A Shackled Heart:

Teacher Aides' Experience of Supporting Students with High Needs in Regular Classes

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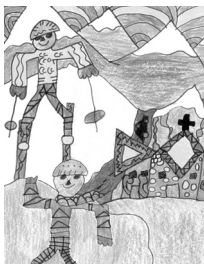

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to seek understanding of the experience of those who support students with high needs in regular classes. Seven teacher aides were interviewed, with the interview and data analysis guided by Heideggerian phenomenology. The findings reveal that teacher aides are unprepared for the responsibility or the relationship that develops with students. The nature of this relationship is brought to light, revealing meaning for teacher aides' mode of caring and how they provide support. As they embody experiences of the student as their own, teacher aides feel "one step away from mother". Their support goes beyond the boundaries of the school day, as they constantly worry and plan ahead. Their hearts are shackled. Serious concerns arise for teacher aides and students when there is an absence of awareness and acknowledgement of the nature of the relationship being created.

Key Words: teacher aides' experience, students, high needs, phenomenology, ORRS.

INTRODUCTION

Within the context of education in Aotearoa, New Zealand, special education policy has been subject to constant review since 1990. In 1997, the Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Schemes (ORRS) was established to support students who have very high or high ongoing special educational needs. This Ministry of Education initiative was "to provide extra teaching, specialist programming and education support, wherever they attend school" (Ministry of Education, 2000, p. 2). For many of these students, the majority of support is provided by a teacher aide, and is often for a considerable part of the day.

This study arose from the first author's experience as an occupational therapist, conducting classroom observations as part of assessment of students' environments. I became aware that teacher aides often appeared to be taking responsibility for much of the students' day-to-day learning and management, also supporting them in the playground, the toilet and at meal times. They appeared to impact on students' relationships with peers and with the teacher. As an occupational therapist, I was concerned with the ways "other occupations support or hinder the person, and how they might better provide support" (Hocking, 2001, p. 465). I was also aware that where teacher aides' occupations sit alongside those of the student, it is often difficult to see clearly where the balance shifts from supporting to hindering a student's inclusion.

The focus of this study was therefore to seek understanding of teacher aides' experience of being with a student with high needs on a daily basis in New Zealand classrooms. Its purpose was to reveal what that experience tells us about how teacher aides provide this support. The teacher aides who participated worked in the context of regular Year One to Eight classrooms, where they supported students identified as requiring significant ongoing resourcing to access the curriculum.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As a result of pressure from both parents and teachers to ensure the inclusion for students with high education support needs, teacher aide hours have increased internationally. This trend has continued to a point where teacher aides, also known as paraprofessionals and paraeducators, have become the main method of implementing inclusive practices in many schools (Giangreco, Broer & Edelman, 1999; Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli & McFarland, 1997). Furthermore, it appears that teacher aides are being given increasing responsibility for the education of students, and are taking responsibility for the success of a student's inclusion (Giangreco et al., 1997; Marks, Schrader & Levine, 1999).

Many studies have identified practices that in effect inhibit or work against the goals of inclusion for the student and the teacher. These identify that practices introduced to support inclusion, as in having a teacher aide full time with a student, may in fact be counter productive, with teacher aides remaining unnecessarily in close proximity to the student (Giangreco, Dennis, Cloninger, Edelman & Schattman, 1993; Giangreco et al., 1997; Hemmingsson, Borell & Gustavsson, 2003; Meyer & Fisher, 1999; Rose, 2000).

This finding is supported by the limited number of studies that have focused exclusively on the endemic perspective of teacher aides (Downing, Ryndak and Clark, 2000; Marks et al., 1999). One revealed that many teacher aides assume responsibility for both the student's learning and behavioural needs, in order for the student to succeed and not disrupt the class or the teacher. They protect the teacher from the "burden" of the student, assuming a liaison role between others involved in the student's school life. They feel like the expert, the one who knows the student best. Shared responsibility for the student seems to be the missing link in this example of inclusive practice (Marks et al, 1999). In addition, concerns have been raised about the extent to which teacher aides take responsibility for adapting

programmes, and make decisions to take students out of class to prevent disruptions (Downing et al., 2000).

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It is apparent, however, that the New Zealand situation differs from that found overseas. Here, ORRS funding is attached to individual students and teacher aides are not required to have a relevant tertiary qualification. Therefore previous findings may not be directly applicable, although Wylie (2000) reported that schools in New Zealand have voiced similar concerns.

METHODOLOGY

In order to better understand teacher aides' experience of supporting children with high needs in New Zealand regular classes, seven teacher aides were interviewed. A phenomenological philosophy guided the process of inquiring about and interpreting their descriptions of supporting students for the major part of the school day. Phenomenological methodology demands attentiveness to details and dimensions of everyday experience that may seem trivial. This attentiveness allows us to be "thoughtfully aware of the consequential in the inconsequential, the significant in the taken-for-granted" (Van Manen, 1984, p. 36), and gives rise to shared experiences and themes revealed by research of this nature.

The research process

The process extended from what was known or anticipated prior to the study, to examining the implications and truth of what was uncovered. This included identifying personal biases and pre-understandings in an attempt to prevent these influencing interpretations.

The participants all had more than one year of recent experience working with a student who has high needs and ORRs funding in a regular primary school classroom. The students had a wide range of disabilities, from primarily physical to those with more challenging behaviour or cognitive delay. All teacher aides supported their student for the greater part of the school day.

Interviews were guided by the fundamental question of how teacher aides' experience supporting these children. They were asked to describe specific examples of supporting the student and their experience while doing this. The intent was to capture stories, anecdotes, incidents and experiences, however little structure was applied within the interviews in order to encourage rich disclosure and fluency. Transcripts were analysed using a thematic interpretative process, with an initial focus on Van Manen's (1990) four existentials of lived space (spatiality), lived time (temporality), lived body (corporeality) and lived other (relationality) to guide reflections and gain a deeper understanding of the experience. Heidegger's (1962) notion of 'concern' as a mode of being-in-the-world, and Levinas' (1998) notion of 'caring encounter' informed the interpretation.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal that teacher aides begin supporting students unprepared for the responsibility and the journey they will travel. "Being in the world of school" means living alongside the student, sharing their daily experiences (Heidegger, 1962). It means experiencing their life-world or everyday existence (Van Manen, 1984). Within the life-world of these teacher aides, lived body, lived time, lived space and lived other are intricately linked, with one impacting on the other.

Corporeality: Carrying another.

Corporeality refers to being bodily in the world (Van Manen, 1990). For these teacher aides, to support their student is to be alongside them in a classroom. They juggle for the right place to situate themselves, as they attempt being as inconspicuous as possible. They try being "there but not there" to support when needed but to avoid having their student and others in the class engage with them unnecessarily. Teacher aides regularly experience loneliness and isolation, doing activities with their student in a different place and time to the rest of the school, with no one with whom to share their emotions and thoughts. They sometimes embody this feeling as a cocoon around themselves and the student, as Sharon and her student did when sharing an experience.

> *I remember an incident when we'd been banished from the class because there'd been an accident. Peter ran into the trolley of paint powder, and so I was told to take him away while it was cleaned up. I got quite angry. I thought "to have that trolley there, paint unlidded, it was an accident about to happen". Anyone could have done it, but because it was Peter, he was singled out. I was really angry that he was being picked on. I felt they were picking on me as well.*
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> *So we took refuge under a tree, on a bench. I sat and I cuddled him, I was feeling very sad for him. It was just he and I against the world, that's how it was. It started to thunder. I began to sing. "I hear thunder…." He stopped, and he listened. He started to join in. So from that time on, if it became stressful in the classroom, if on the mat he touches someone, and they say "please move him", I would take him aside, and we would sing.*

Sharon and Peter are bound, in some way parcelled together. What impacts on one, impacts on the other; feeling picked on and singled out. There is a sense of being treated differently and being excluded. They look for shelter; protection from the storm in the classroom, yet outside another storm is brewing. They hear thunder. To protect the student, Sharon wraps him in her arms, shutting out the world by singing to him. They sit entwined in another world in their cocoon. Having discovered the warmth of this

encapsulating environment, they have a safe haven to return to at other times of trouble.

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Providing this level of safety is physically and emotionally demanding and teacher aides often experience exhaustion at the end of the day. A student that runs often means the teacher aide must run with them. To do this day after day is tiring, as is shouldering the continuous responsibility of watching a student to ensure he or she is accepted in the classroom. Joan described the burden as a weight on her shoulders that she lived with, unaware of its physicality until a day her student was absent. To carry this weight day after day is draining, the responsibility of doing so an encumbering worry. These findings highlight the fear and concern these teacher aides live with day-to-day.

Corporeality: Living with thrownness.

Being in situations where possibilities present themselves, where things just happen, is to live with thrownness (Heidegger, 1962). While life is a series of thrown experiences for all of us, for these teacher aides it seems that unpredictability sits alongside them for the greater part of the day. Many times they feel without choice or control, being totally unprepared for what the day or the student might present. They frequently find themselves in situations where they must act or react, with no time or ability to grasp the full implications or consequences of their actions, as Shirley explains.

> *Often the activities we do are dictated by her mood on the day. If she pushes the activity away, I have to put it aside and do something else. If I'm not prepared, I can think "Oh God, what can I do next?" I've got no-one to enthuse me, to bounce ideas off. If you're not in the right mood, it can be horrendous, because it's just her and me. You can get a bit down really, as she sort of throws things at you, and you think "I can't handle this today." I might put her on the swing and push her a bit. And not talk much.*

When the student rejects the activities Shirley has ready-to-hand, she finds herself unprepared and resorts to repetitive activities that are soothing for both. Shirley uses the silence to retreat. As she lives each day in a constant state of flux, she is unsure of her ability to stay afloat.

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When these teacher aides have resources and strategies ready-to-hand, they feel prepared for most eventualities and in control. The day has some predictability, and they can support the student positively. Conversely, when they don't have adequate resources or strategies to use, they feel anxious, uncomfortable, and stressed. Being unprepared leaves them exposed to risks of being unsafe and sometimes gives rise to despair. The responsibility they feel demands that they remain on the alert and ready to respond, despite their own fatigue and anxiety.

Temporality: Living by a different clock.

Temporality is a notion showing how time is subjective, experienced differently depending on the situation. For these teacher aides, time both flies, leaving insufficient time, yet on other occasions it can drag. Teacher aides also experience being out of time with others. In addition, they find that asking for time from others in the school to discuss concerns is difficult. This often results in catching people on the run, while preparing for class or on the way to morning tea or lunch. This gives a pervasive sense of not being valued, of being less important than others.

Finding time for things others take for granted is also difficult when it depends on someone else being available to keep an eye on the student. Sharon reported:

> *I remember asking one teacher if she could sit with Peter, as I needed to go to the toilet. I thought, "This is ridiculous, having to ask to go to the toilet." When I got back she said "This can't happen again, the minute you went out he tried to run away." But at times I need the loo. I know he used to play up when I went out, so as I left the classroom I'd think to myself "If I run to the toilet, and I run back, I will only be gone two minutes."*

Sharon fears the havoc she creates by leaving her student and feels guilty for disrupting the teacher. She runs, worrying all the time about what may be occurring in the classroom. She goes, then runs back, but the responsibility travels with her.

When fearing for a student's safety, as in running to the toilet or when a student goes missing in the playground, time has a different perspective. Two minutes can feel like an enormous expanse of time when it is filled with images of things that might be occurring. Within this unreality of time, multitudes of possibilities are created in the thoughts of the teacher aide.

These experiences of lived time being out of time with others are paralleled by the past and future having different meanings for many of the students supported by those in this study. As these teacher aides reflect back on where their student has come from to where they are now, they often see the gap widening between their student's learning and that of their peers.

Spatiality: Being always present.

Spatiality, which refers to the way we experience or feel space, is of particular relevance to teacher aides as they move about the classroom, the playground and the toilet. They alter space to support their student's learning and independence; they both create space, and confine it.

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Space can be experienced through a range of emotions. It can feel safe, or unsafe, comfortable and "at home" or uncomfortable. It changes when viewed through the eyes of another, yet for these teacher aides the private space of the student's toilet and separate teaching area is often considered as if viewed through the eyes of another. They are conscious of how others might see the situation. Repeated references to the media "hearing about it" and misinterpreting the situation suggest that these teacher aides feel in an unsafe space, even though they believe their actions are safe.

In addition, how classroom spaces are experienced depends on where they and their student work in relation to the rest of the class and whether the student is doing the same learning activity as the other students.

> *In the classroom, we used to sit with the other kids when they were younger. I was right there alongside the teacher's desk, with the other students around us. This year we've got the computers behind us, and the book place in front of us. As she gets older, we get more and more detached, because what they're doing is way beyond what we're doing. As you're getting up in class and the more structured it is, it is just way above Julie's head. The gap gets wider, and we move further away.*

Shirley and her student now find themselves moved from having other students and the teacher around them, to having furniture to keep them company. The book place and computers have replaced bodies, shutting them off. They have been detached, severed.

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The outdoor space of the playground can also be problematic. Its expanse of space can provide opportunity to relax and temporarily shed the burden of controlling the student's every movement. However, if their student has no personal boundaries or awareness of danger, this space confronts the teacher aide with a plethora of anticipated dangers.

Relationality: The caring encounter with the student.

The relationships teacher aides form with the teacher and other school staff, visiting professionals, the parents, and particularly the student were highly significant in this study. While the nature of these relationships varies, they are experienced by teacher aides through interactions with the student or conversely lack of interaction. How relationships are viewed often depends on whether people come and spend time alongside the student, showing willingness to get to know his or her reality. Sharing this reality connected others to teacher aides as they had experienced what it is like for the student and for them. This created some shared understanding.

The nature of the teacher aides' relationship with students can be typified as a "caring encounter". While many were initially unsure of their willingness to work with a student with high needs, once the child's vulnerability was encountered there was a commitment to supporting the student. Many felt "called" or "chosen". Levinas (1998) describes this as the original caring encounter, where the other is experienced as making an appeal on them. The very core of these teacher aides had been touched. The child had made a claim on them before they had a chance to cognitively process or think about it. They had already experienced responsibility before they knew it. As a result, they are totally there for the child. They have been taken hostage: the more they care, the more they worry, and the more their commitment to continuing to work with the student strengthens.

For example, Joan experienced the pain of her student separating from his mother, so took on the mothering role of "being there" in the way he seemed to immediately need.

> *When I started with him, on the first day, he sat outside the room. He just sat up against the wall and screamed. I thought, "Oh, no, what have I done?" Then we went through this phase of him clutching at me, and he wouldn't let me out of his sight. For morning tea, for lunch, he was just like a limpet, stuck to me. And I couldn't do a thing, I couldn't move. In the end the teacher said I had to leave him and take a break. I felt really guilty walking out with him screaming. I really struggled with that, but I had to, as much for me as for him.*

She stays with him, attached physically and emotionally as he clings to her. It's as though a string pulls her towards him. She feels his pain as her own as she walks away, feeling responsible for his distress.

This commitment grips teacher aides in a way they would never have predicted when they agreed to work with the student. What impacts on one, impacts on the other. When one is banned from the class, so is the other. Teacher aides embody the student's feelings as their own. For instance, Sharon felt *"really hurt when [other students] laughed"* at 'her student' when he did as they said and pulled down his pants.

Being so in tune with their student, teacher aides are directly affected by their moods. They try to read the student's mood as soon as he or she arrives at school, to predict how their day might be. When the student doesn't say anything, nor looks them in the eye, *"it's going to be a tough day"*. There is little sense of choice, nor do teacher aides feel able to change it. They share the mood. It invades both their beings.

Much of their caring involves a sense of knowing their students: connecting with them, sensing their needs and feelings. Teacher aides believe they know the student better than anyone else in the school. In attempting to describe

their relationship, the nearest many can come to defining it is "one step away from mother." Shirley describes this intimate way of knowing how it is for her student. *"I'm quite attached to her. You get to understand each other, and because I'm "one step away from mother", I've got that control. We've just bonded really; you have this little separate bond, so you know."*

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The bond that is created with the student holds the teacher aide and demands of them in ways that encompass their thoughts, their time and their emotions. They feel responsible for the student's being and assume responsibility for the student's deeds and misdeeds. This bonding to the student creates a responsibility that many teacher aides find themselves unable to voluntarily relinquish. For many, it means having the student "with them" at all times, as they think about the student outside the nine to three school day. They carry them, taking them home with them, constantly in their minds. Their hearts are shackled. It would seem that their being is so entwined with that of the student that the "commitment to the other" is felt like "being as one." This appears to be the essence of the relationship between these teacher aides and their students, and one that impacts on all dimensions of their role in supporting the student.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study support the concern others have expressed, that having a teacher aide assigned for the greater part of the day to one student may be counter- productive to inclusion (Giangreco, Dennis, Cloninger, Edelman & Schattman, 1993; Giangreco et al, 1997; Hemmingsson, Borell & Gustavsson, 2003; Meyer & Fisher, 1999; Rose, 2000). It raises the question of whether this is best practice. The study also provides insight into the relationship between the teacher aide and the student, and how this relationship impacts on the way teacher aides provide support. There are implications here for all concerned with the student and the teacher aide.

Implications for outside service providers.

For those from Special Education or any other outside service provider, making a difference for students means taking time to be part of and participate in the day-to-day happenings and the student's life at school, which is also the life of the teacher aide. The study reveals that asking teacher aides what is important, and listening to their stories of how it is, will allow a more enlightened perspective on what is occurring and why. Making a difference may depend on teacher aides perceiving there is mutual respect and shared understanding of their reality because this is the starting point for working collaboratively. However, working directly with teacher aides as the primary source of information about the student and recipient of educational and behavioural strategies, may perpetuate a situation of teachers being unable to take responsibility for students. The current funding model of dedicated teacher aides would seem to make this quandary insoluble. One strategy to ensure that teacher aides are not further isolated by their lack of responsibility for educational collaboration may be to plan and implement professional seminars for school staff that require teacher aides and teachers to attend together.

Implications for schools.

It seems that in focusing on the student and his or her needs, concern for the welfare of teacher aides and how they might be incorporated into school-wide and class-wide practice has been limited. However, understanding the nature of the initial encounter of teacher aide and student, where the teacher aide meets the student in their vulnerability, means awareness of teacher aides' own vulnerability. Putting steps in place to shift this focus might avoid the teacher aide feeling the need to assume total responsibility.

Alongside this, careful consideration needs to be given to how the teacher aide can primarily support the teacher, rather than the student (Downing et al., 2000). In this way strategies for including the student and avoiding dependence on one adult can be created, with greater opportunities for the teacher to work with the student while the teacher aide supports others.

Implications for planning: Individual Education Plans.

An IEP is a prime opportunity for collaboration, with the teacher aide being a vital member of the team. Creative practice and problem solving through IEPs regarding goals for increasing participation might mean a reduced need for one on one teacher aide support. Small group work with the student included would decrease opportunity for the student to become over-dependent on the teacher aide.

The implication for teachers and specialist teachers is that they might consider alternative strategies within the class to include all students and to encourage equal participation. If the specialist teacher worked more within the classroom, sharing responsibility for the student's learning and participation, this would allow the teacher to work more with the student.

Limitations of this study.

This study drew from a small sample of seven teacher aides, in different schools with different students, therefore the extent to which these findings can be generalized to other areas and other teacher aides is unknown. A particular limitation of this study was that all participants were women. While this is indicative of the majority of teacher aides, there are some men in this role, and their experience may be different. In addition, there was only one participant who identified as Maori, therefore the cultural mix of this study is not representative of the New Zealand population nor the cultural mix of teacher aides.

A further limitation is that the study focused on teacher aides supporting students in Year One to Six classrooms. It is

anticipated that the situation in secondary school, where there are multiple teachers and classrooms, might be very different. Similarly, many teacher aides work in other educational contexts, including special schools, satellite units, physically disabled units, and Kura Kaupapa Maori*. Research in these areas would add another dimension to knowledge and understanding of how teacher aides support students.

CONCLUSION

Interpretive analysis of the experiences of seven female teacher aides employed to support students with high or very high needs in regular classrooms in New Zealand revealed concerns similar to those identified in overseas studies. Current practice of providing a dedicated teacher aide to work with individual students results in a high level of isolation within the school setting. As they sit alongside their student, ever present to support learning and manage their behaviour, a close relationship develops. Teacher aides take on personal responsibility for all their student's needs and emotions.

"WHAT IMPACTS ON ONE, IMPACTS ON THE OTHER. WHEN ONE IS BANNED FROM THE CLASS, SO IS THE OTHER."

In addition to supporting the student's educational achievements, teacher aides divert the student into activities designed to reduce disruption to the teacher and other students. They provide assistance with eating and toileting and ensure the safety of both the student they support and other students in the playground. They provide a protective cocoon against teasing by other students and reprimands by the teacher, feeling they are also hurt and reprimanded. They feel unprepared for the responsibility they are given, frequently finding themselves in situations where they must react quickly with no time or ability to grasp the full consequences of their actions.

Nonetheless they sense that the things they do are open to misinterpretation and they feel vulnerable because of this. The work is experienced as physically and emotionally demanding, yet teacher aides are committed to supporting their student, frequently thinking and worrying about them, and preparing activities for them outside the paid school hours.

While the findings of this study may not generalize to other situations, and may not reflect the experience of male teacher aides and those working with older students or in other settings, they are nonetheless worrying. They imply that outside service providers must work closely with teacher aides but that doing so may perpetuate the tendency for teacher aides to come between teachers and students with high needs. They also suggest that inclusion of teachers and teacher aides in professional development seminars and school-based strategies to integrate teacher aides into the wider school community, are required. However, whether such strategies can effectively address the extent to which teacher aides become emotionally shackled to the student they work with is unclear. The fundamental issue raised by this study is whether the practice of having teacher aides assist a single student, rather than assisting the teacher to provide learning to a class that includes a student with high needs, needs urgent consideration.

* Kura Kaupapa Maori – Primary schools where teaching and learning includes the culture and language of Maori.

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