

Professional Learning and Development for Teacher Aides Working to Support Students with Challenging Behaviour: What are the Needs? What Works? A Review of the Literature

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ABSTRACT

The role of teacher aides (TAs)¹ has increased in complexity and includes working to support students with challenging behaviour. This review examines the professional learning and development (PLD) needs of TAs who work with students with challenging behaviour and the types of PLD which are effective. TAs feel underprepared for behaviour work and want PLD which teaches specific behaviour strategies, is practical, hands-on and which can be translated into real-world contexts. Effective PLD focuses on specific interventions, is taught using modelling demonstrations, and gives TAs opportunities to practise skills and to receive feedback. In combination with practical demonstrations and performance feedback, follow-up training and coaching increases the fidelity with which behaviour interventions are implemented. PLD which aligns with the real needs of TAs, is delivered using accepted learning designs and which is sufficiently resourced is more likely to be effective. This paper examines some models of PLD which are effective.

Research paper

Keywords:

professional development, teacher aide

BACKGROUND

A major increase in the number of teacher aides (TAs) in schools has occurred worldwide in many developed countries over the last two decades (Sharma & Salend, 2016; Trent, 2014; Wren, 2017). Similarly, in New Zealand, allocation of TA time in schools has increased steadily over the last thirty years (Ward, 2011) and TA support is the most common way of supporting students with special educational needs (SEN) (Ferguson, 2014; Stevens, 2010).

In England the number of teachers employed in mainstream schools has remained relatively stable over the last ten years but the number of full-time equivalent TAs has more than trebled (Sharples, Webster & Blatchford, 2015). The number of TAs employed in Australia almost doubled between 2000 and 2011 with continued increases predicted (Butt, 2016a) and in the United States the number of TAs working in special education quadrupled between 2006 and 2010 (Butt, 2016b).

The increase in the number of TA hours in classrooms has its roots in the shift in political ideology and government educational policies over the last twenty years towards inclusion, allowing children and young people with disabilities and SEN to attend mainstream schools (Ferguson, 2014; Rutherford, 2012). Employment of TAs is one of the main school responses to accommodating students with additional needs (Butt, 2016a; Trent, 2014;) with TAs regarded as essential to the core work of mainstream schools (Harris & Aprile, 2015; Rutherford, 2012; Webster, Blatchford & Russell, 2013).

The TA role varies widely and includes 'housekeeping' such as arranging materials and keeping the classroom clean and tidy (Trent, 2014) to more complex roles such as working to support students with language and communication needs (French, 2003), adapting and modifying curriculum for students with SEN (Downing, Ryndak & Clark, 2000), supporting students with literacy and numeracy (Webster, Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, Martin & Russell, 2010) and working with students with challenging behaviour including implementing individual behaviour interventions (Martin & Alborz, 2014; Webster et al., 2010). An evaluation report by Massey University (2002) showed the most common supports provided by TAs were implementing individual education plans (IEPs),² adapting curriculum and "providing individual behavioural interventions" (p. 32).

¹ In Aotearoa New Zealand the role of the teacher's aide is to work under the direction of the class teacher to support children to engage in learning to make the most of their learning opportunities. The role includes carrying out learning activities, encouraging children, take over some of the class teacher's duties so the teacher is able to work more directly with individual children and using strategies to manage children's behaviour under teacher direction (Ministry of Education, 2012).

² Individual education plans are written plans that set out goals for a child. The plan is negotiated in collaboration with the parents, school and other professionals who may be involved and outlines how goals will be reached for a child, who will be involved, and resources and special equipment that may be needed (Ministry of Education, 2012)

FOCUS OF THE CURRENT PAPER

Professional learning and development (PLD) for TAs is of interest to various stakeholders including school leaders, teachers, supervisors of TAs, TAs and students, and PLD is regarded as necessary in order for TAs to fulfil their role in ways that are appropriate (Butt, 2016a; Butt, 2016b; Martin & Alborz, 2014; Ministry of Education, 2011; Sharma & Salend, 2016). Some TAs report entering the job with no PLD, learning by themselves about the students they were working with, and that they need PLD in order to be more effective in their role, particularly when it comes to working with children and young people who have challenging behaviour (Downing, Ryndak & Clark, 2000). In short, TAs want more PLD that prepares them for their role on the job.

Given the large and rapid increase in use of TAs in classrooms and concern about the training needs of TAs, particularly in relation to working with students with complex and challenging behaviour, there is a need to understand how PLD can be used to best effect for TAs working in this area (Butt, 2016a; Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015; Sharma & Salend, 2016; Trent, 2014; Webster et al., 2013). The focus of the current paper is identifying the PLD needs of TAs and understanding what PLD is most effective for TAs working to support students with challenging behaviour.

WHAT IS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING?

PLD in education is broadly defined as learning and development experiences for educators which bridge the gap between acts of teaching and associated student outcomes. PLD are sustained and intensive approaches that typically target educator knowledge, understanding, and skills development that enhance teaching practice in ways that result in increased achievement for students. PLD experiences should be designed to fit specified, carefully considered learning goals (Lutrick & Szabo, 2012; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung, 2007).

Educators are generally attracted to PLD which offers pragmatic, concrete ideas that relate directly to the daily operation of classrooms. In addition, another factor should be included in the definition of PLD: the process of educator change. PLD activities may be designed to initiate change in the beliefs, attitudes and perceptions of educators about certain aspects of teaching, or the desirability and effectiveness of a particular instructional technique or intervention for the classroom. The notion of PLD as a transformative process is reflected in this definition (Guskey, 2002).

CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR AND THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER AIDE

When defining challenging behaviour, certain features are commonly identified in the literature. Behaviour may be considered challenging when it impacts daily functioning in the classroom and school, challenges the rights of children and staff, is expressed externally, such as aggression and defiance, and internally, such as anxiety and depression (Hendrix, Vancel, Bruhn, Wise & Kang, 2018; McDaniel, Bruhn & Troughton, 2017; Madden & Senior, 2018). Internalising and externalising behaviours are ways that children and young people communicate their difficulty and distress and reflect emotional and social struggles which must be considered when devising support strategies for implementation (McDaniel et al., 2017; Madden & Senior, 2018). Responsive interventions to support children with behavioural challenges must take into account the lived experience of the child (their thoughts and feelings) and the unique environmental factors which maintain their challenging behaviour (Allday, 2018; McDaniel et al., 2017; Madden & Senior, 2018).

The role of the TA has shifted from general support for the teacher and providing an extra pair of hands, to classroom assessment and delivery of behavioural interventions (Hendrix et al., 2018). Interventions currently implemented by TAs vary from the more disciplinary in some settings, to softer strategies in other settings such as requesting student compliance, with the teacher being responsible for managing more difficult student behaviour (Clarke & Visser, 2017). Wren (2017) states behaviour support work of TAs involves keeping students on-task and avoiding disruption to other learners in the classroom. Groom and Rose (2005) state TAs have a role in the classroom to support overall management of behaviour as well as individual support such as reminding students of expectations for behaviour, dealing with conflict and keeping students on task.

With increased numbers of TAs employed in schools, and increased complexity of the work, it is important to remember the distinction between role of the TA and the role of the classroom teacher. Giangreco (2010) reports the phenomenon of the 'training trap' which occurs when professionals increasingly defer responsibility to paraprofessionals who have received virtually no training at all, with some paraprofessionals having sole responsibility for students with the most complex needs. The role of the teacher in directing and supporting TAs in their work is critical to ensuring students with the most needs receive support from those who are the most qualified to do so.

WHAT ARE TEACHER AIDES' PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT NEEDS?

Recent research shows TAs perceive a need for PLD in the areas of general behavioural intervention and for high priority behaviours such as physical aggression, self-injury and destruction of property (Walker, 2017). Research also shows a gap between the tasks TAs are expected to perform and their preparedness for the role, particularly in the area of behaviour management (Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015; Sharples et al., 2015).

Research is reporting that TAs are expected to implement school-wide behaviour management strategies with limited training, and some TAs report using their own experience as parents in the absence of other knowledge (Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015). The notion of limited training and limited or no guidance from the teacher is also reported by Downing et al. (2000). In this study, some participants described the experience as a "trial by fire" and a "fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants type of deal" (p. 177). The 16 TAs in this study stated that to perform their job, the area where they most needed PLD was around implementation of behavioural interventions such as providing choices, interspersing preferred and non-preferred activities, redirection, demand reduction and positive behaviour supports to increase motivation.

It is not just the international literature reporting these issues. New Zealand studies report similar findings; for example, a New Zealand Ministry of Education study found that some TAs report they did not have adequate knowledge and skills to work effectively with students with additional needs, particularly students with behaviour that was very challenging, and reported being "thrown in the deep end" with some students (Ministry of Education 2011, p.9). This implies TAs need PLD in the area of behaviour management.

A study by Giangreco, Suter and Hurley (2013) showed TAs spend approximately 75 percent of their time teaching curriculum material and supporting students with behaviour management. Given TAs spend most of their time instructing students and helping teachers implement behaviour management strategies, it is logical to assume these are the areas where the most PLD is needed. Pindiprolu, Peterson and Berglof (2007) asked TAs to rank their areas of PLD need in order of importance; intervention for challenging behaviour and functional behaviour assessment were ranked highest. Other studies show that TAs are very interested in receiving additional PLD to support them in their role, including the area of behaviour management (Brock & Carter, 2015) and that TAs want to understand the underlying causes of challenging behaviour and to receive practical guidance in the classroom so they can relate knowledge of behaviour to real-world situations (Martin & Alborz, 2014).

MODELS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING

Various models for PLD reported in the literature include cyclical inquiry models in which educators identify their own PLD needs, complete PLD, reflect upon the learning and make changes to current practice on that basis; acquired learning and development informs ongoing 'cycles' of inquiry. The 'Teaching as Inquiry' model and the 'Teacher Inquiry and Knowledge-Building Cycle' are two models shown to be effective, but which require educational organisations to provide the correct conditions for this to occur; in particular, sufficient time for students to engage in meaningful reflection, and time to discuss thinking and ideas with trusted mentors (Fowler, 2012; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung, 2009).

Guskey's (2000) model for effective PLD describes five levels to be considered by school leaders when evaluating the effectiveness of PLD programmes: how enjoyable the PLD was for participants, new knowledge and skills gained by participants, the impact of the PLD on the wider organisation including sharing of new knowledge, whether new knowledge and skill is applied in practice, and the impact of PLD on student outcomes. Guskey (2000) states that for new knowledge and skill to be applied in practice, participants need time to reflect on their learning and must have authentic opportunities to practise new skills in the learning environment. According to Guskey (2000), the impact of PLD on students' outcomes is a difficult outcome to measure in a direct way. Piggott-Irvine (2006), suggests it can be done via triangulation of multiple data sources including student achievement data, interviews and anecdotal student reports. According to Guskey (2000) PLD should provide TAs with information relevant to their actual work in the classroom, increase their knowledge and skills and allow them time to reflect on and consolidate learning by having opportunities to practise new skills in realistic situations.

According to Lutrick and Szabo (2012), seven components contribute to the extent to which PLD is effective: learning communities which meet regularly to engage in inquiry and reflection; school leaders who collaborate to ensure PLD aligns with staff and student needs; sufficient resourcing for PLD to occur; data which informs the PLD needs of educators; PLD that is delivered using accepted learning designs (modelling reflection, application, feedback, ongoing support), long-term support during implementation, and the ability to measure learning outcomes of the PLD. This model of PLD meets the needs of TAs by giving them opportunities to learn together, to receive new knowledge which is relevant to their needs, and to reflect on learning in ways that allows new skills to be transferred to the real world classroom.

A New Zealand Ministry of Education PLD package for teachers and TAs uses cyclical inquiry and involves teachers and TAs working in collaboration in online modules. Participants watch videos, plan, try new strategies out, and reflect on the experience together (Ministry of Education, 2017). The PLD modules are designed to strengthen working relationships between teachers and TAs, enhance the clarity of the role of teacher and TA, and increase inclusive practice in classrooms. PLD which increases role clarity and provides opportunities for teachers and TAs to learn together meets the PLD needs of TAs because they are more likely to have responsibility for areas of work that are within their role and are more likely to be supported by teachers when necessary.

Models of PLD which present new knowledge and skills, give TAs opportunities to plan new approaches, to practise and reflect on what they have learned, and where they can be with others to share ideas are more likely to meet the PLD needs of TAs. All PLD must have sufficient resourcing to be effective, including allowing TAs enough time to reflect on their learning and practise new skills before implementing them in the classroom. Resourcing is a factor which is shown to contribute to the effectiveness of PLD and should constitute part of managers' PLD planning from the outset (Brock & Carter, 2013; Brock, Seaman & Downing, 2017; Downing et al., 2000).

PROFESIONAL LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT IN EDUCATION – WHAT WORKS?

PLD is necessary for all those working with children in a learning environment (Ingvarson, Meiers & Beavis, 2005; Lutrick & Szabo, 2012). Effective PLD in the context of education is complex and involves many components which combine to align with the needs of particular learners and with particular educational settings (Guskey, 2003).

According to Savage, Lewis and Colless (2011), PLD that is most likely to have a lasting impact on professional practice over time focuses on specific strategies for the learning environment, involves groups of participants rather than individuals, and uses active learning including peer coaching. PLD experiences that include a description of the strategy being taught, modelling of the strategy by the trainer (and via video demonstrations), and opportunities for participants to practice emerging skills and to receive performance feedback, are shown to be effective (Brock & Carter, 2013; Brock et al., 2017; Casey, 2011; Downing et al., 2000). Modelling and performance feedback are associated with increased fidelity of implementation of strategies and improved outcomes for learners (Brock & Carter, 2013) and, compared with stand-alone workshops, provision of follow-up training and ongoing

coaching for TAs has a powerful and positive impact on effectiveness of PLD (Brock & Carter, 2015). PLD needs of TAs will be best-met if they have opportunities to see how things are done by watching others, and having opportunities to practise the new skills in realistic situations and to receive feedback.

Research by Howard and Ford (2007) and Walker (2017) showed TAs value opportunities to visit and observe TAs in other schools and expressed a desire for more practical, hands-on PLD which is relevant to their real work situation. TA preference for PLD of this nature is in line with research that shows it is effective (Dunst, Trivette & Hamby, 2010).

Reinke, Stormont, Webster-Stratton, Newcomer and Herman (2012) emphasise generalisation as the most important component to effective PLD. It is important that TAs are able to translate knowledge from PLD into practice and from one learning situation to another. According to Brock and Carter (2015) knowledge that is gained from PLD on working with students with disabilities can be generalised to all students. Giving TAs opportunities to visit other classrooms and other schools to see strategies in action will help them to understand how to put strategies into practice in their own classroom situations more effectively.

SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE

The role of the TA varies and includes working to support students with complex and challenging behaviour, including implementation of behavioural interventions for behaviours such as hitting, kicking and self-injury. According to this review there is a lot of interest in the PLD needs of TAs and a need to understand what PLD is necessary, and what type of PLD is helpful.

TAs report they sometimes feel under-prepared for the behaviour support role, particularly when behaviour is very challenging. TAs want PLD to understand the underlying causes of behaviour and practical, hands-on learning about how to implement strategies in the classroom such as providing choices, reducing task demand, redirecting students, supporting positive behaviour, and alternating preferred and non-preferred tasks.

According to this review, PLD for TAs working with challenging behaviour should use active learning where TAs practise skills and receive feedback from trainers and coaches. PLD which gives TAs opportunities to watch others implement strategies and to practise those strategies for themselves in role play and real-world situations with performance feedback is effective. TAs want PLD that allows them be with other TAs so they can learn from each other; research shows

taking part in PLD as a group is likely to have a more lasting impact. It is also helpful for teachers and TAs to learn together to improve role clarity, strengthen working relationships between professionals and paraprofessionals, and increase inclusive practice.

Models of PLD that are effective include cyclical models of inquiry where participants reflect on newly acquired knowledge and skills in ways that allow learning to be transferred to the real-world context. Guskey's (2000) model, Lutrick and Szabo's (2012) model, and the online PLD modules from the New Zealand Ministry of Education emphasise the importance of presenting knowledge which is relevant to the real work, allows TAs opportunities to see new ways of doing things, and to learn in collaboration with other TAs and with teachers. All models emphasise the importance of sufficient resourcing in order that TAs are able to take the time to learn and consolidate newly acquired skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STAKEHOLDERS

- Provide PLD which involves active learning including skills practise and performance feedback from coaches over time
- Provide opportunities for TAs to watch others perform skills/strategies so they can see what to do
- TAs should be with other TAs and/or with teachers during PLD so they are able to share ideas and learn from each other
- Allow enough time for TAs to reflect on their learning and how to transfer new knowledge and skills to the classroom environment
- Provide PLD which is directly relevant to the actual work of participating TAs
- Where possible, TAs should visit other schools to observe strategies in action
- Ensure enough resourcing for PLD. This includes enough time for TAs to practise new skills before using them in their real work

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