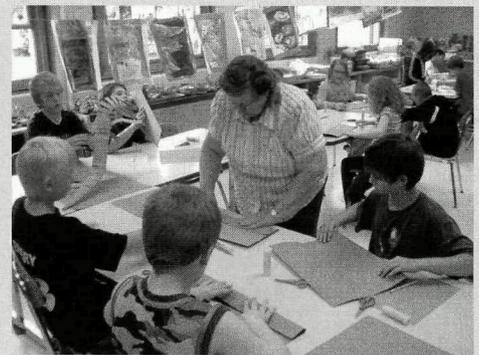
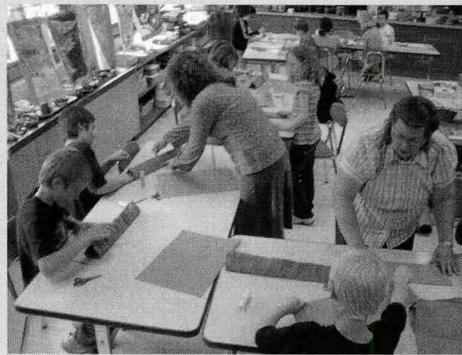


How art educators and paraprofessionals can coordinate strategies to help students with disabilities experience success in the mainstream classroom.

# Creating Effective Paraprofessional Support in the Inclusive Art Classroom

CORRIE BURDICK and JULIE CAUSTON-THEOHARIS



**P**araprofessionals are among the 650,000 (U.S. Department of Education, 2007) people supervised by certified professionals who support students with disabilities as determined by a student's Individual Education Plan (IEP). Other terms to describe this position may include "aide," "assistant," or "associate," among others (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2001; Pickett, 1989). The number of paraprofessionals present in classrooms has increased over the past 10 years (French, 2003; Giangreco & Broer, 2005). While there is a growing body of literature that examines the role of paraprofessionals in the general classroom (Broer, Doyle, & Giangreco, 2005), there is little information about the role of the paraprofessional in the art classroom and the types of support offered.

Fortunately, inclusive education is becoming more prominent in schools. With this increase in inclusion, new challenges are being posed to the art teacher. Currently, there are over 5.5 million students with identified disabilities in schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2008) many of whom are attending art classes (Guay, 1994; Reynolds, 1990). A related challenge in the field of art education is that along with these students, often come paraprofessionals (Broer, Doyle, & Giangreco, 2005; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997) who are designated to act as supports for students with a variety of cognitive and physical disabilities.

What are art educators to do with these potential supporters of art education? How can art educators best utilize paraprofessionals in the art room? We use observational case study (Bogden & Biklen, 1992) data from five middle and five high school art classrooms and interview data from ten art teachers and five paraprofessionals to describe the types of paraprofessional supports provided in these classes. (To protect the anonymity of these professionals, pseudonyms are used throughout this work.) This information, along with relevant literature, is used to examine the ways that art educators can best utilize paraprofessionals to most effectively support the participation of students with disabilities. We found several key components to the most effective support in the art classroom. These included: (1) respect and value for paraprofessionals and students; (2) providing access to materials, instruction, and peers; (3) improving communication; and (4) fading paraprofessional support. This article is organized around each of these themes.

## Respect and Value

In the most successful inclusive art classrooms, we observed a general respect for the paraprofessional and the student who was being supported. This may seem like a given, however some research has shown that many classroom teachers view the presence of a paraprofessional as the person who will “handle most of the planning, adapting, supervision and instruction” (Giangreco, 2003, p. 50) for a student with a disability. Additional studies (see Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996, for a review of the literature) have examined the attitudes of inclusive classroom instructors about teaching students with all kinds of disabilities and found a correlation between these attitudes and the teaching behaviors employed to provide educational opportunity (Cook, 2004). Based upon these findings, we respectfully remind art educators that the presence of a paraprofessional does not relieve the teacher of professional responsibility to educate all students in his/her classroom, but rather offers opportunity for supporting and improving access to the curriculum. Mrs. Clare, a high school art teacher, described her philosophy of inclusive art education as having “a respect for all who enter the art room as part of the learning community. This includes respecting and valuing both the students and the paraprofessional that work in my room” (Clare A., personal communication, November 6, 2009). Philosophies such as these are just one component of the most successful inclusive art classrooms. They provide the foundation for meaningful, creative, expressive art experiences where students of all abilities create and respond to art together.

### *Value and Respect for Paraprofessionals*

Respect means recognizing what the paraprofessional brings to the class. It could be years of experience, as was the case of Ms. Alice, who had worked in an urban high school as a paraprofessional for over 20 years. Although she did not hold credentials beyond her high school diploma, she had a range of experiences working with many different students that made her a valuable asset to the art teacher. The skills and experiences that paraprofessionals bring to the classroom may not always be readily apparent, but when considered thoughtfully can be a starting point for crafting successful support.

### *Valuing Through Sharing*

Sharing of art expertise can lead to more successful collaboration between the art teacher and paraprofessional (Guay & Gerlach, 2006). It is never safe to assume anyone’s prior knowledge of and use of art materials. Whenever possible, involve paraprofessionals in demonstrations and explorations of materials in the art room. Some paraprofessionals may welcome an invitation into the art room during free time (i.e. during art club or after school) to further develop their own command of the materials. In the case of one art teacher in this study, Mrs. Friend, two of the four paraprofessionals she worked with voluntarily came in after school to learn about the materials that would be used by the students they were supported. This demonstrates how the paraprofessional(s) that an art teacher may encounter have different experiences and levels of expertise with art materials. Offering opportunities for them to expand their working knowledge of the art process and materials may be viewed as a valuable and worthwhile investment of their time, and may go so far as to provide a source of joy for that paraprofessional. When possible, don’t allow paraprofessionals to dwell in beliefs we commonly heard in our research such as “I’m no artist,” but instead empower them with art knowledge and experience. See the list given here for more ideas on respectfully teaming with paraprofessionals in the art classroom.

### **Respectfully Teaming with Paraprofessionals in the Art Classroom**

- Welcome paraprofessionals into the art classroom as an important member of the teaching team.
- Address paraprofessionals in the same manner in which teachers are addressed (e.g., Ms. Durst).
- Provide a space for paraprofessional’s belongings and work if necessary.
- Have conversations about students’ learning and behavioral needs and strategies to respond to these needs.
- Discuss and clarify daily roles and responsibilities of both the art teacher and the paraprofessional.
- Share tasks that are routine and communicate authority (e.g., taking attendance, handing out materials, or writing on the chalkboard).

- Determine what specific supports students with disabilities need when in the art classroom. Also, determine when adult support is not necessary.
- Carve out time in your schedule to meet and communicate with paraprofessionals regularly to discuss student-specific concerns and questions.
- Establish back-up plans for absences or unexpected situations (e.g., challenging behavior).
- Find ways to show appreciation for the paraprofessionals on the teaching team (e.g., a thank you note). (Causton-Theoharis, 2008)

### *Value and Respect for Students*

Inclusive education calls for the education of *all* students (Schwartz & Kluth, 2007), including those students who come with paraprofessional support. Respect for students who come with a paraprofessional includes welcoming both the student and their support systems, human and otherwise (Causton-Theoharis, Giangreco, Doyle, & Vadas, 2007). This type of respect can be as simple as creating a physical environment that is accessible or learning about student preferences for materials, subject matter, and level or type of support. An example of learning about a student’s preferred type of support came from Mrs. Jane, a middle school art teacher who works with the student to determine the necessity of support based on a given activity. Instead of assuming that paraprofessional support is needed at all times, she consults the student and the paraprofessional before each project to decide how much support is necessary.

After I give instructions and before letting Sarah (the student) get started on a project, I ask her, would you like any support with this project? If she says yes, I let her choose if she wants my help, Ms. Little’s (the paraprofessional) help, or the help of a friend. I then listen to her... if she says I don’t need help on this project, I let her go it alone. (Jane M., personal communication, December 11, 2009)

Asking a student’s preference for type of support is an important factor in helping students become more independent and shows that you consider the student a valuable source for determining the appropriate support for that student.

## Access

Physical access to the classroom is basic, yet undeniably important, for students. In the art room it is important to consider access to materials, art tables, sinks, visual materials, the teacher, and peers. The placement of furniture in the room should allow for unobstructed movement by all students. Physical access for all members of the classroom ensures that students have opportunities to learn with and from peers. Too often in these classrooms, we saw students with disabilities seated near the door, flanked by a paraprofessional. Instead, in classrooms where students were seated with peers, we were able to see more peer interaction and natural peer supports. Additionally, it was better for student independence if paraprofessionals did not have a seat directly next to the student being supported. Rather, it was better if the paraprofessional floated around and helped other students, acting as a universal support of the art teacher and supporting access to the art curriculum—thus, making their support less obtrusive and allowing for more independence and social interaction for the student with a disability.

## Visual Access

Access also pertains to content and curriculum in the art classroom. Visual materials can play a prominent role in the art curriculum. Artistic production often involves the use of materials or processes that may be new to students; therefore it is important for students to have a clear view of printed or projected materials, demonstrations of processes and techniques, and a clear line of sight to the art teacher to aid in clarity of communication. The paraprofessional can play an important role to support visual access for students in the art classroom by ensuring that the physical placement of the student provides the necessary clear line of sight to the teacher, the visual materials, and demonstrations of processes or techniques. Additionally, it is important that the paraprofessional is actively engaged in the visual presentation so that he/she may provide clarification, verification, or reiteration of important information to the students he/she supports. Additionally, it may be necessary for the paraprofessional to provide remedial or extended access to visual materials. This was seen when Ms. Price, a paraprofessional working in an inclusive

middle school art classroom, picked up the color printouts that the art teacher had provided as visual resources and said, “For any of you who were wondering what the Statue of Liberty looks like, here it is” (B. Price, from field notes/observation transcript, December 5, 2009) as she walked the image around to each table of students to offer them a closer look. This example of universal support also provided extended viewing at closer proximity for the students she supported.



## Access Through Modifications

At times, materials, content, or instruction may need to be modified to ensure access rather than sole reliance on paraprofessional support. Some examples of modified materials include: enlarged handouts, adaptive paintbrushes, or a simple piece of masking tape to hold a paper still as a student works. Of course, using an art curriculum informed by the principles of Universal Design (Rose & Meyer, 2006) would dictate that these same modifications could benefit all types of students—not only those with specific disabilities—and therefore should be offered as an option for all. While there are some modified materials available commercially, many materials in the art room can be modified using everyday materials. For example, a paintbrush handle can be built up with the bar pad used for bicycles, or tennis racket grip tape. When paraprofessionals are familiar with the options available, they can better ensure that their student has access to the necessary modified materials. When the paraprofessional is familiar with the types of modifications required, and the availability of the modifications, they can provide access to the materials, without being dependent upon the art educator. An example of modifying the content might include reducing the number

of products that a student might make. Mike, a high school student with developmental disability was required to make three mono prints while his classmates were required to make four. By reducing the number of required prints, Mike was able to independently complete each print in the allotted time. Kirsten, a student with Asperger Syndrome, prefers to process information verbally. Therefore, her art teacher uses a “turn and talk” strategy during a lesson demo. In this strategy, rather than asking

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students to raise their hands, she has all students turn to a neighbor to briefly discuss key parts of the lesson. This ensured Kirsten was involved in the lesson, but more importantly provided her with an opportunity for natural peer interaction and exchange of ideas. This strategy engaged and benefited all students—including Kirsten. The paraprofessional's involvement in and collaboration on the daily happenings of the art room is imperative to the support of students participating in art. It is necessary for the paraprofessional to be knowledgeable about the ongoing art projects, the procedures and processes, what modifications are available, and what teaching strategies will be utilized, just as they would for any class. This more complete understanding of the art classroom allows for the most appropriate support of students, always assuming the maximum participation by the student.

## Communication

A common problem identified both in the literature (Fisher & Frey, 2001; Trump & Hange, 1996) and in these classrooms is finding the time to communicate. The strategy just discussed describes the importance of building time and space in your lessons to allow students to engage with one another, share ideas, consider new



It is important to be clear about the types of supports that best empower independent artistic production.

things, and solve problems collectively. The same applies to adults working in the classroom. It is critical for the success of students to make time for communication when there “simply is none” (Causton-Theoharis & Burdick, 2008, p. 179).

#### **Planned Communication Time**

Some of the most successful art teacher/paraprofessional collaborative team established “sacred” meeting times, something as short as 15 minutes before or after school that team members set aside and stay committed to. This time was used to discuss specific art curriculum, materials, modifications, behavior plans, or fading plans.

#### **Unplanned Communication Time**

Another collaborative team utilized independent work time for students, which allowed for adults to meet. Informative videos, cooperative learning, or reinforcement activities can all create time for necessary communication. When available, utilize classroom volunteers to supervise students while you meet with team members. Some teachers in our study found it difficult to get in enough meeting time, so they utilized other types of communication strategies in addition to meetings. These strategies included a communication notebook and e-mail. The simplest way to improve your support for students with disabilities in the art classroom is making time to meet with the paraprofessional providing support and collaboratively make a support plan. Some questions that could guide a support plan discussion are listed here.

### **Questions to Guide Paraprofessional/Art Teacher Communication**

- How are you feeling about supporting in this class?
- How can we help improve Joe’s experience in the art room?
- In what areas do you see Joe becoming the most independent?
- How could Joe become more independent?
- Which students in the room would Joe enjoy working with?
- Was there anything in the demonstration today that was unclear?
- Were you comfortable supporting Joe with the materials I introduced today? (Causton-Theoharis, 2008)

### **Fade the Support of a Paraprofessional**

The presence of paraprofessional support for students in the art room is only one step in the process of empowering artists and supporting independent art production. A common finding in this research was to see paraprofessionals providing too much or too intensive support. Research clearly delineates the negative impact of paraprofessional proximity on students (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Causton-Theoharis & Burdick, 2008; Malmgren & Causton-Theoharis, 2006; Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren, 2005). A technique to eliminate this common issue in the art classroom is to allow the natural interaction and socialization of the art room to occur through a technique called fading.

#### **What is Fading?**

*Fading* is the term used to describe the intentional reduction of support. Fading support allows students to encounter materials and peers without a paraprofessional hovering over them. It allows students

to experiment with materials, processes, and techniques in the art room in expected and unexpected ways, without intrusive supports. This encountering and exploration of materials is a natural part of the artistic process; to make creative and aesthetic decisions without necessarily conferring with or meeting the approval of the paraprofessional. This is especially important as many paraprofessionals are more concerned with re-creating the teacher’s example than allowing for the creative expression of the individual they are supporting (Guay & Gerlach, 2006). Fading may allow more opportunities for peer support that can add—more importantly, provide—natural socialization.

#### **What Does Fading Look Like?**

Paraprofessionals who work in the art classroom become a part of the functional art curriculum. Therefore, it is important to be clear about the types of supports that best empower independent artistic production. One team in this study used these three goals to define the role of the paraprofessional in the art room: (1) to help the student, Joe, to become as independent as possible; (2) to help him connect to other students; and (3) to fade support of the paraprofessional. This team did not allow Joe to sit and fail; instead, they used other methods that did not require adult support. (These are known as “paraprofessional free supports,” meaning they are supports that are not based on a student’s sole reliance upon the paraprofessional.) And instead the paraprofessional worked with all the students in the classroom. See the list here for some examples of paraprofessional free supports. Whenever the art teachers utilized any of these paraprofessional free supports we observed students sharing ideas and information about their artwork, students initiating help from friends, and natural communication occurring between

students about art. By simply backing off or fading support from paraprofessionals, students with disabilities can experience what happens naturally for many other art students.

## Paraprofessional Free Supports

(These are supports that do not rely solely upon the paraprofessional.)

- Use peer support
- Have students “ask 3 before me”
- Utilize table captains to retrieve supplies and materials
- Keep students on track with an agenda
- Use adaptive materials (brushes, drawing instruments, paper holders, adaptive scissors)
- Provide vocabulary word banks for critiques and discussions
- Utilize a communication board that includes art terms and art material descriptions to use when communicating with peers
- Assign collaborative art projects (group work)
- Ask students to comment directly on one another’s work in critique
- Have students share materials and supplies

## Conclusion

The unique classroom climate of the art room often allows for students to communicate with one another while working creatively on their art. The meaningful support of students by paraprofessionals to achieve this is dependent upon several factors. These include respect and value of students with disabilities and the paraprofessionals that support them; physical access to the classroom, content, and curriculum; communication; and fading of support. The art teacher is responsible for planning for these key components to lead to a more valuable level of paraprofessional support in the art classroom. Picture if you will, an inclusive art classroom where paraprofessionals and art educators work together to allow for the most autonomous and free artistic expression from all of your students in the inclusive art classroom.

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