The Dissection of Paraprofessional Support in Inclusive Education: 'You're in Mainstream With a Chaperone'

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The experiences of young people with disabilities of inclusive school-ing are largely underresearched. This paper reports recent findings of a small-scale Australian qualitative study, in which secondary stu-dents with vision impairment spoke about their experiences of receiv-ing paraprofessional support. Two overarching themes emerged from this study: 'light' and 'heavy' paraprofessional support. The results pre-sented here demonstrate that participants described that support per-sonnel upheld the strong arm of the special education tradition, which was manifestly detrimental to their inclusion. Raw data is presented to elucidate the emergent themes, and to explain the various pedagogical and general support roles of class and special educators in eliminating the need for direct paraprofessional presence in lessons. The light and heavy model of support is also examined in terms of how it fits into the complexity of the education discourse and the young people's own aspirations for full inclusion.

Keywords: inclusive education, secondary school, paraprofessional support, vision impairment, qualitative research, social justice

Inclusive ideals define educational policy in most developed countries (Foreman & Arthur-Kelly, 2008). In the Australian context, approximately 3000 children and young people with vision impairment (VI) are educated with specialist support (Australian Blindness Forum, 2008) in inclusive schools (Foreman, 2011). In spite of this, as Slee (2011) points out, inclusion presents a major challenge for educators. This may be due to the fact that teacher education programs lack '"real world" learning' (Ryan, Carrington, Selva, & Healy, 2009, p. 156), in which preservice teachers learn to 'experience diversity in people's cultures, backgrounds, abilities and needs' (Ryan et al., 2009, p. 156).

To this end, university teaching programs are pivotal to inclusive schooling. They have a responsibility to prepare preservice teachers to engage all students with inclusive practices (Hemmings & Woodcock, 2011). However, such courses tend to be aligned with the medical model of disability (Allan, 2008; Rice, 2006). Consequently, as Slee (2011, p. 153) suggests, 'student teachers . . . [are] treated to a Grey's Anatomy approach to inclusive education where they are instructed in the pathology of human differences and "defects".'

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In Australia, educational jurisdictions have been including children and young people with VI in mainstream classrooms since the 1930s (Foreman & Arthur-Kelly, 2008). Education Queensland (2012), which presides over the school in which the current study was conducted, 'is committed to providing safe, supportive, inclusive and disciplined learning environments that provide educational opportunities for all Queensland students' (para. 1).

The Deployment of Paraprofessional Support

In an attempt to reduce the vulnerability to exclusion of young people with disabilities from mainstream classrooms, paraprofessionals are regularly employed to support them directly (Tews & Lupart, 2008; Webster et al., 2010). Students with VI are also typically accommodated in this way (Lewis & McKenzie, 2010). Teachers are generally guided by their assumptions about the difficulties associated with educating students with disabilities (Rice, 2006). Therefore, they often tether such students to the special education discourse (Florian, 2010) rather than providing them with appropriate access to the core curriculum. This may explain why paraprofessionals are employed so readily to support students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Indeed, Tews and Lupart (2008) define this era, in which inclusive education has been tied to an excess of support for students with disabilities, as the 'paraprofessional movement' (p. 40).

Yet the overall purpose and value of such support is disputable (Giangreco, 2009; Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001). In their large-scale UK-based longitudinal study of paraprofessional support, Webster et al. (2010) found that support personnel appear to have become the principal teachers of students with special educational needs. Students who received paraprofessional support regressed academically, and tended to forego interaction with peers. These findings present a real danger to the inclusive schooling of students whom class teachers consider are difficult to teach because of their challenging support needs.

Students' Views of Paraprofessional Support

Students with disabilities who attend inclusive schools appear not to have been consulted widely on their support needs. Although some educators may be tempted to dismiss students' views about aspects of their schooling (Cook-Sather, 2006), such an attitude could have damaging effects on inclusive education. American philosopher John Dewey, whose progressive thinking in the 20th century was influential on educational reform and social democracy in schools, held that the primary responsibility of schools was to involve students in continual enquiry into social matters (Dewey, 1944). Following Dewey, if inclusive education is both predicated on and acts as the foreground of social justice, it would fail to exist if educators neglected to listen to the voices of students. In advancing a research agenda that is concentrated on the restoration of inclusive education onto a course of social justice, Slee (2011, p. 169) poses the pertinent question: 'Who is better able to talk about the needs and aspirations of disabled children than the children themselves?'

In their concluding statement of a comprehensive review of relevant literature, Giangreco et al. (2001) noted the absence of student perspectives on the suitability of paraprofessional support in inclusive classrooms. More than a decade after this finding, a database search yielded a small number of published studies with methodology that included the voiced experiences of students with disabilities about the paraprofessional support that they received (Broer, Doyle, & Giangreco, 2005; Mortier, Desimpel, De Schauwer, & Van Hove, 2011; Tews & Lupart, 2008), among other aspects of their inclusion (Curtin &

Clarke, 2005; De Schauwer, Van Hove, Mortier, & Loots, 2009). Most studies were conducted with either former or current students with cognitive or physical impairments; only one participant in Mortier et al.'s (2011) investigation had impaired vision.

An assortment of noteworthy themes emerged from these studies. Students in receipt of paraprofessional support appear to constantly experience feelings of dependence on support personnel, which negatively affected their sense of autonomy (Tews & Lupart, 2008). Furthermore, the studies reported that students often felt controlled by support personnel (Broer et al., 2005; De Schauwer et al., 2009; Mortier et al., 2011; Tews & Lupart, 2008). Students who attended classes accompanied by paraprofessionals continually compared themselves against their peers who did not receive support. This invariably led to them experiencing discomfiture (Broer et al., 2005; Curtin & Clarke, 2005).

Giangreco (2009) contends that issues such as those cited above are among many that are associated with paraprofessional deployment. From these findings, it appears that careless benevolence on the part of schools in providing paraprofessional support is harmful to inclusive education. Moreover, it must not be forgotten that teachers have an 'important gate-keeping function in terms of access to general education experiences for students with disabilities in ... schools' (Rice, 2006, p. 254).

This paper reports key findings of a recent small-scale qualitative study conducted with a group of students with VI who attended an inclusive public secondary school in Queensland, Australia. The study was chiefly informed by the perspectives of participants about paraprofessional support in the context of their schooling. These findings are among several core aspects of the students' experiences of educational inclusion reported elsewhere (Whitburn, 2013a). Broer et al. (2005) called for other researchers to extend on their own findings by exploring the perspectives of current students with disabilities about the support they receive from paraprofessionals. This study was designed to build on this work. Dewey held that only when those most at risk of marginalisation in schools are given opportunities to work toward social advancement would social justice be realised (Boyles, Carusi, & Attick, 2009). The current research aims to investigate the power of the methodology within Dewey's vision for democracy within schools.

Research Design

This researcher conducted a small-scale qualitative study with a group of young people with VI centred on exploring their experiences of inclusion in a mainstream school. Grounded theory provided the methodological framework for analysing and reporting the findings (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The following section provides relevant details on ethical considerations, participants, research setting, the use of student voice, data collection instruments, and coding and analysis techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Grounded Theory. The researcher adopted the qualitative framework of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to guide this study. Grounded theory is a set of systematic guidelines for iteratively collecting and analysing data, with the objective of developing a formative theory that is grounded in the raw findings. As generated theories are grounded in the data collected in fieldwork, they are faithful to the perspectives of those being studied — an important factor in honouring the voices of young people with disabilities who attend inclusive schools. It is therefore a qualitative framework that can be readily applied to inclusive education research (see Kugelmass, 2001; Low, 1996). A discussion of how the framework influenced data collection and analysis follows.

Ethical Considerations

A secondary school was identified where young people with VI were enrolled. The researcher developed an information and consent package for the school principal, to seek his approval to undertake this research. Once the principal's agreement was granted, parents of the young people were sent letters through the mail that both explained the intent of the study and requested their permission for their son or daughter to participate. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee. Once parental approval was granted for their participation, assent packages were produced in accessible formats, such as braille and large print, and offered to the young people. The objective of the assent packages was to seek verbal assurance from the young people that they were willing to participate. Further, the young people were informed that they were not under any obligation to take part in the study, and could opt out at any time, or have their comments struck from the record.

Participants

A group of five young people — four boys and one girl evenly distributed across Year levels 8–12 and aged 13–17 years — participated in the study. Though all participants were legally blind, each had varying degrees of impaired sight, ranging from total blindness to low (yet outwardly functional) vision. Accordingly, they used a variety of assistive devices and alternatively formatted resources, including electronic screen readers and magnification, braille and large print. Each had also experienced a different time of onset of their VI.

Due to the low incidence of VI, combined with the heterogeneity of participants and the somewhat small geographic location of the setting, it became apparent that each could be inadvertently identified through his or her comments. Throughout this paper, participants are neither referred to by pseudonym nor identifiable characteristic, to protect their anonymity. Instead, when necessary, they are assigned letters A through E, with the researcher's voice designated R.

Research Setting. All participants attended a single secondary school in South East Queensland, which had a special education program (SEP). A full-time specialist teacher of vision impairment (TVI) was employed at the school. Each student had enrolled in the school from the beginning of Year 8, and had studied there for at least a full term before commencing participation in the study. Further, all participants had attended an inclusive primary school before transitioning to the research setting.

Student Voice. In a Deweyan sense, 'the creation of an equitable society had its genesis in democratic schools where individuals would freely engage with one another in ongoing inquiry that would inform current social practices' (Boyles et al., 2009, p. 34). In accordance with Dewey's ideology for social justice in education, a principal objective of this study was to call on its participants to inform its agenda. By voicing their experiences and ambitions regarding their education, it was expected that this research would elucidate students' views of the appropriateness of inclusive practices that educators are presently using.

Despite cautioning researchers and educators alike about the risks associated with listening to students' voices, Cook-Sather (2006) argues that the opinions of young people about their education warrant the attention of professionals. She advances that students have both a unique insight into their education, and should be afforded opportunities to shape it. Slee (2011) further advances that this is especially pertinent for students with disabilities who attend inclusive schools.

Insider Status

Along with the participants, this researcher has severe VI, and had attended a school in the 1990s with facilities similar to those of the research setting. Thus he had the potential advantage of being a researcher with insider status. Slee (1996) calls for researchers with disabilities to undertake studies of this nature to expose the confines of inclusion. Charmaz (2006) contends that the interpretative framework of grounded theory involves the voice of the researcher alongside participants. On the whole, this researcher's familiarity with having VI in a predominantly sighted school facilitated him to pursue lines of enquiry in both data collection and analysis that outsider researchers may ordinarily either overlook altogether, or inadvertently disregard as being less significant to the students' experiences.

Data Collection Instruments

Researchers using a grounded theory approach to their study primarily collect data through interviews, which gives them access to participants' raw descriptions of circumstances that take place in certain contexts (Creswell, 2008). This researcher therefore conducted semistructured focus group and individual face-to-face interviews with students to collect data for this study. Three focus group and 28 one-to-one interviews were conducted with participants that varied between 20 and 60 min in duration depending on time constraints.

An advantage of grounded theory is that it calls for open-ended enquiry, with the aim of exploring how participants interpret their experiences of a particular phenomenon (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researcher therefore devised the list of questions below for use in initial interviews, with the aim of evoking participants' responses to emotive questions.

Initial Interview Questions

Q1: Tell me about the most surprising thing you found when you first came to this school.

Q2: Tell me about the easiest/hardest thing at high school.

Q3: Describe when you've felt as if you have achieved well at school.

Q4: Tell me about when you may have felt frustrated at school.

Q5: Describe for me what is satisfying/the least satisfying at school.

Subsequent interview questions emerged from those listed, based on what participants revealed that had affected their schooling experiences. Other questions were often determined from concepts that emerged from analyses of previous interviews, as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990). The researcher audio-recorded the interviews and transcribed them verbatim.

Data Analysis

Data analysis consisted of open, axial and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In open coding, the researcher attempts to interpret the data by analysing it line-by-line and applying theoretical codes to raw findings. It is important here to conduct comparative analysis on emergent codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), to form and strengthen theoretical categories as reflected in the raw data.

Axial coding was performed on data by taking a central theme that had emerged through open coding, and placing other relevant categories around it to examine how they interact (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Through axial coding of multiple slices of data, it became apparent that autonomy and seamless access were central themes that held relevance to

the young people's inclusion in the school. Actions of paraprofessionals impacted on these important elements. Selective coding, then, involved arranging the students' narratives to reflect the developed theory. The interpretation of data is fundamental here (Charmaz, 2006), as the researchers' intuitions must be accounted for in producing meaning from the data. Both the researcher and participants were involved in the analysis, as they discussed results in a final focus group interview.

Findings

The terms *paraprofessional* and *teacher aide* are used interchangeably throughout this paper. The term paraprofessional was found in the literature to generally identify support personnel in inclusive schools, whereas participants of this study tended to use teacher aide. From analysis of the young people's voiced experiences of their inclusion, two overarching themes emerged: 'light' and 'heavy' paraprofessional support. These descriptions of paraprofessional services refer to the actions of support personnel that were both facilitative (light) and inhibitive (heavy) to the young people's inclusion in the school. Here, these themes and their contributory subthemes are elucidated, with the young people's comments and sections of raw interview data used to draw out topical significance to their experiences. Various actions of other school staff that led to the engagement of the divergent strains of paraprofessional support are discussed. Finally, the young people's beliefs on how class teachers could eliminate heavy paraprofessional support are presented.

Mainstream? Some Sort of Stream

First, it is important to illustrate how the young people regarded the role of paraprofessionals in their inclusion in the school. Raw data from one of the focus group interviews amply represents their views:

> R: We've talked about mainstream and inclusion in the classes and inclusion in the school a lot. And whenever I've asked any of you are you actually in mainstream, every one of you has responded with uncertainty. That is, [you indicated] 'I'm not sure', I know [C] you said to me, 'I wouldn't say that I'm not in mainstream'. None of you ever said, you know, 'yes I am, unequivocally in mainstream'.
>
> A: What's mainstream?
>
> R: Well. You guys have told me what mainstream is in your eyes, and that is . . . you're in normal classes, you're competing with others, teacher aides play a big role in that, you're with your peers studying at the same level that they are, not necessarily withdrawn from classes. Is that mainstream for you guys?
>
> A: Yep.
>
> B: Yeah.
>
> D: Yeah.
>
> C: Putting it that way I would say that I am mainstream.
>
> A: Putting it that way . . .
>
> B: Yeah. Putting it that way.
>
> R: Well, that's what I've sort of gotten from all of you. So regardless if the teacher aide's there or not . . . you are still counting yourself as mainstream?
>
> C: Yes.

B: Possibly.

A: In some sort of stream.

B: A water slide without any water. You get stuck half way down.

R: Is therefore . . . the answer is no?

A: Oh . . . you're in mainstream with a chaperone. It's like, going to a party with your parents, or something.

B: Yeah. Or going to a party without a date.

R: Would you describe school with teacher aides like going to a party with your parents?

A: Well, I'd describe going into classes with teacher aides like that.

In this interview each of the young people had difficulty pinpointing whether or not they were included in the school. The students appeared to reach the collective decision that they were not included per se, though they were cautious about using a simple yes or no binary paradigm. Instead, they tried out various metaphorical designations to explain how in-class paraprofessional support impacted their schooling by limiting their inclusion in it.

In the following sections of this paper, the young people's perceptions of the varied paraprofessional roles that constituted the light and heavy themes are described.

Light Paraprofessional Support

The young people considered that convivial, unobtrusive paraprofessional support facilitated their inclusion into the mainstream classes that they attended. They spoke positively about support personnel who scaffolded their education by performing activities including (a) resource preparation and braille transcription, (b) some discreet in-class support, and (c) making specialised equipment available to them for use in lessons. Provision of these support functions enabled the students to retain seamless access to their studies with increased autonomy, which this researcher has termed 'light paraprofessional support'.

Resource Preparation and Braille Transcription. The young people required learning resources in several accessible representations, including large print, braille, audio and tactile formats; some also used electronic copies of worksheets and PowerPoint® slides. Teacher aides generally prepared and disseminated the material in the various formats specific to the students' needs. As one of the young people explained, 'If I need something enlarged they'll [the paraprofessionals] go and get it for me . . . whether it's for a subject they're helping me with or not'. This participant considered that this aspect of support was indispensable, because it provided him access to his studies.

Paraprofessionals who were qualified in braille transcription techniques also performed a multidirectional role of preparing text and graphical content for the young people who required this format, and transcribing students' brailled work into print for class teachers. One participant related that he 'couldn't do without' this service, because through its provision, the support personnel bridged access to divergent text types.

Discreet In-class Support. Paraprofessionals also attended most lessons of four of the young people, to support them directly. This was a divisive issue, but most participants acknowledged that personal support was made necessary because class teachers regularly compromised their access to pedagogy and written material. For example, one participant observed, 'I probably do need a teacher aide [in most classes], because . . . the teacher might

write up the answer, or whatever, and do something on [the] spur of the moment, and I'm not getting that'. Other participants complained that teachers often overlooked their requirements for increased verbal communication and accessible resources, perpetuating their reliance on teacher aides.

The students each expressed a desire for autonomy in the classroom. They appreciated paraprofessionals who tended to the support needs of other students in addition to themselves. For example, one participant described feeling liberated when paraprofessionals had to go and assist other students in his lessons: 'It gives me more independence and . . . free will'.

Another participant explained that he often sat with sighted peers while a paraprofessional sat some distance away from him, and 'just writes the notes off the board for me and that's it, and I do the work by myself'. He added that 'when I'm sitting with my friends, I feel more a part of the class'. This suggests that the young person and the paraprofessional had found the ideal balance of support based on the shared understanding that he preferred the personnel to assist him from a distance. Through this arrangement, he could enjoy both increased responsibility for his own studies and the opportunity to be with his friends. For him, this epitomised inclusion.

Provision of Specialised Equipment. Paraprofessionals provided specialist equipment to some participants in lessons. Devices cited by the young people included visual aids, such as magnifiers, and laptop computers with both adaptive software and electronic resources loaded on them. Provision of such equipment reportedly increased the young people's access to study material and their autonomy. For example, a participant who was provided a magnification device in some lessons described how, through its provision, she had autonomous access to her work, which in turn reduced her reliance on the support personnel: 'If I'm reading a book or something I just have a big sheet [that magnifies printed text], and she [the paraprofessional] basically sits there [unneeded]'.

Another participant who had been using a laptop that the paraprofessional provided to his class expressed relief that he could access electronic copies of texts: 'At least I've been able to see the textbook. I couldn't see the textbook before, so I can actually see it now'.

Although other equipment that teacher aides brought to the young people's lessons was aimed at increasing their access to study material, their autonomy was not enhanced through its use. For example, one participant described how paraprofessionals brought raised-line drawing kits to his numeracy lessons, on which they drew tactile representations of diagrams. As the young person related, he benefited from this support: 'I can feel the line that . . . she or he has drawn up. And that'll give me a rough idea of what the diagram is on the board or on the worksheet'.

Despite not gaining increased autonomy through the use of such equipment, the young people who were dependent on this type of support believed that it was essential to their inclusion in mainstream lessons. They appeared comfortable with the presence of teacher aides in their classes when using this type of equipment because the personnel had unambiguous support roles to perform that were obvious to both themselves and their peers.

Heavy Paraprofessional Support

The second overarching theme had a greater impact on the young people's inclusion than its precursor. Both the negative social implications associated with receiving in-class assistance and the students' perceptions of the authoritarian approach of paraprofessionals contributed to what this researcher has termed 'heavy paraprofessional support'.

Negative Social Implications of Paraprofessional Support. The young people reported that they had been automatically assigned in-class paraprofessional support when they enrolled in the school, typically without their input on their requirements. Each reported having to become accustomed to sitting, often alone, with teacher aides in most lessons. On this issue they constantly compared themselves with sighted students, who they perceived as being able to enjoy freedom because they generally did not have to receive assistance from teacher aides, and could sit with their friends.

The young people spoke of the embarrassment that they often experienced because of their supposed dependence on the support personnel. As one junior student related, 'At the start of the year when I got all the teacher aides in my classes, people were asking "why do you need that teacher" [aide]', which reportedly caused her considerable humiliation.

Being in constant receipt of in-class support induced feelings of exclusion in some students. This was particularly the case for participants who were made to sit away from their peers at desks with the support personnel. As one participant observed, 'When I'm just sitting with the teacher aide, I think I feel more isolated'. Although some believed that the benefit of in-class support to their access to study material outweighed this inevitable consequence of the presence of paraprofessionals, others affirmed that it was restrictive to their social inclusion and, in turn, their membership of the school community.

There was only one student who did not receive paraprofessional support in classes at the time that this study was conducted. He reported that he had, after one year, convinced teaching staff that he did not require in-class support. In this case, paraprofessionals had been withdrawn from his lessons to 'see how ... [I] go'. He remarked that after he stopped receiving direct support from teacher aides, his friends assumed their role from time to time 'with reading the stuff I can't read on the board'. This participant provided a noteworthy contrasting viewpoint to the study. Although he had previously experienced negative social consequences of receiving paraprofessional support, later he relished in his capacity to blend in with sighted students. He proclaimed that the new arrangement 'brings up my morale'.

Authoritarian Approaches of Paraprofessionals. A major point of contention in relation to in-class support was the authoritarian approach of some of the support personnel to their roles. Authoritarian teacher aides reportedly disrupted the young people's autonomy by both overcompensating for them and assuming responsibility for their learning.

Overcompensating paraprofessionals. Some participants reported that paraprofessionals undermined their autonomy through actions that overcompensated for them. For example, as one participant related, the teacher aide often supported her in classes by writing notes from the blackboard. This led to the student feeling as though 'I'm ... slacking off 'cause I'm not writing, and ... [the teacher aide is] writing everything out for me, and I'm just answering the questions'. This participant enjoyed writing tasks, and relished her capacity to write neatly by hand despite her impaired vision. Therefore being restricted in this activity through the automatic actions of the paraprofessional caused her some disappointment, as she was unable to display her skills and act independently in lessons.

Paraprofessionals' assumptions of responsibility. In lessons, paraprofessionals often took responsibility for the students' learning. One participant observed that having a paraprofessional sit with him in classes was not unlike having 'another control, authority figure [in addition to the class teacher], which is solely looking after me, most of the time, which is terrible'. This participant complained that authoritarian teacher aides frequently

demanded he concentrate on his work rather than interact with other students, and insisted he take notes as they dictated them from the blackboard. He reported that paraprofessionals would often check that he had completed his homework, often threatening him that they would have teachers intervene if he failed to produce completed work. He fervently remarked, 'Teacher aides step over their boundaries and take on that authority role trying to boss around the student too much. . . . They should be there helping the student when the student wants the help. They shouldn't enforce anything'.

Other participants reported that paraprofessionals intruded on their independence by attempting to control the manner in which they attended to their studies. For example, one young person detailed his desire for autonomy: 'I feel that I should be able to pick whatever I want to do in my work. If we get a worksheet I'll go straight to the end or skip a few questions, and they're hesitant in letting me do that sometimes'. These actions led the participant to feel resentment towards the support personnel.

Another participant related that he was weary of constantly trying to regain control over his own studies from teacher aides: 'It's another confrontation I don't like having every day'. The only participant who paraprofessionals did not directly support in classes also reported, 'When I was having teacher aides they were more of a nuisance to me, because I could have gotten my work done a lot faster [without them]'. He continued illustrating his point, by emphatically asserting 'I'm not stupid, I'm blind', indicating that he felt paraprofessionals played down his capabilities.

Demographic Contribution to Discomfort

The age difference between the young people and support personnel contributed to the participants' discomfort. Most paraprofessionals who were employed at the school were middle-aged women with children of their own. The young people reported that in addition to the negative social implications attached to working with personnel of this demographic, these paraprofessionals had an overbearing approach to their support duties. The only notable exception was a male paraprofessional, who the young people appeared to hold in higher regard than the women. In relation to this person's approach to his support role, one participant remarked that, 'He's not going to do our work. [He realises that] there's no point pushing us if we don't want to do our work'.

All participants expressed a preference for younger paraprofessionals, speculating that they could have a more productive working relationship with such personnel than those of whom were employed at the school. As one participant observed, 'A younger person would be better. Maybe just close the generation gap [by] one'. It also appeared that participants held individual preferences for support personnel who were of their own gender.

Overreliance on Heavy Paraprofessional Support

The young people believed that educational staff frequently, though perhaps inadvertently, left them with diminished access to classroom pedagogy, instruction, and resources. Consequently, they regularly had an awkward position of dependence imposed upon them. This accentuated the young people's differences to other students, consequently dampening their inclusion in lessons. In addition, it appeared that, because the TVI had reportedly assumed broadened responsibilities in the SEP, much of this role had been allocated to paraprofessionals. As a result, the support personnel had become the young people's principal liaison with the SEP. This was one reason that emerged from this study that attempted to explain why teacher aides had become explicitly authoritarian in their day-to-day interaction with the young people.

However, that the paraprofessionals lacked pedagogical skills was also apparent. They often supported the young people inappropriately in an attempt to compensate for underservicing by the TVI and class teachers. For example, one young person related that the TVI had been 'too busy' to attend to his needs for explicit instruction in VI-specific skills from the expanded core curriculum for students with VI and other disabilities (Hatlen, 1996).

Though this participant was proud of his independence, he recognised that he lacked the basic abilities to use a screen reader to navigate simple web pages and electronic mail. Rather, he had to rely on paraprofessionals to sit with and read content to him when the curriculum required the conduct of online research. He accepted that learning skills to increase his autonomy was of utmost importance, 'so that you're prepared for real life. 'Cause there's no one out there to help you in the world [after school]'. Nonetheless, neither the TVI nor other educators had been available to teach him such skills, which left him in a position of dependence on support personnel. In turn, his ambitions for complete, autonomous access to his studies were compromised.

Reducing Paraprofessional Support

Adding weight to the agitation that the young people experienced in relation to heavy paraprofessional support, they believed that, all things considered, both the TVI and class teachers could diminish their reliance on the personnel if they were more attentive to the students' inclusion. Those who required instruction in VI-specific skills believed it was necessary that the TVI return to focus on their needs in these areas. In addition, the young people suggested that class teachers should prepare lessons with a greater focus on providing them with autonomous access to study material. As one young person proposed, 'They [class teachers] need to be preparing the classes properly. Then we don't need the teacher aides'.

Participants spoke of pedagogical strategies that some class teachers utilised, which both effectively included them in lessons, and eliminated their reliance on paraprofessional support. These included using appropriate communication modes, making accessible resources available to them in a timely manner, using three-dimensional modelling and actual objects to make graphical content accessible to the students, and being approachable outside of lessons for individual consultations (Whitburn, 2013b). One participant described teachers who implemented such pedagogical strategies as 'experienced', and added, 'They know what they're talking about. They teach it in a way that suits us, or suits me'.

However, it appeared that not all educators who implemented such practices did so suitably as to retain continuity in the young people's inclusion in lessons, and others appeared not to understand the impact of the young person's VI on learning. This left the young people uncertain about the success of their inclusion. As one participant affirmed when pressed on whether or not he was enjoying full inclusion in the school, 'Relatively. [But] I still have a teacher aide which is with me [in] all my classes, supporting me'.

Discussion

Participants of this study were hesitant to characterise their inclusion in the school in accordance with a binary structure; for example, yes or no, success or failure, positive or negative. Instead, they set their sights on what they aspired to in their inclusion, namely, seamless access and autonomy. They then placed other stakeholders around these desires, and identified to what degree the actions of these others facilitated or inhibited their

inclusion. MacLure (2003) points out that oppositional binaries are noticeably abundant in the discourses of educational research in constructing how knowledge is 'carved out and carved up' (Edwards, as cited in MacLure, 2003, p. 10). However, MacLure indicates that this is unfortunate, given the complexities of the education discourse. Allan (2008) finds that though it is useful to pinpoint binary opposites when deconstructing educational inclusion, she recommends viewing the relationships between such oppositions in the contexts in which they are created.

By way of explication, it may appear to the casual onlooker that the themes light and heavy paraprofessional support are binary opposites themselves. However, to think that they parallel a simple yes-and-no pattern would be erroneous. Rather, they fit into the convolution of the young people's schooling, demonstrating not only how the young people's inclusion was affected through the paraprofessionals' actions, but also how the actions (or inactions) of teachers and specialist staff contributed to the support personnel's overall conduct. Therefore, light and heavy are not necessarily binary opposites at all, but are 'nested' (Balkin, as cited in Allan, 2008, p. 79) within the fabric of the school's culture and teacher pedagogy.

This study revealed that its participants considered one of the major shortfalls of their inclusion as the heavy paraprofessional support that was provided to them. The culture of the school appeared to endorse practices that perpetuated the discourse of deficit and support for students with disabilities. This was evident in the way that educators relied on paraprofessionals to provide heavy support functions to recompense the students with VI for their shortcomings in noninclusive pedagogical practices. Broer et al. (2005) and Giangreco (2009) caution that underservicing by class teachers is a critical bi-product of having paraprofessionals in classrooms.

The TVI also underserviced the young people, seemingly neglecting to observe his responsibilities of instructing them in VI-specific skill areas from the expanded core curriculum. Together, these occurrences led paraprofessionals to perform invasive support functions that diminished the students' agency. Giangreco (2009, p. 3) cautions that 'the nature of the support [provided to students with disabilities] may be inconsistent with individual goals that are geared toward greater student independence', which was evident in this case, to the detriment of the young people's inclusion. These findings are consistent with other studies (Broer et al., 2005; De Schauwer et al., 2009; Mortier et al., 2011; Tews & Lupart, 2008), and show that young people with VI feel similarly towards paraprofessionals, as do those with intellectual and other impairments.

Further, the study conducted by Broer et al. (2005) revealed that participants felt 'mothered' (p. 425) by support personnel, on account of both the support personnel's demographics (mostly middle-aged women) and their invasive approaches to assisting the students. The authors found that participants would prefer younger paraprofessionals that were of their own gender, and that intrusive support led the students to being socially outcast, isolated away from their peers in classes, and unable to function independently. This corresponds with how the young people with VI who participated in the present study felt about the invasive paraprofessional support that they endured.

Limitations

This study was exploratory rather than exhaustive. It relied on a sample of only five participants who attended a single school. Further, although a sufficient number of interviews were conducted to produce repetition of themes in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the overall findings cannot be extrapolated to all secondary students with VI who attend

inclusive secondary schools. In addition, although the researcher made a conscious attempt to avoid subjectivity on account of his insider status (Merten, Sullivan, & Stace, 2011), his position may have impacted the interpretation of findings.

Conclusion

The students' aspirations for agency is indicative of how young people with VI can function in inclusive classrooms, and indeed the world beyond the school gate, if given opportunities to do so. However, in addition to the finding by Tews and Lupart (2008) that educational inclusion was rapidly becoming a paraprofessional movement, the various themes explored in this paper indicate that support personnel are deployed in a way that perpetuates the special education tradition in inclusive education. Moreover, from students' perspectives, it appears that class teachers are evidently grateful for the paraprofessionals' presence in their classrooms. Slee (2011) argues that 'inclusive education needs to be decoupled from special education. In this way it may be restored as a genuine platform for addressing oppression and disadvantage across a range of constituencies' (p. 154). Until paraprofessionals are divested of primary pedagogical responsibilities in classrooms, this will not occur.

Webster et al. (2010) remind us that class teachers are trained professionals, who hold the inevitable responsibility of facilitating all students in their care to learn. The group of secondary students with VI who participated in this study evidently agreed with these sentiments. If only educators would facilitate them to shake the heavy weight of support from their backs. As teacher training programs become more focused on learner diversity and engaged with social justice, such as that described by Ryan et al. (2009), and as teacher programs are developed with an emancipatory approach as their ideology, such as that described by Rice (2006), there is a glimmer of hope for timely and crucial change.

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