.

The students in Gilbert’s classroom have IEPs addressing their physical, motor, communication, and cognitive difficulties. Several students also have behavioral and mental health challenges. The school draws students from four counties and is separate from the area’s public schools. Therefore, Gilbert’s students have limited opportunities for “push-in” or inclusion arrangements. Their engagement with the general education curriculum occurs through the instruction that Gilbert provides. Some of the students spend part of their day in community job placements or studying at a nearby vocational school. Most of Gilbert’s students receive one-on-one services from a paraprofessional.

Gilbert has worked in the classroom with paraprofessionals for two years. In his classroom, most parapros are assigned to specific students, sometimes accompanying them to the vocational school or to other community activities. The parapros go in and out of the classroom throughout the day, guiding students to and from buses, accompanying them to therapy sessions (occupational, physical, and speech), and sometimes assisting in other classrooms. When parapros are out of the room, the other parapros work as a team to cover their colleagues’ classroom responsibilities. Gilbert frequently divides his students into instructional groups.
While he works with one group, one or more parapos work with the other groups. The parapos also pitch in to help during group instruction.

Members of the research team interviewed Gilbert about his job responsibilities and experiences, focusing especially on his experiences working with paraprofessionals. A team member also spent a day observing in Gilbert’s classroom. The interviews and classroom observations provide insights into several arrangements promoting a successful working partnership between teacher and parapro(s) providing personal and educational support in traditional settings. These arrangements would quite likely contribute to working successfully with parapos in many other educational settings as well. They include:

- preparation of parapos,
- parapos’ sense of ownership in the enterprise, and
- quality of the teacher-parapro relationship.

**Preparation of Paraprofessionals**

The parapos at Gilbert’s school are County Board of Developmental Disabilities employees. In order to work with students with developmental disabilities, parapos must be certified as Registered Service Providers. Among the requirements for this designation are a high school diploma or general education development (GED) certificate; certification in first aid, CPR, and AED; and training in health, safety, and provision of services and support to persons with developmental disabilities. At the CBDD school, the parapos receive some additional on-the-job training from the physical therapist, occupational therapist, and speech therapist.

Gilbert believes that, while this level of preparation may equip service providers to support the basic needs of students, parapos need additional preparation to become true “partners” in facilitating the students’ education. He begins each school year by giving the
parapro who work with him a comprehensive understanding of the students in the class, including their abilities, learning challenges, family and home backgrounds, and previous years’ experience at the school, when applicable. He summarizes each student’s IEP and meets with the parapros to discuss the students’ needs and learning goals. By encouraging parapros to see each student as a “whole person,” Gilbert empowers them to take responsibility for meeting students’ educational needs.

Enabling parapros to function effectively as providers of educational support and instruction requires ongoing efforts. Gilbert trains the parapros with whom he works in methods to deliver and support instruction for each student. He meets with the parapros each day to go over the activities, materials, and supports they will be using, and he reflects with them at the end of the school day on student progress and ongoing learning needs. “[We’re] constantly talking about where our kids are…what’s going on with them. …We tweak [the program] and address [issues] the next day.” Fortunately, the parapros’ schedule contains at least a half hour at the end of each school day for discussing students, planning instruction, and preparing for the next day’s activities. Gilbert believes the time invested in equipping parapros to be “educational partners” is time well spent. The parapros can deliver a higher level of service to the students, and they can more effectively cover each other’s job responsibilities when needed. Furthermore, the parapros experience greater satisfaction from their work. Gilbert, the parapros, and the students, all benefit from the collegial and smooth-functioning classroom environment.

**Parapros’ Sense of Ownership in the Enterprise**

Preparing parapros to deliver instruction and educational support to students goes hand in hand with promoting parapros’ sense of ownership in the enterprise. Under Gilbert’s supervision, the parapros learn to provide instruction and educational support to the students. He maintains
responsibility for what goes on in the classroom, but he encourages the parapros to use their own initiative in choosing books, materials, and even teaching strategies to use with the students. As the parapros’ skills increase, Gilbert transfers more responsibility to them. This leads to greater parapro “buy-in,” and cultivates a climate of mutual trust between Gilbert and the parapros in his class. “I think it’s really important that they feel invested. Really important!” he emphasizes. “[U]nder my supervision …I give them a lot of power and freedom, and I think it’s one of the reasons that our [classroom] chemistry is so good.”

Gilbert also elevates parents’ perceptions of the work being done by the parapros. By highlighting the important role that parapros play in the students’ learning and development, he helps parents view parapros as professional educators. He encourages regular communication between parapros and the parents of students in the class, both at school and by phone, and he supports the practice of including parapros as part of students’ IEP teams when parents are amenable. “I’ve been trying to get that going more, because nobody knows [the students] better than [the parapros] do. …[S]ometimes parents are receptive to that…, some are not. …I get [the parapros] more and more involved, because I think …they’re the boots on the ground, so to speak. I think the more involved they can be, the better it is… And I think it’s… part of [parapros’] ownership…I think it’s part of the process.”

Quality of the Teacher-Parapro Relationship

Gilbert credits much of his success in working with parapros to the relationship he cultivates with them. He never asks parapros to do anything that he himself doesn’t do. He holds high expectations for performance and behavior, and inspires others to meet those standards by demonstrating them in his own actions. Gilbert builds a climate of cooperation and teamwork by cross-training parapros so they can effectively cover for each other and for him, when necessary.
He gets to know his parapros as people, making an effort to learn about their families, their interests, and their concerns. The parapros in Gilbert’s room recognize his investment in them, and respond in kind.

Gilbert, to a greater extent than many teachers, invites the parapros to participate fully and equally in the business of the classroom. He shares with them the reasoning underlying his instructional, administrative, and classroom management decisions. He invites their questions and suggestions, even going so far as to solicit from his parapros an informal “annual review” of his performance. “I want to know if there are things that we can…that I can do better as the leader of this classroom, to help our environment. … And, so, they opened up, and made a couple of suggestions... And you know what? … [W]e implemented those suggestions…”

Above all, Gilbert prizes open communication between himself and his parapros. He describes the atmosphere of openness and rapport in his classroom as “transparency.” Without compromising his leadership authority, he sets a tone of professionalism that empowers the parapros to work as partners in the educational mission of the classroom.