



Teachers working with ESOL paraprofessionals in a secondary context: Examining supervision



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Supervision of paraprofessionals in secondary school reading programmes inadequate.
- Selection of reading materials and production of task sheets an issue.
- Lack of regular planning and supervision meetings.
- Working closely with teacher opportunities for modelling good practice.
- Commitment from management needed to maximise benefits for students.

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ABSTRACT

Internationally paraprofessionals are increasingly employed as one option of providing support for English language learners (ELLs) in schools. Consequently more teachers are working with paraprofessionals and becoming responsible for their supervision. This article examines the supervision of eight paraprofessionals working in secondary schools in New Zealand. To maximise learning benefits for ELLs, we argue that robust systems of supervision are required for ESOL paraprofessionals. While this study is located in New Zealand we believe it illuminates issues that are of international interest in education systems that are struggling to stay abreast of and adequately cater for ethnic and linguistic diversity.

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1. Introduction

With the phenomenal increase in the movement of people around the world as a result of migration and displacement, many western countries are facing previously unseen levels of ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity. This in conjunction with economic migration, the increasing commodification of education (for example, the presence of international students in schools) and the role of English as a global lingua franca, has placed pressure on established education systems. This previously unexperienced

complexity has been referred to by Steven Vertovec as superdiversity (2007). Schools have to meet the challenge of providing for students who may have come from countries with divergent philosophical and pedagogical approaches to education, diverse cultural language and literacy backgrounds and in some cases limited or interrupted schooling.

In countries where English is the main language of education, the increasing numbers of English language learners (ELLs) have led education authorities (for example, Scotland, United Kingdom, New Zealand) to develop policies and guidelines for the support of these students in schools. Some authorities provide earmarked funding to address the challenges of supporting ELLs which can result in a variety of initiatives, including the employment of paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals are also referred to in the literature as teacher aides, teaching assistants, paraeducators, language assistants and classroom assistants. Oral language acquisition and the development of English literacy are particular areas where paraprofessionals have become involved with new learners of English.

Abbreviations: EAL, English as an additional language; ELL, English language learner; ELLs, English language learners; ESOL, English for Speakers of Other Languages; HOD, Head of department; L1, First language; OHP, Overhead projector; TESSOL, Teaching English in Schools to Speakers of Other Languages; TESOL, Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages.

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Paraprofessionals, more generally, have been employed for many years, initially to assist teachers with non-teaching tasks and/or to support students with disabilities and/or learning difficulties. The number of paraprofessionals in western schools has risen as national and local bodies attempt to meet growing educational demands. Not only have they continued to work in the area of special needs education (Pickett, 1999), as noted above, they are now employed to assist in the provision of extra support for minority students and new learners of English as well as to more generally support the raising of standards in schools. For example, a deliberate move to increase the number of paraprofessionals in Scotland to 5000 by 2002 was part of an initiative by the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department (SOEID) to raise standards in Scottish schools in general and was not focussed specifically on supporting a particular group of learners (Wilson, Schlapp, & Davidson, 2003). Funding provided by authorities to employ paraprofessionals, is frequently accompanied with requirements and guidelines as to how they can be deployed to support learners and teachers. Policies and recommendations for professional development and guidelines for the employment of paraprofessionals also reflect the growing awareness of the complex dynamics of utilising paraprofessionals in the school environment (Ministry of Education, 2006; Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NREL), 1999; Pickett, 1999). Teacher training programmes however generally do not or have only just begun to reflect these developments (Bignold & Barbera, 2011).

Once new initiatives involving funding for employing paraprofessionals are implemented or trialled, authorities may seek evidence on the impact of the paraprofessional support and on whether the original aims of the funded initiatives are being met. Studies to assess the success of initiatives involving the role of paraprofessionals have been conducted in several countries, for example in Scotland (Wilson et al., 2003; Woolfson & Truswell, 2005), New Zealand (Harvey, Richards, & Stacey, 2009a); in states of the USA (Gerber, Finn, Achillies, & Boyd-Zaharis, 2001), and England (Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), 2002).

This paper draws on ethnographic research examining the practices of ESOL paraprofessionals in their support of ELLs in initial reading programmes in secondary schools. In particular the paper focusses on the issue of supervision of paraprofessionals by their supervising teachers. We draw on sociocultural theory (Lantolf, 2000) to explain the types of interactions that teachers and paraprofessionals, and to some extent paraprofessionals and students, in our study are typically engaged in. In addition we mobilise the composite concepts of zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1987 cited in Lantolf, 2000) and scaffolding (Ohta, 2000) to critique current practices and suggest a way forward for the supervision and indeed collaborative working practices of teachers with ESOL paraprofessionals.

2. Literature review

At the heart of the issue of supervision is the fact that paraprofessionals are generally minimally qualified and yet support learners with the greatest needs (Giangreco, 2003; Giangreco, Elderman, & Broer, 2003). High quality, effective and regular supervision by qualified teachers is thus essential. Although much of the literature concerns paraprofessionals working in special needs education many of the pervading issues discussed also relate to the work of ESOL paraprofessionals. These issues are summarised by Giangreco et al., (2003, p. 63), working in an American context, who report that paraprofessionals continue to be “asked to undertake critical instructional responsibilities without sufficient role clarification, planning by qualified professionals, supervision, or training”. With regard to the issue of supervision, the question of who provides the supervision, how it is provided, how often and

whether it is considered effective, are recurring themes in the literature (Causton-Theoharis, Giangreco, Doyle, & Vadsay, 2007; French, 2001; Giangreco et al., 2003; Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl, 2001; Wilson et al., 2003). When these concerns are not being adequately addressed, there tends to be ineffective utilisation of paraprofessionals (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2007) and inadequate support for students. One of the key areas that is identified in the literature as directly affecting the quality of supervision is the character of supervision meetings, or the lack of them (French, 2001; Wilson et al., 2003). Our study also identified: the backgrounds of the paraprofessional and supervising teacher; the nature of planning and related decisions on appropriate teaching resources, the physical instructional environment and school timetabling systems as factors that also impacted on the supervision relationship in a range of ways.

Face to face supervision meetings are generally assumed to be synonymous with any supervision relationship (French, 2001) and to be the context where much of the explicit, deliberate acts of supervision occur. Moreover, formal structured communication also provides time to focus on the needs of individual students and the strategies that can be implemented to improve their progress (Amos, 2008). The literature continues to both espouse the importance of meetings (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2007; French, 2001) and recommend meeting frequencies and duration (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2007) while simultaneously lamenting the lack of supervision meetings that actually occur in schools (Wilson et al., 2003). Finding time for planning and supervision meetings continues to be one of the difficulties encountered by schools and supervising teachers (Franson, 1999; Wilson et al., 2003; Woolfson & Truswell, 2005). Causton-Theoharis et al., (2007, p. 57) suggest 15 min daily meetings, 45–60 min weekly meetings and monthly meetings “to discuss the progress of individual students” (p.60). However, many paraprofessionals, whether employed fulltime or part time are frequently hourly paid and not necessarily allocated paid hours outside classroom times to meet with their supervising teachers (Wilson et al., 2003). In a study in Colorado USA, by Nancy French (2001) focussing on special education paraprofessionals, 25 per cent (57) of the teachers responsible for supervision indicated that they never met with paraprofessionals. Similarly, findings in an evaluation of classroom assistants in Scottish primary schools showed that regular planning meetings were “still a minority experience reported by 39 per cent in 2000 and only 25 per cent in 2001” (Wilson et al., 2003, p. 200).

Some teachers and paraprofessionals make the most of breaks to meet informally, at lunchtimes and occasions when students are delayed or attending a special school event (Harvey, Richards, & Stacey, 2009b). Considering the other possible demands on teachers and paraprofessionals' time during breaks e.g. playground duty, pastoral care of students, resource preparation, and supervision of extracurricular activities these opportunistic meetings are not ideal. Unfortunately, lack of meeting times means that paraprofessionals are often allocated tasks when they arrive in the classroom, are given oral instructions ‘on the hoof’, or just join in with whatever is taking place when they arrive in a classroom (French, 2001; Wilson et al., 2003).

To compensate for the lack of quality meeting times for supervision, other forms of communication and allocation of tasks including using lists on the whiteboard, diaries and notebooks have been developed (Wilson et al., 2003). In some cases paraprofessionals who have predetermined timetabled tasks, follow a regular routine, and are given initial instructions pertaining to a series of commercial reading resources, may be perceived as not needing regular supervision (Harvey et al., 2009a). However, such a minimal level of supervision is not experienced as satisfactory by many teachers and paraprofessionals as can be seen by the findings

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