



One-to-One Support for Students with Autism in Mainstream Schools



Hanan Almasoud

(2011)

Lecturer, Special Education Department, College of Education

King Saud University



Introduction

Students with autism in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are still excluded from mainstream schools due to a lack of awareness, knowledge and understanding on the part of teachers and staff in public and private schools with respect to how to support these students and meet their special needs in regular classrooms. An autism spectrum disorder is a lifelong condition that affects the individual's communication skills and social interaction. In addition, it can result in repetitive behaviours and narrow interests. It is known as a spectrum, which means that no two individuals are alike in their difficulties or abilities (Frith, 2008). In Saudi Arabia, public schools are still not eligible to include students with autism due to the absence of paraprofessional roles and to teachers' high teaching loads, which make providing one-to-one aid to the students who need it almost impossible. Conversely, private schools seem more capable of providing special and individualized attention to students with autism; however, parents' requests, regardless of the students' real needs, commonly raise educators' concern in regard to over-identifying student eligibility for one-to-one aid.

From this paradox between public and private schools comes the need to address the issue and to clarify when one-to-one aid is actually needed. This will be the primary aim of this paper. As a part of the teaching staff at a Saudi university, I hope this paper will promote teachers' understanding of how to provide and differentiate support depending on the student's unique needs. This hopefully will influence the quality of education provided for students with autism in Saudi schools. This paper is divided into three parts. Part One will give an overview of one-to-one support, when and how to provide it and will discuss the role of paraprofessionals in supporting the student. Part Two will discuss the different reasons behind the need for providing one-to-one aid for students with autism in different settings. Part Three will discuss the advantages as well as the disadvantages of such allocation and will examine how to reduce these drawbacks as much as possible in order to guarantee that the support provided develops student growth, not dependency.



Overview of one-to-one support

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments (1997), educational personnel are required to provide a continuum of individualized services, support and placements to the student who has autism. The amount and level of one-to-one aid will vary from student to student depending on his or her unique needs (Yell et al., 2005). However, not all students with autism will need one-to-one aid in order to receive an educational benefit. As with other services in the student's individual educational plan (IEP), the decision will depend on the student's unique needs, which have to be discussed, addressed and agreed upon between the school and the parents in an IEP meeting (Simpson et al., 2003; Iovannone, 2003; Knight, 1999; Kraft and Esq, 2009; Ozonoff et al., 2002).

It is important to ensure that the student receive the right amount of one-to-one support—not too much or too little—in order to help him or her make progress academically, socially and emotionally as the student's classmates do (Kraft and Esq, 2009). Some students with autism will need the one-to-one aid during certain activities inside or outside the classroom for full or part time. The support can be provided individually to the student or with a small group of students who would all benefit from the aid provided (Ozonoff et al., 2002).

In terms of the aides' qualifications and training, paraprofessionals who work with students with autism in providing individual support are usually without an advanced degree in the field of autism; however, Ozonoff et al. (2002) emphasized the importance of ensuring that the paraprofessional has at least prior experience in working with students with autism or has received specific training in the best practice for students with autism in addition to the standard principals in education. Kraft and Esq (2009) indicated that parents are more likely to have concerns about the paraprofessional's qualifications, especially parents of students with behavioural difficulties who are more in need of a paraprofessional with special training in behaviour management and intervention. In



regard to the aide's roles, the paraprofessional often engaged in a wide variety of areas including providing assistance in different academic subjects, teaching vocational skills and functional life skills, working on reducing challenging behaviour, and increasing the student's interaction with peers (Giangreco et al., 2001). The following section will discuss in detail the core areas where students with autism will need the paraprofessional's assistance in order to receive an educational benefit and reach their full potential equally with other students.

Reasons behind the need for providing one-to-one aid

There are many reasons why students with autism often need one-to-one support in order to benefit from the education provided in mainstream schools. These reasons centre on the core difficulties that individuals with autism have in social interaction, communication, in repetitive behaviour, and in their narrow interests (Ozonoff et al., 2002). The common situations during which students with autism usually have difficulties are academic activities, social interaction, communication, behaviour intervention, after-school activities, and finally emergency events.

Assisting the student with autism in academic tasks

Iovannone et al. (2003) stated that when the student with autism is not fully engaged in the classroom's activities, he or she is not available for learning and will lose crucial learning opportunities. They also indicated that motivating students with autism to be engaged or to respond to their environment is not an easy task. Thus, paraprofessional support with careful planning for activities, systematizing of the use of materials and modification of the physical environment will have a great influence on the student's academic performance (Iovannone et al., 2003; Kraft and Esq, 2009).

There are many circumstances in which the student who has autism will not be able to follow the classroom procedures and attend to tasks. This consequently will cause him to fall behind academically. Some students will need significant prompting to be engaged in all classroom activities and others may need only occasional assistance. Prompting is a



common method to correct performance until the student attains the skill and is able to perform the response independently (Kraft and Esq, 2009). According to Schopler and Mesibov (1994), prompting is defined as "a procedure where the individual is guided to perform a response", starting from the highest degree of assistance (e.g., a physical prompt) to the lowest degree (e.g., a gesture prompt).

Providing one-to-one support for some students with autism during academic tasks can be significantly important in order to include them alongside their peers, especially in a large group activity. For example, if the student cannot engage during circle activities, where each day's story is read, the teacher could read the story to the student individually and before he or she experiences the story with the entire class. This will help the student to participate with peers and will increase the initiation of social interaction as Harrower and Dunlap (2001) have suggested.

Another area of academic difficulties is that some students with autism will have problems focusing on lessons and sometimes will be engaged in "fantasy talk" that may disrupt the teacher and the student's classmates. Providing one-to-one aid in such a situation can be an appropriate solution to redirect the student and keep him on task when necessary (Kraft and Esq, 2009).

It is worth mentioning that the paraprofessional ensures that one-to-one support does not create a situation where the student only performs a particular skill when a specific person is prompting him. In addition, the aid has to be viewed as a supportive method in the student's academic progress and successes and as part of the student's path towards independence, not dependency (Kraft and Esq, 2009).

Increase the student's social interaction

Students with autism are more likely to misread facial expressions and to display difficulties interacting appropriately with others, which may result in exclusion from many social situations in addition to hindering the student's social development (Jordan and Jones, 1999). Thus, one-to-one support may also be needed in settings where there is



significant demand for social interaction, such as discussion and group work where students with autism often demonstrate difficulties interacting with their classmates (Kamps et al., 1992).

In such settings, the recommendation is to start first with a familiar task that is encouraging to the student and that he or she is capable of performing with his classmates in a group setting. Then, the student can perform the new task with an adult through one-to-one aid until he or she is capable of performing it easily. Finally, the student has to be given the opportunity to practise the skill in social groups, with provision of the support necessary to enable him to perform the task independently as much as possible (Jordan and Jones, 1999).

Enhancing communication skills

One-to-one aid is also important in teaching communication skills. Individuals with autism are often not encouraged to initiate a conversation and interact with others. For this, a paraprofessional's support is essential in order to counteract this passivity and encourage the student to approach others and initiate an interaction with them.

Example: Juan

Juan is a student who has almost no speech. He can name some of his favourite foods and activities (e.g., "orngy" for orange and "keem" for ice cream). His teacher Bill used to initiate all the interactions with him and he thought it was time for Juan to learn how to approach others and initiate an interaction with them. First, Bill would stand 5 to 10 feet away from Juan and would hold an orange, Juan's favourite food. Juan did not move towards his teacher at first and Bill waited for him to approach. When Juan walked over to his teacher, Bill immediately responded to him, offered the reinforcement to Juan, and talked to him. After that, Bill used different items and repeated the procedure several times until Juan learned to approach his teacher spontaneously. In the next step, when Juan reached his teacher, wanting the desired food, his teacher would not respond until Juan named what he wanted from him. Juan approached his teacher and waited for the reinforcement. Bill did not respond. After a minute Juan named what he wanted (the



orange), and Bill offered the reinforcement and talked to him. Bill repeated the procedure several times using different items and at various times until Juan learned the relationship between saying specific words and obtaining the favourite food or activity. This procedure helped Juan to learn that approaching others and initiating interactions with them were valuable skills, and that he can influence others to obtain desirable outcomes (Carr et al., 1994).

This example shows how the appropriate one-to-one support can develop the student's communication skills and reduce passivity, which consequently maximizes the student's opportunities to interact with others in the school, whether it be with teachers, staff or classmates. Development of communication skills will increase the student's engagement and participation with others.

Implementing behavioural interventions

One-to-one support also plays a fundamental role in behaviour intervention, in teaching new responses, and reducing or increasing existing behaviours. For example, some students with autism may learn that throwing tantrums is a way to gain attention or perhaps to make people leave them alone. Extinction is one of the interventions that can be used to reduce the undesirable behaviour that otherwise may have been reinforced by achievement of desirable consequences (e.g., being left alone, gaining attention). The extinction procedure decreases a behaviour that has previously been followed by a positive reinforcement by stopping the following positive event. The paraprofessionals will find that the behaviour initially increases at the beginning of the intervention but this is temporary and the behaviour will decrease gradually over time (Schopler and Mesibov, 1994).

One-to-one aid may also establish new behaviours (e.g., teaching dressing skills) by prompting the student to imitate the behaviour. First, the paraprofessional helps the student to perform the behaviour by using physical prompts until the student is able to perform the task with the assistance of the aide. Then the teacher gradually reduces the physical assistance provided by replacing it with verbal cues with as little physical prompting as necessary until the student is able to perform the task without any touch from



the teacher. Then, the verbal cue is reduced until the active intervention from the teacher is not needed any more. At this point, the teacher can provide the student with permanent prompt systems that show him or her the sequence of the task and which allow the student to perform the task independently. Permanent prompt systems can be in different forms, the most popular of which are photographs, word lists and instructions saved on audio tapes. Although designing a permanent prompt system may seem at first glance to be time-consuming, it will in fact save the aides and teachers time and energy at the long term (Scott et al., 2000; Schopler and Mesibov, 1994).

Ensuring equality in participating in school's non-academic activities

Kraft and Esq (2009) believed that the need for one-to-one aid "does not end at the classroom door" and that the school staff is responsible for providing the appropriate assistance to the student with autism in order to enable him to participate during after-school activities such as team sports and clubs. The major problem that may prevent the student's engagement in such activities is the significant demand on social skills which are one of the core difficulties that students with autism face. Therefore, Kraft and Esq (2009) suggested the following steps in order to facilitate the student's social interaction during after-school activities.

First, by using social story or systematic scenarios, the paraprofessional has to pre-teach the student how to interact in certain social situations that will arise. Second, the student is given the opportunity to practise the skill that he has learned in a real social situation (during the activity). In this step the paraprofessional may provide, when necessary, prompting that can help the student engage with his peers. The form of prompt will vary depending on the student's unique needs; it can be a visual, verbal, physical or gesture prompt. The final step is that the paraprofessional train peers in how to help the student with autism interact with other members in the activity. For instance, a peer can encourage the student with autism by asking someone to play with him or take part in a certain activity that he performs.



Ensuring the safety of the student and others

One-to-one support is not only for academic assistance. Some students with autism will have additional difficulties during emergency situations due to their difficulties accepting immediate changes in their routine. Therefore, the safety instruction has to be taught several times, directly and in advance to ensure the student's safety. This can be achieved by breaking down the instructions into steps that are easily understood in addition to supporting the instructions with pictures. Afterwards, the student has to be given enough time to practise, review and memorize the instructions, and more importantly, to be able to refer to those easily at any time (Betts et al., 2007).

Besides protecting the student from dangerous situations, providing the student with one-to-one aid may also be necessary for students who are engaged in self-injuring behaviour or to prevent physical assault against classmates. The school has a duty to protect the student with autism and his classmates by providing the one-to-one aid if needed in such circumstances and by avoiding removing of such aid without careful planning. This too may result in placing the student or his classmates in danger (Kraft and Esq, 2009).

Giangreco and Broer (2005) have conducted a study aimed to investigate the amount of time that paraprofessionals spend on each area of students' needs and on their other responsibilities in the classroom. The study involved 132 paraprofessionals in 12 inclusive schools. Giangreco and Broer found that paraprofessionals spent about 47% of their time providing instruction, guiding students and supporting them academically, and 19% of the time was spent in behaviour intervention. Over 17% of the time was in self-directed activities, 7% was in supervising students, and finally 3% was spent in clerical tasks. One of the serious issues that this study highlighted was that a quarter of the paraprofessional's time was self-directed, which means that paraprofessionals were making decision on their own. For instance, without referring to the classroom teachers, they were removing students from the lesson when they thought it is not appropriate for him or her or when changing to a different activity. This finding raises concerns regarding



the competency of instruction that the paraprofessional gives to the student with special needs. Therefore, Giangreco and Broer (2005) emphasized that special educators have to give adequate attention to this issue. In the interest of students with special needs, they suggested that teachers have to give enough time to directing paraprofessionals and supervising them.

The advantages and disadvantages of one-to-one aid

Although paraprofessionals are considered as a primary support in mainstream schools, there is virtually no evidence yet to suggest that the student who is given paraprofessional support will do as well or better in inclusive schools (Giangreco and Broer, 2005). However, for some students, without such assistance there will be no educational benefit. Thus, careful planning is needed in order to make the aid work to the advantage of the student. A good and affective aid can be described as a support that fosters growth and inclusion and builds student independence. It is this type of support that helps the student to progress socially, emotionally, and behaviourally and helps the student follow the classroom procedures and keep up with the pace of the class, as Kraft and Esq (2009) have indicated.

On the other side, providing unnecessary aid or failing to fade it gradually may result in making the student rely on others and prevent independence, thus hindering the student's emotional, behavioural and social progress. In addition, unnecessary aid may stigmatize the student, isolate him or limit peer interaction. Unnecessary aid also raises concern with regard to costs, both in time and in money (Kraft and Esq, 2009).

Giangreco and Broer's study (2005) investigated the perspective of the paraprofessionals and their level of concern towards the aid they provide to students with special needs. The study found that about 15% of paraprofessionals were concerned that their proximity to the student with special needs might interfere with peer interaction. Around 36% indicated that more than half of the student's social time (e.g., break and lunchtime) was spent with them, which raised concerns in terms of the student's social development and interaction. Another point of concern related to separating the student



from the rest of the class during academic activity; nearly 36% of the paraprofessionals indicated that they were placed at the side or the back of the classroom. In addition, almost 37% were worried that the student was unnecessarily depending on them and that the assistance they provided was preventing the student's growth and development.

From these findings, it can be concluded that, as with other services in the student educational plan (IEP), one-to-one aid has to be planned carefully. Some general advice that may be given to limit the negative aspects of one-to-one aid is that the paraprofessional has to limit the help to the student in areas of needs. Before offering any sort of help to the student, the paraprofessional needs to ensure that the student has tried to perform the task prior to receiving the needed assistance (Ozonoff et al., 2002).

Conclusion

This paper has given an overview of one-to-one aid and discussed the qualifications and different roles of paraprofessionals in providing aid to students with autism in different settings. It also has discussed the core reasons that students with autism often need one-to-one support in order to achieve academically and progress emotionally and socially. These were as follows: to assist the student in academic activities, to increase his social interaction, to enhance communication skills, to implement behaviour intervention, to ensuring equality in participating in school's non-academic activities, and finally to ensure the safety of the student and others. The final part of this paper concentrated on the advantages and disadvantages of such allocation and how to limit these drawbacks as possible.

Hopefully this paper will serve to enhance teachers' and paraprofessionals' practices and understanding of the role of one-to-one aid in supporting students with autism in Saudi mainstream schools. This in turn should lead to students with autism reaching their full potential and succeeding and progressing equally with other students in a supportive environment that fully includes them inside and outside the classroom.



References

- Betts, S.W., Betts, D.E. and Gerber-Eckard, L.N. (2007) *Asperger syndrome in the inclusive classroom, advice and strategies for teachers*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Carr, E., Levin, L. and McConnachie, G. et al. (1994) *Communication-based intervention for problem behavior: A user's guide for producing positive change*. Baltimore, Maryland: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.
- Frith, U. (2008) *Autism: A very short introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Giangreco, M.F., Edelman, S.W. and Broer, S.M. et al. (2001) Paraprofessional support of students with disabilities: Literature from the past decade. *Exceptional Children*, 68 (1): 45–63.
- Giangreco, M.F. and Broer, S.M. (2005) Questionable utilization of paraprofessionals in inclusive schools: Are we addressing symptoms or causes? *Focus on Autism and other Developmental Disabilities*, 20 (1): 10–26.
- Harrower, J.K. and Dunlap, G. (2011) Including children with autism in general education classrooms: a review of effective strategies. *Behavior Modification*, 25 (5): 762–784.
- Iovannone, R., Dunlap, G. and Huber, H. et al. (2003) Effective educational practices for students with autism spectrum disorders. *Focus on Autism and other Developmental Disabilities*, 18 (3): 150–165.
- Jordan, R. and Jones, G. (1999) *Meeting the needs of children with autistic spectrum disorders*. London: David Fulton Publishers.



Kamps, D., Leonard, B.R. and Vernon, S. et al. (1992) Teaching social skills to students with autism to increase peer interaction in an integrated first-grade classroom. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 25 (2): 281–288.

Knight, B.A. (1999) Towards inclusion of students with special educational needs in the regular classroom. *Support for Learning*, 14 (1): 3–7.

Kraft, C. and Esq, A. (2009) *One-to-one aides for students with autism: A practical and legal guide*. Horsham, Pennsylvania: LRP Publications.

Ozonoff, S., Dawson, G. and McPartland, J. (2002) *A parent's guide to Asperger syndrome and high-functioning autism: How to meet the challenges and help your child thrive*. New York: Guilford Press.

Schopler, E. and Mesibov, G. (eds.) (1994) *Behavioural issues in autism*. New York: Plenum Press.

Scott, J., Clark, C. and Brady, M. (2000) *Students with autism: Characteristics and instruction programming*. San Diego, California: Singular Publishing Group.

Simpson, R., de Boer-Ott, S.R. and Smith-Myles, B. (2003) Inclusion of learners with autism spectrum disorders in general education settings. *Topics in Language Disorders*, 23 (2): 116–133.

Yell, M.L., Drasgow, E. and Lowrey, K.A. (2005) No Child Left Behind and students with autism spectrum disorders. *Focus on Autism and other Developmental Disabilities*, 20 (3): 130–139.