

Let's Talk About Teacher Aides

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ABSTRACT

Since 1989, teacher aides have become a familiar part of our classrooms as they support students with special educational needs. International and New Zealand research shows that despite many teacher aide practices that effectively support student learning in inclusive settings, there are some practices that work against the inclusion of some students and therefore, their academic and social learning needs are not being met. As part of a study that examined friendships and social relationships, four secondary school students with severe physical disabilities, teacher aides and teachers shared their stories. These stories complement other research studies and indicate that some schools are not addressing issues relating to the use of teacher aides. This study provides recent narrative data to inform policy and practice in relation to the use of teacher aides in inclusive settings.

Research paper

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INTRODUCTION

Nationally since 1989, and internationally, the use of teacher aides to support students with special educational needs has become a common phenomenon. For many teacher aides their official focus is to support students with their academic learning. However research (e.g. Siperstein & Rickards, 2004) highlights the complementary nature of academic and social learning and so raises questions about the teacher aide role in the wider learning process in the context of inclusive classrooms and schools.

A BIT OF HISTORY

I came to this research from my experience as a primary and a secondary school teacher with a concern over the way teacher aide practices were creating barriers for social inclusion. Traditionally, teacher aides helped the classroom teacher with photocopying, cutting paper, mixing paints and glue, tidying the resource room and so forth. With

the passing of the 1989 Education Act, when all children were given the right to enrol in their neighbourhood school; teacher aides were seen as the “solution to inclusion” (Rutherford, 2008, p. 88). From my teaching experience and supported by the literature, I observed that many teachers felt apprehensive about having students who had high needs in their classrooms, and these teachers were relieved when they found that many of these students came with an attached teacher aide (Giangreco, 2003). In these early days, teachers had no pre-service education or professional development in ‘special’ education and did not know how to include the students with disabilities so their social and academic learning needs were met. Later this situation was challenged, and in 2002 in her review of Special Education 2000, Wylie recommended there should be professional development for teachers as part of compulsory pre-service education, and also for teacher aides (Wylie, 2002).¹ However, what evolved in this country and overseas was that we had students with severe needs being ‘taught’ (and indeed many teacher aides took over the education of these students with little guidance from teachers because they did not know what to do or were busy) by untrained people in situations where some students received all their support from teacher aides rather than teachers or peers. In reality, the teacher aide often withdrew the student to another room and provided simple activities depending on the creativity of the teacher aide (Giangreco & Doyle, 2002). This created an ‘out of sight/out of mind’ scenario where the teacher did not take responsibility for the students, and life in the classroom proceeded as before. This was not inclusion; it was barely mainstreaming and a situation that Chapman (1988) had earlier described as “maindumping”; such practices had major implications for students’ social and academic learning.

Although there was legislation so students with special needs could be enrolled in classrooms, often teachers were less than encouraging about having these students in their classes. Anecdotal reports revealed that some SENCOs found it

¹ There has been professional development for pre-service teachers and teacher aides offered through Massey University College of Education, and for teacher aides with private providers.

difficult to place students, especially in secondary schools with the pressures of getting through the curriculum and the assessment system. Villa, Thousand, Meyers, and Nevin (1996) found that these initial attitudes and beliefs changed in a positive way with actual experience of including students with disabilities in their classrooms.

With the development of Support Teams and SENCOs in the 1990s, as well as developing university courses and teacher aide training, some teacher aides took on a more productive teaching role. However, more often than not, teacher aides were still left to take responsibility for students' with disabilities, so often the success of the venture depended on the knowledge and creativity of the teacher aide (Giangreco, 2003) with the teacher aide role remaining ambivalent and not clearly defined (Howard & Ford, 2007).

Overseas research, for example, Giangreco and Doyle (2002); Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, and MacFarland (1997) supported the New Zealand experience, reporting that practices excluded children from academic and social learning as well as contact with their teachers: an indicator of successful inclusion is whether academic and social learning goals are being met and expected academic and social progress is being made (Alton-Lee, 2003; Booth & Ainscow, 2002). Recent reviews in New Zealand (ERO, 2008; 2010) report that there are still issues around the variable and effective use of teacher aides for at-risk learners and for those with high needs, with recommendations for sufficient training and professional development of teacher aides within a context of school-wide initiatives: an ecological approach.

Although there has been relatively little research in this country into teacher aide practices, there is a large extant body of literature from overseas researchers (e.g. Booth & Ainscow, 2002 (UK); Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000 (USA); Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001 (USA); Howard & Ford, 2007 (Australia); Skär & Tamm, 2001 (Sweden); Takala, 2007 (Finland)). In this country there is a growing body of knowledge into inclusive (and exclusionary) practices (e.g. Alton-Lee, 2003; Kearney, 2009; Maccartney & Morton, 2009; MacArthur, Kelly, & Higgins, 2005; Mentis, Quinn, & Ryba, 2005); particularly in the area of social relationships (e.g. Higgins, MacArthur, & Kelly, 2009; MacArthur, 2002; MacArthur & Gaffney, 2001a; MacArthur & Gaffney, 2001b; MacArthur & Morton, 1999; Meyer & Bevan-Brown, 2005; Ward, 2008, 2010). Alongside these studies, Rutherford (2008) in New Zealand, and Giangreco, Suter and Doyle (2010) in North America, present extensive literature reviews of the

teacher aide/paraprofessional research. However, despite this expansive research evidence, Rutherford (2008) concludes her study of the perspectives of 18 teacher aides and ten students, with the question: "How much evidence do we need before we begin to think and act otherwise?" (p. 250). Much of the overseas research draws on observations and experiences of teachers and teacher aides; in this country there is an increasing trend that recognises the importance of listening to students to hear the stories of their experiences at school (e.g. Higgins, MacArthur & Kelly, 2009; Rutherford, 2008; Ward, 2008). In an earlier article in *Kairaranga* (see Ward, 2010) I discussed socio-cultural factors that support or create intentional or unintentional barriers (Pivik, McComas, & LaFlamme, 2002) to establishing friendships and positive social relationships. An unintentional barrier can be created through lack of knowledge because of lack of training for teachers and teacher aides; consequently the teacher aides' role in academic and social learning is ill-defined. The purpose of this article is to focus particularly on teacher aide practices and roles from four students' perspectives as evidence to highlight practices and roles that directly support, or hinder, social and academic learning. I will also critique how these practices affect their peers' perceptions of their classmates with disabilities as they ask the question; "Would I like to be friends with him/her?"

In order to contextualise the discussion I will briefly describe my research project and the four students who shared their stories. Drawing on the students' stories and contextual knowledge gained through observations and interviews with their seven teacher aides and many of their teachers, I will discuss these practices and roles, and the implications of them for social learning with the consequential impact on peers' perceptions.

THE RESEARCH

My research project involved four students with disabilities in four New Zealand secondary schools: Sam, Adam, Gemma, and Sarah. The purpose of the research study was to explore the nature of friendships and social relationships and examine what these looked/sounded/felt like for the students. I interviewed them four times over two academic years and also interviewed their principals, teachers, teacher aides, parents, some siblings and some peers. I also observed in their classroom and playgrounds. It was evident from their stories that the practices of their teacher aides unwittingly physically hindered their opportunities to interact with their peers and thus their opportunities to make friends and social relationships. Teacher aide practices also affected

the perceptions of students without disabilities towards their peers with disabilities in a negative manner where 'difference' was reinforced in a detrimental way. A number of practices that created unintentional barriers to interaction and positive peer perceptions are outlined and illustrated with students' stories. Four themes relating to teacher aides' role that emerged from the data are threaded into the discussion:

- teacher aide as facilitator (F)
- teacher aide as academic assistant/support (AcAS)
- teacher aide as physical helper (PH)
- teacher aide as caregiver/mother/friend/counsellor (CMFC).

The four students had physical disabilities and so physical help (PH) was a major factor in the support provided. This was particularly so for Sam and Adam, however Gemma and Sarah also had academic support provided by their teacher aide (AcAS). The role of facilitator (F) was an intentional response that saw the teacher aide deliberately 'standing back' to support peer interactions, and the students' independence.

In the next section I will use some of the participants' stories to illustrate some of these practices and roles, and invite readers to reflect on these and their own experiences. All the students chose their pseudonyms; I selected the other pseudonyms.

Sam's teacher aide, who was a trained teacher, had come with him to secondary school from intermediate school. Initially this suited Sam as he found it difficult to settle into the changes at high school and experienced some difficulties with peer relationships. He was dependent on his teacher aide rather than peers for emotional support, and she would counsel him (CMFC) although he was quick to point out: "I don't need a mother at school!" This contrasts with Rutherford (2008) in her doctoral research, who reported a response from Nell, a teacher aide, who described herself as "a bit of a mother figure really" (p. 160). Sam had poor dexterity in his hands, and although he did not need academic support (AcAS) his teacher aide's main role was to copy his notes (PH); and she also had the key to the chairlift (PH):

...half the problem is that I have to wait...the teacher aide that's meant to be taking me to class sometimes doesn't get there till like five minutes after the bell or ten minutes so...it's like I'm already late but 'cos I don't have a key to work the chairlift which I wish I had but they probably don't trust me with the key.

In Year 11, Sam became more confident, taking more control of his life; however he could see that having a teacher aide affected his peers' perception of him as a needy, dependent person:

When the teacher aide is not in class it's kinda cool because then...even though the teacher aide helps you it's kind of... it kind of feels as if you got...it...it...I know I'm helped but it makes me feel different and like...and I kind of find it hard to just turn around and talk to my friends because people like...especially Mrs Prince...she's always like watching me and telling me to do my work when no-one else in the classroom is doing their work but I have to do my work and I really want to turn around and talk to my friends and that just gets annoying sometimes but...yeah...so I kind of like being independent and not...but it's yeah...that's the way it goes.

Seating arrangements sometimes meant that he was isolated:

I don't have anyone sitting next to me anyway because normally I used to have a teacher aide sitting there and so the teacher aide sits there and I sit there and so people got used to where they were sitting and I don't have a teacher aide anymore so like people just sit where they normally sit and no-one sits there.

This echoes the story of another student, Catherine, in a study by Carroll-Lind and Rees (2009) "Even on days where my teacher aide is away, no one will sit with me because that's my "helper's seat" (p. 2). So in Year 11 Sam told his teacher aide that he didn't need her much; he worked hard to write more quickly thus lessening his need for this physical help, and some teachers began to photocopy notes for him so she wouldn't need to be there:

Well Mrs Prince said to me that she could probably be better utilised somewhere else but if I really needed her then she could stay, but I decided that she could be better used somewhere else.

The teacher aide had shared with me that they were supporting Sam's desire to be more independent (F). This had begun the previous year when she did not go to Art classes with Sam. I observed in this class that without the teacher aide's presence, Sam's peers, as natural supports, helped him when necessary.

Some teachers saw the responsibility for Sam's learning in their class as theirs, or shared with the teacher aide, however his Year 10 Science teacher said: "I help the teacher aide", illustrating ill-defined and conflicting teacher/teacher aide roles. Similarly, in Rutherford's (2008) research, Mack's story reinforced that some teachers absolved themselves of the responsibility to teach all students (p. 126).

Adam liked his Year 9 teacher aide because "She helps me a lot...she would go out of her way to do stuff" (PH) and had formed a close relationship with her (CMFC). Rutherford (2008) reported similar positive feelings from some of her students, for example, Sophie and Mack, as does Sarah later in this article. Adam had experienced less helpful teacher aides in the past:

At intermediate the teacher aides were meant to be a help to the teachers so I got barely helped...I don't think that's fair...no help whatsoever...well yeah sometimes...they helped me write *sometimes*...high school's different... they help you properly.

At Adam's school, teacher aides were changed each year with the rationale that the students did not become too dependent on any individual teacher aide (F) and so in Year 10 he said:

My teacher aide's not very good. She misses out words. I get annoyed...I don't like my teacher aide this year... she's not very nice...the way she talks to me and stuff...she's rude to people.

Like Sam, Adam also found waiting for a teacher aide annoying, particularly as he was not able to get his books out of his bag (PH):

My teacher aide...is always ten minutes late after the period. It's like waiting and waiting and waiting for the teacher aide to come...you have to be there on time, not ten minutes after and say, 'Sorry I'm late! I was doing something else'.... Some teachers get my gear out.

He also found that in Year 10 he didn't have a teacher aide as often as in Year 9 and he was unhappy about that, for example, she didn't come as often to science, "when we do a science experiment and I can't do anything" however, he did find that when the teacher aide was not there, his teacher helped him more rather than his peers, but: "Only a few teachers will help me with my work."

Adam's form teacher shared her perspective of ill-defined roles with me:

I don't think in this school at present that ordinary classroom teachers take full responsibility for the learning of students with special needs at all. Gosh...I'm getting myself into trouble here...in many classes I go into, that student is basically excluded from that class. I mean they're physically in the class but they have no part in it because the teacher feels, right, the teacher aide is responsible for that student; I'm responsible for these students [i.e. the student without disabilities]...and it makes me angry.

For all students, but particularly male students, the constant proximity of a female teacher aide as 'nanny', 'nurse' (for a 'sick' student), or 'mother', creates a perception of neediness and difference. A male teacher aide would change the perceptions of peers and may facilitate entrée into boys' talk and activities. For some female students, the boundaries for female teacher aides and their female students may be blurred, with a friend/co-dependent relationship developing, as we can see from Gemma's stories.

When I first met **Gemma** she was in Year 13 and had had the same teacher aide for five years. From my observation and from talking to Gemma, her teachers and the teacher aide I concluded that they had developed a co-dependent relationship (CMFC). Gemma had found it difficult to make friends until Year 12 and so Mrs Graham had become her friend at school. She would also ring her after school if she had any worries or concerns ("She rings me up often when she has problems" – Mrs Graham); she would also ring Gemma to check that she was doing her homework. Mrs Graham appeared to want to be a part of Gemma's group in Year 13, always taking part in the girls' conversations and activities, even if Gemma did not need her to be there: "Oh I just flit around... and then I just check on her" (Mrs Graham). She always had a stock of paper, pens, erasers etc and kept Gemma supplied with these; she also became a supplier to all the other girls as well and she seemed to enjoy the students' dependence on her for these things. Mrs Graham admitted that she organised Gemma and that in Year 13 she was trying to wean her off this ("not harping, harping like I would have done in previous years") and to be more independent (F), however I observed these practices still happening in several classes.

Gemma's teacher aide seemed to have taken responsibility for Gemma's learning (AsAS) as teachers did not plan ahead for her or prepare or order large print material, and would take it upon herself to withdraw Gemma when she felt it was

right and take her to the Learning Centre to work on activities of her making (AsAS). If anything was 'hard' Mrs Graham took her off. When I asked her what help Gemma had received for her learning difficulties, she replied: "Just whatever I supply her with". She elaborated:

Mostly she would go to maths...but we just did the maths in the centre and seeing she wasn't interested in 30 times 6 or something like that...I would get an Ezibuy magazine or Postie magazine or something similar and say, 'Look, if you had \$20 what could you buy out of here for \$20?' And she would go through the book and find things like that and 'if there was 10% discount on clothes, how would you work it out?' That's how we did maths.

However, some of her teachers felt that this had resulted in Gemma underachieving and leaving school without basic skills, signalling a frustration from a teacher's perspective with a lack of knowledge about the student's needs, unclear roles, and how these should be addressed, and suggests that Gemma was a 'guest' in the class (Meyer et al., 1998; Schnorr, 1990) whereby the rest of the students in the class did not see Gemma as part of their class and made little attempt to get to know her socially. In one class, Mrs Graham and Gemma sat at the front and away from the other students. When the teacher asked the class to work in groups, Mrs Graham would just work with Gemma (AsAS). This resulted in isolation and a focus on difference, thus affecting peers' perception of her as 'other'. As I discussed earlier, the constant presence of a teacher aide in a caring/helper role can be perceived in a negative way: Gemma described how one boy frequently taunted her: "There goes Gemma with her helper lady! Gemma needs a helper lady". Gemma found this distressing and humiliating.

Reminiscent of Sam's quotes (and Nell's in Rutherford, 2008), Gemma described her teacher aide: "She helps me...she's really, really nice... she's neat! If I can't do anything she just does it no trouble...yeah she's like a mum! We got on really well." (CMFC). Sarah's perception of her teacher aides' role was more clearly defined.

Sarah liked her teacher aides, and saw that their role was to help her with her academic learning:

You can joke with them and fool around with them and then they take it a serious way. They've helped me catch up with my work [she felt she was not learning at her previous school]... like if I'm away they'll write some wall notes down for me and put them in

my books for when I get back [Sarah often had time off for illness and stints in hospital]...if the teacher aide didn't understand my question then I'd just put up my hand and the maths teacher would come over and help [so the teacher aide was the first port of call]: (AcAS).

She spent her first two years at another secondary school and was enjoying her new school. I observed in most of her classes in both years; however, in each class where she had a teacher aide, she sat at the front with the teacher aide creating an 'island in the mainstream' with no interaction with the rest of the class. In classes where she did not have a teacher aide she would sit with students who had disabilities. She had no close friends at the school apart from Amy who also had spina bifida (and spent intervals and lunchtimes in the Learning Support Centre) and who was in her maths class; they shared a teacher aide – the teacher aide sat between them and it was hard for them to have conversation 'through' the teacher aide. Sarah's teacher aide talked about when the class was put into groups for a science activity:

We tend to just move in *our* group. We tend to just stick with us and it's just the way it goes (AsAS).

This resonates with Gemma's experience; what could have been an opportunity for Sarah (and Gemma) to work with her peers without disabilities is lost to the "us" and "them" barriers for students learning together.

DISCUSSION

During my observations in classes and in interviews with all the teacher aides, I concluded that they were dedicated and well-meaning people who cared about their students and were working towards what they thought were the students' best interests. Some had received some training however in two of the schools (Gemma's and Sarah's) I felt that roles were not clearly defined and that teacher aides were left to assume far greater responsibility for academic learning than they were paid for or trained for. There was little (if any) on-the-job training and support; none of them were included in planning meetings (this would cost more) or specific professional development for 'their' student.

In my conversations with all the participants, their stories of teacher aide practices highlighted that this was an area that needs more exploration; it also highlighted that principals, teachers and teacher aides were unsure of their roles and that there are still barriers to inclusive education:

some stories indicated that we had not moved far from the 1990s experiences. Alongside the extant literature, I concluded that teacher aides were an underused resource for a number of reasons: limited teacher aide training; lack of professional development for teachers on how to use teacher aides effectively, and lack of clear role definition, lack of inclusive school policies and ethos, often creating intentional and unintentional barriers to students' social learning. The students' voices provide us with important perspectives of their experiences as they work with their teacher aides each day.

Education is not just about academic learning; teachers and teacher aides need to also focus on social learning and the development of key competencies (Ministry of Education, 2007) and this should be achieved within regular schools: "To achieve inclusive education for all children, change is essential – we need better education policies, more positive values and practices in schools, and we need to listen to what disabled students themselves say" (MacArthur, 2009, p. 7). Research (e.g. Siperstein & Rickards, 2004) has shown that students who are happy at school and who enjoy positive social relationships do better academically, so there is a direct relationship between the two. Themes that emerge from literature reviews of friendships and social relationships (for example, Ward & Meyer, in progress) are that children need to be in *proximity* to each other so they can see similarities as well as differences; they need *opportunities* to be together in natural situations in order to develop healthy perceptions of each other; and that these opportunities to be in proximity can be *facilitated* by teachers in the way they structure their classrooms and the learning, and well as the way that teacher aides operate in the classroom and playground. My research (Ward, 2008), and other research, for example, Downing, Ryndak and Clark (2000); Giangreco et al. (1997); MacArthur & Gaffney (2001a); Rutherford (2008), found that often structural and social barriers meant that opportunities for students to work and play together were not facilitated or even thought about, and that practices often worked against students being together, for example, seating arrangements such as 'islands in the mainstream' or the teacher aide 'velcroed to the hip' of the students and always sitting next to them; withdrawal from the class, and helicopter teacher aides. Other practices that isolate students from their peers are the teacher aide as 'friend', and as previously discussed, gender issues. Over-reliance on a teacher aide can lead to separation from classmates as friends and natural supports, an emphasis on 'difference'; dependence on adults; only talking to adults all day; negative perceptions

of students who do not have disabilities and thus a negative impact on peer relations; limitations on receiving competent teaching; exclusion; loss of personal control and in some cases, loss of gender identity.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

By listening to the four students' experiences of their teacher aides, we learn about a number of practices and ambivalent teacher aide roles that, whether intentional or unintentional, create real barriers for social learning and interactions, and the development of positive social relationships. It is appropriate that the last words should be those of a student:

The teacher draw up the seating plans. They tend to leave a desk [for the teacher aide] just in case, but in the classes like maths and computers where I don't really need a teacher aide, I have someone sitting next to me. In economics it was fine because I didn't use the teacher aide very much...then she sat at the back until I needed her so I had someone sitting next to me... you're being like a normal person.
(Adam)

As teachers we must listen to students and their experiences as we reflect on, review, and question our attitudes, exploring barriers whilst seeking to maximise inclusive practices in our schools and classrooms whereby valuing and supporting all students' academic and social learning in an inclusive context.

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