An appreciative inquiry into teacher aides' perspectives on best practice for inclusion

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ABSTRACT

This project utilised interviews and a focus group within an appreciative inquiry framework to gain an understanding of the perspectives of four teacher aides on the 'best of what is' in teacher aiding practice, and the components that contributed to moments of best practice. Interview and focus group data were inductively analysed and several themes emerged that closely reflect the extant literature on teacher aiding and inclusive practices. These themes included making a difference, collaborative practices, access to relevant expertise and the ability and willingness of educators to be flexible and responsive in accordance with student needs. A number of barriers to inclusive teacher aide practice were also identified and were consistent with existing research findings. The researcher proposes that teacher aides' roles are implicitly or explicitly defined and constrained by wider school structures and policies concerning how students with significant learning needs are educated. Thus, efforts to improve how teacher aides are deployed and utilised need to be approached within the context of whole-school development towards improving educators' capacity to effectively respond to student diversity.

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None of us got where we are solely by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. We got here because somebody – a parent, a teacher, an Ivy League crony or a few nuns – bent down and helped us pick up our boots. -Thurgood Marshall

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Lastly, I would like to thank my partner, Ross, the person who has helped me 'pick up my boots' more often than any other over the course of my study.

Wait out for someone who won't let life escape you, who'll challenge you and drive you towards your dreams. Someone spontaneous you can get lost in the world with. A relationship with the right person is a release, not a restriction.
                                                                                            - Beau Taplin

In you, I have found that someone.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

During the late 1980's and early 1990's, the New Zealand education system underwent extensive reforms: with the commencement of the New Zealand Education Act 1989, students with disabilities were given the unrestricted legal right to attend regular state schools. Twenty-five years later the Ministry of Education (Ministry) (2014) reports that 99.6% of children and young people with disabilities attend regular state schools. Teacher aides have, and continue to play an integral role in enabling the presence of students with disabilities in regular schools, and teacher aide hours are the most commonly reported service provided for students with disabilities (Ward, Purdie & Irving, 2009). Despite the common practice of providing teacher aide support in New Zealand, understandings of how teacher aides are utilised, whether the presence of teacher aides is positively contributing to student participation and achievement, or what effective teacher aide practice looks like, are limited to the findings of a small number of studies (Rutherford, 2008; Stevenson, 2012; Tutty & Hocking, 2004; Ward, 2007). These New Zealand based studies reflect international findings that suggest that how teacher aides are deployed matters; and that the presence of teacher aides is by no means an unmitigated good, and can hamper the participation and achievement of students with disabilities (Blatchford, Russell, & Webster, 2012; Bourke, 2008; Broer, Doyle, & Giangreco, 2005; Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Mortier, Desimpel, De Schauwer, & Van Hove, 2011; Tews & Lupart, 2008; Whitburn, 2013).

Previous research has indicated that students' school experiences of inclusion and exclusion are also experienced by the teacher aides who work with these students (Rutherford, 2012; Tutty & Hocking, 2004). This puts teacher aides in a unique position in the sense that they have some insight into how varying teacher and wider school practices impact on students' personal experiences of school, and on their own experiences as teacher aides.

The present study aims to add to the research concerning teacher aiding practice in New Zealand: specifically, by utilising an appreciative inquiry approach, it seeks to gain an understanding of those components that contribute to students' learning and inclusion from veteran teacher aides' perspectives.

Background and justification for this study

My interest in this particular topic originated from my own experiences as a teacher aide working with a student who has complex learning needs. I came to the job of teacher aiding with little practical experience in the education field, but plenty of enthusiasm and - after several years' study in the field of psychology and educational psychology - a head full of ideas concerning best practice. I soon realised that the gap between how students' learning needs were addressed within a real-world setting and how best practice suggested they might be addressed, can at times be more aptly termed a chasm. Within discussions amongst school staff it is often implied that the status quo - though perhaps not the best way - is the only way given the challenges inherent to the students with whom we work, and the limitations of the system we work within. For a time I almost came to accept this story – and no doubt, there are

aspects of truth within it. Discussions with my supervisor and engagement with literature taking a critical theoretical perspective led me to thinking that such stories belong to the "ideological fog" (Freire, 1998 as cited p. 763 in Ballard, 2013) surrounding wider beliefs around the value of (some) human beings and the (lack of) responsibility of the state – in this case represented via the education sector – in providing public services for the common good.

Being at heart an idealist with strong convictions concerning social justice, I had to go looking for better ways of serving students with diverse learning needs. Given the ubiquitous nature of providing teacher aide support in New Zealand, gaining an understanding of how experienced teacher aides perceive their own best experiences, and the components that contribute to these, seemed a viable way to find examples of how students with complex learning needs can be given maximal opportunities to participate and achieve in the context of New Zealand schools. An appreciative inquiry approach was chosen so the focus could be on highlighting the best of what is already being done in schools - solutions in action - in the hope that doing so will in some small way aid "the process [of] constantly looking for better ways to respond to diversity" (p. 223, McMaster, 2013).

When I started to search the literature concerning teacher-aiding practice in New Zealand, I was astounded to find so little research given the universal presence of teacher aides in New Zealand schools (Rutherford, 2012). This served as further encouragement to research teacher aiding practice, and how the presence of teacher aides can work to enhance students' inclusion, as well as what barriers exist to teacher aides working inclusively.

Using words deliberately: A note on terminology

From a social constructionist perspective, language is powerful: it is not solely a reflection of 'reality' but rather imbues the social world with meaning (Andrews, 2012). Accordingly it is appropriate to define the rationale underpinning the terminology utilised in this report.

When referring to the inclusion movement, this denotes the process of political, social and structural change - still ongoing – concerned with how the education system responds to human diversity. Although the concept of inclusive schooling is defined in numerous ways, for the purposes of this report, an inclusive educational environment is an environment that provides opportunities for the presence, participation and achievement of *all* students, in a manner that is responsive to their needs and relevant to their lives (Carrington, et al., 2012). As per the views of many prominent inclusion advocates (e.g. Ballard, 2013; Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Carrington, et al., 2012; McMaster, 2013; Slee, 2012), building inclusive schools and communities is considered an ever-evolving process rather than an end destination: this perspective acknowledges that understandings of inclusion are influenced by a variety of historical, political, economic and social forces at any given time, and as such must be understood in context.

Where mainstreaming is referred to, this simply denotes the practice of allowing students with diverse abilities to be present in regular states schools: in the context of this report mainstreaming is not synonymous with inclusion.

As a reflection of the Ministry's choice of terminology, the term 'special education' or 'special education needs' will be used when discussing past and present Ministry policies pertaining to the education of students with impairments.

Teacher aides are known by many different designations: in New Zealand alone teacher aides can be termed teacher's aides, kaiāwhina, teaching assistants and education support workers (Rutherford, 2008). Internationally there is even greater variation, including the terms paraprofessionals, paraeducators, classroom assistants, educational technicians, instructional aides and special needs assistants (Stevenson, 2012). Although titles vary according to nationality, this proliferation of terms also reflects the varied roles and responsibilities of teacher aides. In this report the term 'teacher aide' was chosen to reflect the ambiguous position of aides within schools (Rutherford, 2012). The term 'teacher's aide'- as used by the New Zealand Ministry (2014) - suggest that the aide supports the teacher in his or her instructional capacity, however the literature suggests that the majority of aides work at least partially as student's aides (Rutherford, 2012); hence the choice of the term 'teacher aide' to reflect the ambiguity of the current situation. Where the term 'teacher's aide' has been used, this has been done intentionally to reflect a more clearly defined role.

When referring to children and young people in an educational setting, the term 'students' has been chosen to reflect their position as children and young people who attend school to learn. When referring to students with disabilities / impairments, person first language is used. The term 'students with complex learning needs' refers to students whose impairments present a number of challenges for schools that do not demonstrate fully inclusive practices and / or environments. Where the term 'disabled student' has been used, this terminology has been chosen as it is intended to convey the perspective that non-inclusive environments and practices – not impairment - are what creates the experience of disability (Carrington, et al., 2012).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Schools in Australia (Bourke, 2009), Canada (Tews & Lupart, 2008), North America (USA) (Giangreco & Doyle, 2007), the United Kingdom (UK) (Blatchford et al., 2012) and New Zealand (Ward, et al., 2009) are all increasingly employing teacher aides, purportedly to meet the needs of students with complex learning needs. Research suggests that how teacher aides are deployed varies significantly from school to school and even within schools (Blatchford et al, 2012; Bourke, 2008; Giangreco & Doyle, 2007; Rutherford, 2012; Tews & Lupart, 2008; Tutty & Hocking, 2004); furthermore, how teacher aides are utilised depends largely on schools' and educators' conceptions of inclusion and inclusive practices (Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Kearney, 2009; Rutherford, 2012). Any consideration of teacher aiding practice therefore needs to be situated in the wider context of inclusive education. Accordingly, this literature review will begin with a discussion of the historical and present context of inclusive education in New Zealand before considering the presence and practice of teacher aides in schools. Teacher aiding will be examined in terms of research on aides' working conditions as well as on how the provision of teacher aide support affects student outcomes. Finally, the prerequisites for the provision of teacher aide support that enhances students' access to a truly inclusive education will be considered.

Inclusive education in New Zealand: Historical, social, political and economic context

Perceptions of disability shape how a society responds to people with disabilities, including the provision of education. These perceptions, often touted as 'common sense', in fact develop in a particular historic, cultural, political and economic context, and benefit some humans whilst undermining others (Ballard, 2013). Having an understanding of the historical evolution of perceptions of disability, and how such 'common sense' understandings shift over time, emphasises their genesis in social construction rather than objective reality (Kearney, 2009).

In New Zealand, as in much of the world, perceptions of disability continue to evolve. Early 20th century discourses could be described as being governed by a moral model, with deficit perceptions gaining justification through the eugenics movement; where early understandings of natural selection were applied to humans, and in aid of 'racial fitness', weak or immoral individuals were prevented from having children (Ministry of Social Development, 2015). Concerns with 'enhancing' racial fitness underpinned New Zealand's disability social policy. An inquiry report during the early 20th century provides an example: citing concern about 'feeble-minded' children, and that action needed to be taken to avoid 'the multiplication of these degenerates' termed 'an inferior strain' in the New Zealand population (Ministry of Social Development, 2015). The goal as determined by the inquiry was to 'increase the elements of the mental, moral, and physical strength of the nation' (Ministry of Social Development, 2015).

Returned service men from both wars led to greater acceptance of impairment and the beginnings of State care, albeit primarily in the form of institutionalisation (Ministry of Social Development, 2015). Rehabilitation and medical intervention were emphasised during this time and disability was considered a defect inherent to the individual that may be 'fixed' with medical intervention; this is now widely referred to as the medical model of disability. In the 1950's, the institutionalisation of people with disabilities began to be challenged and slowly a more community oriented and rights based approach to disability started to take shape (Ministry of Social Development, 2015).

Within this context, education of children with disabilities was originally the province of charitable organisations, however by the 1970's government funded 'special schools' were well established (Ministry of Social Development, 2015). Around this time the efficacy of segregated settings began to be challenged by research findings that suggested outcomes for children in well-supported inclusive settings were superior to those for children in segregated education (Kearney, 2009). In wider society, people with disabilities called for more emphasis to be placed on the role of rigid societal structures in disablement rather than the impairments of individuals, and demanded a society more responsive to diversity (Dalziel, 2001).

The inclusion movement in New Zealand had its genesis in worldwide social movements towards equality for all people (Selvaraj, 2015). The atrocities perpetuated during World War II served as the impetus for the first iteration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 (Grant & Gibson, 2013). Within this post-war context there was increasing demand from many sectors of society for the extension of equal rights to all citizens; this debate was particularly relevant to education, widely perceived to confer opportunity to its recipients, and to be instrumental in the development of democracy and social justice (Grant & Gibson, 2013).

In North America, the landmark *Brown vs. The Education Board* case resulted in racially segregated schooling being ruled as unconstitutional in 1954 (Selvaraj, 2015). The impact of this decision was considerable and during the 1960's and 1970's equal rights for all continued to be a prevalent idea (Grant & Gibson, 2013). Within this wider context there was a push for students with impairments to be afforded the same rights to education as other students. In North America the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was developed in the early 1970's and eventually enacted in 1975; presently known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act – it legally mandates all children's right to a public school education, regardless of impairment or ability, albeit with the caveat of 'least restrictive environment' - meaning that students essentially have to prove their ability to cope in a mainstream environment (Valle & Conner, 2011). In the United Kingdom, the 1978 Warnock report presented challenges to segregated schooling, and posited that the needs of students currently educated in separate facilities would be better met in regular state schools (Runswick-Cole & Hodge, 2009).

This period of large-scale economic, political, legal and societal change did not leave New Zealand unaffected. The Race Relations Act (1971) and the Human Rights Commission Act (1977) were purported to provide all New Zealanders the right to freedom from discrimination on the basis of race, marital status, sex and religious and ethical beliefs. Since then, New Zealand has signed further United Nations Human Rights Declarations relevant to the just education of all children and young people: in 1989 New Zealand became party to the

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), in 1994 the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994) was signed, and in 2007 New Zealand signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006).

In addition to human rights declarations – which are not legally binding unless a state develops legislature to that effect – New Zealand has adopted legislature and policies relevant to the education of students with disabilities: most notably, the commencement of the Education Act (1989) - where Article 8 declares "… people who have special educational needs (whether because of disability or otherwise) have the same rights to enrol and receive education at State schools as people who do not." In addition, section 57 of the Human Rights Act (1993) declares it illegal for educational establishments to discriminate on the basis of disability, both in terms of access to, and the provision of education. Also relevant to inclusive education is the New Zealand Disability Strategy (Dalziel, 2001); this is a Ministry of Health policy document - developed in consultation with people with disabilities as well as parents of children with disabilities - that has as its vision a fully inclusive society, realised "when people with impairments can say they live in: 'A society that highly values our lives and continually enhances our full participation.'" (p. 5, Dalziel, 2001).

Despite the seemingly clear intentions of human rights declarations and New Zealand legislature, for children with disabilities, access to public education that is responsive to their needs and relevant to their lives remains tenuous (Kearney, 2009). Persistent understandings of disability as a deficit inherent to the individual are perpetuated by an ideological and economic system that values some forms of knowledge and capability over others (Ballard, 2013). The same legislature (Education Act 1989) that afforded children with disabilities access to regular state schools also implemented major educational reforms; these followed on the back of large-scale public sector changes and reflected similar policies in other countries such as the USA and the UK (Fitzsimmons, 2000). Commonly referred to as the 'rolling back of the state', no public sector escaped this major economic and ideological restructuring. Reforms were founded on neo-liberalist doctrine, where the principles of a market economy are applied to public sector activities. According to Peters, Fitzsimmons and Marshall (1999, as cited in Fitzsimmons, 2000) "…neoliberalism is a substantive discourse of governance, which is potent precisely because of its capacity to combine economics, the social, and politics, on behalf of rational choice as a principle of legitimacy (p. 3)."

For the education sector this translated into the most significant overhaul since the late 19th century. The reforms, termed Tomorrow's Schools (Department of Education, 1988 as cited in Selvaraj, 2015), emphasised the principles of equity, quality, efficiency, economy and effectiveness. In addition to affording children with disabilities the right to attend regular state schools, the ensuing legislation (Education Act, 1989) enshrined in law the decentralisation of school management from a state run to a local body system. In accordance with a market model, schools were now competing for students, and schools' efficacy was gauged by widely publicised 'productive outputs' – namely students' success - measured according to achievement standards decreed by the state (Fitzsimmons, 2000). These achievement standards were – and remain - largely tied to economic and business imperatives aimed at accelerating economic growth and keeping New Zealand 'competitive' in a global, 'free market' economy (Fitzsimmons, 2000; Ministry of Education, 2014; Selvaraj, 2015).

The ideology underpinning neo-liberalism pervades not only economic policy but also dominant discourse around human capacity and worth (Ballard, 2013; Rutherford, 2014; Selvaraj, 2015). Knowledge, skills and education came to be considered of value primarily according to their measurable contribution to the nation's economic output and, as a result, some forms of knowledge and competence came to be valued over others (Rutherford, 2014). Marketisation of 'human capital' decrees that some humans are more likely to produce a return on investment, and therefore merit the input of resources; this idea, termed meritocracy, is central to neo-liberal ideology and purports that an individual's achievement and access to resources is based on his ability to successfully compete with others (Ballard, 2013; Fitzsimmons, 2000; Rutherford, 2014).

The inclusion movement has grown up in this paradoxical environment – where on the one hand human rights and the value of diversity have come to be increasingly recognised and advocated for, and on the other hand an economic ideology reinforces a narrow definition of human value. Paradoxical thinking continues to affect how inclusion is implemented in the New Zealand educational context, and this is reflected in current policy and practice.

Inclusive education in New Zealand: Current policy and practice

This section of the literature review will consider how current education policy and practice provides the context for teacher aides' work and the education of students with disabilities.

Special Education 2000 (SE2000), implemented in 1996, provides a capped funding structure for allocating resources to schools, with the stated objective of developing a "world class inclusive education system" (Ministry of Education, 1996 as cited on p. 20, Coleman, 2011). Although SE2000 is no longer explicitly referred to by the Ministry, current special education funding structures are similar to the original iteration of SE2000 and encompass a number of service delivery and resource provision initiatives; some allocated to schools as bulk funds according to the school's decile rating or roll numbers, and others allocated to individual students according to pre-determined categories of need (Coleman, 2011). Although fundamentally a funding policy, SE2000 and its present iteration have significant implications for educators' and support staff's practice.

Since its inception, SE2000 has undergone a number of reviews that have identified issues pertaining to under-resourcing, fragmented service delivery, and problems with service delivery underlap (gaps in service delivery) and overlap (duplication and / or inefficient use of resources and services) (Coleman, 2011; Selvaraj, 2015). As a result of a court case brought against the Crown in 2000 by 14 parents of children with disabilities, the High Court ruled that the resource and service provision for students with disabilities was inconsistent with the Crown's obligations under the Education Acts of 1989 and 1964 (Selvaraj, 2015). Not surprisingly, during this time enrolments in special schools increased markedly as parents went looking for schooling options that were more responsive to the needs of their children (McMenamin, 2009).

In 2008 the incoming government ordered another review of special education services: this report drew on 2000 submissions from educators, families of students with disabilities and community organisations. Although satisfaction with special needs resourcing had improved, interestingly the number one 'change' the majority (40%) of respondents expressed a desire

for was, "the need to retain the range of settings currently available within the school sector, expressing support for special schools as part of the range of options"; secondly around one third of respondents identified that "the one thing that needed changing was the level of funding and services available, particularly the funding and services available in regular schools" (Ministry of Education, 2015). Of the remainder of respondents 22% identified teacher education (both pre and in-service) as a priority area for change and 15% identified the need for attitude changes with regard to disability and inclusive education. Taken together, these findings suggest that responsiveness to students' learning needs remains a challenge within regular schools. The findings also indicate the widely held perception that students with disabilities are better served in specialised facilities.

The outcomes of this review and concerns regarding the consistent underachievement of schools in providing successful educational outcomes for Maori and Pacifica students, lead to the development of the 'Success for All: Every School, Every Child' action policy (Ministry of Education, n.d.). This action statement has a number of objectives that are framed in language that is reflective of an inclusive ethos: for example under 'expectations and behaviours', being professional and flexible means "recognis[ing] that inclusiveness is not about a *special* response. It's about a professional, flexible response to the needs of all learners and their families, whānau and communities. There is no one-size-fits-all" (Ministry of Education, n.d. emphasis added). In contrast, language in the Ministry's (2014) *Statement of Intent 2014-2018* is business like and focussed on demonstrable economic return; two of the four desired outcomes of the New Zealand education system are directly fiscally oriented, namely that, "The education system is a major contributor to economic prosperity and growth" and that "Investment in education provides higher returns" (p. 14). This duality in Ministry policy is ongoing and reflective of the uneasy co-existence of neoliberal ideology and education imperatives that require a strong commitment to the advancement of social justice in order to succeed (Rutherford, 2014; Slee, 2014), and perpetuate confusion of what inclusion means and what inclusive educational practice looks like. In the words of Selvaraj (2015) "inclusion requires more than well intentioned policy" (p. 97).

In New Zealand, the education of students with disabilities is still largely synonymous with the special education paradigm (Ministry of Education, 2015). The concept of inclusion is frequently confounded with the concept of mainstreaming (MacArthur, 2009): akin to assimilationist principles, mainstreaming is where the presence of students with impairments is deemed acceptable as long as those impairments are minimally disruptive to the functioning of the school (Valle & Conner, 2011). Persistent under-resourcing and lack of a clear, unified direction during the transition to inclusion, has contributed to the perception that inclusion equates to a "one-size-fits-all" approach to education that is inadequately responsive to the needs of students with complex impairments (Hornby, 2012). Indeed much of the criticism levelled at inclusion from scholars supportive of segregated special education provision concerns inadequate provision for children's needs (Hornby, 2012): ironically, most proponents of inclusion would likely concur with this sentiment if not with the definition of "inclusive education" that engendered it (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Ballard, 2013; Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Florian, 2012; Higgins, MacArthur, & Kelly, 2009; Kearney, 2009; Rutherford, 2011; Selvaraj, 2015). Maintaining the discourse of 'special' education identifies some students (somewhat arbitrarily) as being in need of 'special' services that are not able to

be provided by 'regular' teachers: in Slee's words, "classroom teachers are persuaded, without much resistance, that a widening group of young people require specialist intervention and treatment" (p. 275, 2014). It also conveys the impression that the problem is within the student rather than within the educators or educations systems lacking the support, capability and / or inclination to provide for all students (MacArthur, Sharp, & Kelly, 2007; Whitburn, 2013).

Widespread confusion about inclusion has enormous implications for the work of teacher aides in New Zealand. Notoriously poorly demarcated, the teacher aide's role and responsibilities will tend to encompass any responsibilities that are eschewed by other education professionals (Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Giangreco & Doyle, 2007; Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001; Kearney, 2009; MacArthur, 2009; Rutherford, 2008; Tutty & Hocking, 2004; Whitburn, 2013). Classroom teachers can lack the knowledge and skills to effectively include students with complex learning needs and conflicting or unclear ideas about the meaning and practice of inclusion leave teacher aides to fill the gaps in ways that are not always conducive to successful outcomes for the students whom they support (Giangreco & Doyle, 2007; Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Giangreco et al., 2001; Kearney, 2009; MacArthur, 2009; Rutherford, 2008; Tutty & Hocking, 2004; Whitburn, 2013). The ORS, which is the primary funding source for the employment of teacher aides, is one example of Ministry policy that inadvertently works to exacerbate such confusion (Kearney, 2009; Tutty & Hocking, 2004).

The ORS provides resources for students deemed to have high or very high needs that are likely to be ongoing for the duration of the student's time in education: this resourcing is 'attached' to individual students and is granted when the student's level of need (i.e. deficits, as documented by the teachers who work with the student) are verified by an independent body of specialists who – unless there is some contention concerning verification - are unlikely to meet the student prior to a decision being reached (Coleman, 2011). Although providing funding that is attached to individual students was introduced in order to protect the student's interests, the verification process has been widely criticised for highlighting students' deficits and contributing to the perception that the barriers are within the child and hence, unchangeable (Bartleet, 2009; Kearney, 2009; Rutherford, 2008). The ORS has direct implications for the work of teacher aides as their employment is frequently dependent on individual student's funding, tying teacher aides to individual students in a very real sense.

Teacher aiding: Themes from literature

Prior to the integration of students with disabilities, teacher aides were employed to assist teachers with clerical tasks and resource preparation (Clegg, 1987 as cited in Ferguson, 2014). Over the past 25 years the role of the teacher aide has shifted and aides are now primarily employed to support students with diverse learning needs in an integrated school environment (Bourke, 2008; Giangreco, Doyle, & Suter, 2012; Rutherford, 2008; Ward, 2007). The pervasive employment of teacher aides in New Zealand's schools is perhaps best appreciated via schools' use of funding for the provision of special education resources: a report by Ward, et al. (2009) indicated that teacher aide hours are the most commonly allocated resource, ahead of the provision of specialist teacher time. Furthermore, the same report indicated that

77% of schools surveyed would spend increased funding on further teacher aide hours. Similarly, parents of children with disabilities seem to welcome any further funding for increased provision of teacher aide hours, and cite lack of funding for teacher aide hours as one of the primary barriers to inclusion (Kearney, 2009; Quality Public Education Coalition, 2005). The presence of teacher aides seems to be widely regarded as an unmitigated good, and in the transition to an inclusive education system, teacher aides have frequently been perceived as "*the* solution to inclusion" (p. 4, Rutherford, 2012).

Despite the ubiquitous presence of teacher aides in schools in New Zealand and internationally, there is increasing evidence to suggest that the indiscriminate deployment of teacher aides is not in students' best interest (Blatchford et al., 2012; Bourke, 2008; Broer et al., 2005; Giangreco, Yuan, McKenzie, Cameron, & Fialka, 2005; Kearney, 2009; MacArthur et al., 2007; Mortier et al., 2011; Rutherford, 2012; Tews & Lupart, 2008; Tutty & Hocking, 2004; Whitburn, 2013). Furthermore a large body of research regarding inclusive pedagogy suggests that overreliance on teacher aide support is not compatible with effective inclusive practices (e.g. Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Alton-Lee, Rietveld, Klenner, Dalton, Diggins, & Town, 2000; Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Florian, 2012; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Giangreco et al., 2012; Higgins et al., 2009; Kearney, 2009; MacArthur, 2009; Rutherford, 2014). This component of the literature review will explore the themes in the literature on teacher aides and inclusive practice. Teacher aides' roles and working conditions will first be discussed, followed by a consideration of how teacher aides contribute to students' educational experiences, lastly this review will discuss research findings on how teacher's aides can contribute to student learning as part of a comprehensive approach to inclusive pedagogy.

Teacher aide working conditions: A snapshot from the literature

Studies concerned with teacher aides' working conditions have repeatedly found that what aides do varies enormously across and even within schools (Blatchford et al., 2012; Bourke, 2008; Ghere & York-Barr, 2007; Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010; Mansaray, 2006; Marks, Schrader, & Levine, 1999; O'Brien & Garner, 2001; Rutherford, 2008; Stevenson, 2012). The job title of teacher aide can encompass any number of tasks including but not limited to administrative assistance to teachers or the school more generally, remedial work with small groups of students, supporting one or more teachers within a whole class context, and working one to one with an individual student (ibid.). Some schools provide teacher aides with clear job descriptions, and roles and responsibilities are well defined: however for the majority of aides this is not the case and they are frequently left to 'fill the gaps' left by poorly organised school systems and / or reluctant teachers (Giangreco et al., 2010; Rutherford, 2012).

The research also shows that teacher aides are frequently working in an instructional capacity and assuming whole or part responsibility for the planning and implementation of the academic, social and behavioural education of students with complex learning needs (Blatchford et al., 2012; Giangreco, 2013; Kearney, 2009; MacArthur et al., 2007; Rutherford, 2011; Stevenson, 2012; Tews & Lupart, 2008; Tutty & Hocking, 2004; Whitburn, 2013). When this is the case, teacher aide – student pairs frequently feel isolated, like 'an island in

the mainstream' (ibid.). This situation is likely to develop in the absence of a clearly stated school policy that both establishes the expectation that every teacher is responsible for the education of *all* the students in her or his class, and provides the support to enable teachers to meet diverse student needs (Giangreco & Broer, 2005). There are obvious legal and ethical implications of assigning the least qualified and lowest paid staff members to 'teach' students with the most complex learning needs: allowing 'regular' students to be educated by unqualified staff would be considered unacceptable, yet it is commonplace to allow this to be the case for disabled students (Giangreco, 2013; Kearney, 2009; Rutherford, 2011; Rutherford, 2014).

Teacher aides generally do not have formal training in education and opportunities for professional development (PD) are inconsistently offered by schools (Bourke, 2008; Giangreco et al., 2010). Research literature indicates teacher aides' opinion that a training framework specifically aimed at aides can be helpful in terms of learning effective instructional and behavioural support strategies, and elevating teacher aides' status in the eyes of teachers (Bourke, 2008; Butt & Lowe, 2012). However the lack of opportunity for career development may present a barrier to teacher aide training; the return on investment of resources is unlikely to be significant for aides engaging in training, as the low cost of employing aides is an advantages for schools and they are unlikely to justify paying more for trained aides (Rutherford, 2014). While Giangreco and Broer (2005) are supportive of increased training for teacher aides, they cautions that without robust school expectations and systems around inclusive practices, the training of teacher aides can provide further justification for the abdication of responsibility for the education of disabled students to teacher aides.

How schools value teacher aide staff is generally a reflection of how schools value students with disabilities (Rutherford, 2012). If the school ethos is partially or non inclusive, teacher aides tend to be absolutely indispensible (as the sole 'solution' to the 'problem' of disabled students), but undervalued and at the bottom of the hierarchy (much like the students with whom they work) (ibid.). From this marginalised position teacher aides have to manage often complicated and convoluted relationships: teacher aides may feel that it is their responsibility to advocate for the education of the student who cannot do so for him or her self, whilst simultaneously feeling that they are not adequately providing for the student (Tutty & Hocking, 2004). In addition to these challenges, the low pay, few opportunities for advancement and minimal job security characteristic of employment as a teacher aide can add to aides feeling of little value (Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2001).

How does the presence of teacher aides influence student outcomes?

Student outcomes according to parents and educators

Most research considering the impact of teacher aides on student outcomes has used teacher and parent perceptions of students' progress. Certainly this research indicates that as far as educators and students' families are concerned, teacher aides are crucial. The Ward, et al. (2009) report, investigating allocation of special needs funding in New Zealand found that when teachers were questioned as to what components they considered contributed most to successful outcomes for the integration of students with disability in their classrooms, the

majority (66%) cited quality teacher aide support, ahead of teacher quality. In the same report 65% of teachers indicated that one of the most favourable outcomes of the provision of effective support was that it enabled the teachers to focus on other students in the class. These findings are consistent with those of Blatchford, Russell, and Webster (2012) in the UK who suggested that teacher aide support considerably improved the working lives of teachers. Kearney's (2009) New Zealand research concurred with Ward and colleagues' (2009) findings and further indicated that principals who were less inclusive in outlook tended to place more emphasis on the importance of teacher aides' presence.

Student outcomes according to students

It is evident from the research that students have clear ideas concerning the type and intensity of support they require; however they are not always consulted when such decisions are made (Broer et al., 2005; De Schauwer, Van Hove, Mortier, & Loots, 2009; MacArthur et al., 2007; Mortier et al., 2011; Rutherford, 2008; Tews & Lupart, 2008; Whitburn, 2013). Although research on student perspective is generally characterised by small heterogeneous samples of students, the strong themes across studies and countries is compelling and indicates that how students are supported affects their ability to participate and achieve in school.

The potential for teacher aides to "help or hover" has been a long-standing theme in the literature and is confirmed by students' perspectives (Broer et al., 2005; Giangreco et al., 2001; MacArthur et al., 2007; Marks et al., 1999; Rutherford, 2008; Tews & Lupart, 2008; Whitburn, 2013). Students relate that teacher aides who help are adept at knowing when to step in and when to step back; these teacher aides tend to help every student in the class, not only the student with a disability; good teacher aides are kind, friendly and fun, they care about and know how to relate to the student; such teacher aides are 'professionals', they arrive on time, are organised and know the subject; good teacher aides facilitate peer interaction by highlighting students' competence and shared humanness or simply by knowing when to get out of the way (Rutherford, 2008; Whitburn, 2013). Several studies showed that peers would frequently step in as natural supports in the absence of teacher aides, and that for most students this was preferable to adult support (Broer et al., 2005; Mortier et al., 2011; Whitburn, 2013;).

Conversely students were able to identify unhelpful teacher aide practices, and undesirable outcomes related to receiving teacher aide support. Students frequently felt stigmatised by the presence of aides, particularly if the latter "hovered" rather than making her or himself available to other students (Broer et al., 2005; MacArthur et al., 2007; Rutherford, 2008; Tews & Lupart, 2008; Whitburn, 2013). Several students felt that – while other students were able to "slack off" in class – the constant presence of the aid precluded this luxury and reduced opportunities for socialising with peers during class: in one student's words, "it's like going to a party with your parents" (Whitburn, 2013, p. 153). Students were very aware of their limited access to teacher support, in the words of a student; "They can't really spend a lot of time with one person, because they have a class to teach" (Broer et al., 2005 p. 423). Some students felt teacher aides' presence hindered access to teacher time, however in the absence of teachers modifying curriculum or providing accommodations, students were unable to access learning without teacher aides (Whitburn, 2013). The happiest situation for many students was when teachers did adapt lessons or the environment so students could access learning independently; in the words of a secondary school student: "They [class

teachers] need to be preparing the classes properly. Then we don't need the teacher aides." (Whitburn, 2013, p. 157).

Student outcomes according to objective outcome measures

Few studies of the impact of teacher aide support on student outcomes have used an experimental design with objective outcome. A notable exception is the extensive research conducted by Blatchford and colleagues (2012) in the UK, involving approximately 8000 primary and secondary school student participants. For this sample of children, students who were supported by teacher aides performed less well academically than students of comparable age and ability levels that were not supported by teacher aides (Blatchford et al., 2012). Furthermore, there was a negative correlation between the amount of teacher aide support received and student test scores.

Blatchford and colleagues' findings suggested that teacher aides work primarily with children who are struggling academically and for these students that means less access to the teacher's time; conversely for the teacher this means more time with the rest of the class (Webster, Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, Martin, & Russell, 2010). Perhaps not surprisingly, the presence of teacher aides was found to have a positive impact on some students' behaviour and the teacher's stress levels (Blatchford et al., 2012). The results also indicated that how teacher aides work with children is qualitatively different to teacher's instructional approach: teacher aides tended to provide less challenging lessons, with a greater focus on task completion at the expense of the learning process (Blatchford et al., 2012). Previous research has also highlighted the task completion orientation of teacher aides (Giangreco et al., 2010). Furthermore, teacher aides tend to be more inclined to use 'close down' rather than 'open up' talk when engaged in instruction (Webster et al., 2010). The majority of teachers and aides participating in the study lacked training in how to work effectively together, as well as dedicated time for collaboration (Webster et al., 2010).

Effective deployment of teacher aides in an inclusive schooling context

When schools are committed to developing and maintaining school-wide inclusive pedagogy and practices, the appropriate utilisation of teacher's aides can contribute to the achievement of all students (Causten-Theoharis & Malgrem, 2005; Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2003; Webster, Blatchford, & Russel, 2013). This requires that teacher aides are not considered as the sole solution to ensuring the presence of students with disabilities, but that aides' support is one component of a cohesive plan that provides the student with maximal opportunities to participate and achieve (Causten-Theoharis, 2009; Giangreco, 2013). Where teacher aide support is used, there should be great clarity around how the support will be provided and what the purpose of the support is. Ideally this would include input from the student regarding what kind of support would be most helpful for him or her (Causton-Theoharis, 2009; Mortier et al., 2011; Whitburn, 2013). Teacher aides need to be supervised to ensure that their practice is conducive to the social participation and learning of the student (Chopra, Sandoval-Lucero, & French, 2011; Giangreco, Smith, & Pinckney, 2006), with dedicated time for teachers and aides to work collaboratively (Webster et al, 2013). Within such contexts, teacher aide support has a valuable place and can contribute to successful student outcomes (Webster et al, 2013).

Conclusion

The increasing provision of teacher aide support for students with disabilities has occurred within a specific historical, cultural, social, political and economic context. The pervasive presence of teacher aides in schools has not happened by design, but rather as a reactive measure based on underlying values, beliefs and assumptions about students with disabilities. Current policies and practices in education, although constantly evolving, still reflect many of the historical deficit-based constructions of disability with the added complication of a market driven model of public service provision that emphasises competition and meritocracy.

When school values reflect such deficit-based assumptions, teacher aides can become the sole solution to addressing the needs of students with complex learning needs. Given full responsibility and little support, teacher aides can end up feeling isolated and undervalued. Moreover, research indicates that students' learning and social participation can be compromised with the provision of inappropriate teacher aide support. Conversely, the research indicates that in an inclusive schooling context well supported teacher aides - as one component of a cohesive and targeted approach to responding to student needs - can have a positive impact on student outcomes.

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

Epistemological framework: Social constructionism

This research study is premised on the assumption that there is no one true interpretation of reality (Andrews, 2012). How social phenomena are interpreted is dependent on the worldview of the interpreter (Andrews, 2012). This worldview may be shaped by a variety of interlinked values, beliefs, assumptions and experiences and will continue to evolve and transform during the individual's lifetime as she or he encounters challenges to, or affirmations of, her or his worldview (Andrews, 2012). Culture could be understood as the collective worldview of a society, and similarly, culture keeps evolving as values, beliefs and assumptions are challenged or affirmed by the individuals or cohorts within a society (Saldana, 2011).

A social constructionist perspective implores researchers to situate research within the broad contextual framework of culture, as it is only within this that social phenomena can be made sense of (Andrews, 2012). As described in the literature review, education exists within a complex interplay of historical, cultural, social, political and economic factors; as do understandings of what it means to be disabled (Ballard, 2013). As such, a social constructionist perspective is an appropriate epistemological framework from which to engage in educational and disability research (Valle & Conner, 2011).

Theoretical framework and methodology: Appreciative inquiry

Firmly grounded in a social constructionist epistemology, appreciative inquiry (AI) can be broadly defined as a qualitative action research process that utilises an appreciation of 'the best of what is' as the foundation for generating organisational change (Bushe, 2012). Although the 4 D (referring to Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver) methodology is now widely thought of as *the* appreciative inquiry methodology, Srivastva and Cooperrider (1986), the founders of the AI approach, originally developed it as a research method to enhance the generative potential of grounded theory building (Bushe, 2012).

Cooperrider considered new ideas to be the most powerful force for change, and posited that the traditional problem oriented approaches to organisational change, characterised by a focus on deficits, limited the generation of new ideas and solutions (Bushe, 2012). Moreover, Srivastva and Cooperrider (1986) felt that relationships lay at the heart of any organisational change, and that a deficit focus denigrated relationships. Conversely, by focussing on solutions that are present within organisations – either as already in use or lying dormant in participants' imaginations – the capacity for generating new ideas and the energy for collaboration towards the enactment of solutions is enhanced.

Bushe (2012) emphasises that AI does not preclude the exploration of barriers to change, a common criticism of AI approaches (Grant & Humphries, 2006), and points out that,

… the invitation to focus on the positive and the act of remembering high points in life can evoke sadness, anger and despair – perhaps that the current situation is not like that, perhaps that the high point story happened so long ago, or seems so infrequent, perhaps a deep yearning for something different from current experience is touched (Bushe, 2010, as cited p. 16, Bushe, 2012).

In their AI of the functioning of several Boards of Trustees in New Zealand, Grant and Humphries (2006) found that denying participants' opportunity to explore barriers during the inquiry process could lead to frustration and anger, and unwillingness to complete the research process. Accordingly, Grant and Humphries expanded the notion of appreciation to encompass all aspects of participants' experiences. However, they emphasised the importance of returning the focus to the generation of solutions.

For the present study, a limited time frame meant that a full IA action research cycle was not possible. However the tenets of AI theory, namely a focus on 'best practice' and the generation of potential solutions, guided this research. It is hoped that by providing teacher aides with a voice, and encouraging reflection on potential solutions, this study might foster change for the participants and for the researcher through a process of 'conscientisation', whereby we develop new ways of interpreting and acting in the world (Freire Institute, 2015).

Research Design

Research objectives

This project aimed to find out from teacher aides' perspectives:

1. Insight into the 'best of what is' in teacher aide practice.

2. What "those moments when the educational practice is in accord with the values that underpin the practice" (Giles & Alderson, 2008, p.469) look like.

3. What components (for example, people, attitudes, knowledge, collaboration, resources, spaces, instructional styles, peer involvement) contributed to moments of best practice.

4. To offer some teacher aides – as a part of a marginalised group (Rutherford, 2012) – an opportunity to share their experiences, solutions and innovations for enhancing inclusive practice in schools.

Participants
Selection criteria

The participant selection criteria was simply teacher aides who had worked for a minimum of two years with students verified as entitled to funding under the Ongoing Resourcing Scheme (students with significant learning needs). Educating students with complex learning needs in mainstream settings is frequently cited by educators as very challenging (Kearney, 2009; McLaren, 2013; Rutherford, 2008; Stace, 2011), hence, further developing knowledge of how to effectively work with students with complex learning needs is valuable and very relevant to teacher aiding practice.

Participant recruitment

Four teacher aides were recruited via an itinerant specialist teacher known to the teacher aides. After the teacher aides indicated potential interested in participating in the project the researcher sent them a copy of the information sheet (Appendix 1), the individual and focus group consent forms (Appendix 2), and the interview schedule (Appendix 3). Subsequently, if teacher aides were still interested, interview times were arranged.

Participant characteristics

All participants worked in one New Zealand city; all were female; two of the participants identified as New Zealand Europeans, for the other two, ethnicity was undetermined. All of the participants had worked with students with complex learning needs in mainstream primary schools for a minimum of six years, with one participant having practiced as a teacher aide for 19 years; three of the participants currently worked in mainstream schools, and one had recently started working in a special education unit attached to a mainstream school.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection and analysis happened in three phases:

Phase one: Semi-structured interviews

Participants were all interviewed using a semi-structured interview format. Interviews were focused on the 'Discovery' and 'Dream' phases of AI. Discovery questions aimed to elicit participants' best moments as teacher aides, and the components that had contributed to these moments. Dream oriented questions asked participants to imagine how more of the best moments might be fostered, and what might be needed to encourage this (see Appendix 3 for interview schedule).

Phase two: Inductive thematic analysis

Interviews were transcribed and – once approved by the participants (Appendix 4) - inductively analysed using an applied thematic analysis (ATA) approach (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). The ATA process requires the researcher to organise the data into thematically similar categories. An integral component of the ATA process is the development of the codebook (please see Appendix 5 for an excerpt from the code book developed for this study) (Guest et al., 2012). The researcher reads the text and applies a code when data that may constitute a theme is identified; the code is carefully defined in the codebook, and subsequent data that matches this code is categorised accordingly (Guest et al., 2012). New codes are developed when interview data does not fit with existing codes. A code becomes a theme if it is frequently repeated in the interview data from multiple participants (Guest et al., 2012).

Phase three: Focus group

The third component of data collection and analysis was the focus group. The primary purpose of the focus group was to ensure the participants were satisfied the themes identified

accurately reflected their perspectives (Guest et al., 2012). The secondary purpose of the focus group was to collectively generate potential solutions based around the themes identified in the interview data.

Limitations

The most obvious limitation to the finding is that the sample of teacher aides is small and relatively homogenous; all the participants are female and work in primary school settings, furthermore, none of the participants identified as any ethnicity other than New Zealand European. Therefore, generalisability of the findings is limited.

Another potential limitation of the findings is my own experiences as a teacher aide: given that the researcher is the research instrument in qualitative studies (Saldana, 2011), it is likely that I interpreted the findings with the 'filter' brought by my own experiences. Conversely, having 'insider knowledge' of the experience of teacher aiding imbued me with a sense of when to probe further during interviews. Furthermore, my own status as teacher aide may have contributed to putting participants at ease during the interview process.

Ethical considerations

Despite the low risk nature of this research project, to ensure participants' safety, an application was submitted to the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC) and subsequently approved (see Appendix 6 for MUHEC approval letter).

The primary ethical issue for consideration was confidentiality: during the interview and focus group processes, participants would potentially be sharing sensitive information pertaining to themselves, the schools they worked in and the students whom they worked with. In order to protect confidentiality and allow participants to maintain control over what they chose to share, interview transcripts were provided to participants and they were free to make amendments as they wished, prior to transcript release forms being signed (see appendix). For the focus group component, participants signed a separate consent form that stipulated the confidential nature of focus group content. In the final report, all identifying information pertaining to people and places was removed or replaced with pseudonyms. As soon as the results were written up, participants were sent copies and given the opportunity to amend or delete any of their own quotes used in the write up.

Participants were informed that they were able to withdraw participation in the project at any time, without any adverse consequences.

I consider this research as belonging to the participants in the study more so than it belongs to me. In keeping with this sentiment, as long as they wish to be, I will keep participants informed regarding dissemination of any component of the project.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This chapter contains the results of inductive thematic analysis of the interview transcripts and how these inform the research objectives; namely understanding the best of what is in teacher aide practice, gaining an understanding of what "those moments when the educational practice is in accord with the values that underpin the practice" (p. 469 Giles & Alderson, 2008) look like from teacher aides' perspectives; identifying the components (for example, people, attitudes, knowledge, collaboration, resources, spaces, instructional styles, peer involvement) that contributed to moments of best practice as related by the teacher aides; and finally to offer some teacher aides – as a part of a marginalised group (Rutherford, 2012) – an opportunity to share their experiences, solutions and innovations for enhancing inclusive practice in schools. Once the researcher completed the thematic analysis of the interview data, the results were discussed during the focus group; all the participants who attended the focus group felt very satisfied with the identified themes and sub-themes. Each theme will be defined and discussed, accompanied by relevant excerpts from the interview and focus group data.

Overall, the interview data highlighted several aspects of educational practice that all participants thought were imperative to the successful inclusion of students with complex needs. However, despite the researcher's best efforts to maintain a focus on "what works" as per the appreciative inquiry ethos, participants spoke frequently and at length of the barriers they faced in their roles as teacher aides. Given the unanimous nature of these concerns among participants, and the intention for this research to provide a voice for teacher aides, barriers will also be explored within this section.

The results are presented under the relevant research objectives.

The best of what is in teacher aide practice

This section considers the findings relating to the first two research objectives:

- To gain an Understanding of 'The Best of What Is' in Teacher Aide Practice
- To gain an understanding of what "those moments when educational practice is in accord with the values underpinning the practice look like from teacher aides' perspectives*" (p. 469 Giles & Alderson, 2008)

Participants were asked to think about the best moments in their roles as teacher aides, and what was happening when those moments occurred. Feeling satisfied and rewarded in their role seemed to be synonymous with students' presence, participation, and achievement. It is for this reason – and because an appreciative inquiry approach was used, which by definition relies on participants' lived experiences – that the question regarding 'the best of what is' in teacher aide practice has been addressed via teacher aides' experiences of reward and satisfaction in their work.

The first theme, *making a difference* relates both to the participants' experiences and the impact their practice as teacher aides has on the students with whom they work.

Making a difference

For these teacher aides, the best moments are when they know they have made a real and tangible difference in the lives of the students and / or their families:

> Rose: I often end up with very challenging children – by choice – and I find it hugely exhausting but really, really rewarding, you know, it's not very often in life that you actually get the chance to make a difference in someone's life and that's kind of where you're at really.

Making a difference in the lives of students, and by association students' families, was the most compelling reason all participants continued to work as teacher aides. Participants felt they were making a difference when they witnessed student learning; "learnt the student" (Jeanie's description of the process of coming to know and understand the student's unique characteristics, preferences and communication style); received expressions of gratitude from parents; and when they perceived themselves and the student to have a sense of belonging within their class and wider school environment.

Rose described witnessing student learning, noting that "…it's just every time that child does something they've never done before, or shows that they know something that you had no idea that they knew…. It's just that knowing that you're helping; those are the very best moments of all, yeah." All of the participants agreed that students' demonstrations of their learning were unique and did not adhere to a pre-conceived schedule of assessment but were very significant nonetheless, as best conveyed by Gina:

> I mean, any other child they've got a script basically, I mean, "here's the National Standards", you know, "you've got to fit into here", our kids don't, so um, the steps that they're making are very small quiet steps for everybody else around them, but in their world that's, some of those steps are massive. And, you know, you've got to step back and look at where they've come from to really appreciate, you know, where they're going [.]

Jeanie felt she made a difference when she had "learnt the student", and the other teacher aides agreed that working effectively as a teacher aide means building rapport with students. Diane explained her strategy when working with new students, "…I sit back and just watch and I think, yeah, and see what works for that child. So you, I think you've got to have the knowledge of how they work, and how they can be all so different". Many of the children these teacher aides worked with were non-verbal; hence in order to build reciprocal relationships that enabled teacher aides to be responsive to students' cues and communications, teacher aides had to "tune in", using a level of observation that was only possible when spending significant periods of time with the student

> Jeanie: …with this child – I need to stop thinking about what I can do for him and actually just learn and understand him, and just stop, and know him, get to know him better. And his communication, because… I know it's there, I know that, and it's so subtle, and so now I'm on that track of learning him better, so that what I put in place and offer is a little more tailored to him. So it'll be something as subtle as the way he'll tip his head and I'll think, OK he's not liking that… or he gets up and runs off and the way he'll run off I'll know, "he needs the toilet" or no, he's distressed about that. And it's very warming if he… and so he might just go like that [leans towards interviewer and touches her arm very briefly and softly] and it's just a little wee thing which if I

wasn't focusing on tuning in would be missed. So I find those really rewarding, when I think "Yay! I'm learning here! I'm getting it!"

The participants felt that this learning of the student – in terms of his or her strengths, preferences, aversions, sensitivities, and communicative behaviours - was the most valuable type of knowledge they possessed as teacher aides.

The student's family were perceived as the only people who knew the student better than the teacher aide, as Rose noted, "the teacher aide is the person at the coalface with the kids, the teacher aide and the parents are the people who spend the most time in the day with that child". Therefore, when parents expressed gratitude, teacher aides felt that this indicated they had really made a difference, not only in that student's life, but also in the life of the family as a whole:

> Jeanie: …because they [parents / caregivers] know the child the best and they're the most invested in the child and they've just got so many challenges and barriers up all the time, if I can make a difference, if they can recognize that there's a difference, that it's really supportive or helpful with their child and with their situation then that to me is a really rewarding moment

Similarly, Rose felt that parental recognition of her work as a teacher aide was an indication that her teacher aiding practice was having a positive impact on student learning; "When parents actually - I mean that's one of the big ones – is when parents actually say to you, you know 'thank you, you've just done such a great job' or 'you're doing a really great job'."

All participants were adamant that students' sense of belonging was an integral part of their school experience, and felt this was facilitated by the classroom teacher ensuring that the student and teacher aide were actively involved and part of the class. When children in the class knew the TA and student well, this reduced isolation and led to disabled students having more time with their peers. Diane explains, "I think you have to have that relationship with the whole class for them to understand what you are doing." Similarly, Jeanie thought that her engagement with the class, and understanding of when to back off facilitated friendships and peer supports:

> I actually like it if one of the students comes and starts sort of hanging out with him, I'll just stand back and go away and just leave them to it, and I think there's a lot of value in that …when I see the peers of the student stepping up and supporting them or taking my role basically, or socializing – those are real good, feel-good moments for me and so making that happen coz that's not gonna happen if they don't feel like, welcome to come and hang out with us.

This sense of the student belonging with the class was important for Gina too,

> …to see them joining in, with the class… one of the wee guys that I'm working with – he's on the spectrum and he doesn't like being around a lot of people at all … the other day we were having a game of T-ball… and we sort of hit the ball, ran around the bases and the smile on this kids face was just magic you know… and he actually really enjoyed that, and the rest of the classmates were, cheering him on and he was a real team member and he was part of the class and… you know, that's awesome.

The components that contribute to moments of best practice

Results in this section relate to research objective three:

- Identify the components that contributed to moments of best practice, as related by teacher aides.

Overarching themes resulting from interview and focus group data were *Collaboration*, *Expertise* and *Flexibility and Responsiveness*. Several sub-themes emerged for each of these areas, as will now be discussed.

Collaboration

Collaboration, supported by effective communication, was considered imperative for students' participation and learning, with everyone "on the same page… doing the same thing":

> Rose: …it's always the team; it's always got to be a team. You cannot – with the kind of kids I'm working with anyway – you couldn't say that one person could do it on their own; it's the classroom teacher, it's the teacher aide, it's the school,…the psychologist, the SLT – whatever, it's everybody together. And actually together, not a bunch of people working independently of each other and doing their own thing, it's everyone coming together and working like that.

When working with children presenting with challenging behaviours, such consistency was considered vital. Participants identified a number of elements that were crucial for effective collaboration, namely egalitarian relationships; effective communication; clear demarcation of roles and responsibilities; team members valuing each other's knowledge; a supportive "failsafe" environment; and top-down led school culture.

All four participants emphasised the importance of egalitarian relationships among all members of the team supporting the student, that teacher aides' roles were valued by teachers and other education professionals. While describing a past role in what she considered a particularly effective working environment, Rose relates, "And we were treated on the same footing as teachers and everyone else; I mean we're just all people doing a job aren't we?"

Participants felt that how the teacher perceived teacher aides affected how the children responded to aides, Diane elaborates:

> Well the thing I think it was too, [the teacher] said right at the beginning when we first started off was "we're all equal, she's a teacher aide but she's still an adult and we are all equal, we're all staff, so she's really not a teacher aide" which I think…I mean I don't mind being called a teacher aide, but the kids then had that respect level.

Effective communication was viewed as central to collaborative teamwork, and included systems to share information and to ensure all team members were kept "in the loop". This included effective home-school communication systems, and communication systems within school between team members:

> Jeanie: …it's been, a lot of talking between teacher, parent – we have good written communication between the parent [and school] – there's been a lot of talk between the teacher, the teacher aide, the specialist teacher; everyday, over a coffee or over the counter or over the desk or somewhere we're analysing all the time what's going on.

Similarly, Gina emphasises that frequent communication have been integral to effectively working together to support one of the students with whom she works:

> …the other team, or the staff, they put in a lot more communication around supporting a child for everybody, and if there is a problem you can go and communicate about it openly, and we get our heads together and sort something out, which to me makes a lot more sense.

Collaboration also needed to be planned for, as Diane pointed out, "I think we have to work as a team, and I think you have to have those sit down times, just to reflect, just reflecting and saying 'well this worked well and this didn't work well'. During the focus group, all participants were emphatic that if they could make one solution-oriented suggestion, it was for schools to prioritise opportunities for members of the team to communicate effectively.

The manner in which communication occurred was closely tied in with egalitarian relationships, in the sense that for communication and collaboration to be effective, the participants needed to feel that their voice was heard and valued, as opposed to teacher aides being given instructions with no opportunity for input. For successful collaboration to occur it was important that all team members are respected and valued for the particular type of knowledge and expertise they have to offer: no knowledge is dismissed as redundant or of less value. When teams worked well together, the teacher aides felt valued for the wealth of knowledge they brought to the table, particularly personalised knowledge regarding the child. When asked how education professionals can best support teacher aides to work effectively with students, Rose imparted the following advice: "…it's listen, please listen, because the teacher aide is the person at the coalface with the kids, the teacher aide and the parents are the people who spend the most time in the day with that child. You've got to listen!" Similarly, Gina feels that "The opportunity… to actually be heard is huge – and properly heard – I mean where your input is [deemed] valid."

Effective communication was also connected with clear understandings among team members regarding roles and responsibilities. Although this pertained to the team as a whole, including teachers, other education professionals and families, of primary importance seemed to be clear demarcation of roles and responsibilities between teacher aides, classroom teachers and specialist teachers:

> Jeanie: This sounds really basic, like it should be… agreed and respected lines of control, just knowing who's responsible for what, if there's resources needed, do I make it? I'd like to make it, can I make it? Or how do I get it, or who do I get it from? Who says what to who?

Jeanie was the only participant who indicated she was in a working situation where roles and responsibilities of the classroom teacher, specialist teacher and teacher aide were clearly demarcated. The ambiguity experienced by others will be addressed in the section on barriers.

All of the participants had worked in very challenging conditions. In these situations solutions were not obvious or immediate but instead required empathy, persistence and trial and error on behalf of all team members. In such complex situations, the participants emphasised the importance of being able to disclose openly when they felt overwhelmed or were struggling to find an effective approach. The support of other team members was vital. This included trusting that all team members, including the student and his or her family, were doing their

best and feeling that it was safe to "fail" from time to time. Jeanie explained, "We've got to be backing each other up! There's a whole big wide world out there that's gonna be blaming, let's not blame each other as well." Similarly, Gina noted that a supportive team culture enhanced knowledge sharing, saying, "If you've got a problem and you feel safe enough to say, 'Hey, I've come across this, can I have some suggestions as to how to handle it?' … or even just validation that you've been heard, that you've expressed it, that you are struggling".

Jeanie agreed, describing a challenging situation where she did not feel she had the requisite knowledge of a student to be able to help him in the best possible way:

> I didn't know what the best strategy was to deal with it, so I went to the other teacher aide that's normally with him, said 'I don't know what should I do, what is it, what do we need to do?' and I'm totally secure going to that because I know that she would rather I did that than just do something that wasn't quite appropriate with him. And that's how it should work, that's where I tapped into her… and [didn't] feel like a failure for having to do so.

Finally, it was perceived that a supportive team environment was influenced by school leadership. Participants agreed that being able to work with students effectively to enhance participation and achievement was profoundly influenced by a school culture that was supportive, collaborative and considered teacher aides and all students to be of equal value. Three participants spoke of the flow-on effect on whole-school culture of the principal's attitude and approach to leadership:

> Rose: Actually it's interesting because with a principal like that it flows on through the whole school so it really was like a team thing in the school so everyone interacted with everyone and… whenever something new came along, it's like he would get everyone to buy into it so everyone was a part of it; you didn't have things imposed upon you, you took them on board and went with them… it just makes a huge difference, people own what they're doing, they believe in it and so they do a good job of it.

The *Collaboration* theme constituted a significant proportion of the data, both for the interviews and focus group. It is clear that effectively working as a team within a supportive wider school culture was imperative to these teacher aides feeling that they were able to support students well. Participants also identified a number of obstacles to effective collaboration that will be considered in the *Barriers* section of this report.

Expertise

Having access to expertise was regularly discussed as a salient element of effectively working with students with complex needs. Broadly speaking expertise referred to the presence of knowledge and experience amongst team members being sufficiently broad to meet the challenges inherent in providing effective education for students with complex learning needs. Although expertise was commonly referred to as a crucial aspect of effectively working with students with complex needs, unfortunately it was mostly referred to as lacking. This will be further discussed in barriers, however this section will briefly elucidate any positive experiences participants did relate, and in the absence of these, what the teacher aides discussed as being the theoretical ideal in terms of expertise. The *expertise* theme

encompassed two sub-themes: opportunities for all staff to learn about teaching and diversity through *professional development*, and having *timely access to relevant expert knowledge*.

All participants agreed that ideally, teacher aides, teachers, and school leaders would have greater opportunities for professional development to support education for a diverse student group.

> Just more PD for the whole team… I think that's really important, I think the teacher and the TA need to do a lot of… we're meant to be going out doing courses you know. Doing all our PD work, I mean, I think that's half of it [role as a teacher / TA team].

In Jeanie's words, "it would be nice to be able to get more knowledge, to be able to tap into that… going to seminars would be really cool, going to speech language therapists… to have more access to all of those." Similarly Rose commented, "…I do think that schools need to take seriously sending their TA's to courses."

Having access to relevant 'expert' knowledge was also highly valued by all participants. The teacher aides appreciated professionals who spent time with the student and his or her teacher and teacher aide, made suggestions and provided resources that were personalised to the student, provided practical strategies, and were open to feedback and to finding alternative solutions if the first approach was unsuccessful. Diane had a very positive experience with a person from a charitable trust who provided help with communicative strategies:

> So [she] came and worked with my wee boy, and she was just fantastic… she'd say, 'try this' or you know, 'I would do this' and 'give this a go' you know… I think that's what we need to be doing all the time… And he just took off; it was like 'Wow!'…she had great ideas.

Although professionals with specific knowledge (e.g. in relation to communication and behaviour) were valued, they were typically in short supply and often only available once a situation reached crisis point, as related by Gina:

> I think for me the behavioural specialists come in because you're at desperation level, so you are taking on board as much as you can to try to help correct the situation, because I don't have all the skills, and I wanna learn and if there's something that I can do to help this kid then give it to me!

Speech and language therapists were seen most frequently by all participants and were considered very helpful, in Gina's words:

> I think the most that I have to do with would be the SLT's, they're popping in quite often and they're checking in, 'How's he going?' working alongside, you know, 'How can we make this easier?' giving us the resources…

Although Rose definitely appreciated the knowledge brought in by professionals, she emphasised the need for them to work collaboratively, "…come up with the ideas, let's run them, if they don't work let's go back to the drawing board and start again. Just listen and be flexible, and work through it; don't come in with a 'fix-it' plan and then walk out the door." Having found herself in several situations where she was educating the "experts", Rose also emphasised the importance of professionals – including specialist teachers - having a solid foundation of knowledge, "I cannot work with someone who has no knowledge of autism! How can they possibly make suggestions if they don't actually… that's always the first thing I ask when we get someone new in, 'Do they know anything about autism?' because you just can't do it without it."

Flexibility and Responsiveness

Participants emphasised the importance of willingness and ability on behalf of all team members to remain flexible and be responsive to the student's needs as and when required. Three sub-themes emerged within this theme; namely *shared understandings of inclusion*, *student centred* focus and *creative practice with empathy and persistence*.

When participants talked about the teachers whom they most liked working with, they demonstrated a clear preference for teachers who demonstrated inclusive values and practices. These teachers were described as making efforts to communicate with and get to know *all* students in their class. Gina described the teacher she most liked working with:

> She was just quite funny as well, and just joined him in, and you know, "oh come on, come and sit here, you can help me stir" you know, "come on kids watch [student name] he's doing a great job stirring" or, you know, "righto [student name] c'mon, move over, next person's turn" so that was cool… Nothing was a major issue, you know, she'd check in all the time and… there was a really good visual timetable on the board… so we'd follow that.

In one of the schools she worked in, Jeanie had been working with the same student for three years and had found every teacher to take responsibility for all students within their class, while still trusting Jeanie to adapt in response to the student's cues:

> Miek: And the, so the teacher takes that child on as his or her responsibility?
>
> Jeanie: Yep, yes… this is his third teacher and they've all been the same, in the sense that, they see him as their student and they trust me to make the individual calls at the time in the classroom.

For Jeanie being able to have some autonomy as a teacher aide was important, as long as this autonomy was afforded to her because her knowledge and skill set was valued rather than because the teacher was not interested; "If the teacher lets me go and do my own thing with them [student] because they value me, that's perfect, that's fine… It's when you do your own thing because they're not interested… that's a barrier."

For these teacher aides it was important that inclusion was understood as having a student-centred focus that values the unique learning needs of all students. Diane explained the responsiveness of one of her favourite teachers during mat-time, "…she's actually fantastic, she'll read a book and she'll see the kids getting tense and she'll just [say] 'Ok, we'll come back and read this again some time later' and really they're not listening to the story." Similarly, Gina talked about how a teacher's relaxed attitude reduced the disruption caused by a student's occasional outbursts, "…if he had a tanty on the floor he had a tanty on the floor. Just don't stand on him. Move around him; go on, it's all good. You know, it wasn't an issue"

Participants felt that working with students with complex learning needs often required a creative "trial and error" approach founded in empathy for the student. Because each child was unique, what worked in one situation would not necessarily work for another, as expressed by Jeanie:

> Jeanie: …there's so much that's not known, a lot of these conditions, nobody knows stuff, and it's always just a little bit…

Miek:	Trying something and seeing what happens?
Jeanie:	Yep, trial and error, and see what happens, that's right.

Rose relished the challenges posed by her role as a teacher aide, as expressed in the following excerpt:

Rose:	I said to them 'and I want challenging, don't give me boring because I just won't…' you know…So yeah, it's just that high challenge of actually doing, working something out, coming up with solutions that actually make someone's life better, you know. It's not a lot different in many ways I suppose to working in the medical profession, except you're just doing it in a different field really.
Miek:	Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, so you're reading, getting to know the child, learning the child, and then applying the knowledge that you have from previous… to work, to making that situation work?
Rose:	Yeah that's right. Mm, and it's very much a trial and error thing, you know, there are no… answers…

Participants indicated that they appreciated being able to work with other education professionals who understood that sometimes there were no easy or ready-made answers, and that getting it right the first time was not always possible.

Barriers to inclusive teacher's aide practice

It is worth noting that despite a concerted effort on the part of the researcher to maintain focus on the "best of what is" in teacher aide practice, the majority of the interview and focus group data concerned barriers to effective and inclusive practice faced repeatedly by all participants. These barriers have been coded under the theme, *when teacher aides' working conditions are not conducive to the presence, participation and achievement of students with complex learning needs*. A number of factors were considered to contribute to such working conditions and these have been categorised under three additional themes, namely school culture; ORS funding structure; and under resourcing.

School Culture

School culture was considered to largely determine teacher aides' working conditions. A hierarchical approach in which staff associated with disabled students are not valued is not conducive to supportive, collaborative environments:

Jeanie: I'm not getting valued, so chances are she's [specialist teacher] not getting valued. This is a top-down thing again; you know if this boy does something under my care, if he hurts another child I feel shattered by it, I feel a failure by it and I hate that feeling… and I'm sure all of us that work with him do hate that feeling. But if we, if I could feel comfortable saying "God, he went and he pulled her hair and now I can see the build up, now I'll know the cue [when] he's building up", that would be so much more effective than feeling shamefaced that "oh he's done this under my care and I'm a failure"… so it's not a really productive sort of environment.

In such school environments, teacher aides described inclusion as poorly understood and synonymous with 'mainstreaming' rather than more complex school change focused on

student diversity. Teacher aides in this study felt that the quality of education for students with complex learning needs was dependent on the capacity and motivation of a few individuals, usually teacher aides. Gina describes the situation at her school:

> I mean a lot of it has fallen on our [teacher aides'] shoulders to kinda make up our own wee programs as we go along I guess, so you've got an afternoon slot or something, how are we gonna fill that? Nobody else is saying "oh hey, this is happening" so I'm now saying, "hey I'm going to do some cooking, do you want…" you know, to the other people so we're not segregated and I'm trying to bring a classmate as well so they're working together…

Jeanie has had similar experiences and described the lack of collaboration in one of her roles, "…other than that it's pretty much, 'you stay with that one [student] and you stay with that one'. And the resourcing, there doesn't appear to be a lot of mixing and matching and consultation about sort of pooling resources and things… it's bizarre."

Some schools provided little opportunity for any staff to engage in professional development regarding inclusive practices, and teacher aides were generally not offered opportunities for professional development of any kind leaving teacher aides feeling undervalued.

All the participants were aware of the impact of school culture on their role as teacher aides and on the education of the students with whom the aides worked. There seemed to be a consensus that the principal's attitude was important. Jeanie relates an encounter with the school principal that left her feeling frustrated:

Jeanie:	…this wee guy, I was with him and a wee girl so… anyway he grabbed her hair, and he had a handful of her hair and he was pulling, she was screaming, I was trying to… didn't have enough hands, the principal walked past and I can't remember whether he said something or may've helped unlock the boy's hand… I can't remember which, but at about that time I managed to free him anyway, and he [principal] just carried on walking past.
Miek:	Didn't sort of stop and say, 'Are you ok?'
Jeanie:	No. No. It's like, 'Thanks mate, that was helpful. You're the *principal* here mate! C'mon!' at least say, you know, 'Hey, you're still doing a good job.'

Whilst discussing solutions to barriers in the focus group, culture – and how you "solve it" - stood out:

Rose:	It's [culture] a big one. Don't know how you fix that, I mean that's what we're all saying, "culture, how do you fix that?" but it is huge.
Jeanie:	It's not rocket science though.
Gina:	No, it's not.
Jeanie:	Start at the top… make sure the perspective is an inclusive one, and let it flow.

Under-resourcing

While the participants felt that there was an element of prioritisation at work when funding shortage was touted as a reason resources could not be made available for students with

complex learning needs, there was general agreement among participants that the resources schools had to work with were often inadequate – or inefficiently utilised - to cater to the increasingly diverse needs of students.

This under resourcing included physical school environments that did not meet the needs of students; SENCO's, teachers and other education professionals who were time-poor and mostly unavailable; a lack of dedicated time for teams to collaborate; and finally little help for students deemed to have moderate learning needs.

The teacher aides all spoke of the need for quiet break-out spaces where students with significant sensory sensitivities could go when they needed to focus or de-stress, Rose elaborates:

> …well, it would be really nice if those kids could be part of the classroom but, particularly for autistic children, often they can't. So because of reasons like noise levels, and visual stimulation and just a whole host of things, they often need – to be able to learn, to access the curriculum – they need a space devoted to them.

The importance of effective collaboration has been discussed in-depth; for this to occur, time for teachers and teacher aides to catch up and plan for the student is imperative. All of the teacher aides in this study worked in situations where funding was not dedicated to meetings involving teacher aides: either meetings would not happen or would happen in a rushed and informal way, or if they did take place, teacher aides attended unpaid, as was Jeanie's experience:

Miek: So there's a bit of collaboration?

Jeanie: Yep. And that's sort of semi-formal, we had sort of a time period which we weren't paid for, I had to come in early for it – I actually had to stop working at the other school half an hour earlier so I could get there – not paid for it, but whatever, so we could share what we've experienced that week and what might work and what we might wanna do.

Time arose in interviews as a resource that was in poor measure. The teacher aides in this study frequently lacked the support that they needed due to the high workloads of SENCOs, teachers and other education professionals. Rose explained the frustration of accessing the Ministry of Education - Special Education (GSE) support, "…it's not even like you ask for them, you have to scream out and try and sort of gather them in, and you have to basically say, you know, 'we're about to bust out here! Something terrible's gonna happen!'"

Diane relates her experience of being unable to access the SENCO's support due to the latter's very heavy workload:

Diane: And you know you want to see her [SENCO] about things that's happening you know, with your child, and… just, she's not there, or she's busy or… it's just not, not working.

Miek: Mm, and so, did you have access to specialist teachers?

Diane: No, coz she did the specialised teaching too.

Rose talked about the idea of the classroom teacher planning and providing resources for the student Rose works with, "…the teacher I've been working with is brilliant and she's been really helpful but, she does not have the time in a day to do all that."

Participants were also concerned that there was inadequate support provided for children who had learning difficulties. The teacher aides felt that teachers were being overloaded and perhaps not adequately equipped to meet the needs of such students, particularly when there were several with diverse needs in any given class. Jeanie explained the frustration experienced by herself and a teacher trying to access support for a child's learning:

> …if it's a learning need, you don't count, you've gotta actually have bad behaviour and it's, learning and behaviour, so if it's a child that's not learning and there's something missing, and we need to know, what is it? Where should we be focusing? What's going on? And they [RTLB] say 'oh yeah, but they're not disruptive in the class'

Rose related similar concerns for a student in her classroom:

> …he will be fine until he gets older, he's got no social skills whatsoever, so by the time he gets into senior school and certainly by the time he hits high school, major problems… Now, a little bit of money now…[but] you haven't got a hope in hell of getting funding for something like that, it just doesn't happen, there's just not enough money.

Ongoing Resourcing Scheme Funding Structure

Teacher aides felt that the structure of ORS perpetuated the belief that teacher aides belonged with one student only, yet all of the teacher aides in this study felt that being attached to one student was not conducive to best practice. Participants preferred roles where they worked with a number of different students within one class or across the school, as related by Diane:

> I don't see why I should work with this child for a whole day… I was one of those teacher aides that often would, once he was settled, or if he was going to start, I'd give him something and I'd go off and help the class. I didn't like for him to think that he was just attached to me.

During the focus group, participants discussed how the ORS funding structure impacted on the nature of their role as teacher aides:

Rose:	It would be nice if they could get away from the idea of funding children, currently they fund a child, so as a teacher aide generally – well for me anyway – I've always worked with a child. But if they would fund schools or classrooms depending on their need, you'd have far more flexibility in how you used the teacher aides.
Jeanie:	So you mean like have a teacher aide in the classroom even though there's no one particular…
Rose:	Not attached to one [student], because the problem with funding currently is that my job description basically says, "you are working with Joe Bloggs for umpteen hours a week." Now, that pretty much ties you to being with that child, if you're gonna spend a lot of time with other children the parents of that child are gonna go, "Hey! Sorry, but there's my child, you work with my child!" and fair enough, but it ties you to a very rigid role whereas I think the role of teacher aiding could be a bit more diverse… And there's a huge risk of making your child dependent.
Gina:	Absolutely.

The stress associated with one-on-one work was also discussed during the focus group:

Rose: …it is incredibly stressful to be focused one-on-one with a really difficult child… if you're completely focused on a child who's an emotional disaster, and that's all you do…

Gina: So taxing, yeah.

Rose: You're just wiped at the end of it, you know!

Jeanie: Mm, and imagine how the child feels?!

Rose: Exactly, yeah.

Gina: You can't teach, you can't care, you can't… you know, coz you're in a state of anxiety yourself.

All of these barriers not only influence teacher aides' working conditions, but also significantly impact on student learning. Such working conditions will now be further discussed.

When teacher aides' working conditions are not conducive to student learning

This theme encompasses the day-to-day reality for teacher aides working in schools where the culture is not conducive to inclusive practice. Most of the concerns identified a lack of support for teacher aides who work with students with complex learning needs, and the assumption that these students are the teacher aide's responsibility. Such attitudes, lack of clear demarcation of roles and responsibilities, and the participants' dedication to the students with whom they work, seemed to culminate in teacher aides' roles encompassing whatever is not done by others – in other words teacher aides were perceived by participants in this study to be "picking up the slack".

The most common barrier experienced by all the participants was the lack of curricular planning and resourcing for children with complex learning needs. None of the participants - who collectively have 44 years of teacher aiding experience - had experienced a situation where the planning and resourcing for students' curriculum work was done solely by the classroom and specialist teachers: all the participants were at least partially responsible for this rather substantial aspect of students' education. Diane's experience was typical:

Miek: So how did you know what work you were doing?

Diane: I didn't.

Miek: Did you make it up?

Diane: Yep.

Miek: As you went along?

Diane: Yeah.

Rose put it bluntly:

…they will tell you that the teacher, you know should be making the resources coz they're meant to be in charge; oh, like hell! [laughs] I've never [in 19 years] worked with a teacher who has time to make all the resources… And yet we're not actually funded to do it either because precious little time to fund with the child anyway, and so

you can't afford to take half an hour out of there a day to say well go and do this and do that.

Although it was clear that all the teacher aides in this study had acquired a great deal of knowledge regarding effective instructional approaches for the students with whom they worked, by their own admission there were aspects of teaching they had little knowledge of. Furthermore, as indicated by Rose in the above excerpt, the teacher aides were never given time to plan or prepare resources and often had to improvise or "wing it". When asked how some of the barriers to student learning could be removed, Gina replied:

Gina: Just to have things available without having to keep requesting it all the time. Um, down to the simplest things, you know, you've got to be the one that has to go and organise it. I know with one of our kids there was quite a few behavioural problems and this kid really enjoyed cooking, this is actually a place where this child is calm and is enjoying what they're doing and really focussed on the learning… but then, to try and get some simplistic recipes or something healthy – not just icing biscuits all the time – you're asking for these resources and they're not coming [laughs], and they're not coming, and you know I mean, yes, I can go and make a whole heap myself…

Miek: in your own time…

Gina: and not get paid for it, you know, which you do, all the time… Well if you haven't got things there all the time, you know, and some kids need things bang, bang, bang [clicking fingers], it needs to be really structured otherwise it's chaotic for them... so that sort of thing can be quite frustrating.

A lack of support generally seemed to be a common theme, whether it was related to students' academic or social and behavioural learning. Gina described a situation where she was more or less left to her own devices, but was identified as "not coping" when things went wrong:

I was given some things to do with a really challenging kid and there was an assumption that "it's fine, Gina's got it, it's not a problem" and I was just left, out of it. And then things sort of didn't go as well as expected and then it was um... that, you know, I wasn't coping.

It could be argued that the willingness on behalf of teacher aides to 'pick up the slack' perpetuates this state of affairs; Diane explains why she chose to 'pick up the slack' while other teacher aides she worked with chose not to:

Diane: Mind you, some of the other teacher aides didn't, they stood back and said…

Miek: "I'm not doing it."

Diane: Yep. Which… I couldn't do that, because I felt that this wee boy needed…

Miek: Yeah… that's it isn't it, you want to make a point but then you feel like you're letting down…

Diane: the child.

Miek: Yep, you feel like he's going to be the one suffering for it.

Diane: Yep.

This was a common sentiment among the teacher aides; as was the understanding that in the absence of predictable and engaging tasks some students would become very anxious; as such it was in teacher aides' best interests to plan and prepare as much as feasible. One further reason for 'picking up the slack' was that all participants enjoyed making use of their own skills and knowledge. Rose related a statement made by Tony Attwood at a recent seminar, "… 'Teacher aides' he said as far as he's concerned, 'you are doing a PhD level job and you should be paid accordingly and treated accordingly' and, I mean that's a little bit of an exaggeration but, it is a specialist job."

Teacher aides felt that their work should be valued as in situations involving very challenging behaviour, other staff was often unprepared to work with students. Some of the students participants worked with were considered "terrifying" by other staff in the school. Both teachers and other teacher aides would frequently refuse to be left alone with these students. If the teacher aides assigned to the students were unable to make it to work, there would be "chaos". This meant that all of the participants in this study found it very difficult to get release time for collaborative meetings or professional development: in fact this was cited by schools as one reason teacher aides were not provided with opportunities for professional development, as related by Diane when discussing the provision of PD, "But also in this job, we can't be released, because there's nobody to cover us."

Despite the crucial role played by the teacher aides who worked with such students, there was still a sense that their work was not valued, as expressed by Jeanie:

> And at the end of the day I don't know why they don't value us because there's no one else that'll work with him. So if I'm sick or, there's only four of us that work with him, the teachers… they don't know what to do, they don't know how to work with him, they don't know how to deal with him, so I guess it's easier just to leave it to those of us that are prepared to, but I think in return we need to be valued for that.

According to the participants, teacher-aide work is generally considered undesirable and low-skill: Rose provided an example of how this attitude implicitly pervades:

> …she [speaker at a conference on ASD] was talking about this CBT and she said 'and the great thing about it is that it doesn't just have to be used by psychologists' she said, 'anyone can use it' she said 'the teachers can use it, even the teacher aides' and I thought, there it is in a nutshell! People not even aware they're doing it but they do it all the time: people list who works in a school, you'll find teacher aides are always at the bottom of the list.

An opportunity for teacher aides to share experiences and find support

This section considers the findings relating research objective four:

- Provide an opportunity for teacher aides – as part of a marginalised group - to share experiences, solutions and innovations for enhancing inclusive practice in schools.

All the participants commented on how beneficial it was to openly share their work-related experiences. Generally, opportunities to communicate with other teacher aides – even within their own schools – were few. Participants felt it was good to have their approaches to

working with students affirmed, as well as seeing that very similar challenges are faced by teacher aides in other schools, as discussed during the focus group:

Rose: It's quite nice for me to know that other people think the same way.

Gina: Absolutely, coz you get isolated.

Rose: Yeah, and sometimes you think, am I just being weird? [laughs]

Gina: Well yeah, you question yourself as to, are you actually doing the best?

Rose: Just talking like we're doing now, you know, hey I'm not the only one out there struggling with this, or dealing with that, and there's no provision for us to do that.

There was also a sense that teacher aides possessed a lot of expertise that was rarely shared, in Gina's words, "There's this pool of knowledge and wealth, it's all there, but it's just not being shared." As a result of the benefits participants derived from the interview and focus group experiences, they have decided to meet with each other on a regular basis to share information and support in challenging situations.

In addition to finding support in each other, participants were offered the opportunity to share their best experiences of and ideas for inclusive educational practices for working with students with complex learning needs. The participants' ideas for and experiences of best practice closely mirror the current research literature: this will be further explored in the following Discussion chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This chapter aims to interpret how the current research findings fit within the larger framework of previous research in the field of teacher aiding practice, as well as to consider the implications of the current research, and how the findings may contribute to the development of education policy and practice. Figure 1 shows the relationships between key thematic areas. School culture is conceptualised as a vital context within which teacher aides can work together effectively to make a positive difference in children's school experience.
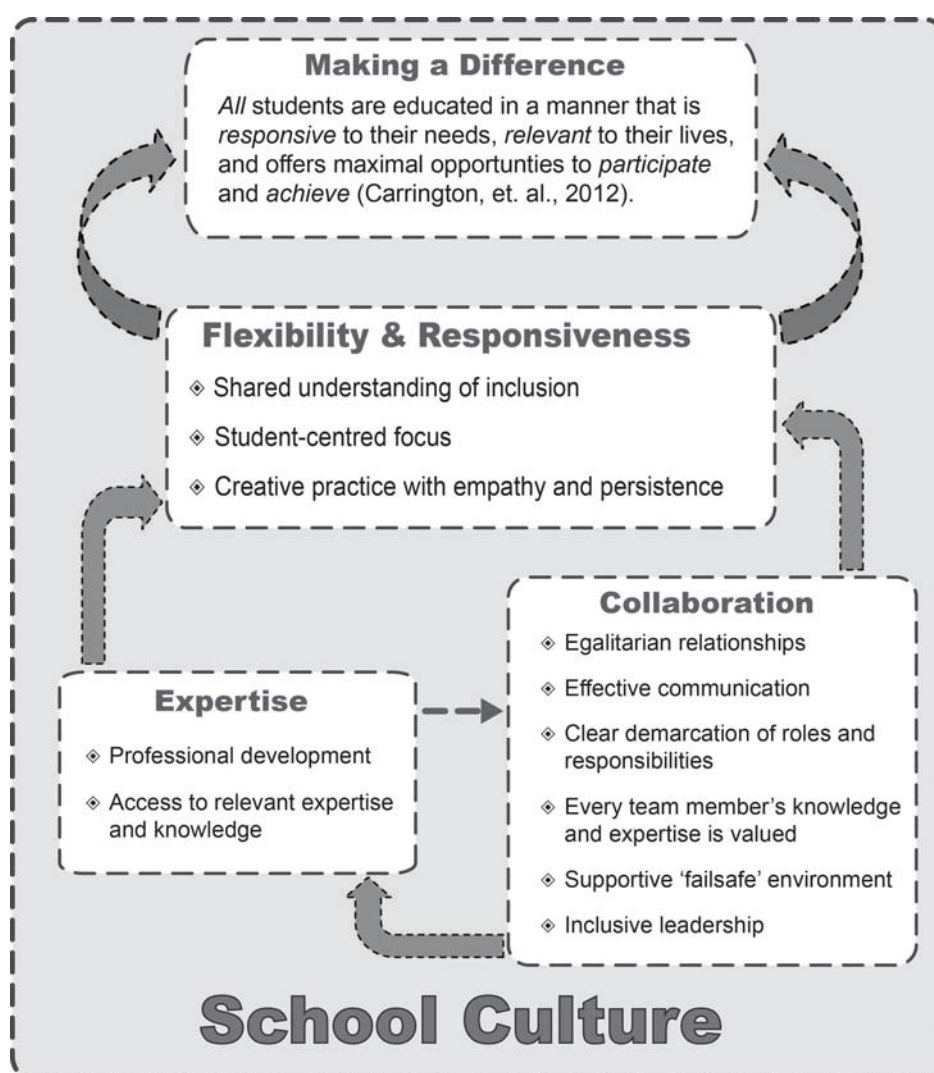

Figure 1:   *Aspects of school culture, relationships and practice that support teacher and teacher aide effectiveness*

The 'best of what is' in teacher aide practice

Understanding what "those moments when the educational practice is in accord with the values that underpin the practice"(Giles & Alderson, 2008, 469) look like from the perspective of veteran teacher aides.

Making a difference

The results of this study suggest that for these teacher aides, their best moments were when they felt they had made a difference in the lives of students and their families: this superseded other motivations such as monetary compensation. The desire to make a positive contribution to students and families is repeated in the literature investigating teacher aides' motivation for remaining in their roles (Giangreco et al., 2001; Kearney, 2009; Mansaray, 2006; O'Brien & Garner, 2001; Rutherford, 2008; Stevenson, 2012; Tutty & Hocking, 2004).

For the aides in this study, moments of best practice or making a difference was synonymous with instances where students achieved and participated as legitimate members of a class, where aides learnt more about students, and when parental gratitude was expressed. Previous research with teacher aides certainly supports the findings that teacher aides care about students, and that 'best outcomes' are generally perceived as student learning, getting to know the student well, and responding to students' needs (Blatchford et al., 2012; Giangreco et al., 2010; Mansaray, 2006; Marks et al., 1999; O'Brien & Garner, 2001; Rutherford, 2008; Stevenson, 2012; Tutty & Hocking, 2004).

Research concerning effective inclusive educational approaches suggests that educators' sense of care for students is imperative (Keddie, 2013; Lewthwaite, et al., 2015; Rutherford, 2008; te Riele, 2006; What Works Research Group, 2012). The aides in this study had a strong sense of empathy and care for the students with whom they worked. Bourke (2008) argues that the caring relationship between aides and students have frequently been misconstrued in the literature as leading to excessive proximity and co-dependence (e.g. Broer et al., 2005). In contrast, Bourke construes the unique quality of this relationship as a significant strength. The teacher aides in this study described the unique caring relationships they developed with many children – not only those whom they were employed to support. In accordance with Bourke's (2008) observations, these relationships were characterised by an openness and trust that was not typical of teacher – student relationships, and – according to some of the participants in the current study - were likely fostered by children's perception of aides as being more available and approachable (Mansaray, 2006). In this sense the current study provides support for a conception of aides as the 'emotional care-takers' of the school. From Bourke's (2008) perspective, the empathetic mindset of teacher aides, borne out of close personal relationships with students, is a source of untapped potential that could be further utilised to help other staff members develop greater empathy and appreciation for diversity.

Conversely, the implications of the strong care-based motivation of teacher aides in particular, can be less constructive. The teacher aides in this study frequently put the students' needs ahead of their own concerns in sometimes very challenging working conditions, a finding echoed by Rutherford's (2008) and Tutty and Hocking's (2004) research. Viewed from the sociological perspective of theories of care work, teacher aides could be interpreted

as being 'prisoners of love', in the sense that, as the relationships with students deepen, it becomes harder to avoid taking extra responsibility where others fail to do so (Giangreco et al., 2001). England (2005) describes the wider systemic implications of being a 'prisoner of love':

> Owners, employers, and managers… can generally engage in cost-cutting strategies without feeling their consequences. Sometimes they can even be confident that adverse effects of their decisions on clients will be reduced by workers' willingness to make personal sacrifices to maintain high-quality care… This perspective suggests an equity problem of taking advantage of altruistic motives (p. 390)

Viewed from this perspective, the implications are that when teacher aides work with students in virtual isolation – as the participants in the current research frequently did (Blatchford et al., 2012; Giangreco et al., 2010; Kearney, 2009; Marks et al., 1999; O'Brien & Garner, 2001; Rutherford, 2008; Stevenson, 2012; Tutty & Hocking, 2004) – educators, schools and the state "are less likely to have direct contact with [students]… [and] therefore can generally engage in cost cutting strategies without feeling their consequences", thereby (inadvertently) taking advantage of teacher aides' altruistic motives.

Indeed, findings of the current study suggest that teacher aides were very willing "to make personal sacrifices to maintain high-quality care": this includes teacher aides' unpaid attendance at meetings, unpaid time spent researching behavioural support and instructional approaches, unpaid time spent preparing resources and activities for students, and personally paying for resources and / or activities for students. Previous research suggests that these are not aberrant findings (Giangreco et al., 2010; Rutherford, 2008; Webster et al., 2010).

In summary, teacher aides' desire to make a difference in the lives of students can be framed as a significant asset to the wider school community, not only to the students whom aides support. Arguably, it is reliance on teacher aides' goodwill and dedication to the students with whom they work that has thus far formed the backbone of mainstreaming in New Zealand's schools. Where schools are not providing an inclusive environment that responds to students' needs, teacher aides' sense of obligation inadvertently perpetuates the abdication of responsibility on the part of individual teachers, schools and the State for the education of students with disabilities.

Teacher aides' perspectives on the components that contributed to moments of best practice

The teacher aide participants in this study identified a number of components that contributed to moments of best practice; namely, collaborative attitudes and practices that involved the whole team around the student; timely access to relevant expertise regarding effective strategies to support students with complex learning needs; and finally, educators needed to be flexible and responsive in accordance with students' needs.

Although all four participants in this study had – at various times throughout their careers - experienced aspects of the components they identified as maximising students' opportunities to participate and achieve, only one participant currently worked in an environment that enacted the majority of these components of best practice. Participants identified many of the components during the 'Dream' phase of appreciative inquiry. The components identified as

crucial to successful outcomes for students were frequently discussed in terms of their absence. In keeping with the researcher's desire to give teacher aides a voice, the barriers identified during the interview process will also be discussed.

Collaboration

The themes pertaining to effective collaboration were discussed more than any other aspect of teacher aiding practice in this study; it appears that from these teacher aides' perspectives, sound collaborative relationships form the foundation for effectively working with students with complex learning needs. Effective collaboration among educators is widely considered to be integral to working successfully with all students in an inclusive schooling context, but particularly so when working with students with complex learning needs (Alton-Lee et al., 2000; Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Ashbaker & Morgan, 2012; Brock & Carter, 2013; Giangreco et al., 2010; Rutherford, 2008; Saggers, Macartney, & Guerin, 2012; Webster et al, 2013).

The components identified by the participants as essential to successful collaboration among team members - namely; clear demarcation of roles and responsibilities; egalitarian relationships; effective communication; every team member's knowledge being valued; and a supportive "failsafe" environment - are strikingly similar to those suggested by the literature, namely; consensus about objectives, roles and responsibilities; equal power distribution among team members; transparency, or open and honest communication; reciprocity, or the valuing of every member's contribution; and finally, shared problem solving and responsibility (Mitchell, Morton, & Hornby, 2010; Saggers et al., 2012).

For the teacher aides in this study to feel that effective collaboration was occurring, they needed to feel valued for their expertise by being offered authentic opportunities to contribute ideas and expertise during planning for students. This reflects previous findings by Rutherford (2008) and Giangreco et al. (2001), indicating that appreciation and respect for what teacher aides do is conducive to more effective working relationships between educators and aides, and that this pooling of expertise in turn benefits students (Webster et al, 2013). Research has repeatedly demonstrated that aides spend a greater proportion of one to one time with students than teachers do and that this results in aides having more extensive knowledge of individual students (Bourke, 2008; Giangreco et al., 2010; Marks et al., 1999; O'Brien & Garner, 2001; Rutherford, 2008; Webster et al., 2010). Such knowledge can be invaluable to teachers who may not have as much time to spend with individual students (Webster et al, 2013). Conversely teachers' pedagogical and content knowledge is imperative to students' learning as demonstrated by the Blatchford et al. (2012) research. In this study, Jeanie's current role was testament to the benefits of effective collaboration between team members: pooling the teacher's, specialist teacher's, SLT's, and Jeanie's knowledge has meant the whole class - including the student whose ORS funding had been used to employ Jeanie - has had access to a carefully planned program and quality instruction. Being treated as an 'equal' and having her knowledge and skills respected and sought out by the other team members has resulted in Jeanie feeling like a valued member of the team.

Participants identified the necessity of clearly demarcated roles and responsibilities, including efficient systems of communication among team members, as imperative to effective collaboration. This is reflected in the wider literature investigating the perspectives of school leaders (Chopra et al., 2011), teachers (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007), teacher aides (Bourke, 2008; Rutherford, 2012), and students (Rutherford, 2012; Whitburn, 2013).

Similarly, where studies have investigated the impact of interventions aimed at improving how schools deploy teacher aides, defining roles and associated expectations is frequently cited as the number one priority by schools taking part in the research (Chopra et al., 2011; Giangreco et al., 2003; Webster et al, 2013).

The teacher aides in this study felt that working collaboratively required a supportive "failsafe" environment that was evident throughout the school. Participants related that working with students with complex learning needs can be very demanding, particularly when students' behaviour is challenging (Bourke, 2008; Tutty & Hocking, 2004); thus support for teachers and aides was considered imperative. The extant literature also highlights the importance of fostering supportive school cultures where the education of all students is considered as the collective responsibility of all staff, leaving no one as an isolated 'island in the mainstream' (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Giangreco, 2013; Higgins et al., 2009; Kearney, 2009; MacArthur, 2009; McMaster, 2015; Mentis, Kearney, & Bevan-Brown, 2012; Rutherford, 2011; Ward, 2011). School leadership was also identified by the teacher aides in this study as a crucial component for the development of supportive school cultures: this observation is supported by the wider literature on school culture indicating that effective leadership is integral for the development of inclusive schools (MacArthur, 2009)

Expertise

Providing opportunities for all students to be present, participate and achieve in education that is responsive to their needs requires expertise. Accordingly, the participants in this study identified the necessity of ongoing PD for aides, teachers and school leaders along with timely access to relevant professional expertise, as crucial to meeting students' learning needs. Unfortunately, participants identified expertise as frequently lacking, and that access to PD was variable. The participants emphasised the importance of PD for teacher aides and teachers to increase their capacity to respond to diverse learning needs.

Professional Development

The aides in this study felt that PD was very important, and they had clear ideas regarding the type of PD that was desired: for the most part, participants expressed a preference for PD that was practically applicable and specific to the learning needs of the students with whom they worked. The literature suggests that quality PD for teacher aides improves student outcomes in a variety of domains, including academic gains (Butt & Lowe, 2012; Brock & Carter, 2013; Webster et al, 2013) and improvements in social engagement (Giangreco et al., 2003; Causten-Theoharis & Malgrem, 2005). Giangreco and colleagues (2003) caution that skills based training aimed only at teacher aides can lead to what he terms a "training trap"; where school leaders and teachers may feel further justified in leaving the responsibility for educating disabled students in the hands of teacher aides. In this study, schools that offered PD to teacher aides seemed to have a more inclusive ethos, where aides were valued. However, participants were frequently given primary responsibility for students regardless of whether or not they were offered PD. This finding suggests that a priority needs to be placed on PD opportunities that support teachers and TAs to learn about effective classroom practice

together. The Ministry (Ministry of Education, 2014a) has recently released the Teachers and teacher's aides working together modules; a series of nine PD modules freely available to teachers and TAs aimed to help them collaborate effectively within the classroom. While these modules are very promising, the aides in this study were not aware of them and wondered if the teachers who most needed such PD would be least likely to dedicate time and effort to it, and conversely, those teachers more likely to utilise the modules were the "good ones". As classrooms becoming increasingly diverse and more likely to include teacher aides, PD that enhances collaboration between teachers and teacher aides, and addresses any deficit assumptions, may need to be prioritised in schools.

Research involving teacher aides has found that the provision of PD contributes to aides feeling like valued members of the school community, as well as a perception that their status is raised in the eyes of teachers (Butt & Lowe, 2012; Chopra et al., 2011; Giangreco et al., 2001; Giangreco et al., 2003; Webster et al, 2013). The participants in this study reiterated these findings, and related that for teachers to 'listen' to them, teacher aides would need to make an appeal to authority – one such example provided by Rose was that – despite having 19 years of experience working with students on the autism spectrum - she would still start sentences with "Tony Attwood says."

Participants in the current study emphasised that the expertise of teachers was a very important component contributing to successful outcomes. Deficits in teachers' expertise regarding how to provide for the needs of diverse learners is one of the most powerful barriers to successful inclusion (Hornby, 2012; Kearney, 2009; Prochnow, 2006).

Teachers' participation in quality PD has been shown to significantly improve student outcomes (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). In a best evidence synthesis report prepared for the Ministry on PD for educators, Timperley and colleagues found that PD programs that successfully challenged and transformed underlying deficit assumptions regarding certain groups of students were effective in significantly raising student achievement: this was particularly so for students who were persistently under achieving (Timperley et al., 2007). The report states, "It was important that PD challenged existing assumptions and provided alternative pedagogies that were better able to meet the needs of students" (p. 164). The need for alternative pedagogies was crucial as the process of changing assumptions was iterative, in the sense that implementing pedagogical change would lead to improved student outcomes, thereby further challenging the educator's deficit assumptions and increasing confidence in her or his ability to affect student learning. These findings indicate that although challenging underpinning theories and assumptions is crucial in raising the achievement of marginalized groups of students, providing teachers with pedagogical alternatives that are directly implementable in a classroom context are also crucial in shifting perceptions.

The consultative model: drawing on professionals' expertise

New Zealand's consultative approach was premised on the notion that interprofessional practices, such as the formation and implementation of individual education plans (IEP), would lead to interprofessional learning, thereby building the capacity of teachers to respond to students' diverse learning needs (Prochnow, 2006). The participants in this study valued the input of specialists who were able to work collaboratively.

SLTs were particularly well regarded; participants unanimously agreed that SLTs were regularly available, spent time with the student in his or her schooling environment, had practical ideas and solutions, and generally worked collaboratively with other members of the team. Research indicates that this type of interprofessional learning and practice are crucial elements in developing inclusive educators that possess the expertise to adequately respond to student needs (Mentis et al., 2012).

In summary, the emphasis on the necessity of expertise is supported in the wider research literature. Developing expertise requires access to effective PD for teams, where participants are challenged, provided with alternative pedagogies and opportunities to put these into practice. The consultative model can result in increased expertise if the right conditions for interprofessional learning and practice are met.

Flexibility and Responsiveness

Inclusion calls for schools and educators to transform theoretical and structural approaches to education, rather than calling for students to 'fit in or get out'. As such, successful inclusion requires flexibility and responsiveness in accordance with student needs. The teacher aides in this study identified their own and other educators' flexibility and responsiveness as crucial to successful inclusion of students. The ability for educators to be flexible and responsive appeared to be largely determined by school wide beliefs around the education of students with diverse learning needs, the accessibility of relevant expertise, and how effectively the team collaborated.

Sub-themes under flexibility and responsiveness include shared understandings of inclusion; a student centred approach; and creative practice characterized by empathy and persistence. Again, much of this theme was derived from the 'Dream' oriented questions where participants were encouraged to reflect on what could be. Otherwise the information pertaining to these themes was elicited when participants were asked to describe the characteristics and approaches of their experiences with the 'best' teachers and schools.

Shared understandings of inclusion

The participants' experiences as teacher aides reflected some tension in how inclusion and inclusive practices are defined in the school context. Frequently inclusion is considered synonymous with mainstreaming, and in the absence of intentionally developed shared values and objectives, how inclusion is understood and (not) practiced within schools can vary from teacher to teacher (MacArthur, 2009). A shared understanding of inclusion as being responsive and flexible in accordance with student needs is at the heart of helping students succeed (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). Although this shared understanding can operate at a classroom level, where a team of individuals working with a student share common understandings and objectives (as was the case for a number of participants in this study), to enable educators to effectively and consistently respond to student needs, a school-wide approach is required (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

When participants in this study talked about the teachers and other professionals with whom they really enjoyed working, invariably these people acted in ways that demonstrated inclusive attitudes; this included actively encouraging all students to join in; taking

responsibility for the learning of all students in the class; recognizing that every student has diverse learning needs, regardless of ability, and responding to these needs by adapting various aspects of the environment / curriculum / schedule; having high expectations of all members of the class; conveying by example that attitudes of acceptance and tolerance to diversity were expected of all members of the class; and finally, demonstrating empathy and persistence in the face of difficult situations (e.g. when students display very challenging behaviours). For these teachers inclusion was not synonymous with mainstreaming. These findings echo Rutherford's (2008) research where teacher aides identified very similar characteristics of 'good' teachers. As in Rutherford's study, the teacher aides in this study conveyed that how teachers worked largely came down to underlying attitudes and assumptions regarding students with disabilities and inclusive education: these attitudes underpinned practice and meant that "when they're good, they're good all round" (p. 7, Rutherford, 2012).

Student centred

The teacher aides in this study identified the necessity of taking a student centred approach, with the learner as "the focus of teacher planning" (Carrington & Elkin, 2002, p. 52). The importance of maintaining a student centred perspective is emphasised by students interviewed during studies by Broer, Doyle, and Giangreco (2005), Rutherford (2008) and Whitburn (2013): these students assert that their dependence on teacher aides was contingent on whether classroom teachers were responsive and flexible in accord with the students' needs. By association, the level of support teacher aides need to provide is dependent on teachers' ability and willingness to be responsive to student needs. Similarly, the participants in this study emphasized the need to 'tune in' to what students required and to meet these needs in an appropriate way. It was preferred if the classroom teacher was also able to read student cues and act accordingly. Attention to students' cues was considered a very important preventative strategy to ensure that students who were unable to communicate verbally had their needs recognized so situations where students resorted to inappropriate behaviour were avoided. These teacher aides recognized that, whilst expertise was certainly helpful, there was no effective one-size-fits-all approach to helping students learn more appropriate behaviours. Every student required an individually tailored approach, and sometimes this meant removing students from class and classmates, but this would be done according to pre-agreed systems with clear parameters, that were implemented to meet the student's needs (e.g. to prevent sensory overload), rather than as a reactive strategy necessitated by not adequately responding to student needs in the first place.

Creative practice characterized by empathy and persistence

Participants in this study related that being responsive and flexible can be very challenging when working with students with significant learning needs; particularly when students display challenging and/or aggressive behaviours that compromise their own or classmates' safety. Previous research confirms this perspective and studies have found that the inclusion of students who display challenging behaviours is particularly complicated for educators (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Pierson & Howell, 2013).

Although the teacher aides in the current study frequently faced very trying situations, it appeared that they maintained a sense of empathy for the student, and a creative approach to

problem solving that could be described as an educated trial and error process that clearly required persistence in the face of what was sometimes slow progress. The literature reflects the participants' sentiments, in that while there are some very useful approaches to be aware of (e.g. applied behaviour analysis, augmented communication methods), effective behavioural support needs to be tailored to the individual student and his or her particular context (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Bevan-Brown, Carroll-Lind, Kearney, Sperl, & Sutherland, 2008; Breitenbach, Armstrong, & Bryson, 2013; Downing, 2005).

In summary, for the participants in this study, how students were supported - and thus teacher aides' working conditions - changed considerably depending on the ability of teachers to be responsive and flexible. This is reflected in the extant literature: in the absence of clear teacher guidance, teacher aides will attempt to 'pick up the slack' left by other educators (Blatchford et al., 2012; Butt & Lowe, 2012; Chopra et al., 2011; Giangreco et al., 2001; Giangreco et al., 2010; Kearney, 2009; Rutherford, 2012; Stevenson, 2012).

Barriers to inclusive teacher's aide practice

The findings of this study show that teacher aides still face a number of barriers in their roles that not only affect their own wellbeing at work, but also affect disabled students' opportunities to participate and achieve within regular schools (Bourke, 2008; Butt & Lowe, 2012; Giangreco et al., 2001; Giangreco et al., 2010; Kearney, 2009; Mansaray, 2006; Marks et al., 1999; O'Brien & Garner, 2001; Rutherford, 2008; Tutty & Hocking, 2004). The participants in this study almost unanimously identified the following barriers: school culture that is not conducive to inclusive practices; under resourcing; and funding structures, particularly the ORS. These barriers are summarised in the Figure 1.

When these barriers were present to a greater or lesser degree, this led to teacher aides having to practice in an environment that was not always conducive to students' participation and achievement: lack of support for students' learning; hierarchical and authoritarian approaches to teamwork; teacher aides feeling that their contribution was not valued and appreciated, all contributed to situations where participants would feel isolated, unsupported, undervalued, and frustrated in their roles. For three of the four participants, these barriers had previously led to decisions to resign from teacher aiding roles.

School Culture

The participants in this study had a strong sense that school culture was at the root of how schools would provide for the educational needs of students with disabilities. Research on inclusive practice would tend to confirm this perspective; the substantial influence of school culture on how schools respond to diversity is well-documented in the literature (Alton-Lee, 2003; Bishop & Berryman, 2010; Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Carrington & Elkin, 2002; Carrington & Robinson, 2006; Kearney, 2009; MacArthur, 2009; McMaster, 2015; Rutherford, 2012; Timperley et al., 2007; What Works Research Group, 2012; Zollers, Ramanathan, & Yu, 1999).

How schools respond to diversity affects staff and students, as generally how students are treated will be reflected in how staff relate to one another: this is reflected in the extant literature concerning teacher aides' experiences (Bourke, 2008; Chopra et al., 2011; Giangreco et al., 2001; Rutherford, 2008; Stevenson, 2012). How teacher aides are valued,

respected and appreciated is related to how schools value, respect and appreciate diversity (Rutherford, 2011). When schools perceive students with disabilities as a liability rather than an asset, teacher aides tend to be undervalued, leading to the odd paradox described by participants in this study where aides are both indispensible – because teachers have "no idea" of how to work with disabled students – and simultaneously undervalued, because what teacher aides do is considered low-skilled work, tantamount to "babysitting" (Giangreco et al., 2001; Kearney, 2009; Rutherford, 2008).

School Culture

◈ Hierarchical top-down approach to managing staff

◈ Status depends on place in the hierarchy – teacher aides are considered "the bottom of the heap"

◈ Lack of consensus around the meaning and practice of inclusive education (frequently considered synonymous with mainstreaming)

◈ Fragmented, blame-oriented approach to handling challenging situations

◈ Students with complex learning needs are considered a low priority, as are the staff who work with them.

◈ Opportunities for professional development regarding inclusion or strategies for working with students with complex learning needs are very limited for all staff and generally unavailable for teacher aides.

◈ Lack of responsiveness to and flexibility for students with complex learning needs.

Teacher Aides' Working Conditions

◈ No clear demarcation of roles and responsibilities – teacher aides "pick up the slack".

◈ Lack of communication between team members

◈ Teacher aides have high levels of responsibility with little support from other team members.

◈ Hands-off teachers, student perceived as "belonging" to the aide.

◈ "No one else will have him" – teacher aides' jobs are considered difficult and "terrifying" to some, release time is rare.

◈ Teacher aides' expertise or opinion is not sought when relevant.

◈ Teacher aides feel undervalued.

Under Resourcing

◈ The school's physical environment does not adequately provide for students' needs.

◈ A lack of dedicated time for team collaboration

◈ Busy / time poor / unavailable teachers, specialist teachers, SENCOs and other education professionals

◈ Not enough help for children with "moderate" learning needs.

Special Education 2000 Funding Structure

Ongoing Resourcing Scheme Funding Structure

◈ Teacher aide hours are largely funded by the Ongoing Resourcing Scheme, where funding is allocated to individual students, reinforcing the perception that the aide belongs with the student.
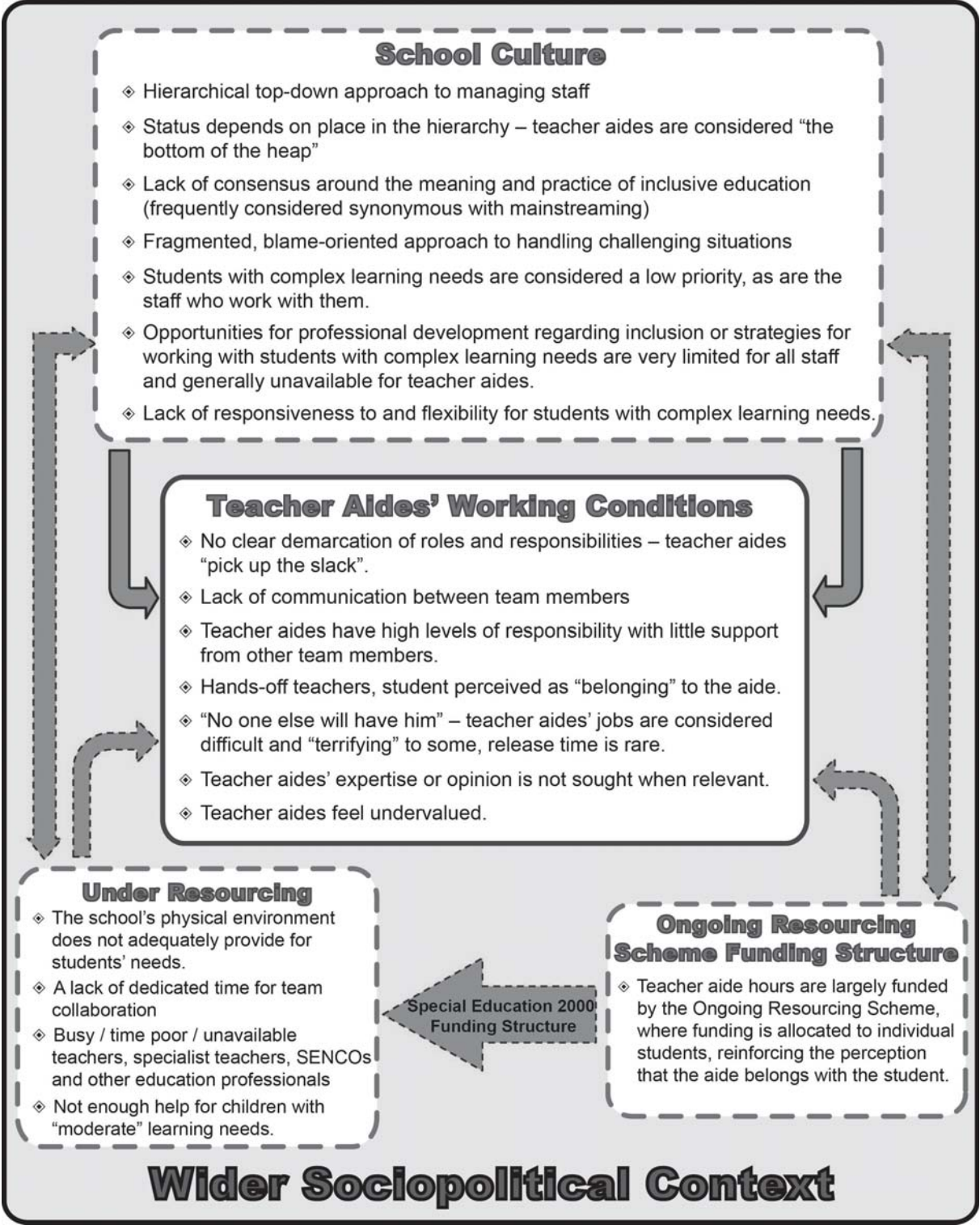
Wider Sociopolitical Context

Figure 2: Barriers to inclusive teacher aide practice

Interestingly, although frequently citing lack of expertise as a profound barrier to educating children with disabilities (Kearney, 2009; Prochnow, 2006), as was the case for the majority of participants in this study, some teachers are still willing to hand over the responsibility to teacher aides, who ostensibly possess even less expertise. This may in part be due to an assumption that it takes less skill to teach children that are lower achievers; Webster et al., (2010) argue that if anything, it takes greater skill. All of these issues arise out of deeply held values and beliefs that implicitly guide teacher practice and contribute to wider school culture.

Definitions of culture are numerous and reflect the complexity and multi-layered nature of the construct; McMaster (2015) describes school culture as a shared value system. This value system is shaped by the collection of and negotiation among individuals' beliefs, but also by discourses that dominate the wider socio-political context at any given point in time. The influence of implicit neoliberal ideals – such as independence, competition and meritocracy – on the structures and practices within a school, are likely to be greater if left unexamined (Ballard, 2013). Shared value systems underpin school practices, whether these have been consciously and collaboratively composed, or not. For those who are unable or unwilling to act in accordance with the school's culture, remaining within it will be very challenging (McMaster, 2015). The teacher aides in this study had experienced this tension first hand; when they were unable to reconcile their own values with those of the school they worked in, they felt they had little choice but to resign.

Research into the development of inclusive school communities suggests that for long-term sustainable implementation of inclusive practices, schools need to be committed to a collective process of examining, and if necessary transforming, the underlying values driving educational practice (Alton-Lee et al., 2000; Bishop & Berryman, 2010; Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Carrington & Elkin, 2002; Kearney, 2009; McMaster, 2015). Similarly Ballard (2013) and Slee (2012) emphasise the inextricable connections between cultural and political ideology and educational practice.

One example of how such an approach can lead to better outcomes for students is Te Kotahitanga Project (Bishop, Berryman, Wearmouth, Peter, & Clapham, 2012): this project intended to address the persistent underachievement of Māori students and began with interviewing to gain stakeholders' (teachers, Māori students and parents) perspectives. Through the interview process it became clear that many teachers held deficit views of Māori students, and that Māori students and parents were acutely aware of these attitudes. In the words of Bishop and colleagues (2012), "…despite teachers being well-meaning and with the best intentions in the world, if teachers are led to believe that students with whom they are interacting are deficient, they will respond to them negatively" (p. 696). Based on the interview data, an Effective Teaching Profile (ETP) was created and used as the basis for a PD approach that supported teachers to critically examine and transform deficit based pedagogical approaches (Bishop et al., 2012). For schools that have taken part in this PD program, the participation, engagement, retention, and achievement of Māori students all show strong positive gains in relation to comparison groups of schools (Bishop & Berryman, 2010; Bishop, Ladwig, & Berryman, 2014). Furthermore, for the schools that took part, the majority of teachers reported the process as being "enlightening and empowering" (p. 697, Bishop et al., 2012).

Booth and Ainscow's (2011) *Index for Inclusion (Index)* is a PD tool - also based on

principles of social justice - that guides schools through the process of understanding how the structures and practices engendered by the school's culture are working to include and / or marginalise groups of students and staff. A recent initiative by the Ministry, the *Inclusive Practices Tools (IPT)*, provide guidance and resources (mostly in the form of surveys) for schools to review how well practices are providing opportunities for all students to be present, participate and achieve (Ministry of Education, 2013). According to McMaster (2013), while the IPT borrows heavily from the *Index for Inclusion*, it is overly focused on quantifying inclusion due to its primary reliance on surveys that require likert-scale responses, and a corresponding emphasis on audit-type processes. Based on his own research where the *Index* was utilised to facilitate one secondary school's journey to inclusion (McMaster, 2015), McMaster (2013) makes the following suggestions for how schools can use the IPT to facilitate meaningful change: ensuring inclusion is defined broadly – not only as pertaining to students with 'special needs'; involving all students; allowing for students to express their views in a variety of creative ways; allowing time for reflection and the resolution of cognitive dissonance during development of the action plan (Timperley et al., 2007); reflecting deeply on school values and vision; and finally, referring to the six indicator statements that provide the foundation of the *Index* as these provide a depth to the planning process that McMaster claims is lacking in the IPT.

Giangreco (2013) suggests that how teacher aides are deployed is the proverbial "tip of the iceberg", and indicative of what lies beneath the surface. In this sense, the utilisation of teacher aides could be considered as the cultural artefact (Hall, 1989 as cited in McMaster, 2015) - the observable manifestation of deeply held values, beliefs and assumptions – that "is difficult to make sense of… without an understanding of deeper motivators…" (p. 22, McMaster, 2015). The deployment of teacher aides reveals much about the shared value system in a school, and what this system assumes about the worth of people with disabilities. The teacher aides in the current study could not only see this, but also experienced it, as their perceived worth and value in the role of teacher aides was inextricably bound to that of the students with whom they worked (Bourke, 2008; Rutherford, 2008; Tutty & Hocking, 2004). Little support for student learning left teacher aides feeling isolated and unsupported. Where teacher aides were treated as the "bottom of the pile" and teamwork was approached from a hierarchical, authoritarian perspective by those in positions of power, teacher aides felt undervalued. Giangreco, Suter and Doyle (2010) suggest that it is this undervaluing of people with disabilities that perpetuates the inappropriate deployment of teacher aides:

> How else might we explain the double standard that continues to exist? If you are a student without a disability, highly qualified teachers deliver your education. If you are a student with a certain type of disability label… the likelihood increases that you will receive a substantial part of your education from a paraprofessional who may be inadequately prepared, trained, and supervised (p. 51).

Under-resourcing

The participants in this study frequently cited the unavailability of teachers, SENCOs and other education professionals as a barrier to working effectively with students with complex learning needs. There was little or no dedicated time for collaboration between teachers, specialist teachers, teacher aides and other education professionals. Although the participants felt this was in part an issue of prioritisation, they also observed that educators had

considerable workloads that created a pressurised environment, with little opportunity for developing capability to teach to diversity. Participants felt this contributed to teacher aides sometimes being left to 'pick up the slack' and provide instruction, planning, and / or resources to those students who presented with significant learning and behavioural needs; this could be an issue even when working with teachers who the participants considered 'good'.

One overarching issue that spanned every teacher aides' experience without exception was the lack of dedicated time for collaboration between team members: if this did occur, it was because teacher aides attended unpaid. This is not a one-off finding; literature from the USA (Giangreco et al., 2010), the UK (Blatchford et al., 2012), Australia (Bourke, 2008) and New Zealand (Rutherford, 2008) all reports similar issues. Despite the plethora of research demonstrating the integral role of effective collaboration in the provision of quality health and education services (Dettmer, Dyck, & Thurston, 1999; Mentis et al., 2012; Theofilou, 2011), schools still do not consider dedicated time for collaboration in providing for students with disabilities a priority, and are instead relying on the goodwill of teacher aides.

Kearney's (2009) research found that lack of funding was frequently cited by school principals, teachers, and to a lesser extent parents, as one of the fundamental barriers to the inclusion of students. Moreover, the primary issue concerning funding was a perceived lack of teacher aide hours. The Ward et al., (2009) report indicated that 77% of schools would spend extra funding on increased teacher aide provision. Given that previous research indicates teacher aide provision will not necessarily lead to better educational experiences for children with disabilities (Blatchford et al., 2012; Giangreco et al., 2005; Rutherford, 2012; Tews & Lupart, 2008; Whitburn, 2013), schools' (and parents') requests for increased funding towards teacher aide provision might best be interpreted as "people calling out for help in a way that they know how, by asking for a paraprofessional, even though this request may not address their root concerns" (p. 363, Giangreco et al., 2012). When faced with concern for the safety of children, it is understandable that educators want to ensure safety via the presence of intensive adult proximity. Although providing intensive one to one support may be a necessary interim solution, Giangreco et al. (2012) warn against the acceptance of the "myth of the prototypical student who 'needs' a one-to-one paraprofessional" (p. 364), and assert that,

> Variations from school to school suggest that these mythical prototypes are socially constructed. This is evidenced by the fact that students with a particular constellation of characteristics routinely receive one-to-one paraprofessional supports in one school but not in another (p. 364).

Addressing the root cause of the problem will require a careful focus on matching the provision of resources to the determined need; if the problem is that a teacher does not understand how to plan for the full range of diverse abilities within his or her class, the provision of teacher aide support will not address this teacher's need, and hence the rights of students to a relevant and responsive education will also remain unaddressed (Giangreco et al., 2012).

How schools' physical spaces were arranged was also frequently perceived as a barrier to working effectively with those students who needed to retreat to calm, quiet spaces at regular intervals throughout the day to maintain sensory regulation. This has previously been

identified as an issue in the literature, particularly when working with children who have sensory sensitivities (Stace, 2011). Arguably, schools' physical structures serve as a concrete reminder that we are working in an education system that was not originally designed with everyone in mind.

The Ongoing Resourcing Scheme funding structure

The ORS provides funding for individual students, and along with the Special Education Grant (SEG), funds the majority of the provision of teacher aide hours (Ward, et al., 2009). The participants in this study felt that the structure of the ORS funding – in terms of being 'attached' to individual students – contributed to the sense that students 'belonged' with 'their' aides, and perhaps stifled schools' ability to use teacher aides more creatively. As pointed out by one participant, teacher aides were contractually bound to students by way of the funding; a fact that some parents of ORS funded students would stress if the aide was perceived as spending too much time with other students. These are not issues with simple solutions and further research is required into how different funding structures impact on student outcomes (Coleman, 2011).

The barriers reported by the participants in this study echo previous findings. Schools appear to be struggling to meet the needs of all learners. School cultures characterised by a lack of understanding and awareness of deeply held deficit assumptions about students with disabilities are significant contributors to the status quo. These assumptions shape every day pedagogical practices, and are reflected in how schools deploy teacher aides. Although lack of funding is frequently touted as the primary hurdle, how schools would purportedly use extra funding suggests the fundamental problem may lie in a lack of understanding of how to use resources to match needs. However, this study has found examples of schools that appear to be able to be more responsive to all students' needs and such schools operate within the same economic structures as all other schools. This indicates that *how* they have chosen to use the funding available has been crucial to their success.

Appreciative inquiry and offering teacher aides an opportunity to share their perspectives

> "One of the simplest paths to deep change is for the less powerful to speak as much as they listen, and for the more powerful to listen as much as they speak." (Steinem, 2015)

The participants in this study relished the opportunity to share their experiences and insights with other teacher aides. Given the support in the literature for interprofessional learning, and the increasingly indispensible role aides have in schools (Webster et al., 2010) providing more opportunities for teacher aides to share their stories would be valuable. Bourke (2009) emphasises the importance of understanding teacher aides' roles from their perspective; she contends that research into educational reform rarely identifies teacher aides as major stakeholders, and when information regarding aides' roles is collected, it is generally from "key personnel" within schools. If the literature tells us anything, it is that what teacher aides are purported to be doing – according to education policy and school rhetoric (Kearney, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2014) – is not actually what teacher aides are doing (Bourke, 2008; Rutherford, 2008). Accordingly, understanding teacher aides' roles from a top down view is

inadequate if an accurate picture of the state of education provision for students with complex learning needs is to be developed.

Furthermore, as indicated by Giangreco, Edelman, and Broer (2001), in some schools, teacher aides rarely have opportunities to discuss their role or practice with other educational professionals. Because they are rarely required (or paid) to attend staff meetings, teacher aides can exist almost in isolation within schools, with little idea of whether the circumstances of their role are 'normal', or even ethical.

Conversely, offering greater opportunities for teacher aides to collaborate with other aides and teachers would contribute to increased expertise via interprofessional learning (Chopra et al., 2011; Dettmer et al., 1999; Mentis et al., 2012), and would provide aides with a much needed support network (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007; Giangreco et al., 2001).

Implications for policy and practice

The generative potential of appreciative inquiry was the primary reason it has been used as the research methodology for this study (Bushe, 2012). My intention was to give teacher aides a voice and in so doing find "better ways to respond to diversity" (p. 223, McMaster, 2013). Teacher aides are in a unique position to offer insights into how schools respond to diversity, working daily at the juncture between school values and practices, the educators who implement them and the students who are included and excluded by them (Rutherford, 2008; Tutty & Hocking, 2004). What then are the 'take-home messages' about effectively responding to diversity that the participants in the current study have offered us?

The teacher aide's role can be understood as being either implicitly or explicitly *defined* by the school-wide culture. Mitigated by their close relationships and caring for the students with whom they worked, these teacher aides' roles encompassed any responsibilities that were abdicated by teachers and other education professionals.

In this sense, how teacher aides are deployed and utilised within any given school is an observable artefact of how the school responds to diversity. Accordingly, any re-structuring of how teacher aides are deployed and utilised within schools needs to occur with wider consideration of how the school is responding to diversity, and what this implies about the school's underlying value system.

Based on the participants' suggestions, following are a few probing questions schools may want to consider both with respect to how teacher aides are deployed and how students with complex learning needs are provided for.

- How is the school actively encouraging effective collaboration?
  - Are teachers, teacher aides and other education professionals given dedicated (and paid) time for collaboration around effectively meeting the needs of diverse learners?
  - Are school leaders modelling collaborative approaches to interprofessional practice that emphasise egalitarian relationships, supportive 'failsafe' learning environments, and effective communication?

- o Has the school developed a carefully considered role description for teacher aides that clearly defines how teacher aides will be deployed and utilised and are all school staff aware of what the roles and responsibilities of aides are, and what they are not?
- How is the school ensuring that teaching staff possesses enough expertise to meet the needs of diverse learners?
  - o Does the school have systems in place for identifying gaps in teachers' knowledge and capacity for catering to diversity?
  - o Is the school willing to invest in quality professional development that supports teachers and aides to work collaboratively to meet the learning needs of diverse students?
- Do school structures and policies enable teaching staff to be responsive and flexible in accordance with the needs of students?
  - o Has the school developed clear, shared values and objectives concerning inclusion and inclusive practices?
  - o Is inclusive practice conceptualised as student centred? (i.e. the education and instructional environment needs to respond to the student, rather than the student being expected to fit into a generic educational environment or instructional approach).
  - o Are all teaching staff willing and able to demonstrate persistent empathy for all students – even those whose behaviours can be very challenging – and are teachers aware of, and able to contribute to the 'educated trial and error' approach that is often required when working with students with significant learning needs?

It is interesting to note that many of the participants' ideas echo suggestions made by advocates of inclusion (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Alton-Lee, 2003; Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Carrington & Robinson, 2006; Carrington, et al., 2012; Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Giangreco, 2013; Higgins et al., 2009; MacArthur, 2009; McMaster, 2013; Ministry of Education, n.d.; Rutherford, 2012); this indicates that there is a real need for New Zealand schools to become more reflexive of how implicit value systems and corresponding pedagogical practices are impacting on their most vulnerable students.

As teacher aide practice is embedded in school-wide culture, so school-wide culture is embedded in the historical, cultural, social, political and economical factors described in Chapter Two. How then can wider policies support schools to develop more inclusive learning environments?

- Provision of quality professional development that takes no short cuts (McMaster, 2013) in challenging educators' deficit assumptions about certain groups of learners. The success of te Kotahitanga project underscores the potential for positive change generated by such State sponsored initiatives (Bishop & Berryman, 2010).
- Holding schools accountable for commitment to inclusive practices using a conceptualisation of inclusion that goes beyond the Education Review Office's current

interpretation of inclusion as the physical presence of students with significant learning needs in mainstream environments (McMaster, 2013).

- Resourcing schools adequately to meet the needs of diverse learners: this includes supporting schools and educators to develop a range of approaches within an inclusive context that *match the needs* of diverse learners, in place of sole reliance on the presence of teacher aides (Giangreco, 2013).

- Further research is required into the outcomes of varying funding structures, and how these might be re-conceptualised to allow for more flexible and approaches to providing support.

Conclusion

Although still faced with many barriers to inclusive practice, it is encouraging to note that the participants in this study could see and clearly articulate solutions, and that there are pockets of inclusive practices already occurring. Although this study looked at teacher aide practice specifically, it soon became apparent through participants' stories that how teacher aides are deployed and utilised is constrained by school-wide culture and practices, and that considering teacher aiding practice as divorced from this wider context is redundant. School-wide cultures should aim to support teachers and aides in collaborating and building capacity for responding to the needs of all students in the class. Consequently, this project has culminated in a number of probing questions for schools to consider when developing better ways of responding to diversity.

School-wide culture in turn sits within the current wider socio-political context: the latter presents with issues that are perhaps more intractable than those presented by school culture. However, the answer to this may lie partly in persistent and unwavering calls for more inclusive schools: the teacher aides in this study witnessed with hope the tolerance and acceptance of diversity demonstrated by most children in the schools where participants worked. In this way the teacher aides in this study expressed their understanding of inclusive education as an 'apprenticeship in democracy' and a conduit for equity and social justice (Slee, 2012). This gave the teacher aides hope that these children - educated in inclusive school environments - would grow into adults that recognised and championed the value of diversity.

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APPENDIX ONE: PROJECT INFORMATION SHEET

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
TE KURA O TE MATĀURANGA

An Appreciative Inquiry into Teacher Aides' Perspectives on Best Practice for Inclusion

INFORMATION SHEET

Researcher Introduction

My name is Miek Deuninck; as part of the Master of Educational Psychology study program I am undertaking a small research study that looks at the positive experiences of teacher aides who work with ORS funded students in inclusive schools. My interest in this field of study comes as a result of my own experiences working with an ORS funded student as a teacher aide.

Project Description and Invitation

The proposed project is a qualitative study that aims to tap into teacher aides' direct experiences of 'what works' for the inclusion of students that have complex learning and behavioural needs.

Disabled students' school experiences of inclusion and exclusion are often also experienced by the teacher aides who work with these students. This puts teacher aides in a unique position in the sense that they have some insight into how varying teacher and wider school practices impact on students' (and their own) personal experiences of school.

The aim of this study is to bring to light instances where effective collaboration among teachers and teacher aides resulted in the presence, participation and achievement of students with complex learning and behavioural needs. We will also consider your experience of any barriers to students' presence, participation and learning. Identifying these can also provide important information that can be used to improve teaching practice.

I would like to begin interviews in late July of 2015 and would like to invite you to participate in this research. Please carefully read the information that follows explaining the project before making a decision about participation. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to sign a Consent Form which shows that you understand the study and have chosen to participate.

Participant Identification and Recruitment

You are receiving information regarding this project because you have expressed preliminary interest in being involved.

The criterion for participation is that you have worked as a teacher aide for a minimum of two years in an inclusive education context.

Project Procedures
Individual Interviews

> - I will interview each participant individually; this interview will be a semi-structured chat about your positive experiences as a teacher aide and who and what you believe contributed to those experiences. We will also talk about any barriers to student participation and learning.
> - It is anticipated that this interview will take up to a maximum of 90 minutes of your time, depending on how much information you would like to share.
> - The interviews will take place at the College of Education in Dunedin at a time that is convenient to you.
> - What you have to say is important to me and I don't want to forget any of it; for that reason I would like to audio record the interview.

Focus Group

> - After I have looked over all the interviews and identified common themes I would like all the participants to gather and discuss these common themes in a focus group format.
> - It is anticipated that the focus group discussion will take up to a maximum of 2 hours of your time.
> - The focus group will take place at the College of Education, University of Otago, and at a time that is convenient to you.
> - I would also like to audio record the focus group discussion.

- Data collected from you in the project will involve interviews and the focus group discussion. The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. All information is treated confidentially and no names of people or places will be in the final thesis. If you use any personal details such as names or identify places such as schools in the interview, I will ensure that this information is removed from the typed transcripts.
- You have the right to decline to answer particular questions if these make you feel uncomfortable.
- Once transcribed, the recordings will be held on a hard drive by my supervisor, Dr Jude MacArthur. The data is held for a 5-year period so that I can undertake further writing about the project with my supervisors. This writing may be used in conference presentations or in academic publications. After that time my supervisor will clear information from the hard drive.
- The interview and focus group transcripts will be made available to you for editing.
- You have the right to withdraw from the project at any stage up until September 1st, 2015; this includes the right to terminate an interview if you wish, without any disadvantage to you.
- It is possible that information of sensitive nature such as student and / or teacher names will be shared during the focus group meeting. Information shared during the focus group, including the identity of the participants, must be kept confidential and you will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement to that effect.

Data Management
- All data collected will be kept confidential and will be stored securely on an encrypted external hard-drive only accessible to the researcher and her supervisors.
- All identifying information, including personal names, school and place names, will be removed when interview data is transcribed. Participants will be given pseudonyms. The area in which the study was undertaken will not be identified.
- Every effort will be made to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. The researcher cannot absolutely guarantee that participants' identities will remain completely confidential once the research findings have been disseminated. There is always a small risk that someone may identify participants, it is important to know that complete anonymity and confidentiality cannot be promised in this regard.
- At the end of the project any information collected will be stored securely for five years and destroyed as per the requirements of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

Participant's Rights
Please note that these rights are relevant to both the interview and focus group parts of the project. You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:
- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study anytime before September 1st, 2015;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.

Thank you for taking the time to read this and consider participation in this study.

Project Contacts
If you have any further questions please contact:

Researcher: Miek Deuninck
                Mob: 021 2644 915
                Email: email.miek@gmail.com

Supervisors: Jude MacArthur
                Mob: 027 7415413
                Email: J.A.MacArthur@massey.ac.nz

                Jeanette Berman
                Mob:0275253567
                Email: j.berman@massey.ac.nz

Yours sincerely,
Miek Deuninck

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, Application number 15_033. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Andrew Chrystall, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, telephone 09 414 0800 x 43317, email humanethicsnorth@massey.ac.nz.

APPENDIX TWO: CONSENT FORMS – INDIVIDUAL & FOCUS GROUP

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
TE KURA O TE MATĀURANGA

An Appreciative Inquiry into Teacher Aides' Perspectives on Best Practice for Inclusion

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM - INDIVIDUAL

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree / do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.

I wish / do not wish to have my recordings returned to me.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature: .... Date: ....

Full Name - printed ....

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
TE KURA O TE MATĀURANGA

An Appreciative Inquiry into Teacher Aides' Perspectives on Best Practice for Inclusion

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree not to disclose anything discussed in the Focus Group.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature: .... Date: ....

Full   Name   -
printed
....

APPENDIX THREE: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

An Appreciative Inquiry into Teacher Aides' Perspectives on Best Practice for Inclusion

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Can you please describe your best moments and / or experiences as a teacher aide?
   If you could think of a few different experiences that would be fantastic, but just one will be very helpful too.

2. What aspects of each of these experiences made them so fulfilling and memorable for you?

3. What do you think were the key components that contributed to each of these successful experiences?
   For example, was it the people involved and what they did or did not do, the wider class or school culture, or some other factor like the physical environment?

4. What do you think some of barriers are to the participation and learning of students you have worked with?
   Think about both barriers to learning and barriers to positive student behaviour.

5. What do you think were the key components that contributed to each of these barriers?
   For example, was it the people involved and what they did or did not do, the wider class or school culture, or some other factor like the physical environment?

6. What would you like to see done differently so that these barriers don't arise in the future?

7. If you could have a perfect day's work as a teacher aide, what would it look and feel like?
   For example, where would you spend your time, with whom, what would you be doing and how would you be doing it etc?

8. If you could create an ideal teacher aide's role, what would that look like? *For example, what would the school and class environment be like? How would the physical environment be set up? Who would you be working with?*

9. What particular teacher attributes and characteristics make it easy for you to work and collaborate with teachers?

10. What particular attributes and characteristics make other professionals easy to collaborate and work with?
    These could be any professionals that work in a team around a child with funding under the ORS, such as speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, and / or psychologists.

APPENDIX FOUR: TRANSCRIPT RELEASE FORMS

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
TE KURA O TE MATĀURANGA

An Appreciative Inquiry into Teacher Aides' Perspectives on Best Practice for Inclusion

AUTHORITY FOR THE RELEASE OF TRANSCRIPTS

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript of the interview(s) conducted with me.

I agree that the edited transcript and extracts from this may be used in reports and publications arising from the research.

Signature: .... Date: ....

Full Name - printed ....

APPENDIX FIVE: CODEBOOK EXCERPT

Thematic Analysis Code Book

Objective 1: *Gain insight into the best of "what is" in TA practice.*

When did teacher aides in this study feel most satisfied and rewarded in their jobs?[*]

1) Code: Making a difference
Brief definition: Teacher aides worked to make a difference in the lives of students and their families.
Full definition: The overarching theme characterising responses to questions about the best moments in their work as TA's was the moments when they knew they had made a real and tangible difference in the lives of the students and / or their families. This was the most compelling reason all participants worked as teacher aides.
When to use: See sub-codes below.
Examples from data:

> if I can make a difference, if they can recognize that there's a difference, that it's really supportive or helpful with their child and with their situation then that to me is a really rewarding moment. (M.K.)

> I often end up with very challenging children – by choice – and I find it hugely exhausting but really, really rewarding, you know, it's not very often in life that you actually get the chance to make a difference in someone's life and that's kind of where you're at really. (R.B.)

a) Code: Student learning
Brief definition: Teacher aides witnessed students' learning.
Full definition: TA's witnessed small incremental progressions in students' learning as a result of the strategies put in place by the team around the student to reach commonly established objectives.
When to use: Use when teacher aides recount specific incidences or more generally discuss positive gains in children's learning (can be academic or social).
When not to use: Do not use when barriers to children's learning are discussed. See
Examples from data:

> So sometimes you can see progress in their communication, and that's really rewarding for me, that's a really good moment, when they either start doing something - communicating in a way that they wouldn't otherwise have had that voice - then I find that really rewarding as well. (M.K.)

> So that's when they've reached those wee steps. I don't set big goals, I mean I got him to do high five with the kids and high five with everybody. And I'd say "come with me" and he'd come. Yay! Just, simple[.] (K.D.)

> …it's just every time that child does something they've never done before, or shows that they know something that you had no idea that they knew… It's just that knowing that you're helping; to me that's, those are the very best moments of all, yeah. (R.B.)

b) Code: Learning student.
Brief definition: TA's felt they had learnt more about the child or student they were working with.
Full definition: Communication difficulties can be a real barrier for children with severe disabilities and it can take time to *"learn the child"* through being with and being responsive to the communicative efforts of the child, however subtle these might be.
When to use: Use when participants discuss getting to know the child they're working with, or refer to the unique knowledge of the teacher aide and parents in knowing the child best due to time spent together.

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[*] Teacher aides feeling satisfied and rewarded in their role seemed to be synonymous with students' presence, participation, and achievement – i.e. TA's were only happy when they were 'making a difference' in students' lives via learning and social integration. It is for this reason – and because an appreciative inquiry approach was used with by definition relies on participants' lived experiences – that the question regarding 'the best of what is' in teacher aide practice has been addressed via teacher aides' experiences of reward and satisfaction in their work.

When not to use: Do not use if talking generally about expertise re a specific condition, e.g. autism, Down's syndrome etc. See *Expertise* codes.

Examples from data:

> …when a new kid comes along I sit back and just watch and I think, yeah, and see what works for that child. So you yeah, I think you've got to have the knowledge of how they work, and how they can be all so different. (K.D.)

> …with this child – I need to stop thinking about what I can do for him and actually just learn and understand him, and just stop, and know him, get to know him better. And his communication, because… I know it's there, I know that, and it's so subtle, and so now I'm on that track of learning him better, so that what I put in place and offer is a little more tailored to him. So it'll be something as subtle as the way he'll tip his head and I'll think, OK he's not liking that… or he gets up and runs off and the way he'll run off I'll know, "he needs the toilet" or no, he's distressed about that. And it's very warming if he… and so he might just go like that [*leans towards me and touches interviewer's arm very briefly and softly]* and it's just a little wee thing which if I wasn't focusing on tuning in would be missed. So I find those really rewarding, when I think "Yay! I'm learning here! I'm getting it!" (M.K.)

c) Code: Parental gratitude

Brief definition: When parents express gratitude, appreciation and /or approval.

Full definition: The parents were considered by the participants as the people who knew the student best and whose lives were most affected by any changes (for better or worse) in the student's behaviour; therefore, if the parents noticed positive changes in the student and expressed this in some way, the teacher aides felt as though they were making a real difference to that student and family's lives.

When to use: Use when participants mention expressions of parental gratitude and / or appreciation for TA's work.

When not to use: Do not use when parents / family is discussed in contexts other than gratitude or appreciation.

Examples from data:

> I kinda was trying to think of those sort of things where… the best moments and the thing I kept coming back to was um, when the parents are really genuinely appreciative; those are the times when it warms my heart, and it might be just a really genuine "thank you" or for either the care or the support or progress that they're seeing. (M.K.)

> When parents actually - I mean that's one of the big ones – is when parents actually say to you, you know "thank you, you've just done such a great job" or "you're doing a really great job". (R.B.)

d) Code: Belonging.

Brief definition: Student and TA considered as belonging with the class.

Full definition: The teacher aides liked it when it was made clear by the classroom teacher that they were a part of the class and were able to work with other children in the class or school. They felt this facilitated the student's peers engaging with the student because it meant the TA and student were better known to the whole class, and it reduced isolation of the TA – student pair.

When to use: Use when TA's discuss being part of and / or working with the class as a whole or when TA's mention student engagement with class peers.

When not to use: When TA's talk about SN only group work / activities (see code)

Examples from data:

> I think you have to have that relationship with the whole class for them to understand what you are doing. (K.D.)

> I was one of those teacher aides that often would, once he was settled, or if he was going to start, I'd give him something and I'd go off and help the class. I didn't like for him to think that he was just attached to me. (K.D.)

> I actually like it if one of the students comes and starts sort of hanging out with him, I'll just stand back and go away and just leave them to it, and I think there's a lot of value in that …when I see the peers of the student stepping up and supporting them or taking my role basically, or socializing – those are real good, feel-good moments for me and so making that happen coz that's not gonna happen if they don't feel like, welcome to come and hang out with us. (M.K.)

APPENDIX SIX: MUHEC APPROVAL LETTER

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
ALBANY

16 July 2015

Miek Deuninck
106 Noema Terrace
Wanaka RD2
9382

Dear Miek

HUMAN ETHICS APPROVAL APPLICATION – MUHECN 15_033
An appreciative Inquiry into Teacher Aides Perspectives on Best Practice for Inclusion

Thank you for your application. It has been fully considered, and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern.

Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, a re-approval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

Dr Andrew Chrystall
Acting Chair
Human Ethics Committee: Northern

cc   Dr Jude McArthur   Dr Jeanette Berman   Professor John O'Neill
          Institute of Education   Institute of Education   Director of of Education
          Palmerston North   Albany campus   Palmerston North campus

Te Kunenga
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