

The Ministry of Education

Teacher Aides Programme Evaluation.

The Evaluation of the Teacher Aides Programme for Rarotonga and Pa Eua
Schools.

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Background

In 2011 the Ministry of Education undertook a review of its Special Needs Education Policy (2002). From this review the Cook Islands Inclusive Education Policy (2011) was developed and endorsed. The policy's main focus is inclusiveness, access and participation. It ensures that the Cook Islands education system is equipped to cater for the learning needs of children who may not be developing or achieving to their potential.

Teacher aides are employed by the Ministry of Education to ensure that those learners who have been identified with special learning needs are receiving the support, either by one-on-one learning or specialist programmes, to help build students' skills and approach to learning.

The Education Act 2012, ensures that all children must be enrolled at school no later than the day in which they turn 5 years of age. This would mean an increased need for teacher aides in Cook Islands schools now that parents and families are unable to delay enrolment if their child does have special learning needs. This is backed up by the MoE Workforce Plan 2014-2024 (2014) where it predicted there will be more teacher aides needed in schools and ECE centers as per Ministry of Education policy for ECE and Special Education and the continual identification of students with special needs.

As of 2014, teacher aides make up 15% of the national total of the teacher and support staff population. Teacher aides make up 58% of the total support staff (Ministry of Education Statistics Report, 2014).

All teacher aides who completed the survey for the purposes of this programme evaluation are female, with a working entitlement of 5 hours per day in Primary Schools and 4 hours per day in ECE Centres or classrooms.

Objectives of the Evaluation

The Teacher Aide Programme was evaluated under the following headings.

Relevance

Assess the relevance of the programme in supporting teaching programmes and student learning.

Effectiveness

Assess the effectiveness of the teacher aide programme in terms of whether it is meeting its objectives and outcomes.

Efficiency

Is the teacher aide programme managed and delivered effectively and efficiently in relation to meeting objectives, reporting and monitoring of strategy and its impact and providing value for money.

Sustainability

Identifying what factors are evident that may enhance or constrain sustainability of the teacher aide programme.

Lessons and Recommendations

The lessons learned from the operation of teacher aide programme to date and what recommendations can be drawn for the future of teacher aide support in teaching programmes and student learning.

Methodology

Evaluation Process

For the purposes of the programme evaluation, information was been obtained from 16 of the 21 schools with teacher aides during the 2014 education review visits schools and independent ECE Centres. Responses consist of 33 teacher aides, 27 teachers and 14 principals.

The information gathering process included observations, interviews with principals, teachers and teacher aides, the school compliance check lists and questionnaires.

Findings

Principals

Instructions from the Ministry of Education to principals on the use of teacher aides in their schools vary in accordance with school needs and for the most part relate to general job description advice, learning support expectations and hours of employment. However all principals are aware of professional requirements of teacher aides and have assigned them to an experience classroom teacher.

Feedback from most of the principals identify that the teacher aide job descriptions are in place however they are generic. Some principals would like to have more autonomy in placing teacher aides where the school needs are greater, rather than focusing on student support.

When asked how well the teachers are using the teacher aides, the responses from principals varied. Most teachers are utilizing the teacher aides well with individual students and provide support in planning, group work and achieving their IEP goals. However some principals suggest that teacher aides are not being used as well as they should, and this has resulted in teacher aides being monitored by principals rather than the classroom teachers.

Most of the Principals are satisfied with the level of work being completed by the teacher aides, bearing in mind the diverse range of skills they bring to the position and skills not exclusive to education and teaching. Generally, principals are confident of the work teacher aides are doing in their schools with students, and are seeing some improvements with those students.

90% of principals recommended increased training and development of teacher aide skills and responsibilities, with the suggestion of a remuneration review.

Teacher Aides

All of the teacher aides interviewed and surveyed knew the expectations and responsibilities of their role in their schools. Some attend staff meetings while others meet with their Principals or Learner support regularly.

Predominantly, their main role was to support learners with special needs and students at risk of not achieving, largely in areas of literacy (reading, writing, oral language) and mathematics.

Teacher aides bring to the job a range of experiences and qualifications. Some with tertiary level education, training certificates of various forms and NCEA qualifications. 11% of the teacher aide cohort interviewed had teacher aide certificates and these were gained since being appointed to the role. When asked as to what training or study program they are undertaking to up skill themselves, 25 % are not involved in any program, and the rest are on programs not directly related to their jobs, however all of them would like to undertake further study in a specialized teacher aide course. 37 % want to become teachers, 37% are not sure and the remainder would like to be qualified teacher aides. At the moment opportunities for training were mostly provided by staff associated to the school as there aren't any formal training opportunities available.

Teacher aides have indicated that they are doing tasks which aren't part of their job description and are expected to stay at school over their paid hours. Sometimes they are asked to do tasks beyond their capabilities and experiences. A majority of teacher aides have indicated that support from their classroom teachers is limited and they are often left to work in isolation with their student. However, most believe they have made some progress with the students' achievements but could do more if they were better equipped to work with students with special learning needs. Some have become accustomed to the student behaviour and routines because they have been with the child for a long period of time.

Teachers working with Teacher Aides

All of the teachers working with teacher aides are full time classroom teachers with full teaching programmes. Their role is to plan with the teacher aide the learning programme for the student and to ensure the plans are carried out. This is often supported by individual education plans (IEP's). They understand the teacher aides role is to be with those identified students and to support the priority goals of the IEP's, while also ensuring their welfare.

However teachers have indicated that most of the teacher aides are ill-equipped for their position. There should be a level of formal training or induction given to the teacher aide to prepare them for the position. The majority of teachers are recommending training for the teacher aides before coming into the classrooms.

A majority of teachers are not trained in inclusive education and feel overwhelmed with the responsibility of training or supporting the teacher aides on top of their own teaching workload.

Teachers are seeing more students with learning concerns coming to school but unfortunately they are not quite equipped to handle these children. They acknowledge that students with special learning needs are a part of the school community, and they cannot exclude them from the classroom, but teachers have raised their concern about the level of distraction to the rest of the class that these students can sometimes bring.

Nevertheless they appreciated the effort and professionalism given by the teacher aides despite the lack of training. Some teacher aides have been with the child for some time and know them very well. In the early days teacher aides were to help teachers with resource making and supervising groups of children while the teacher worked with other groups but now they are required to do more. There is an obvious misinterpretation of the roles of a student support teacher aide and that of a school support teacher aide.

Literature

When we look at the literature we find there is parallel correlation between what is happening in the Cook Islands, New Zealand and other countries.

The need for Teacher Aides

The growing emphasis on inclusive and personalised learning, higher levels of students with behavioural and learning needs have contributed to the increasing need for teacher aides. As a result, “teacher aide numbers have grown by 33% in the ten years from 1999 – 2009” (Hewson, M. 2011. pg.2). This is supported by Stevens (2010) that the allocation of teacher-aide (TA) time has increased hugely over the past ten years, both internationally and in New Zealand.

According to the Cook Islands Ministry of Education Workforce Plan 2014-2024 (2014), there will be more Teacher Aides needed in schools and ECE in the near future as per MoE policy for ECE and Special Education and that, the trend of increasing identification of special needs students will continue.

What Teacher Aides are required to do

“Traditionally, teacher aides helped the classroom teacher with photocopying, cutting paper, mixing paints and glue, tidying the resource room and so forth” (Ward, A. 2011. Pg. 43).

However recently, the role of teacher aides has shifted with changing needs of schools and students (Hewson, M. 2011). According to the New Zealand Ministry of Education (June 2012);

Teachers’ aides work in different ways, depending on the needs of the child they are employed to support. In general, they will:

- *carry out learning activities with your child*
- *help your child’s teacher by using strategies to manage your child’s behaviour*
- *work with other students in the class and encourage students, including your child, to play and work together and learn from each other – this can boost your child’s learning and social skills*
- *take over some of the class teacher’s duties so they have time to work more directly with your child.*

While they’re an important part of the child’s team it’s the teacher who remains responsible for the child’s learning and behaviour.

Teacher aides in Queensland, Australia are expected to “work closely with teachers and non-teaching professionals to provide a wide range of support for students including developing and locating resources, setting up and operating equipment, undertaking administrative duties, supervising students,

and facilitation of activities under the direction of a teacher” (2013).
(<http://education.qld.gov.au/hr/recruitment/teaching/teacher-aides.html>)

The Cook Islands Ministry of Education Ancillary Policy, indicates that the teacher aide responsibilities is to assist a registered teacher with the instruction of a student or a group of students. A delegated teacher shall be responsible for managing the work of the “teacher aide”. Management includes in consultation with the “teacher aide” the delegated teacher is responsible for;

- Planning the programme
- Selecting and organizing learning activities
- Regular monitoring of delivery
- Assessment of student achievement.

What’s actually happening in Schools

According to Ward, A. (2011.pg.43), “many teachers felt apprehensive about having students who had high needs in their classrooms because they had no pre-service education or professional development in ‘special’ education and did not know how to include the students with disabilities so their social and academic learning needs were met”. However these “teachers were relieved when they found that many of these students came with an attached teacher aide” (Ward, A. citing Giangreco, 2003).

The findings of this review also reveal that teachers and principals in the Cook Islands are apprehensive too for the same reasons. But they too are adamant to have a teacher aide to assist with the situation because the allocating a teacher aide is the most common strategy for supporting students with disability (severe or minor) in regular classrooms (Stevens, H. 2010).

These teacher aides were meant to assist the classroom teacher but what Ward (2011) found to be happening in New Zealand and overseas are that students with severe needs are being taught ‘by untrained people in situations where some students received all their support from teacher aides rather than teachers or peers. In other words many teacher aides took over the education of these students using their own creativity with little guidance from teachers because the teachers did not know what to do or were too busy (Ward, A. 2011).

This survey has again reveal evidence where these incidences are happening in some school in the Cook Islands for the same reasons, but principals and the allocated teachers have good support system in place for their teacher aides.

Issues

Teacher Aides' Effectiveness

According to Stevens (2010) there is little empirical research demonstrating the effectiveness of teacher aides in supporting students to participate and learn at school, and what factors contribute to their effectiveness. There is a major tension between those who consider extensive use of teacher aides in an instructional role is acceptable and those who consider it is not

However others have stated that the involvement of a teacher aide may be the crucial support that enables a student with intensive academic and/or behavioural needs to be educated in a regular classroom (Martella et al. (1995), Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren (2005) cited by Stevens, H (2010). Another research or survey is needed to affirm or not, of what is the case in our Cook Islands schools in terms of teacher aides' effectiveness.

The Working Group believes that, for the most part, the productivity of teacher aides is in the hands of school management and teacher aides themselves. Principals and teacher aides can draw on the collective capacity of their peers and their supporting bodies and on their professional development experiences to build the practices that will lead to productive systems in their school (Working Group, 2011)

Attitudes towards Teacher Aides

In many New Zealand schools there is a "them and us" mindset between teachers and teacher aides. A worrying outcome of this mindset is a feeling by many of our teacher aides that their work is undervalued (Hewson, 2011). This issue appears to be one that is frequently discussed within teacher aide circles and one that many principals acknowledge as causing concern to teacher aides (Working Group, 2011).

There is evidence from this survey of tendencies by some staff and principals to undervalue teacher aides, not so much in the work they do, but in the position they hold. In some schools there are strong relationships of togetherness between staff, teacher aides and management.

The Working Group (2011) found that the ways teachers and teacher aides' work together is a critical issue in thinking about the effectiveness of teacher aides'.

Teacher Aides are a valuable resources (Hewson, M. 2011) which are being undervalued. The keys to ensuring that the teacher aides workforce is a highly productive one, there need to be within the system genuine respect, value and support for the work teacher aides are doing (The Working Group, 2011).

Remuneration of Teacher Aides

Teacher aides work with some of our most vulnerable and at-risk students and yet are one of the lowest paid employment groups in New Zealand (Hewson, 2011). Some Principals, teachers and teacher aides have commented on this issue as one of their main concern in performance.

Training and Qualification of Teacher Aides

There is limited quality professional development opportunity available or considered for most teacher aides. Principals identify complex issues around appointment, tenure, hours and conditions that impact on effective use of teacher aides in our schools.

There is a lack of qualified or trained teacher aides so a compromise arose when making appointments, where applicants who showed strong empathy for children, matched to their school culture and values, had good commitment, and would fit in with the team are employed. Experience and qualifications did not rate strongly as a pre-requisite (Working Group, 2011). This is the same situation Cook Islands schools find ourselves in when teacher aides are appointed, that they are not properly equipped to work with children with special learning needs.

Schools rely heavily on external agencies to provide training and professional development for teacher aides (Working Group, 2011) however in Cook Islands schools, the staff and in some instances senior management ends up taking the training of teacher aides over and above their normal role. At the time of this survey there wasn't external agencies providing specific training.

Summary

A majority of the teacher aides upon recruitment were not adequately prepared for the responsibilities of the job at hand. Teachers have become frustrated they are responsible not only for the work plan of the child with special learning needs but also for the training of the teacher aide. Subsequently, this has often become too much for the teacher and teacher aides are left to work on their own. A lack of formal inclusive education experience has left many classroom teachers with little confidence in supporting their learners.

Principals on the whole displayed a high degree of awareness of the concerns of teacher aides. Many had made significant efforts to be inclusive and to have management processes and systems that ensure the contribution of teacher aide is optimized and valued.

Nevertheless, there was evidence from teacher aides' responses that sometimes the 'walk' was not fully consistent with the 'talk' (Working Group, 2011).

The teacher aides are valued by Principals and staff alike, some genuinely for their work and effort but others value them mainly in terms of taking the problem away from teachers, that is, someone else is having to address the issue of caring for the special needs child. Teacher aides were seen as the "solution to inclusion" (Ward, A. 2011) citing (Rutherford, 2008, p.88).

We know that the number of teacher aides needed in the future is going to increase therefore there is "a significant need for the specialized training of Special Needs Aides", Otherwise we will have unskilled "child minders" in our classrooms and ECE Centre's which "may do as much harm as good" (MOE Workforce Plan 2014-2024. Pg.6; Inclusive Education Policy, 2011. Pg. 13).

In conclusion there is evidence that teacher aides and their work are being undervalued and at times are being charged with responsibilities over and beyond their capabilities and responsibilities. Teacher aides are also being used in areas which are not part of their responsibilities. The schools may be or may not be at fault but evidence from this programme evaluation suggests that schools are unprepared for the influx of students with special learning needs and their unskilled teacher aides.

Recommendations

Teacher aides are valuable resources and a vital part of the process of inclusive education in schools, therefore it is imperative that time and effort be given to ensure the concerns at the moment are addressed. Knowing the New Zealand experiences are identical to what the Cook Islands are experiencing, we can therefore make similar recommendations to further enhance our teacher aides systems and services in all Cook Islands schools.

The Ministry of Education and school principals are considered responsible for undertaking the following recommendations;

- To consider the pay structure for teacher aides in light of their increasing workload requirements and responsibilities
- A program or an agency be set up to provide professional development for teachers as part of compulsory pre-service education, and also for teacher aides.
- Clarify and specify with performance criteria teacher aide job descriptions. Discuss one to one with the teacher aide concerned and articulate the expectations of both parties to the teachers she will work with.
- Provide a self-assessment form to assist the teacher aide to evaluate and use as a basis for discussion at appraisal meetings.
- Give higher priority to discussion about terms, conditions, relationships, and resourcing at appraisal meetings.
- Tailor professional development to meet the individual needs of teacher aides as well as involve them in the school-wide professional focus.
- Implement guidelines for teachers to use teacher aides in their classrooms to their full potential.
- Explore other ways of allocating teacher-aide hours to provide best possible support for students, eg gifted and talented, mainstream kids leaving teacher to work with high needs/at risk students; ICT/ inquiry learning facilitation.

- Raise the level of appreciation and value teacher aides feel for their effort through raising the responsibility and autonomy of teacher aides in the teaching role.
- Become more involved in the professional conversations of the teacher aide group. Involve the senior management team in working more with this group.
- Involve teacher aides in the professional development of the teaching staff as well as professional development specific to the needs in their role.
- Have a structured, professionally-driven career pathways for teacher aides
- Provide training and support networks for principals and senior management
- Use MoE research agencies to provide best practices guidelines to schools (Hewson, M.2011)
- Delegated experience teachers be given incentive (management units) or additional time to support the extra responsibilities of having teacher aides supporting their learning programme.

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Appendix 1

Survey Questionnaires

Principals Questionnaire

<i>Questions</i>	<i>Principals responses</i>
<i>What instructions do you have from MoE about the use of your TAs</i>	
<i>Individual TA job descriptions</i>	
<i>How well are your teachers able to employ (use) the TAs they have?</i>	
<i>How well are your TAs able to complete their work</i>	
<i>Do you believe TAs contribute to students learning in your school</i>	
<i>What do you think works well in the TA system</i>	
<i>What improvement/s could be made if any?</i>	

Teacher Aides (TA) Questionnaire

School:	
Questions	TA Responses
<i>What is your role in the school?</i>	
<i>To whom are you directly responsible?</i>	
<i>What contact do you have with this person?</i>	
<i>How many hours are you at school weekly?</i>	
<i>Do you attend staff meetings?</i>	
<i>What qualifications do you have?</i>	
<i>What, if any, training did you have for this position?</i>	
<i>Are you currently training/studying? If so, what?</i>	
<i>What is working well with the job?</i>	
<i>What improvements could be made?</i>	
<i>Do you have plans for a next step?</i>	

<i>What if any changes would you suggest to the teacher aide system?</i>	
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Teachers Working with TA Questionnaire

School:	
Questions	Teachers Responses
<i>What is your role in the school?</i>	
<i>What is the role of the TA under your charge?</i>	
<i>What are your responsibilities with regard the TA?</i>	
<i>What are the TA responsibilities?</i>	
<i>How well equipped was the TA when she started working with you?</i>	
<i>Is the TA improving student learning in your class?</i>	
<i>What practices are working well with the TA?</i>	
<i>What things could be improved?</i>	
<i>What changes, if any, would you make to the TA system?</i>	