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Te Whare Wananga o te Upoko o te Ika a Maui



Report on a Survey of
TEACHER AIDES
of 'High' & 'Very High Needs' Deaf Students
in Mainstream Schools

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Section 1: Summary of Key Findings

1.0 BACKGROUND

The research project of which this survey forms a part investigates the communication access and learning situations of mainstreamed primary aged Deaf students in receipt of ORS funding (i.e., verified by SES as ‘high’ and ‘very high’ needs). In addition to six case studies, key groups involved with mainstreamed deaf students were surveyed by questionnaires mailed to national samples of parents, mainstream teachers, teacher aides, itinerant teachers of the deaf, and interviews with Deaf mentors.

This paper reports specifically on data obtained from and about **teacher aides**. Seven teacher aides participated in case studies based on classroom observation and interviews. Questionnaires for teacher aides (TAs) were posted to 348 schools identified by SES as having an ORS funded deaf student enrolled there. This yielded 129 completed questionnaires from teacher aides (a 37% response rate; however about a third of schools contacted in the mail-out reported no deaf student to be enrolled and therefore no eligible teacher aide respondent.)

1.1 KEY FINDINGS

i. TAs have a significant daily support role for deaf students

91% of ORS funded deaf students are supported by a TA for a large proportion of their contact hours at school – typically 15 –25 hours a week - as compared to 86% who have an itinerant teacher of the deaf who visits for 2 –6 hours per week. As such, TAs are a central component of mainstreamed deaf students’ education and potentially have considerable impact on the quality of their school experience and learning outcomes.

ii. Roles and tasks of TAs are many and varied

Only 19 of 129 respondents enclosed a formal written job description, the majority of which were written for a general teacher aide or a 'special needs' teacher aide position. However all respondents described their work in their own words.

The roles and tasks most commonly performed by TAs are:

- Tutoring and assisting child with academic programme (often individually)
- Adapting lessons and learning resources for the deaf student
- Support, supervision, advocacy - managing behaviour, social support
- Re-explaining - oral 'interpreting' of instructions
- Sign language interpreting
- IEP participation: reporting progress, setting goals, typing up, actioning goals
 - Notetaking
 - Hearing aid management
 - Liaison with parents and other staff in school on day to day matters
 - Speech & auditory training practice
 - Teaching signs to hearing children & staff

Teacher aides do not normally have opportunities to observe other professionals performing similar tasks to themselves, for instance another TA, an interpreter, or a teacher of the deaf (since their contact hours are often scheduled not to overlap). This leaves them to take a lot of initiative in formulating their own role, often without relevant models on which to base their methods of working with a deaf student.

iii. TAs have significant responsibility for student learning and communication access

According to TAs, teachers, principals, and parents, TAs assume a high level of responsibility for deaf students' communication access, language development, social participation and curriculum learning.

“How important is the TA to the deaf student’s learning?”
(Classroom teachers’ perception)

Vital or Very important	80%
Important	13%
Somewhat important	7%

“I rely on her to interpret and modify for Robert just about everything we do in the curriculum” (Teacher of a signing deaf student)

“To what extent do you feel responsible for the deaf student’s learning?” (Teacher Aides’ perception)

Totally or Very responsible	68%
Somewhat responsible	30%
Not responsible	2%

“I feel very responsible for the teaching. The classroom teacher can’t, or doesn’t, teach him.” (TA of a signing deaf student)

A survey of Deaf Mentors/Resource Persons (paraprofessionals who visit mainstreamed deaf students as role models) revealed their strong perception that TAs frequently assume too much responsibility for the accomplishment of learning tasks, by ‘helping’ students to the point of impeding genuinely independent learning skills and achievement. They attribute this to a lack of awareness of deaf people’s capabilities and training in effective teaching strategies.

57% of TAs had worked continuously with the same student for 1 - 4 years. In one case, the TA had worked for 9 years with a 12-year-old student.

“How long have you worked with this deaf student?”

Less than 1 year	26%
1-2 years	44%
3-4 years	13%
4+ years	17%

Extended service with the same student raises potential issues of student dependence, the importance of monitoring of TA competence, and the likelihood of the TA becoming the default ‘deaf expert’ in the mainstream school. In the six case studies, all TAs had worked with the student for at least two years and were considered by the teacher to have more expertise in relation to the child than the teacher, particularly where the teacher could not communicate directly with the student.

A principal's comment illustrates some of these issues:

"The [TAs] see themselves as being pivotal in this child's total learning - more so than an ordinary teacher does with a normal child in the class. We know that we are responsible for that child's learning progress for the year, but next year there's another teacher with different strengths... But with the deaf children, going through with a teacher aide, if the teacher aide is not able to interpret... well, they [the TAs] worry about that! With a long-term attachment with one child, you can develop an emotional attachment which is counter-productive too. These people need to be objective in the work that they're doing and... I don't know how they can be, quite frankly."

iv. TA training is lacking

The perceived level of responsibility for student learning and the skills required (as indicated above) are not commensurate with TAs training or employment conditions. Most TAs have little or no training specifically for working with deaf students; those who work with a profoundly deaf student who uses NZSL are more likely to have had some specific short-term training (usually NZSL classes or short workshops).

TAs perceive their main training needs to be:

- Techniques for teaching deaf students - especially reading, maths
- NZSL – expressive and receptive skills
- Interpreting skills
- Speech and auditory training techniques

TAs report a high level of dissatisfaction with the amount and depth of the training available in relation to the tasks they are expected to fulfil.

55% had no training specific to their role as TA for a deaf student. 45% had attended short training courses (from one to several days) since their employment. These were mainly through the Deaf Education Centres or SES, with content described as Sign Language, Note-taking, and generic 'Mainstream Courses'. Favourable comments were made about the relevance of training offered through the DECs, although most respondents wished for more, and earlier – for example: *"I attended a one week*

course at VADEC for part time teachers and teacher aides of deaf students after I had been in the job for one year and one term. It was an excellent course”.

Highest level of education reported

- 15 - Bachelor’s degree or teaching diploma*
- 52 – unrelated vocational or trade qualification
- 40 - no tertiary education

(*The group who hold a Bachelors degree or Dip Teaching are apparently overqualified for a TA position, yet may still be under-trained for the specific task of teaching a *deaf* child.)

Previous jobs held by TAs included:

Office work, hairdresser, landscape gardener, shop assistant, TA to other special needs student, mother, small business owner.

v. Barriers to appropriate training of TAs

Current barriers to more appropriate training of TAs include:

- Lack of targeted professional development funding via ORS
- Lack of time to attend training - no coverage for relief staffing in TA’s absence
- Few training opportunities available – no qualification or ongoing training designed for this role
- Rate of pay and employment status offers no material incentive to upgrade skills and qualifications
- Possible lack of awareness (by schools) of need for training

A principal commented:

“The funding that comes through the [ORS] funding, doesn't cover the professional development, and yet ... we are required to be good employers and make sure that they have a share of professional development... it's a disproportionate amount (for two students). The professional development funds have to be split with the deaf students' class teachers ... the professional development for the signers [TAs] is specific and really necessary - and there's no funding for that.”

The relatively low pay rate for TAs offers little incentive for investment in training even if it were available or required. One commented, *“The level of training needed would outweigh the rate of pay”*.

TAs also report that the lack of replacement staffing to support the deaf student in their absence deters them from attending professional development opportunities during term time.

In short, TAs are currently in the position of doing a complex and responsible job for little remuneration, with minimal training and low status. A mainstream principal commented:

“It's a lot of responsibility they take on ... and the situation almost forces that responsibility upon them - for a very meagre payment. Basically they're screwed down to the bottom of the scale. We're trying to get them as cheaply as we can because we don't have the funding to pay them. But they are worth more than they are being paid.”

vi. Supervision and appraisal

The majority of TAs have generic (or no) job descriptions, which do not reflect many of the actual tasks they perform - as identified in (ii) above. Generic job descriptions do not define specialised competencies in relation to deaf learners against which their performance could be accurately appraised.

Most TAs report that their work is appraised in some manner, mainly by classroom teachers or other school staff who do not have specialised knowledge of deaf learners, and the skills required to work with them. Itinerant teachers play an important role in informally advising and supporting TAs ‘on the job’, but are not usually directly involved in their recruitment or appraisal. This was seen as unsatisfactory by itinerant teachers and Deaf Mentors.

“Who assigns your duties?”

Class teacher 109, Other 39, ITOD 23, Principal 6

“Who evaluates your performance?”

Class teacher 56, Other school staff 52, ITOD 22, Principal 24,
No-one 7, No response 11 (= no evaluation?)

“Who do you ask for assistance, advice?”

Class teacher 99, ITOD 56, Other 48, Principal 16

In general, monitoring of the effectiveness and competencies of Teacher Aides appears to be superficial or under-informed in relation to the needs of deaf learners.

vii. Satisfaction with Employment Conditions

The majority of TAs reported that they were *satisfied* with:

- The type of job
- The teachers they worked with
- What was expected of them
- Work conditions
- Their effectiveness at the job

Overall they were *dissatisfied* with:

- Their rate of pay
- Their training for the job

The discrepancy between *satisfaction* with ‘effectiveness at job’ and *dissatisfaction* with ‘training for the job’ is interesting. In fact, a lack of training combined with weak task specification (e.g., in a job description or through performance objectives) make it difficult to accurately evaluate how effectively one is performing.

viii. Sign language skills of TAs

Relatively few TAs overall use sign language; 29% of TAs report that they communicate with their student in some form of signing, as follows:

NZSL & Signed English, mixed	15%,
NZSL	11%
Signed English	3%

The majority first learned to sign Australasian Signed English, or in an NZSL night class. 12% report being self-taught (‘by book’ or ‘on the job’), while only 7% learned NZSL through natural interaction with Deaf people (family or friends).

54% said that they do not have regular opportunity to improve their sign language skills. The other 46% said that they have opportunities to improve their NZSL skills in a variety of ways, such as, self-funded enrolment in community night classes (if available), occasional workshops offered by DECs, and through contact with a visiting Deaf Resource Person or an itinerant teacher of the deaf.

For the majority of TAs who work with signing students, there is insufficient opportunity to develop either basic or advanced sign language proficiency. There is also inconsistency in the form of signing used with deaf students. The small proportion of TAs who use sign language with their students are invariably also interpreting for them, which demands skills and training additional to the ability to sign fluently. Some Teacher Aides report acquiring sign language on the job, usually learning from the child for whom they provide interpreting and tutoring, supplemented by reference to books or videos as the need arises.

There was no indication in this study that the NZSL skills of TAs are formally evaluated either prior to, or during their employment. Being 'able to sign' is apparently sufficient for employment. This has a parallel in the fact that the sign language skills of deaf students are generally not formally monitored or developed either.

These conditions amount to an unsatisfactory language learning and educational situation for deaf students whose primary language is potentially NZSL. It is also a source of vocational stress for TAs themselves. These concerns are echoed by parents and by Deaf Mentors in the study, who identify TAs' depth of competence in NZSL as a vital factor in student's access to meaningful learning.

ix. Problems with sign language interpreting effectiveness

Sign language interpreting is one particular skill for which TAs lack appropriate training and appraisal. The difficulty of classroom interpreting is frequently not appreciated by TAs themselves or by other school personnel, as illustrated by this teacher's response to the question, "*What information do you expect the Teachers*

Aides to pass on to Sam in class?” Answer: “Everything that we discuss, everything that’s said - and they do too ... so he knows exactly what’s happening and what people are being told. Yeah ... everything that he would normally be expected to hear.” Analysis of transcripts of classroom discourse (from case studies) reveals that this perception is usually not borne out by the information actually transferred by TAs’ interpretation in class.

Common problems observed in interpreting data

- *Gaps* - significant omission of content information; difficulty conveying various ‘layers’ of talk that happen simultaneously in the classroom
- *Incomprehensible*, impoverished, or inaccurate sign language use
- *Changes to message* - alteration of content (e.g., changing question forms from open to closed; major deletions and additions), alteration of style or tone of delivery and nature of the interaction (e.g., from ‘one-to-many’ to ‘one-to-one’ address)
- *Physical positioning* – TA often seated inappropriately for child to be able to simultaneously see interpreting and other visual aspects of the event such as the teacher, other student speakers, or the board.
- *Conflicting task demands for the student*– whereas a deaf person can receive complete information only through the visual channel, many classroom learning tasks require multi-modal attention from students, for example: listen + watch visual display, listen + look at print, listen + look + write/draw, listen to instructions + action that requires eyegaze. Such activities result in loss of information and participation for deaf students watching an interpreter.
- *Unrealistic demand on students’ visual attention to interpreting* – attending to (and producing) an interpreted message is more mentally and physically taxing than being directly involved in communication, as this ITOD’s comment highlights:
“I was observing [student, age 12] in the hall, and she was being very selective about what she watched. She was more conscious at her age of what the people were doing around her. I suppose [the TA] would have been communicating for over an hour which I thought was excessively long. That’s one of the things that people here don’t think of ... They expect the communicator or the interpreter or whatever, just to go on and on and they also don’t take into account how tired the child gets taking in all this information. So after about probably 20 minutes it was just going out instead of going in, you know... So to make the communication meaningful there has to be a lot of thought and sensitivity (about) the communication mode.”

Classroom data, and TAs own accounts, show that the standard of interpreting (in combination with the inherently complex nature of classroom discourse) does not generally provide signing deaf students with equal access to linguistic and social inclusion in classroom activities. This is borne out by other empirical research.

1.2 CONCLUSIONS FROM KEY FINDINGS

TAs have a central role in supporting the learning of ‘high’ and ‘very high needs’ deaf students; they often have more daily interaction with, and moment-to-moment responsibility for, the child than any other single person in the educational team.

TAs perform multiple and sometimes quite specialised roles in relation to deaf students. Their duties encompass literacy teaching, sign language or oral interpreting, curriculum adaptation, speech training, discipline, and social support. Many perform the roles of interpreter and tutor, and most have a significant role in developing the deaf child’s face-to-face and written language, for which they lack formal preparation. In general, their personal backgrounds and training cannot be seen to adequately prepare them for the tasks they perform. Most TAs have contact with, but are not selected or formally supervised by, a deaf education specialist.

Teacher Aides as a group display considerable personal dedication, resourcefulness, and commitment to the individual students they work with. Many have developed good skills over several years, while others continue to work in less effective ways that have not been refined by evaluation and appropriate training. The majority of TAs serve the same student for more than one year, thus increasing their potential impact on the student’s educational experience.

In some cases, a ‘very high needs’ deaf student is supported at school by a minimally trained TA and an itinerant teacher who is not trained as a teacher of the deaf (as found in one of the six case studies). In such situations the teacher aide, particularly if long-serving, is likely to have more expertise in relation to the deaf student than both the itinerant teacher and the classroom teacher. This situation cannot be described as adequate or appropriate provision of ‘specialist support’ for a deaf student with ‘very high needs’.

The wide range of work undertaken by TAs, alongside their employment conditions, constitute a vital, and relatively cheap, adaptation of the mainstream learning environment. School principals and mainstream teachers vary in their perception of the effectiveness of TAs, from those who believe that a competent TA can make

mainstream education accessible to the child, to those at the other end of the spectrum who express grave concern about the feasibility of relying on untrained TAs to bridge the gaps between a deaf student and a learning programme designed for hearing children. TAs themselves perceive difficulties in deaf student's learning situations, including their own shortcomings in training and skills for the job they perform. TAs are often in the best position to closely observe deaf students' interaction at school, and they describe serious limitations in many students' background knowledge and language skills needed for meaningful participation in the mainstream class programme and social integration with peers. TAs report that these gaps often manifest in behavioural problems (as reflected in the frequent listing of 'behaviour management' in the description of their role), and academic lag.

Looking at mainstreamed deaf learners' situations through the lens of Teacher Aides' work suggests no straightforward solution to improving the status quo. The apparent need for further professional development of TAs should perhaps be re-conceived in terms of what pre-service training and qualification would be appropriate to the various types of specialised work actually being performed by paraprofessionals. Ultimately, the data suggest that the learning contexts available to (and considered appropriate for) deaf students need to be reconfigured in more significant ways to enhance their educational experience and outcomes.

Section 2: Options in Response to Issues Raised by Teacher Aide Survey

2.1 OPTION ONE – Professional development & training

Employ and train Teacher Aides who are competent in:

- communicating effectively with deaf children and adults, thus providing an appropriate model for the child’s linguistic and social development
- teaching literacy, curriculum subjects, and speech/listening to deaf children
- sign language interpreting
- notetaking
- behaviour management (specific to the experience of deaf children)

2.2 OPTION TWO – Provision of trained interpreters & notetakers

Provide individual deaf students with a qualified interpreter and a notetaker, where these services would realistically enable the student to participate academically and socially in the mainstream (with additional teaching support from ITODs and others).

2.3 OPTION 3 – Group Deaf learners and specialist resources together to create accessible learning environments

Create regional and sizeable groupings of deaf students connected with mainstream schools, providing specialised teaching resources and access to professional interpreters. This arrangement would ideally enable students to engage directly in learning interactions with teachers, deaf and hearing peers, and mentors to create a context that suits deaf learners in terms of communication accessibility, literacy instruction, learning styles, and opportunity for social identity.

2.4 Commentary on options

Option 1 is unlikely to be feasible economically or practically, within the current parameters of funding and employment status of the paraprofessional ‘teacher aide’ role. Persons now employed as teacher aides may not be the same pool of people to be drawn on for training in the range of specialist skills that are required.

Option 2 requires significantly increased investment in training and remuneration of new categories of skilled professionals (as opposed to paraprofessional) within the Special (Deaf) Education workforce. Although

professional training of sign language interpreters has been available in New Zealand since 1992, and advocacy to the Ministry of Education for their employment in schools has been ongoing since 1994, no centralised measures to progress this have occurred. Furthermore, interpreters and note-takers cannot be assumed to resolve all barriers for all deaf students. For example, younger students tend not to have a sufficiently developed language or foundation of knowledge through which to cope with interpreted communication in class. Students who use sign language interpreters must already be bilingual; and interpreters are not the appropriate means to achieving that goal. For older students, an interpreter may successfully facilitate access to instruction but not necessarily afford social access to a peer group.

Option 3 requires strategic re-configuration of best resources, personnel and practices in order to develop an educational option that is shown to be effective and consistently available across regions - and therefore attractive to parents as an alternative to mainstream class placement. This would decrease the extent of reliance on teacher aides in the education of deaf students.

Options 2 and 3 also implicitly require a formalised recognition that more deaf students may potentially be bilingual and would benefit from access to a bilingual learning environment and resources that are not sustainable in an immersion situation (i.e. one speaker in a mainstream language environment). This recognition, and the ensuing provision of resources, would change the currently 'de facto' (or absent) status of NZSL as an appropriate language of education for many deaf students.