

***Different Ways of Knowing?  
Understanding Disabled Students' and Teacher Aides'  
School Experiences within a Context of  
Relational Social Justice***

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## ABSTRACT

Disabled students' experiences of working with teacher aides constitute a recent focus of international inquiry. To date in New Zealand, there has been no specific investigation of this aspect of education, despite the widespread reliance on teacher aide support as the primary means of responding to disabled students' presence in schools. Similarly, there are very few New Zealand studies in which teacher aides are the primary participants. This thesis seeks to address this absence in New Zealand educational research by exploring students' and teacher aides' experiences of working together, in order to understand the impact of assigning responsibility for students who have complex learning support requirements to teacher aides who require no qualification, training, or experience to work in this role.

This interpretive qualitative study is positioned in a multi-dimensional framework of current disability, social justice, and sociology of childhood theorising. A series of semi-structured meetings were held with ten students, aged eight to seventeen years, who attended schools in the South Island of New Zealand. As well, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eighteen teacher aides who worked in a range of primary, intermediate, and secondary schools in the same geographic area as the student participants. Data were interpreted utilizing both inductive and deductive means of analysis.

Students' participation in the research and their contributions to the findings demonstrated their competence, agency, and heterogeneity. Students conveyed a sense of the importance and value of the teacher aide's role, if clearly defined and carried out in a positive, professional manner within the context of supportive schools. The findings relating to teacher aides' experiences highlighted the diverse, ambiguous nature of their roles, conceptualised as a continuum of support ranging from aiding teachers in inclusive contexts, to aiding students in assimilationist circumstances, to assuming the role of teacher or babysitter for students in exclusive educational environments. Analysis of teacher aides' experiences revealed the fundamental importance of relationships in coming to know students in terms of their humanness and competence, and in underpinning teacher aides' efforts to do the right thing by students. Participants also identified the need for all adults involved in the policy and practice of education to develop shared understandings of respectful, socially just ways of thinking about disability and childhood as the foundation of a common commitment to teach *all* students well.

The insight generated by participants, who represent perhaps the least powerful of students and employees in New Zealand schools, illuminates some of the most significant changes that need to occur in the thinking and practices of people involved in educational policy-making, teacher and teacher aide education, and schools. Addressing these educational deficits may contribute to the development of a socially just education system that is respectful of and responsive to human difference while recognising and respecting our mutual humanness.

**This thesis is dedicated to my nephews,  
Dan and Tim Wells.**

**Dan**

*Your death brought such different ways of knowing life.  
Your spirit continues to shine bright, lighting the woundedness.*

**Tim**

*You are treasured.  
May you continue to embrace life with lovely humour, integrity, and a good heart.*

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education does not neglect its responsibility to prepare teachers to respect and teach all students.

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Since embarking on this study, I have been shadowed by children and young people, their virtual presence sustaining my efforts throughout the doing and writing process. Memories of students who have taught me have caught me by surprise at different moments. They are students who have been defined in terms of IQ, yet their immeasurable JQ (Joy Quotient) more accurately describes who they are. They are the reason I began this thesis, and they are the reason I reached some kind of ending with it.

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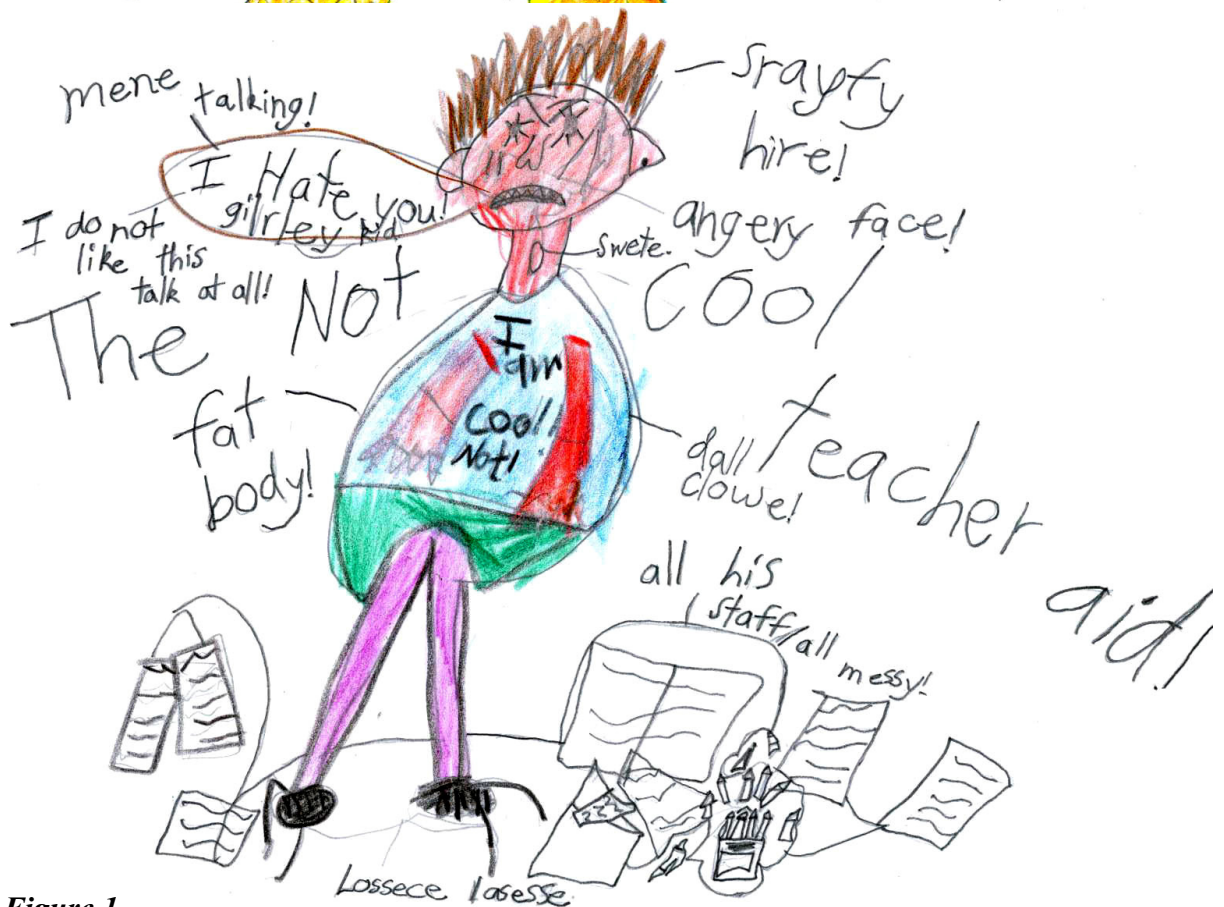
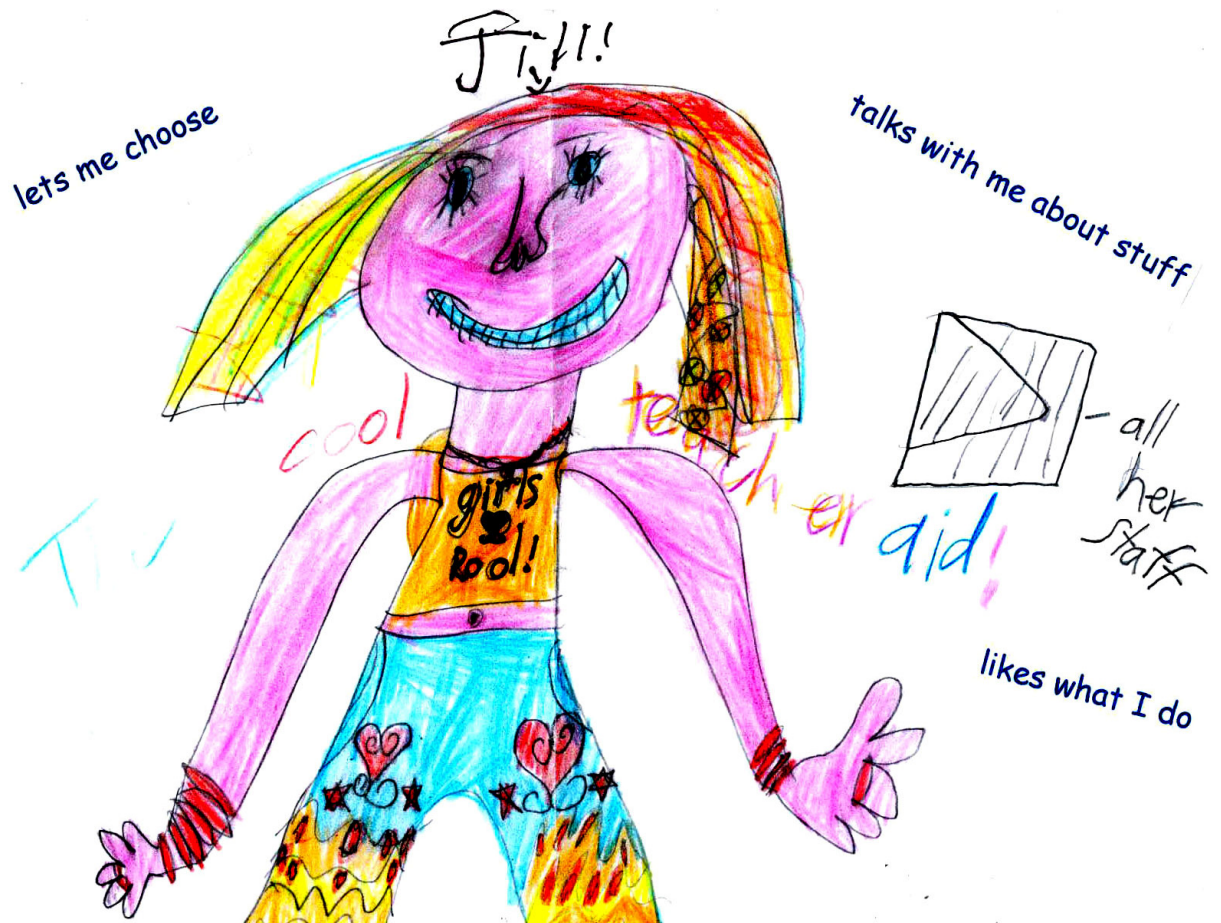


Figure 1.  
Bella's pictures of "Cool" and "Not Cool" teacher aides.



## PREFACE

### WHAT BRINGS ME TO THIS STUDY?

One of the fundamental characteristics of qualitative research is that of the “self as instrument” (Eisner, 1998). Inherent in the self are values, beliefs, and attitudes that have been shaped by age, gender, upbringing, education, and life experiences. I have chosen to preface this thesis with my rationale for undertaking this particular doctoral study. Why am I so interested in understanding the experiences of disabled students and teacher aides in New Zealand schools? Why do I care about this topic? Clough and Nutbrown (2002) noted that “...in a sense, methodology is as much about the way we live our lives as it is about the way in which we choose to conduct a particular piece of research” (p. 68). They suggested that our research methodologies are derived from our personal identities and values which in turn, determine our ethical responses to situations. They encouraged researchers to identify their motivations for choosing particular aspects of human experience as the focus of their research, and referred to work carried out by Clough and Corbett (2000) in which leading figures in inclusive education share their paths to their research and practice in this field. “Accidental-or-not” reasons for pursuing life work in disability and education were outlined and these struck a chord with my own beginnings and entry to this particular world.

Similarly, Slee’s (2004) articulation of how he came to know disability resonated with my experiences, and forced me to think more deeply about ontology and epistemology, theoretical concepts of which I had only hazy and partial knowledge at the outset of my study. Thankfully, Rosenau’s (2004) frank account of learning the language of academia helped in my translation of these terms. Like me, a newcomer to research, Rosenau explained that while workers in the field rarely talk of theory, “each of us operated under our own ever-present ontology and epistemology (i.e., under our personal theories of how things work based on our beliefs about how the world *is* and how it is we *know* what we know)” (p. 264). These personal theories, operating at a micro level, are in turn influenced by macro level discourses and values. So, what do I know about disability (an ontological question) and how have I come to know this (an epistemological question)? What follows are some of the experiences that have shaped my thinking/knowing about disability within the context of education, and which have brought me to this study.

***Coming to Know About Disability: Some Reflections******Going to school first time around.***

From 1964 to 1975 I received my compulsory education in four different schools. I did not know any “handicapped” children. They were completely absent from the schools and world of which I was a part. I did however know about mental illness, depression in particular. I recall a family member having electro-convulsive therapy (ECT, commonly known as shock treatment) at a psychiatric hospital (referred to locally as the “looney bin”). Such knowledge was, however, intensely private, to be kept within the family.

My lack of knowledge about different ways of being in the world reflected the thinking and practices of the time. One of the most powerful ideas about disability was that derived from the medical model, involving the pathologising of deviance from a societal norm. Such deficit thinking about human difference meant that what was “wrong” with someone constituted a private trouble rather than a public concern. Handicapped children had no real place alongside their peers in the public school system. Special schools were thought to be the best place for children whose difference justified their segregation from regular education.

***University first time around: Abnormal psychology.***

In 1979, as part of my Psychology major studies for a Bachelor of Arts degree, I enrolled in a third year Abnormal Psychology course. I looked forward to this with great enthusiasm, having struggled with the rats and numbers focus of previous Psychology courses. This was to be about people, and that is where my interest lay. The professor, esteemed in his discipline, organised a field trip for us. We travelled by bus to a large psychopedic institution for handicapped children situated two hours away from the university. We were led through the maze of hospital green corridors to a large day room with squeaky polished linoleum floors. The professor sat at the front of the room, and told the ward attendant to “bring Johnny in.” In Johnny shuffled. He looked to be in his late twenties or thirties, and was clothed in institutional issue garb. He was told to stand in front of the class, and to turn around when required. The professor then told us that “this is Down syndrome. Note the palmar crease—hold out your hand, Johnny, the slit eyes ... Right, Johnny, you can go. Bring Isobel in. This is spina bifida....” This is how we were taught about “abnormals.” I was young and had limited life experience. The professor was a leader in the world of psychology. I thought that,



given his position and education, he must be right, but I intuitively knew that what he did that day was wrong. I still feel a sense of shame.

I know now that this approach to academic and field knowledge epitomises medical model thinking and practice. I realise now that, anxious to be a good student and get a good grade, I diligently learned about human beings in terms of their abnormalities. I could now accurately name what was wrong with people. I had yet to learn that this kind of knowledge de-graded others and obscured my knowing more important things about human beings.

### ***Sheltered workshops and deinstitutionalisation.***

My involvement in working with disabled people was accidental, or, as I now consider, serendipitous. I simply answered a newspaper advertisement for a “sheltered workshop supervisor.” Crossing the threshold of this segregated facility for adults labelled as having intellectual handicaps marked my entry into what was, at the time, a very different world, in which the needs of the handicapped were benevolently attended to within the context of a charitable organisation. While I really enjoyed my relationships with “clients,” I felt increasingly uncomfortable with the subtle and not so subtle distinctions made between them and us, the white-coated staff.

My subsequent employment with the same charitable organisation involved supporting adults to move out of institutions into the community. I remember distinctly the reaction of one young man following our visit to his new (group) home. He stood rubbing his hands together gleefully, repeatedly declaring, “I am going to live in a real home.” This was to be the first time he had ever lived beyond institutional walls, having been born into such a setting two to three decades prior. I do not know whether he had ever received an official diagnosis of impairment, or whether the circumstances of his birth were the key determinants of his disabled life.

### ***Back to school: Teacher training.***

My frustration with the intellectual disability bureaucracy led me to seek professional training as a secondary school teacher. I specifically wanted to work with disabled students in integrated settings. I was informed by the Programme Director that that was a waste of time. Special Education was considered to be a “dead end” and I would be well advised to put my

efforts into teaching academic subjects. I thought otherwise, resisted the Director's advice, and insisted on postings in schools with special classes called "work experience units," which confirmed my commitment to work in this area. As with the workshop, however, I felt uncomfortable with the segregation and constraints of special education units.

***Secondary school second time around: Teaching students.***

I had the good fortune of gaining a teaching position in a rural high school where I had the responsibility of coordinating the work experience unit. I had the privilege of learning from and with students with a wide range of learning support requirements, and worked with eight teacher aides to gradually "mainstream" students into regular classes. These years had a critical impact on my thinking about students and their right to a decent education, as I tried to negotiate their entry to classes where they could learn alongside their peers. I realised the complexity of bringing about such change within the structure and systems of a high school, and developed huge respect for the teachers who opened their doors to give "our" students a fair go, and for the teacher aides who made so much of this change process possible.

Of the many memories of students I am thankful to have, one is particularly pertinent when considering my reasons for undertaking PhD study. I remember Bill (not his real name), whose apparent shame at being associated with the unit was evident in the way he sought to leave S2 (euphemism for the unit) before the bell went. He would carefully and surreptitiously check that no one was in the quad before scurrying out the door of S2, to reach the safe anonymity of the middle of the quad, where his demeanour changed from one of furtive urgency to nonchalance, even bravado, as if he'd just stepped out of a regular class. I see myself now as an accomplice in this act, knowing that I could incur the principal's wrath by this early release from class, yet considering Bill's self worth and dignity worth the risk. I guess I thought it futile to further alienate Bill from school by assuming an authoritative stance and insisting that he spend a few more minutes on the academic task at hand. In those few minutes before the bell, his thoughts and energy had already moved from learning to read to how he could get out of (escape?) the unit without being seen by his "normal" peers. I considered then, and now, that education is so much more than the curriculum. Looking back, I realise that Bill was in this instance the teacher, in that his response to special education served as a powerful lesson in the limitations and even harmfulness of such an approach to education. Bill's actions served as a catalyst to my working to get students out of the unit, a long, gradual process begun in this high school in 1989, and which, in 2008, is far from

complete. Along with other students I had the privilege of learning with and from, Bill's actions highlighted for me the wrongness of special education, and the need to work for and within a more equitable education system, in which students are not marginalised or shamed on the basis of their human difference.

***University second time around: Different ways of knowing.***

I wanted to do my students justice, and realised that I didn't know enough about disability and education. I therefore enrolled in a Master of Education programme offered in the Educational Psychology department of a large Canadian university. In 1993, as part of my studies, I was taught how to task analyse a smile. The professor, an ardent behaviourist, took his task very seriously, and carefully elaborated each step, drawing from his experience in teaching a child how to smile. I still find this lesson difficult to believe. Surely he could not be serious. Surely other people could see that he had missed the point - that what was necessary in this instance was to give the child a reason to smile.

I began to seriously doubt the value of some of the academic knowledge being cited as "special education best practice" in the MEd programme. It didn't *feel* right. There were, however, alternative ways of understanding the world. I had the tremendous fortune to have Dick Sobsey as my supervisor. His thoughtful and constructive understanding of disability, learned both formally and experientially through family and work experiences, informed his writing of the book *Violence and Abuse in the Lives of People with Disabilities* (1994). From him I learned about more respectful and hopeful ways of thinking about people, despite the damage done to them by others in the name of care and treatment. His contextual, ecological, interdependent approach to understanding disability was a positive contrast to the acontextual, dependent/independent dichotomous focus of special education knowledge.

Further alternative ways of knowing were found serendipitously when mining the university library stacks one day, half way through my Masters' study. Like Slee (2004), finding "a different set of call numbers in the library was profound" (p. 52). Discovering the writings of Burton Blatt, Steven Taylor, Robert Bogdan and Douglas Biklen, educators and researchers from Syracuse University, I was struck by the humanness of their understanding of disability and education. Their focus on interpreting disability within social contexts, their awareness of the limitations, dangers even, of systems of care and education, coupled with their ability to write in ways that provoked and inspired readers to think and act differently gave me a sense

of hope and possibility. Similarly, finding the work of other Syracuse University scholars such as Luanna Meyer, Dianne Ferguson, Michael Giangreco and others has continued to influence my thinking and practice in profound ways. Interestingly, Pugach (2001) makes specific reference to the significant contribution of the “Syracuse group” (p. 445) in advocating and practicing qualitative research as a means of “reconstructing the meaning of the lives of children, youth, and adults with disabilities” (p. 445). Slee (2004) uses the expression “epistemic fissure” (p. 53) to describe the radical shift in his ways of knowing about disability. I believe that finding the work of Dick Sobsey and Syracuse scholars represented my epistemic fissure, and legitimated my “*thinking otherwise* about the deep structure of disablement” (Slee, 2004, p. 47).

### ***Teaching in teacher education.***

My work within teacher education over the last thirteen years has involved teaching and learning with adults training to be teachers, teacher aides, and disability support workers. I strive to act as a facilitator of learning, rather than an authoritative expert, and encourage students to think and to question, rather than simply accept common knowledge as the truth. I love teaching and working with students, and believe that relationships are the heart of our work as teachers.

To date, in each formal education context in which I have studied or worked, knowledge of disability has been variously absent, marginalised, specialised and/or contested. In 2008, little seems to have changed. In the development of a new teacher education degree programme, despite extensive advocacy, lobbying, research evidence, and genuine support from students (who recognise the importance of and need for Inclusive Education as a compulsory component of teacher education), it seems that little time and space can be provided within the crowded curriculum. Twenty years on from my initial encounter with teacher education, I continue to resist and question the hegemonic knowledge of disability in terms of special needs and the consequent legitimisation of marginalisation in educational contexts.

In writing about some of the experiences that have brought me to this study, I realise that I have come to know about disability both formally, “from a distance” (Slee, 2004, p. 50), and informally, through my interactions and relationships with people. From the former I have learned about conditions, labels, and what is “wrong” with people. From the latter, I have learned about what Bogdan and Taylor (1992) have termed the social construction of

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humanness, what is good about people, regardless of the labels assigned them. While the education system is the powerful disseminator of bodies of knowledge considered important to a society, my most powerful teachers have been those students I have known through relationships, whose right to access an education has been and continues to be conditional, contested, and less than it could or should be.

Rosenau (2004) asserted that “relationships are fundamentally emotional experiences as well as social positions” (p. 270). My feelings about students and their right to a fair deal in the education system underpin and sustain my work as an educator, and, in turn, have brought me to this study. I agree with Rosenau’s theorising of disability in terms of the inseparable nature of rights and relationships, in which the former’s “feeling of power” needs to be considered in conjunction with the latter’s “power of feelings” (p. 263). She concluded, “beyond, or rather under, a rights-based agenda is a relationship-based agenda, and underpinning a relationship-based agenda is what it means to be human and how we know each other to be” (p. 270). By way of relationships, understanding what it means to be human lies at the heart of this thesis.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Having outlined in the *Preface* what has brought me to this thesis, the *why* of the PhD, the purpose of Chapter One is to provide a context for this study of disabled students' and teacher aides' experiences of their work together. The chapter begins with a brief description of the project and its relationship to existing research regarding students and teacher aides. A summary of relevant New Zealand policy is then provided as a background context against which the study findings and discussion can be interpreted. In the final part of the chapter, the purpose and structure of the thesis are outlined.

#### *The Research Context*

The educational experiences of disabled students constitute a relatively recent focus of inquiry in New Zealand educational research (e.g., MacArthur, 2002; MacArthur & Gaffney, 2001; MacArthur & Kelly, 2004). At the beginning of this PhD study in 2001, relatively little research involving disabled students as primary participants had been conducted in New Zealand. At that time, a few older diploma and master's level theses represented the extent of New Zealand research regarding teacher aides. No studies had been carried out in New Zealand with both students and aides as primary participants. The absence of these groups of people in existing formal knowledge regarding education and disability thus determined the focus of this study, which seeks to legitimise and understand disabled students' and teacher aides' perspectives and experiences of working together in schools.

*Life as a Disabled Child* (Watson et al., 2000), a large qualitative study of disabled young people's experiences in Britain, provides an excellent starting place for considering the importance of learning with and from children. I learned about this project shortly after beginning the present study and was reassured by the similarity of our rationale and purposes. Both the *Life as a Disabled Child* project and this study have a commitment to listening to and understanding the experiences of students, based on the belief that they are the experts regarding their lives. Both studies are informed by current understandings of disability and sociology of childhood theorising, and seek to broaden our understanding of individuals'

experiences and the ways in which these are influenced by structural and cultural factors that act to disable people.

The final report of the *Life as a Disabled Child* project concluded with recommendations for further research. Of particular relevance to the present study is the following observation:

Children labelled as disabled are required to negotiate more intensive, interdependent and long-lasting relationships with such adults [classroom assistants] than their non-disabled peers. Moreover, the quality of these relationships, and the support provided, have a significant impact on children's experience and attainment in school. Yet, the dynamics and impact of these relationships are poorly monitored and under-researched. There is then considerable scope for child-centred research on the provision of classroom support by non-teaching staff (including the role, status and training of such staff in schools). (Watson et al., 2000, pp. 32-33)

Serendipitously, this thesis responds to Watson et al.'s (2000) call for student-focused research regarding support staff. Subsequently, other researchers have echoed the need to address this under-researched aspect of education, in Britain (Cajkler et al., 2006; Howes, Farrell, Kaplan, & Moss, 2003), Sweden (Hemmingsson, Borell, & Gustavsson, 2003), and the United States (Broer, Doyle, & Giangreco, 2005; Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001). Although not specifically focusing on students' involvement with teacher aides, a growing number of studies prioritise the participation of disabled children in research projects (e.g., Ainscow, 2005, 2007; Connors & Stalker, 2007; Davis & Watson, 2001; Kelly, 2005; MacArthur, Sharp, Kelly, & Gaffney, 2007). The growth of inquiry with children reflects researchers' commitment to current ways of thinking about childhood and disability, which recognise individuals' capacities, rights, and citizenship (Kelly, 2005; Watson et al., 2000). Involving children is also consistent with the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989), in honoring children's right to be consulted about matters concerning them. Davis and Watson (2001) observed that schools cannot become fully inclusive until students' perspectives are taken seriously by educators and policy-makers. In particular, they claimed that "children should be enabled to challenge the structural, cultural and individual conditions which create disability" (p. 671).

Paralleling the emergence of child-centred inquiry has been a steadily increasing research focus on the work of teacher aides in supporting disabled students in schools, the work by Giangreco and colleagues in the United States being particularly influential. Teacher aides'

contributions to research are valuable in providing a unique perspective of school life from those who are positioned between children and teachers, and witnesses to the actions of each. Given that both children and teacher aides are on the receiving end of macro level educational policy and micro level professional practice, their respective accounts can help us understand the impact of current policy and practice on their lives, and inform the development of future educational initiatives.

The use of teacher aides has become one of the most common means of supporting the inclusion of disabled students in regular education settings (Bowers, 1997; Giangreco, Edelman et al., 2001; Hemmingsson et al., 2003). Teacher aide support for disabled students is provided for various reasons, depending upon the perceived needs of a child, school policies and practices, as well as macro level government policies and resourcing provisions. Ostensibly, the rationale for such support is to facilitate students' presence, participation and achievement in local schools. The provision of assistance in practice tends to involve the assignment of a teacher aide to a child perceived as having "special needs," for a set number of hours per day/week. Some schools also employ teacher aides to assist groups or classes and their teachers. How, where, and what kind of support is provided depends upon the teacher aide(s) and the teacher(s) involved with the student(s). These adults are in turn influenced by the policies and culture of the school in which they work, as well as by their personal and professional beliefs and values.

The titles used to describe the teacher aide role are numerous, varying across schools and countries (French, 2003; Kerry, 2005; New Zealand Educational Institute [NZEI], 2004). For example, in very general terms, there are in New Zealand: teacher aides, kaiāwhina, and teaching assistants; in Britain: Learning Support Assistants (LSA), Classroom Assistants (CA), and Special Needs Assistants (SNA); in the United States: paraprofessionals, paraeducators, and educational technicians. The plethora of job titles both reflects and perpetuates a lack of shared understanding about what teacher aides actually do. Their role is often ill-defined and open to interpretation, again, differing according to educational contexts (Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Kerry, 2005). Furthermore, it is a role characterised by ambiguity and paradox, the greatest being that students who, through no fault of their own, may present the greatest challenge to qualified teachers may receive much of their education from an unqualified teacher aide (Blatchford, Russell, Bassett, Brown, & Martin, 2007; Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Giangreco, Edelman et al., 2001; Howard



& Ford, 2007; Lacey, 2001; Shah, 2007; Takala, 2007). As noted in 1999 by Brown, Farrington, Knight, Ross, and Ziegler, “the quality of education a student with disabilities receives should not be dependent on the effectiveness of those who have the lowest status and the least training of any professionals in the school system” (p. 252). Perplexingly, there is no theoretical framework or research evidence to support the efficacy of using teacher aides to assist in the education of disabled students (Giangreco & Broer, 2005, 2007; Giangreco, Edelman et al., 2001). Indeed, as will be examined in Chapter Three, a growing body of research indicates that the inadvertent use of teacher aides may have an adverse impact on students’ learning and socialisation.

### ***Teacher Aides: An Overview of the New Zealand Context***

As mentioned, at the beginning of this research project teacher aides were only incidentally referred to in New Zealand research publications and were largely absent in Ministry of Education documents, despite the increasing number of teacher aides in schools since the implementation of the 1989 Education Act amendments. This legislation gave school-aged disabled children the right to enroll in local state schools, an entitlement they had not previously been granted. While teacher aides had been present in schools prior to 1989, it appeared that demand for their services increased significantly post 1989. Unfortunately, I cannot cite any references to support this statement as there is still no national database or gathering of information about teacher aides by the Ministry of Education. However, in a 2004 report, NZEI (the union to which teacher aides can belong) attributed the increase in support staff and the diversity and complexity of their roles to a number of factors following the introduction of *Tomorrow’s Schools*’ (Lange, 1988) reforms in 1989. The decentralisation of school administration and funding, the increase in disabled students in local schools following the 1989 Education Act and *Special Education 2000* (SE2000) policy (Ministry of Education, 1996), reviews of curriculum and qualification structures, rapid development and use of information communication technology (ICT) in schools, and changes in regulatory requirements have increased demands on teachers and schools. As well, changes in socioeconomic and sociocultural patterns (e.g., reduced availability of parent volunteers in schools due to work and income demands) have necessitated significant growth in the numbers and roles of support staff.

In 2000, Meyer and Bevan-Brown claimed that “teacher aide hours are perhaps the most common and most requested service provided to students with significant special needs within

the general education environment” (p. 170). Later research confirmed that teacher aide support continued to be the most common way in which schools respond to the needs of disabled students (Massey University, 2002; NZEI, 2004). NZEI (2004) also observed that the devolution of management to local schools has not been accompanied by any national monitoring of the use of non-teaching staff employed by schools, resulting, not surprisingly, in the present anomalies that characterise the employment of teacher aides.

Although increasingly regarded as vital to the inclusion of disabled students in regular schools, the value of teacher aides in New Zealand is not reflected in their employment conditions, which are typically marked by low remuneration, job insecurity, and variable support for training and professional development (NZEI, 2004). No training or experience is required for teacher aides to work in New Zealand schools, yet many assume responsibility for the education and support of children who have complex learning and support requirements (e.g., Lai, Sinclair, Naidoo, Naidoo, & Robinson, 2003). Thus, it appears that teacher aides in New Zealand continue to be utilised in the absence of any national conceptual policy framework or research evidence to support this educational practice. Moreover, little attention seems to be paid to international research that provides evidence of the iatrogenic effects of using teacher aides in ill-advised ways. In the current political and educational climate in which evidence-based practice is exalted, such a situation is unusual. I hope that this study may be helpful in bringing to light some of the effects that working in a research and policy void have on students and teacher aides in New Zealand schools.

### ***New Zealand Educational Policy Context***

The following overview of key legislative and policy provisions outlines details of the macro level background context to students’ and teachers’ daily work in different educational contexts. This information is excerpted from a more detailed discussion included as Appendix A (New Zealand Educational Policy Context).

The rights of disabled children and adults in New Zealand society over the last 18 years have been increasingly recognised in legislation (e.g., 1989 Education Act, 1993 Human Rights Act), commitment to United Nations conventions (e.g., UNCRC, United Nations, 1989), and the implementation of the *New Zealand Disability Strategy* (NZDS) (Minister for Disability Issues, 2001). Underpinned by current thinking about disability that recognises cultural and structural barriers to participation and justice, the NZDS aims to develop an inclusive society,

utilising a framework that specifies fifteen objectives and related actions (Minister for Disability Issues, 2001). While all of the objectives relate in one way or another to disabled children, Objective 2, “ensure rights for disabled people,” Objective 3, “provide the best education for disabled people,” and Objective 13, “enable disabled children and adults to lead full and active lives” (Minister for Disability Issues, 2001, pp. 11 and 13) are particularly pertinent to education. Integral to these national commitments is the *Treaty of Waitangi, Te Tiriti o Waitangi*. Signed in 1840, the founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand articulates principles of participation, partnership and protection that guide the development of this bicultural nation. These principles are consistent with the social justice underpinnings of inclusive education practices, as are the provisions mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph.

Specific policy regarding special education was introduced six years after the 1989 Education Act. *Special Education Policy Guidelines* (Ministry of Education, 1995) outlined seven principles for the Government’s SE2000 policy (Ministry of Education, 1996). In the original SE2000 document, the government’s aim was “to achieve, over the next decade, a world class inclusive education system that provides learning opportunities of equal quality to all students” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 5). Eleven years later, in the Ministry of Education’s website, the stated aim of “the Government’s special education policy is to improve learning outcomes for all children and young people with special education needs at their local school, early childhood centre, or wherever they are educated” (Ministry of Education, 2007b). Special education is officially defined as “the provision of extra assistance, adapted programmes or learning environments, specialised equipment or materials to support children and young people with accessing the curriculum in a range of settings” (Ministry of Education, 2007b). While there is no national inclusive education policy, the definition of inclusive education provided in the Ministry of Education’s *Terms Used in Special and General Education* is as follows:

Inclusion in education is about valuing all students and staff. It involves supporting all children and young people to participate in the cultures, curricula and communities of their local school. Barriers to learning and participation for all children, irrespective of their ethnicity, culture, disability or any other factor, are actively reduced, so that children feel a sense of belonging and community in their educational context. (Ministry of Education, 2007c)

*Educate: Ministry of Education Statement of Intent 2006-2011* (Ministry of Education, 2006b), while claiming that special education in New Zealand performed well relative to international standards, acknowledged that there was “significant underachievement” (p. 20) among special education students. Reference was made to research indicating that “not only is it possible to teach learners with special education needs together with their age peers, but also that doing so can lead to improved learning for all” (p. 20).

The inconsistencies in Ministry policy statements and definitions are discussed in Chapter Three’s review of education literature. In reference to students and teacher aides in this study, some of the relevant aspects of SE2000 (Ministry of Education, 1996) are noted as follows. SE2000 (Ministry of Education, 1996) consists of a multi-component framework designed to serve students identified as having (a) “very high, high, or combined moderate needs,” and (b) “moderate needs” (as determined by a national verification process for students in the former category, and by local schools for students deemed to have moderate needs). Resources for individuals verified as having higher needs include the Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Scheme (ORRS), in which funding is allocated to individual students and commonly used to pay for teacher aide support, among other resources. Students with moderate needs have access to school-based resources, including the Special Education Grant (SEG), Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLb) and Resource Teachers: Literacy (RT: Lit). The amount of the SEG is calculated according to each school’s total roll and decile ranking, the latter being the rating given to a school related to the economic and social factors of the local area. Schools in more affluent areas receive less government funding than those in less affluent areas, based on the assumption that families in the former can more easily afford to support their children’s education than families with lower incomes. All of the teacher aide participants in this study supported students funded by ORRS; several of the student participants were similarly ORRS funded.

In 2000, the Minister of Education commissioned a review of SE2000 for the purpose of recommending ways of improving education for children with “special needs.” Entitled *Picking Up the Pieces*, the Wylie Report (Wylie, 2000) highlighted the fragmented and inconsistent nature of special education services and funding. Of particular relevance to this study are Wylie’s recommendations for the “mandatory inclusion of provision for students with special needs within core preservice teacher development courses” (p. 97) and for the provision of professional development for teacher aides and practicing teachers.

As noted, no training is required for teacher aides to work in New Zealand schools. The only Ministry of Education initiative regarding teacher aides was introduced to schools in 2002. *Kia Tūtangata Ai: Supporting Learning: An Introductory Resource for Teacher Aides/Kaiāwhina Supporting Teachers of Students with Special Education Needs* is a professional development resource intended for use at a whole school level, as opposed to targeting teacher aides only (Ministry of Education, 2002b). An evaluation of its effectiveness, carried out in 2004, is examined in the review of teacher aide literature in Chapter Three.

The New Zealand educational context for disabled students and teacher aides is marked by inconsistencies. The Ministry of Education's alignment of special and inclusive education, as though they were one and the same, is in itself contradictory and contradicts current research regarding inclusive education, as will be discussed in Chapter Three. Students have a right to attend local schools, yet some are required to go through a contestable, needs-based application process in order to access the resourcing required to take their place in the classroom. That untrained teacher aides, working on a highly casualised basis, are often charged with the care of students who have complex learning support requirements in lieu of teachers' teaching them is troublesome. The impact of these and other issues are examined in this study.

### ***The Purpose of this Thesis***

The purpose of this thesis is to develop understandings of disabled students' experiences of teacher aide support, and, conversely, teacher aides' experiences of working with disabled students. This interpretive qualitative study is positioned in a framework of current disability, social justice, and childhood theorising, and seeks to contribute to an emerging research literature in which disabled students and teacher aides are the focus. It is hoped that the study findings will be utilised to provide an understanding of the impact of existing policy and practice on students' and aides' school lives, and to inform the development of future educational thinking and practice in New Zealand schools.

Eighteen teacher aides and 10 students from primary, intermediate, and secondary schools in the southern part of New Zealand's South Island generously shared their time and experiences in interviews (with aides) and a series of meetings (with students) in the latter part of 2004.

The initial scope of inquiry of this thesis centered around four main research questions:

1. What is the role of the teacher aide?
2. What kind of relationships develop between disabled students and teacher aides?
3. What influence do teacher aides have on the school lives of disabled students (e.g., in areas such as learning and academic achievement, social experiences, personal development)?
4. What changes are desirable in schools/the education system regarding the education of disabled students and the role that teacher aides play in this?

Participants' responses generated a breadth and depth of data which were initially analysed and written as findings chapters relating to each of the four key research questions. Upon completion of the writing of these five chapters (one focusing on students' perspectives, and four on teacher aides' experiences), it was obvious that, due to the size and scope of the findings, it was not feasible to include all five chapters in this thesis. A decision was therefore made to narrow the scope of the thesis, to do justice to the findings that have hitherto not featured extensively in research literature regarding disabled students and teacher aides. Discussion therefore focuses primarily on the relational aspects of disabled students' and teacher aides' work with each other (questions 2 and 3), teacher aides' experiences of working with teachers (a subject which emerged from participants' discussions and relates to all four questions), and the need for education of the adults involved in disabled students' schooling (a significant issue raised by participants in response to question 4). This refining of the scope of study is consistent with the emergent nature of qualitative research, in which changes are made in conducting research in response to unanticipated findings (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

A summary of the four teacher aide chapters that were written prior to making the above decision is presented in Appendix T. The Summary of Teacher Aide Findings was sent to participants, who were invited to provide feedback on my interpretations of their interviews. The findings that have not been included in this thesis will be submitted for publication, in recognition of my obligation to share the generous contributions and insight offered by research participants. Some of the student findings have already been presented at a *New Zealand Association for Research in Education* conference (Rutherford, 2007).

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***Thesis Structure***

The multi-dimensional theoretical framework of the study is presented in Chapter Two. Given the complexity of disability, a range of theories underpins the ways in which this research has been conducted, interpreted, and documented. Current thinking about humanness, disability, social justice and childhood is utilised as a means of interpreting participants' perspectives and experiences. For example, the dynamic interaction of macro and micro level factors relating to body, identity, structure, and culture (disability theorising) is more often than not characterised by fundamental injustice (social justice theory) towards children and young people (sociology of childhood) whose human differences are interpreted and responded to in ways that diminish or deny their humanity (theoretical interpretations of humanness). Central to these ways of thinking is the fundamental importance of relationships in supporting or limiting individuals' competence, rights, and humanity.

Having outlined the macro level theoretical context of the study in Chapter Two, the following chapter narrows the focus by exploring research relating to education, disabled students, and teacher aides. Chapter Three's review of relevant literature in each of these areas concludes with a discussion of the rationale for this particular study, identifying how it differs from extant research regarding students and teacher aides.

Chapter Four focuses on the methodological framework of this thesis. In seeking to *understand* students' and teacher aides' experiences, and in interpreting disability in a multi-dimensional, socially constructed manner (Priestley, 2003), I have situated this study in an interpretivist paradigmatic framework, as outlined by Ferguson and Ferguson (1995). Discussion of interpretivism, social constructionism, and aspects of qualitative research precedes an examination of involving children as participants in research projects. In the second part of this chapter the methods used to carry out this study are outlined.

The research findings are presented in Chapters Five to Seven. Students' experiences of teacher aides form the focus of Chapter Five. The role of the teacher aide is summarised in Chapter Six, followed by discussion of the relational experiences teacher aide participants spoke of in their work with students. In Chapter Seven, discussion turns to participants' experiences of working with teachers, paying particular attention to the notion of teacher aides' and teachers' different ways of knowing disabled students. This is followed by an

outline of participants' thoughts about the education of adults involved in disabled students' education.

Discussion of this project's findings in relation to published research and the study's theoretical framework is the purpose of Chapter Eight. The chapter concludes with an interpretation of the teacher aide's role in terms of supporting the reproduction of the educational status quo or possibly contributing to the transformation of educational thinking and practice regarding disabled students.

Chapter Nine draws the thesis to a close in its examination of the limitations of the study and implications for policy, practice, and further research.

Prior to beginning the study proper, I wish to clarify (a) thesis parameters, (b) interpretations of separate/special schools, and (c) the use of language, to assist in the reading of this thesis.

### ***Thesis parameters.***

Regrettably, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine the growing number of legal, policy, practice and accompanying research initiatives that relate specifically to the education of Māori students and to the education of students from the Pacific and other nations. To do justice to these developments would exponentially increase the scope and size of the study. I would like to emphasise that my decision to focus on the general laws and policies that apply to all New Zealand schools is in no way intended to diminish the importance of considering education from a range of cultural perspectives. Exemplary research focusing on Māori experiences of disability and education is being carried out by a number of researchers; in particular, Jill Bevan-Brown's extensive work in this area continues to make a significant contribution to this body of knowledge.

### ***Separate schooling options are not always special.***

Within the New Zealand education system there are separate schooling options, targeting particular students. It is important to distinguish between those that are available for Māori and Deaf students, and those whose enrollments consist of students who have cognitive, physical and/or multiple impairments. For Māori and Deaf students and their whānau/families, the choice for separate schooling tends to be a positive and informed one, which is made in the interests of children having access to their culture and language through



their education. This tends not to be the case where traditional special schools are concerned, in that their primary purpose does not relate to the development of a particular language, culture, or identity. Rather, they have tended to cater for those students perceived as unsuitable for regular schools, and so have absolved the latter of their legal responsibilities to meet the needs of all children (Rouse, 2006).

***Terminology: A word on wording.***

While acknowledging the dynamic nature of language and the variation in preferred terminology in any given time, context, and ideology, I have chosen to use the terms “disabled students” and/or “impairment” when referring to students in the context of this thesis (Gordon & Rosenblum, 2001; Kelly, 2005; MacArthur et al., 2007). As will be outlined in the discussion of disability theorising, current understandings of disability highlight the significant impact of sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical beliefs, systems and structures in disabling individuals who have some form of physical, sensory, or cognitive impairment. Slee (2001c, p. 175) suggested:

... that our grammar needs checking as when I speak of disabled people I use the word “disabled” as a verb rather than adjective in the first instance. People are not of themselves disabled, it is a relational concept within a sociological discourse rather than a pathological descriptor within a medical discourse.

The terms “special” and “normal” continue to be used widely in discussions of disabled people. As numerous researchers have pointed out, “special” has deficit connotations (e.g., Fulcher 1995; Ypinazar & Pagliano, 2004). The use of these social constructions perpetuates the unhelpful and inaccurate dichotomous notion that there are two kinds of students, who therefore require two different kinds of education. At various times in this thesis, I have had to use “special” and “normal” in discussion. In the interest of reading clarity, I have not used quotation marks each time to convey my problematising of these constructions.

The purpose of the *Preface* and this introductory chapter has been to provide the detail necessary for understanding the *why* and the *what* of this study. In Chapter Two, the thesis proper begins.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

*“It seems to me that one of the primary tasks of disability studies is to make disability belong to the world even though it remains a stranger in this world” (Titchkosky, 2001, p. 131).*

The aim of this chapter is to provide a theoretical context for the study. Specifically, literature regarding humanness, disability, social justice and childhood is critically examined. How a society understands and responds to human difference in the form of disability is reflected in the ways in which the society’s education system is structured, and in the ways in which disabled students are taught, with whom, and by whom. Thus, an examination of the ways in which disability is constructed by society at a macro level is necessary to inform our understanding of the system in which disabled students are educated. Disability theorising therefore forms the foundation of this thesis, particularly given that, in its policy response to disabled students, the New Zealand education system plays a key role in perpetuating the socially constructed dichotomy of normal and special students (Higgins, MacArthur, & Rietveld, 2006). Fundamental to an appreciation of the complexity of disability and its impact on people’s lives is understanding what it means to be human (Bauman, 2007; Bérubé, 1997; Bogdan & Taylor, 1992; Head, 2006; Hunt, 1966; Kittay, 2001). Understanding meanings of humanness is therefore the starting place for this chapter.

#### Understanding Humanness

*To be truly and fully human and secure in one’s humanity one needs to be cared for by other human beings and to be confident that care will be provided when needed; but to be human one needs also to be moral—one needs to care for other human beings and be ready to hurry to provide help when it is needed. It is ultimately on the relationship of caring and being cared for that human society is built and the humanity of its members is sustained. (Bauman, 2007, p. 58)*

Humanness is “socially defined and culturally variable” (Jenkins, 1998, p. 2). Sociology Professor Zygmunt Bauman (2007) asserted that *human* society is characterised by its “enabling” work, namely that which offers care and compassion to those who would struggle to survive on their own. He also recognised that within such a society, its most vulnerable members may be disabled by those who do not hurry to give help when it is required. In

doubting the humanness of those who fail to fit a society's norms, its socially constructed ways of functioning, a society diminishes its own humanity (Bauman, 2007).

Historically and currently, the humanness of disabled people has been contested (e.g., Diamond, 1991; Ferguson, 1987; Hughes, 2002; Hunt, 1966; Jenkins, 1998). Questioning individuals' humanity on the basis of their perceived human difference has had a profound impact on all aspects of the latter's lives, in some situations, justifying the ending of life (Davis, 2006; Goode, 1984; Head, 2006; Hubbard, 2006; Hughes, 2002; Kliever & Drake, 1998; Mostert, 2002). The following discussion of the dehumanisation of disabled people provides an overview of what many individuals have experienced at the hands of other human beings. In the subsequent discussion, a more hopeful and humane understanding of our shared humanity is outlined.

### ***Not Quite Human? Dehumanising Thinking and Practices***

The history of Western societies' responses to disability does not consistently reflect humanity at its finest (e.g., Blatt, 1987; Kliever, 1998). While wavering between optimism and pessimism regarding the worth of disabled people, socially constructed definitions of who counted as human, and therefore who was worthy of life within a society, were typically narrow. Describing cultures as collective solutions to human situations, Garbarino (2000) proposed that cultures differ in their goals regarding the kind of human being they wish to create. The rejection of those whose humanness was, at best, debatable has been accomplished in many ways, depending upon the social, political, economic and religious contexts of particular cultures at different points in time (Groce, 1999; Kliever, 1998; Mostert, 2002). As observed by McDermott and Varenne (1995), "in every society, there are ways of being locked out" (p. 327), depending upon the human characteristics valued and devalued at any given time. They claimed that, "for every disability and difference brought to the fore, there is a cultural, and invisible, order that is the background" (p. 343) and proposed that disability "may be a better display board for the weaknesses of a cultural system than it is an account of real persons" (p. 327). While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a comprehensive historical analysis of disability in terms of dehumanisation, what follows is a consideration of some of the key features of such a display board. Understanding responses to the perceived anomaly of human difference in modernist Western cultures can inform our understanding of current thinking and practice in current, postmodern contexts. As Blatt noted

in 1979, “we must take all history seriously - the history of what we did right and the history of what we did wrong. People learn from both their successes and their failures” (p. 19).

Modernity, according to Corker and Shakespeare (2002), refers to “the social institutions, belief and value systems of capitalist civilisation, including the globalisation of industrialism, mass surveillance and technological warfare, that are entrenched in Western society” (p. 2). Integral to modernity are Enlightenment foundationalist assumptions about the nature of reality and ways of knowing, including among others, the privileging of science as Truth and the primacy of the rational, independent individual. All-encompassing meta-narratives are “built on an operational code of binary, ‘either/or’ thought” (p. 2).

Disability has been known within modernist Western societies in positivist terms (Kliewer & Drake, 1998; Smith, 1999). Ontologically, the Truth or meta-narrative of disability is that it is a real thing, a biological flaw inherent in an individual. The nature of intrinsic human deficit can be scientifically/objectively known (that is, free of personal and cultural values and experiences), labelled, measured and, in some cases remediated, through diagnosis, prognosis, and control by specialists who have been professionally socialised within a scientific worldview (Gallagher, 2004a; Kliewer & Drake, 1998; Smith, 1999). Such a deterministic and allegedly value free interpretation of disability focuses only on the individual, and ignores any consideration of contexts and relationships in constructing, compounding, or ameliorating disability. In its positioning of disability as a flaw within the ir-rational and dependent individual, this positivist way of knowing perpetuates the modernist and simplistic dichotomising of humans into able and disabled beings.

The segregation and institutionalisation of flawed individuals from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards represents one of the main ways in which Western societies have dealt with socially constructed deviance (Smith, 1999). The rationale for such confinement and the words used to articulate the latter varied according to shifting perceptions of abnormality, and included concerns about safety (of society from the deviants and of the deviants from society) and the correction, cure, and rehabilitation of those incarcerated (Hughes, 2002; Smith, 1999). While the latter included sterilisation and, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, shock therapies and psychosurgery (Hughes, 2002), such attempts to cure deviancy and induce normalcy were not always successful, leaving the pathologised broken and in exile from normal society (Ferguson, 2002; Hughes, 2002).

The privileging of scientific knowledge as Truth about disability was evident not only in the medicalisation of human difference but also in the development of the science of statistics in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Davis, 2006). This led to the creation of scientifically objective means of measuring human intelligence (the Intelligence Quotient [IQ] test) and the use of statistical procedures to construct a normal distribution of intelligence (Davis, 2006; Gallagher, 2004b; Smith, 1999). Intelligence was believed to be a genetically determined, fixed characteristic which was possible to measure and which could be used to position the majority of a population within the norm. As intelligence was constructed as a significant marker of human ability, productivity and worth in modernist societies, measuring IQ was thought to provide a scientifically efficient means of classifying members of populations according to their usefulness to society (Kliewer, 1998; Smith, 1999). Those whose humanity had been reduced to a number, a sub-normal intelligence score, were then labelled and segregated into places where their existence did not burden or impinge upon the functioning of human society. Conceptualising individuals in terms of their being an economic and social burden was a powerful means of rationalising institutionalisation. Each of the practices of numbering, labelling, and separating served to heighten individuals' difference and distance from the norm (both mentally and physically), thus reducing a sense of shared humanity with normal people. Despite 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century critiques of this concept of intelligence and its measurement, positivist constructions of IQ and normalcy have played a powerful role in the structuring of public education systems, and continue to implicitly and explicitly influence current educational policy and practice (Davis, 2006; Gallagher, 2004b; Kliewer & Drake, 1998), as will be discussed in Chapter Three.

Closely aligned with the statistical construction of a norm was the development of a science of eugenics (Davis, 2006; Gallagher, 2004b; Hughes, 2002; McPhail & Freeman, 2005; Smith, 1999) which was used to justify political agendas. While Hitler's "ethnic cleansing" programmes, the ultimate means of dehumanisation, are notoriously well known, relatively little public attention has been focused on earlier eugenic movements in Western societies, particularly Britain and the United States, but also New Zealand, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In his account of *Constructing Normalcy*, Davis (2006) highlighted the "symbiotic relationship" (p. 6) between the sciences of statistics and eugenics, in seeking to measure and "improve humans so that deviations from the norm diminish" (p. 6). Concurrently, Darwin's theory of evolution in the natural world and Spencer's notion of the survival of the fittest were influential in their application to the human social world (Kliewer, 1998). Eugenics were

justified in terms of improving national physical and mental fitness, which in turn, strengthened a capitalist nation's economic capacity, a vital consideration in an era of industrialisation and immigration (Davis, 2006).

Population control programmes consisted of both "positive" and "negative" eugenics practices. In the former, the "fit" were encouraged to have lots of children, while the focus of the latter was prevention of the "unfit" from producing more of their defective selves (Hubbard, 2006). As noted already, sterilisation of deviants was a common institutional practice. Further state control of the kinds of human beings who should be allowed to reproduce (the norm) was achieved through legislation targeting existing members of a society through involuntary sterilisation, and potential members by the restriction of immigration (Hubbard, 2006; Tennant, 1996). The indiscriminate clustering of the genetically abnormal, feeble-minded, weak, poor, criminal, as well as those from certain ethnic groups under the all-encompassing labels of deviance/abnormality could be interpreted as the genesis of negative and erroneous stereotypes about disability that continue today (Davis, 2006). It might be said that, along with "good genes," the fit transmitted eugenic assumptions to future generations.

The worst moment of modernity according to Hughes (2002) was the euthanising of disabled people and Jews in Hitler's Germany in the name of "racial hygiene" (Hubbard, 2006). The extensive role of scientists, doctors, and educators in this national imperative was evident from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through to World War Two (Mostert, 2002). Beginning in 1939, the state-sanctioned children's killing programme was followed by the adults' killing programme, Aktion T-4 (Mostert, 2002). It was estimated that the "disinfections" of 6,000 children and 70,273 adults, genetically defective burdens on society, had achieved considerable economic savings for the nation in terms of savings on meat, jam, cheese, and bread (Mostert, 2002).

Such atrocities leading up to and during World War Two represent an extreme example of inhumanity. To a lesser extent across the Atlantic, it should be noted that the American Psychiatric Association advocated a similar response to disabled people. This professional body sanctioned Kennedy's (1942) argument for the "'euthanasia for those hopeless ones who should never have been born - Nature's mistakes'" (as cited in Kliewer & Drake, 1998, p. 96). However, resistance to such "clinically perfumed homicide" (Kliewer & Drake, 1998, p. 97)

meant that in most Western societies the predominant treatment continued to take the form of institutionalisation.

Blatt and Kaplan (1966) captured the awfulness of institutional conditions in *Christmas in Purgatory: A Photographic Essay*, an exposé of the heartless existence in back wards in New York state institutions. While Blatt and Kaplan exposed the “big picture,” Taylor’s observations of institutional wards in the 1970s focused more specifically on attendants’ perspectives of their charges, aptly captured in the title of his article, *They’re Not Like You and Me* (1987/1998). In their construction of the identity of residents as objects, Taylor noted that “attendants lose any real sense of residents’ individuality or humanity” (1998, p. 194), which in turn limited or prevented their having any sense of empathy with residents. Thus, already distanced from normal life in society, institutional residents experienced a further distancing and dehumanising within institutions, in the nature of their interactions with their “keepers.”

It is evident that in many circumstances in modernist Western societies, those who do not meet the criteria of socially constructed normalcy have been regarded as other than human (Kliwer, 1998). In contrast to such a limited and limiting understanding of humanity (Ware, 2002), broader, more human ways of interpreting human difference have been proposed, and it is to these that discussion turns.

### ***Fully Human: Humanising Thinking and Practices***

In an article entitled *Socially Produced Identities, Intimacy and Competence*, Goode (1984) highlighted the potentially damaging effects that the privileging of positivist constructions of ab/normality has on disabled individuals’ lives. In such an etic or outsider knowledge of human difference, “the objectivity of clinical procedure ‘constitutionalises’ and ‘decontextualises’ competence” (Goode, 1984, p. 245). Such a “fault-finding” (p. 232) kind of construction of individuals’ identity by professionals, whose ways of knowing are typically determined through very limited and distant clinical relationships, can produce only a partial knowledge of human beings. As Hargreaves (2001) observed in his discussion of the emotional geographies of teaching, “we cannot know or understand people we rarely meet” (p. 1070). In contrast, an emic or insider perspective, obtained through more naturalistic ways of knowing, such as sustained observation of and interaction with people in their natural contexts, has the potential to reveal a more complex understanding of human beings. As

Goode noted, this kind of sociological approach can yield knowledge that lies beyond the scope of scientific clinical-medical-psychological methodologies. Who clinicians “‘find’ before them rests as much upon the social organisation of their relationship with her as it does ‘her’ (the client’s) physical and/or psychological characteristics *per se*” (p. 247). Ironically, when different ways of knowing are considered, the positivist claim to knowing the Truth about, in this instance, disability, turns out to be a partial truth.

A particularly powerful illustration of the “antithetical testimony” (Goode, 1984, p. 229) given by different people about the same person is provided in Goode’s description of his visit to a local State Hospital (institution) in the 1970s. During a tour of a ward, Goode described his encounter with a patient, admitting that he was horrified by the latter’s appearance. Goode felt nauseated and distressed, and was supported by a nurse as he left the patient’s room. In a subsequent conversation with a doctor, he was informed that the person “‘was hydrocephalic’” (p. 230) with a hopeless prognosis. Upon his return to his university, Goode listened to his tape recorder which had captured the nurse’s conversation with him in the patient’s room. The nurse described “Johnny” as her favourite, as a person with specific likes and dislikes, with whom she enjoyed interacting. Trying to fathom the discrepancies in three people’s descriptions of the same human being, Goode used the term “sociogenic” to describe the ways in which our identities are socially produced. He proposed that:

... a person’s identity - who he or she is taken to be in terms of the significance or meaning attached to his or her body and behaviours - emerges out of a concrete and particular social situation and is a product of social interaction within that situation. (p. 231)

In the situation described above, both Goode and the doctor had no real relationship with Johnny, and so used knowledges derived from popular culture (in Goode’s case) and professional medical training (in the doctor’s case). Both kinds of knowledge served to denigrate and distance Johnny in terms of understanding him as a human being. In contrast, the nurse’s longterm caring relationship with her patient enabled her to construct his identity through a different and more personal way of knowing. In the absence of “competency granting social relationships” (p. 244), Johnny’s vulnerability would have been exacerbated by his being known only in terms of his hopelessness, and treated accordingly by those who had declared him so.



Goode's work has much in common with that of Bogdan and Taylor, who, in 1987, proposed the notion of a sociology of acceptance in contrast to the prevailing interpretations of human difference in terms of deviance. They argued that accepting relations, characterised by warmth and closeness, can and do exist between labelled and unlabelled individuals. In such relationships, while the labelled person's difference is not denied, it does not equate to a diminishing of her/his humanity or moral integrity. In subsequent work, Bogdan and Taylor (1992) highlighted the critical difference that relationships can make in revealing people's humanness. On the basis of their extensive qualitative research with people defined as mentally retarded (the terminology used at the time) and people with whom the latter related, such as family and associates, they noted:

In the relationship, the deviant attribute, the disability, does not have a stigmatizing or morally discrediting character. The humanness of the person with the disability is maintained. These relationships are based not on a denial of the difference, but rather on the absence of impugning the other's moral character because of it. (p. 278)

Rather than defining a person's identity in terms of pathological characteristics (e.g., Down syndrome) or the sociocultural meanings assigned to particular groups of people (e.g., disability as deviance/deficit), Bogdan and Taylor (1992) proposed that the definition of a person is determined by "the nature of the relationship between the definer and the defined" (p. 276). They, like Goode (1984, 1992), believed that identities are socially produced, and may vary according to the contexts in which people are known, and by whom. Bogdan and Taylor's (1992) conceptualisation of the "social construction of humanness," in which people in close relationships with disabled individuals define the latter, considers four dimensions: (1) attributing thinking to the other; (2) seeing individuality in the other; (3) viewing the other as reciprocating; and (4) defining social place for the other (p. 280). People are thus seen in terms of their shared humanity, as "full-fledged human beings" (p. 280), rather than having their disability displace and overshadow their humanness, as is the case in the positivist, medical constructions of disability discussed earlier. The essence of our shared humanity is captured in Bogdan and Taylor's assertion:

Whether or not people with severe disabilities will be treated as human beings, or persons, is not a matter of their physical or mental condition. It is a matter of definition. We can show that they are human by proving that we are capable of showing humanity to them. ... *What others are depends on our relationships with them and what we choose to make of them* [italics added]. (p. 291)

Recognition of the relational nature of being human necessitates a profound shift in thinking from the positivist, dichotomous assertion that human beings are either independent/normal/rational/productive or dependent/abnormal/irrational/burden, depending primarily upon the nature of our physical and mental constitutions. The limitations of such either/or definitions of who counts as a person have been eloquently articulated by Kittay (1999, 2001), a philosopher and mother of a daughter who has multiple impairments. Kittay (2001) frankly acknowledged Sesha's limitations, yet explained that she and other people who have come to know Sesha have learned different meanings of personhood, in which relationships are considered of greater significance than rationality and productivity:

If traditional conceptions of personhood are not capacious enough to include Sesha and those who share her impairments, we need a new definition. ... a definition that brings our relationships (real and imaginative) with others to the centre of any conception of personhood. (pp. 567-568)

Kittay (2001) questioned the hegemony of socially constructed independence which obscures the reality that, in the course of our lives, we are all dependent on one another. She described independence as a fiction that "turns those whose dependence cannot be masked into pariahs, or makes them objects of disdain or pity" (p. 570). Another philosopher, MacIntyre (1999), concurred. In his book, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, he sought to address the absence of discussion by Western moral philosophers of our vulnerability and our inevitable dependence on others throughout our lives. He stated, "how we cope is only in small part up to us. It is most often to others that we owe our survival, let alone our flourishing..." (p. 1). In emphasising our dependence and interdependence, MacIntyre envisaged:

... a form of political society in which it is taken for granted that disability and dependence on others are something that all of us experience at certain times in our lives and this to unpredictable degrees, and that consequently our interest in how the needs of the disabled are adequately voiced and met is not a special interest, ... but rather the interest of the whole political society, an interest that is integral to their conception of their common good. (p. 130)

In regarding and respecting disability as an essential part of being human, the focus is shifted from the former being a private trouble to a public matter that affects every member of a society, and plays a significant role in determining the nature of that society. MacIntyre (1999) highlighted the possibility that each member of a community has the capacity to teach important lessons that relate to our common good.

Numerous others have documented the power of those whose humanness has been questioned to teach powerful lessons about different ways of being in the world, and what constitutes a meaningful life (e.g., Bauman, 2007; Bérubé, 1997; Head, 2006; Hunt, 1966; Kittay, 1999, 2001; Sacks, 1995; Ware, 2002). Unlike economic productivity, such contributions to society cannot be quantified or measured, yet are no less, and may be more valuable in facilitating our understanding of our shared humanity and common good. These lessons are learned in the context of relationships that are characterised by mutual dependency, as illustrated in Kittay's realisation that, without her daughter, "I would wither" (2001, p. 576).

The positioning of understanding humanness at the beginning of my thesis reflects my belief that disability is an inherent and necessary part of being human. As others have suggested (e.g., Bérubé, 1997; Finkelstein, 2001; MacIntyre, 1999) understanding disability can illuminate our understanding of humanity and the ways in which human beings have constructed different cultures and societies, with various social, educational, economic, political, legislative and religious values and structures. These macro level factors in turn influence and are influenced by human beings' interactions and relationships with each other in micro level contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). How we know and define others, whether in terms of our shared humanity or abnormal difference, is as much a measure of our humanity as it is of those we define (Bogdan & Taylor, 1992). So why and how do we come to respond to the same individuals in such antithetical (Goode, 1984) ways? What influences the ways in which we construct individuals' identities? The following discussion focuses on understanding the complexity of disability and the process of disabling human beings.

### **Understanding Disability**

*"There's many different meanings of disability, isn't there?"*  
*(disabled student, as cited in Barnes et al., 2000, p. 2).*

This British student's quote captures simply the complexity of disability. The purpose of this part of the chapter is to explore the many different meanings that make up an eclectic, pluralistic theoretical framework in which to understand disability (Danforth, 2006; Gabel, 2005; Priestley, 2003; Shakespeare, 2006). As is evident from the discussion thus far, the ways in which disability is conceptualised have significant implications for people's lives. In this study's focus on students who are known primarily in terms of the disability label

assigned to them, it is particularly important to examine the thinking about human difference that underpins educational philosophies, policies and practices. As Longmore (2003) explained:

“Disability” is not what most of us commonly think it is. People with disabilities are not who or what we have been taught to assume they are. The experience of disability is not what we have been told. Much of the reigning social thought about disability is distorted. Most of the conventional wisdom about disabled people is wrong....

The danger is that dominant ideologies of disability will pinion our perceptions, shackling efforts to think in new ways about disability and disabled people, and about “normality” too. Describing this sort of constricted mindset, e. e. cummings wrote: “he does not have to think because he knows/... because he knows, he cannot understand.” All of us, disabled and nondisabled alike, will never truly understand disability experiences and identities unless we examine what we think we know. We all have a lot of relearning to do. (pp. 13-14)

Reference has already been made to the hegemonic positivist conceptualisation of disability as a biological and/or psychological condition/impairment situated within the individual, which negatively affects the latter’s physical, sensory and/or cognitive functioning. Various referred to as the medical model (Shakespeare, 2006), individual model (Priestley, 2003), or personal tragedy theory (Oliver, 1990), disability is known as a personal problem. While this received Truth about the nature of disability continues to hold a great deal of power, particularly in medical, psychological, and educational disciplines and practices, it has been rejected by an increasing number of disabled people and academics in the emerging field of Disability Studies, defined by Rice (2006) as “an interdisciplinary area of study that utilises the lenses from social sciences and humanities to view disability from personal, social, cultural, historical, and literary perspectives” (p. 253). Since the 1960s (approximately), both grassroots and academic activists and researchers in Western societies have proposed alternative ways of theorising disability that recognise the contextual and relational nature of disability.

In his discussion of the “family of social approaches,” Shakespeare (2006, p. 9) provided a critical analysis of the emergence of the British social model, in which disability is no longer considered to reside within the individual, but rather is situated within society in terms of disabling and oppressive structures which limit individuals’ participation and citizenship. Since 1976 the social model has been developed by numerous academics, and ongoing debate continues among Disability Studies’ scholars as to the nature of disability and critique of the

multi-faceted social model. While space does not permit a comprehensive discussion of these academic arguments, reference will be made to certain theorists whose work is particularly relevant to this study.

Thomas (1999) proposed an amended version of the British social model in her social relational definition of disability, which she described as a “materialist feminist understanding of disability” (p. 2). Noting that the British social model evolved with a focus on oppressive materialist barriers in particular, Thomas’ theorising has extended the scope of inquiry to include the impact of oppressive and disablist social relationships and practices on individuals’ psychological and emotional well-being. In other words, Thomas asserted that disability is about both barriers to “doing” and “being.” Factors and processes involved in both disability and impairment effects are instrumental in restricting individuals’ activity (barriers to doing), and in affecting individuals’ psycho-emotional well-being (barriers to being). She therefore defined disability as “a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well-being” (Thomas, 1999, p. 156).

While Thomas (1999, 2004, 2006) further developed the social model, Shakespeare (2006) argued for its abandonment, proposing instead an “interactional approach” (p. 56). Calling for a more holistic approach than that offered through individual or social models, Shakespeare claimed that disability always involves interaction between individuals and the social and structural contexts in which they live. Intrinsic factors include the nature and severity of impairment, personality, attitude, and abilities, while extrinsic factors include the attitudes and responses of others, environmental structures, support systems, as well as economic, social and cultural influences. Such an interactional interpretation of disability has some similarities to Thomas’ social relational approach, however Shakespeare differs from the latter in several ways. For example, he does not place the same emphasis on social oppression, believing that to do so may obscure the influence of positive social relationships, as Bogdan and Taylor (1992) have noted. Shakespeare’s interpretation of impairment as a universal phenomenon that affects every human being in varying ways, at some point in their life, is consistent with MacIntyre’s (1999) thinking about human vulnerability. Recognising our shared fragility as mortal human beings might help highlight, and hopefully change, the disabling extrinsic factors that act to make life more difficult than it need be for people. For example,

Shakespeare noted that disabled people would not have to describe themselves in terms of their deficits in order to access support and/or rights.

In addition to the interpretations of disability proposed by Thomas (1999) and Shakespeare (2006), I have found Priestley's (1998, 2003) approach extremely useful in providing a foundation from which to consider the complexity of disability. As did Thomas (1999, 2004, 2006) and Shakespeare (2006), Priestley (1998) has adopted a position of "ontological pluralism" (p. 79) in developing a framework within which to understand disability. His examination of debates regarding individual and social models and materialist and idealist explanations of disability is helpful in outlining the distinctive features of each and the ways in which they overlap to form a more comprehensive conceptualisation of disability. Such theorising is important because it shapes the kind of research undertaken, which in turn determines the production of particular knowledge that informs policy and practice (Priestley, 1998; Williams, 2001).

Priestley (1998) argued that the interaction of the two key dimensions of social theory, that is, the relationship between the individual and society (subjective-objective dimension), and the explanation of phenomena in materialist or idealist terms, can be utilised to theorize disability. In his 1998 article, he outlined four positions or approaches: (1) the individual-materialist; (2) the individual-idealist; (3) the socio-materialist or social creationist; and (4) the social constructionist.

In its focus on impaired bodies as the "units of analysis" (Priestley, 1998, p. 78), the individual-materialist approach (later referred to by Priestley [2003] as a biological model, concerning the body), is most closely aligned with the traditional medical model. This approach conceptualises disability as "the product of biological determinism or personal tragedy manifested in the material condition of the individual" (1998, p. 79). Positivist methods are typically used in this particular theoretical position. The individual-idealist approach, which Priestley (2003) referred to as a psychological model concerning identity, focuses on the psychological aspects of the individual, such as cognitive and affective dimensions. He described this interpretation of disability as "the product of personal experience and the negotiation of social roles between individuals" (1998, p. 80). Its units of analysis are identity, beliefs, and experience, and examples of typical methods used in the study of this approach to disability include phenomenology, symbolic interactionism and

interpretive psychology. As well, within an individual-idealist approach, Priestley noted the contribution of disabled writers who emphasise the importance of individual experience and personal identity. In a socio-materialist/social creationist position, termed “structural model” by Priestley (2003), disability is conceptualised as “the material relations of power arising from the development of political economy and/or patriarchy within a specific historical context” (1998, p. 80). Here, the units of analysis are physical, structural and/or institutional barriers. The final approach, social constructionist, or “cultural model” (Priestley, 2003), defined disability as “a social construct - the idealist product of a society developing within a specific cultural context” (1998, p. 81). Cultural values and representations constitute the units of analysis within methods of social constructionism and cultural relativism (Priestley, 1998).

In considering these four approaches, Priestley (1998, 2003) provided a way of addressing the missing components of the individual and social models, respectively. With its narrow focus on biological causes of impairment, the individual model fails to consider social, relational, and contextual factors that impact on individuals’ lives. Conversely, the initial social model paid little attention to the individual’s experience of impairment in its explanation of disabling social barriers (Molloy & Vasil, 2002; Reeve, 2004; Shakespeare, 2006; Stalker, 1998; Thomas, 1999; Watson, 2004). Such either-or approaches can provide only incomplete and static understandings of disability. Priestley’s framework recognises the dynamic nature of disability as a product of the interaction and interdependence of all four components, in different ways and in varying contexts and times. The two individual (micro level/personal) approaches acknowledge the diversity and uniqueness of individuals’ experiences of impairment and identities, while the social (macro level/public) positions highlight the commonality of discrimination, exclusion, and oppression that are enacted through materialist-structural and idealist-cultural social processes (Priestley, 1998). While Priestley (2003) admitted that simultaneously drawing on multiple approaches is challenging, he believed that the ways of knowing about disability made possible through ontological pluralism may provide a more thorough understanding of its complexity. For this reason, I am drawn to Priestley’s work to provide the theoretical underpinnings for this thesis.

Priestley’s (1998, 2003) framework provides a structure within which to examine the work of other Disability Studies’ theorists who position themselves in one or more of the four conceptual frames. The next part of discussion explores each of the latter from the

perspectives of particular theorists, in order to further elucidate the various meanings of disability. Although outlined separately in an attempt to provide clarity of discussion, the artificiality of such separation is acknowledged and the blurring of approaches inevitable.

### ***Individual-Materialist/Biological/Body/Impairment***

Impairment is eloquently described by Shakespeare and Watson (2001) as “the absent presence” (p. 14). As noted, the “bracketing” of impairment within the traditional social model has been contested, particularly by disabled feminist writers whose experiences of impairment are personal realities that cannot be ignored in accounts of disability (Shakespeare & Watson, 2001). The absence of the body in social model interpretations of disability seems particularly conspicuous given the significance attached to body and appearance in Western cultures and the impact of the latter on how we are known and judged by others.

The significance of impairment was recognised by Thomas (1999) in her social relational definition of disability. She defined impairments as “those variations in the structure, function and workings of bodies which, in Western culture, are medically defined as significant abnormalities or pathologies” (p. 8). In later work she claimed that “impairment does not cause disability, certainly not, but it is the raw material upon which disability works. It is the embodied socio-biological substance - socially marked as unacceptable bodily deviation - that mediates the social relationships in question” (2004, p. 41). The term “impairment effects” is used to acknowledge that impairments do impact on individuals’ lives in comparison to majority ways of living. Thomas was careful to point out however, that restrictions deriving from individual impairments are not to be confused with those imposed by a disabling society. Like Shakespeare and Watson (2001), she emphasised that the specific nature of impairment (e.g., physical, sensory, cognitive, behavioural, affecting appearance and/or functioning, visible or invisible, stable or degenerative) affects the kinds of disablism experienced. As already noted, Shakespeare’s (2006) more recent thoughts on the universality of impairment are also important to consider in any discussion of bodily interpretations of disability.

### ***Individual-Idealist/Psychological/Identity***

A teenager who has Down syndrome observed, “it is not how I look, it’s how you see me” (Gaad, 2004, p. 322). How individuals see themselves and how others see them have significant implications for what Thomas (1999) has termed “the psycho-emotional



dimensions” of disability. Whether individuals take pride in their identity, of which impairment is an inseparable part, or deny the latter by efforts to “pass” as normal, or acquiesce, knowingly or not, to the hegemonic deficit interpretation of impairment/disability, is influenced by the dynamic and complex interaction of interpersonal relationships, and structural and cultural contexts. This in turn affects individuals’ psycho-emotional well-being. As Thomas (2004) asserted, oppression is experienced “on the ‘inside’ as well as on the ‘outside’” (pp. 37-38).

Drawing from Thomas’ work, Reeve (2004) further developed understandings of the psycho-emotional dimension of disability, claiming that for many disabled people, the inside barriers are the most disabling in individuals’ lives. She outlined three ways in which the latter may be manifested, depending upon individuals and the contexts in which they live and with whom. Firstly, exclusion from physical environments and/or having to use back door entrances to buildings because of structural barriers can give individuals a sense of not belonging and not being wanted in otherwise public as well as private places. The use of space/place as a means of marginalizing individuals has been similarly noted by other researchers (e.g., Danforth & Navarro, 1998). Multiple and ongoing experiences of structural disablism can have an emotional cost on individuals. So too, according to Reeve, can the reaction of other people, in terms of intrusive curiosity and staring, as if the violation of individuals’ personal space is legitimised by the latter’s difference from the norm. While Reeve acknowledged that the visibility of impairment affects people’s responses, she pointed out that the fear of having one’s invisible impairment revealed can also be a source of psycho-emotional disablement. Finally, the latter may be manifested in internalized oppression, when individuals internalize the hostility and prejudices of the dominant group within a society towards those they marginalize. The power of language, images, and myths in perpetuating negative and inaccurate stereotypes which are taken for granted truths can have significant effects on individuals’ identity and sense of worth. In particular, Reeve noted:

Disabled children may experience more acute internalized oppression because their less powerful position means that they are more vulnerable to the views of the wider society; in addition, their parents may be unwitting oppressors in the process, because their beliefs and expectations will be shaped by the professionals they defer to. (2004, p. 88)

In such circumstances, internalized oppression can significantly affect who students can be, thus disabling them psycho-emotionally in addition to/alongside structural, cultural, and

impairment factors. A powerful example of the impact of the barriers “in here” is provided in a student’s remarks:

“Let’s say what if they found out [I’m in special ed]? Would they still be my friends? Would they still go to the park with me? Or would they just blow my cover and tell everyone I was in special ed?” He decided not to take the risk, so that “it was very important that I kept my secret to myself.” (Peters, 1999, p. 115)

In this instance, the educational response to a student who experienced difficulties in learning, namely “special ed,” compounded rather than ameliorated the student’s difficulties. He resisted the stigma associated with special education and its consequent staining of his identity (Taylor, 2000) by keeping secret his educational status in order to preserve his friendships. The psycho-emotional cost of such a compromise is not known.

Peters (1999) concurred with Thomas’ (1999, 2004, 2006) and Reeve’s (2004) arguments regarding psycho-emotional disablism and cited a student’s observation that “‘labelling makes you one of two things: weak or strong’” (p. 114). The power of labels to simultaneously determine and damage a human being’s identity has been documented extensively in disability literature by both those with academic credentials (e.g., Danforth & Navarro, 1998; Kliever & Biklen, 1996; Taylor, 2000) and, more recently, those to whom labels have been assigned (e.g., Bogdan & Taylor, 1994; Busch, 2007; Kennedy, 1998). In Bogdan and Taylor’s (1994) presentation of the life histories of two people labelled as retarded, Ed Murphy (pseudonym) captured the essence of the power of labels to objectify and dehumanise in his observation that “the problem is getting labelled as being something. After that you’re not really a person” (p. 33). In drawing attention away from the individual’s complexity as a human being, labels tend to become the latter’s master status, reducing a person’s identity and humanity to a single dimension, of which stigma is a salient feature (Bogdan & Taylor, 1994; Taylor, 2000).

Like Reeve (2004), Peters (1999) asserted that many disabled children and adults internalize language and labels that reflect an oppressive hegemonic discourse of disability, resulting in an acceptance of “the status quo of a governmental system devoted to their ‘welfare’ rather than achieve an integrated positive identity from their own lived experiences” (1999, p. 103). Thus, individuals’ identities/being and development/doing are stained and constrained respectively, as noted by Thomas (2006):

...limits are placed on who disabled people can be by the shaping of individuals' inner worlds and social behaviours. This interacts with social barriers that restrict what disabled people can do – “out there” – in the “public” arena. Limitations on what we can be and what we can do fuse together in a toxic disablist mix. (p. 182)

For example, educational policies that label and segregate students on the basis of impairment reflect prevailing cultural beliefs within a knowledge economy (in which knowledge is used to produce economic benefits within a society) about the value of certain kinds of human difference, particularly those assumed to relate to intelligence and the ability to reason. Such policies are enacted by individuals working within the education system, in the context of their interactions and relationships with students. How the former, carriers and transmitters of culture (Smith, 2000), relate to students can have considerable impact on students' sense of self, their self-esteem, personal confidence, and identity. Referring to studies in which students labelled as learning disabled revealed the impact of being so labelled, Poplin (1996) observed that “the same words that answer questions such as ‘Who am I?’ shape what students believe about ‘who I can become’” (p. 11).

It is important to note that both Thomas (1999, 2004, 2006) and Reeve (2004) make the distinction between individuals' psychological and emotional acceptance of impairment and the impact of others' responses to the latter. In other words, as observed by Finlay and Lyons (2005), “... adjustment to disability is not necessarily the same as adjustment to others' attitudes to disability” (p. 121). Failure to make this distinction may result in a privileging of an individual model of disability, in which psychologists are called upon to help individuals adjust to/cope with/overcome their impairment (read “personal trouble or tragedy”). Such an approach misplaces responsibility for change on the individual, and obscures the need to address, as a public issue through collective action, the oppressive macro level structural and cultural origins of disability. Watson (2004) emphasised the need for a model of disability to recognise that the “feelings of hurt” experienced by individuals “can be seen not as individual assaults, but as part of a systemic attack which can be shown to be typical for disabled people as a whole” (p. 110). As Thomas claimed, “the personal *is* political” (2006, p. 182).

### ***Socio-Materialist/Social Creationist/Structural***

The third dimension of disability in Priestley's (1998, 2003) framework focuses on material barriers to participation and citizenship that operate within political economies in particular time periods. In Western societies, individualism, independence, economic productivity, material success, and normalcy are privileged. They determine the ways in which societies are

physically and environmentally structured, and the ways in which economic, educational, political, and social life and infrastructures (e.g., housing, transport, communications, health and welfare services) are organised in terms of systems, structures, policies and practices. These in turn determine the extent to which individuals have equitable opportunities to develop, participate and flourish in society (Watson, 2004). Those who deviate significantly from the socially constructed norms that define the kind of human being considered desirable, particularly in terms of normalcy, productivity and independence, are particularly vulnerable to systemic discrimination, and/or, in Thomas' (1999) terms, experience barriers to *doing* which also impact on the nature of individuals' *being*.

Since 19<sup>th</sup> century industrialisation, the ways in which Western capitalist societies have organised and structured their basic economic and political activities have resulted in the isolation, exclusion, and oppression of those deemed unable to contribute to the success of the economy through participation in the workforce (Priestley, 2003; Thomas, 2006). In his widely cited paper regarding the "concept of oppression" in relation to the development of a social theory of disability, Abberley (1987) commented:

... the "problem" of disability is why these people aren't productive, how to return them to productivity, and, if this is not seen as economically viable, how to handle their non-productivity in a manner which causes as little disruption as possible to the over-riding imperative of capital accumulation and the maximisation of profits. (pp. 15-16)

In a competitive, individualistic market-driven society in which independence and material success are indicators of human worth, individuals who are perceived as not economically viable are marginalised (Hunt, 1966; Thomas, 2006). They and their families are expected to deal with their "problems" as a private trouble (e.g., Kittay, 2001), and/or utilise systems of community care in which disabled people are professionally controlled, heightening rather than reducing dependence on others (Thomas, 2006). In order to minimise the burden of the costs of such systems of care to the economy, a proportion of the funding required to operate the latter is dependent upon charitable donation, as evident in the establishment of charitable organisations that must be operated in the most cost efficient manner possible. In economic terms, non-productive disabled people represent a poor return on investment; therefore, shifting some of the responsibility/burden for their welfare to families and/or the non-profit sector of society may be considered financially prudent, in terms of minimising disruption and cost to the hegemonic socioeconomic order.

The poverty that is a consequence of un- and under-employment and subsequent socially created dependence on welfare benefits and impairment-specific charitable care organisations acts as an effective means of the creation and control of “second class citizens” (Hunt, 1966, p. 158). Barriers to participation in society’s key activities and consequent reliance upon charity for one’s welfare serve to undermine individuals’ ability to assert rights of citizenship in society, thus compounding their powerlessness. In a more positive light, in relocating the position of disability from the individual to the social, and in redefining it in terms of social oppression, the materialist/structural interpretation of disability enabled and legitimised political action by disabled people, working within “a discourse of rights and citizenship” (Watson, 2004, p. 103), to bring about social change. As such, its contribution at grassroots, political, and academic levels has been significant in broadening both understandings of disability and opportunities for participation and citizenship by disabled people.

### ***Socio-Idealist/Social Constructionist/Cultural***

A social constructionist or “cultural model” (Priestley, 2003) prioritises the role of cultural values and representations in constructing disability. While focusing in particular on materialist and psycho-emotional dimensions of disability, Thomas (2004) nevertheless recognised the work of cultural theorists in their interpretation of the influences of the “cultural superstructure” (p. 39), noting that a range of discourses and images “incubate the meanings and messages about impairment and ‘unacceptable difference’ that inform the attitudes and behaviours of us all” (p. 39). Similarly, Ferguson, Ferguson, and Taylor (1992) suggested that “perhaps the most pervasive, and yet the least recognised, context for disability is the cultural stew of images and stereotypes about disability that inevitably simmers on the back burner of everyone’s consciousness as we make our way through life” (p. 8).

In contrast to the focus on the individual in terms of impairment and identity, this approach to understanding disability illuminates the ways in which disability is constructed and given meaning through a complex interplay of social interaction, relationships, and activities within cultural contexts; in other words, disability is a social and cultural construction (Biklen, 2005; Biklen & Duchan, 1994; Bogdan & Taylor, 1992; Danforth & Navarro, 1998; Dudley-Marling, 2004; Ferguson & Ferguson, 1995; Ferguson, Ferguson, & Taylor, 1992; Gallagher, 2004b; Grenier, 2006; Molloy & Vasil, 2002; Nunkoosing, 2000; Rice, 2006; Smith, 1999; Taylor, 2000). McDermott and Varenne (1995, p. 345) proposed:

In the ethnographic study of disability, the subject shifts from Them to Us, from what is wrong with them to what is wrong with the culture that history has made a Them separate from an Us, from what is wrong with them to what is right with them that they can tell us so well about the world we have all inherited.

Danforth and Navarro (1998) defined social construction in terms of “the centrality of language, thought, interaction, and culture in the making of human meaning in lived contexts. Those beliefs and understandings taken to be factual in conversation and interaction are merely constructs that are granted privilege over alternative explanations” (pp. 31-32). According to Biklen (2000a), cultural interpretations of disability are “imposed understandings, cultural stereotypes” (p. 339) that are characterised by pessimism and rarely informed by individuals’ own experiences. Kliewer, Biklen, and Kasa-Hendrickson (2006) referred to the “cultural denial of competence” (p. 163), claiming that disability is a culturally devalued, fixed construct which is “simple, one dimensional, dormant, stalled, and fossilized” (p. 175) and which stifles possibilities of human development. Regardless of the means by which simplistic representations of disability are transmitted within cultures (e.g., language, literature, media, humour, policies and practices underpinned by deficit thinking, environmental in/accessibility and the differential use of space), the pervasive default conceptualisation of disability in “normate culture” (Biklen, 2000a, p. 346) is one of deficit. Gordon and Rosenblum (2001) suggested that disabled people “...risk being seen as *nothing but a problem*—because they are assumed to suffer from problems and are expected to be a problem for ‘the rest of us’” (p. 14). The problematic notion of problem was iterated by McDermott and Varenne (1995):

It is one kind of problem to have a behavioural range different from social expectations; it is another kind of problem to be in a culture in which that difference is used by others for degradation. The second problem is by far the worse. (p. 330)

An illustration of such degradation was provided in the comments made by a student in Peters’ (1999) study, cited earlier in the discussion of identity. His concern that his friends would find out that he was “in special ed” reflected his implicit or explicit understanding that cultural beliefs about certain kinds of human difference had a significant impact on his identity and life, in terms of both being and doing.

In their discussion of the social construction of Asperger syndrome, Molloy and Vasil (2002) outlined the role that cultural institutions, particularly schools and special education, play in the construction and reifying of this particular disability category. They argued that the identification of Asperger syndrome is largely dependent upon a child's entry into educational contexts, that is, it is situation or context specific, and even within such contexts, is constructed in various ways according to the differing and oft competing discourses and practices of professionals employed to provide special education services, such as speech language therapists, psychologists, and so on. The sum of each of these professionals' fragmented knowledge of and response to a label/syndrome may be less than the whole of the child who represents the heart of their work. While efforts to remediate the child's problems may serve the interests of schools in minimising disruption to their efficient functioning, such deficit constructions may "sentence[s] the child to a lifetime of special needs and interventions" (Molloy & Vasil, 2002, p. 667).

As outlined in the discussion of disability theorising thus far, partial, inaccurate, and destructive ways of constructing disability are increasingly challenged and resisted by disabled people as well as people from all walks of life who have a commitment to social justice. For example, McDermott and Varenne (1995) reframed conceptualisations of disability by asking not, "what is wrong with a person?" but rather, "what is wrong outside the child in the world we give them?" (p. 330). In doing so, they sought to make apparent the ways in which cultural beliefs, values, and structures mark and make consequential certain socially constructed differences, some of which are valued and fostered and some negated and marginalised. Dudley-Marling (2004) framed comparable questions, such as "'what's wrong with an institution [school] that produces so much failure?'" and "'what's wrong with a culture that created an institution that creates so much failure?'" (p. 483). In a similar vein, Biklen (2000a) recognised the irony and injustice that "the dominant culture's inhospitable ways create the problems society shuns" (p. 341). In recognising the power of cultures to disable, a phrase used by MacIntyre (1999) comes to mind, that "we might do well to begin with a certain suspicion of ourselves" (p. 4).

Priestley's (1998, 2003) multi-dimensional framework provides a means of understanding the complexity of disability, the many different meanings noted by the student at the beginning of this discussion. The dynamic interaction of macro and micro level factors relating to body, identity, structure, and culture is more often than not characterised by fundamental injustice

towards individuals whose human differences are interpreted and responded to in ways that diminish or deny their humanity. As Watson (2004) stated, “it is clear that disabled people are treated unequally in almost all aspects of their lives” (p. 102). Discussion therefore turns to the issue of social justice and its varied meanings, processes, and outcomes for disabled people.

### **Social Justice**

*“Disability is one of the most frequently forgotten forms of social, political and cultural oppression”*  
(Christensen, 1996, p. 63).

Like disability, there are numerous meanings of social justice (Christensen & Dorn, 1997). These “competing notions” vary, depending upon the beliefs and actions of individuals operating within particular social, political, and historical contexts. The notion of rights is similarly relative, Young and Quibell (2000) noting that a “right” is an idea used by human beings to get on with each other, “the benchmark of people’s obligations to one another” (p. 754). Underpinning the concepts of social justice and rights are theoretical explanations which will be outlined following a brief discussion of who is entitled to be served by justice.

Ironically, the societal exclusion that characterises many people’s experience of disability is paralleled to some extent in the realm of social justice. While the notion of universal human rights is widely acknowledged (e.g., Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948; United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2007), it is more narrowly applied and experienced, depending upon the ways in which different cultures and societies define what it means to be human and thus, entitled to human rights. For example, in her discussion of disability, human development and rights, Baylies (2002) referred to “the extent to which impairments have so frequently been taken to diminish both personhood and humanness” (p. 736). Similarly, other researchers have noted that some individuals are considered to be “inappropriate subjects for justice” (Kittay, 2001, p. 574) whose access to human rights is at best conditional and at worst denied (Baylies, 2002; Diamond, 1991; Kittay, 2001; Watson, 2004; Young & Quibell, 2000). Kittay (2001) noted in her discussion of her daughter’s circumstances that the need for resources to support human development and flourishing is out of proportion to the individual’s ability to reciprocate, to produce any meaningful return on society’s investment,



therefore her entitlement to citizenship and rights may be forfeited. Kittay (2001) commented on the injustice of such situations:

... any society, and surely any decent society, has the care of dependents as one of its central functions. ... To presume that they [dependents] stand outside of justice, that they are not entitled, that—for reasons of their impairments and dependence—they lack rights, seems odd indeed if the point and purpose of such principles (if not the sole one) is a social order that secures the ability to care for dependents. (pp. 573-574)

Such instances suggest that, despite the rhetoric, the enactment of justice is not universal (Young & Quibell, 2000), nor is it blind. Possible understandings of the partiality of justice in the lives of many disabled people may be found in theoretical approaches to social justice, which form the focus of the next discussion.

### ***Theoretical Understandings of Social Justice***

Ironically (once again), the inclusion of disability in theories of justice is a relatively recent phenomenon (Christensen & Dorn, 1997). In Fraser's (1995) widely cited article, *From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age*, disability is conspicuous by its absence. Fraser's analysis may be useful however when considering injustices in the lives of disabled people. Her identification of socioeconomic injustice, originating in a society's political-economic structure, and cultural or symbolic injustice, stemming from "social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication" (1995, p. 71) corresponds with Priestley's (1998, 2003) structural and cultural factors regarding disability. As did Priestley in his discussion of the latter, Fraser noted that "far from occupying two airtight separate spheres, economic injustice and cultural injustice are usually interimbricated so as to reinforce one another dialectically" (1995, p. 72). Both involve societal processes and practices that discriminate and disadvantage certain groups in comparison to the majority population. For the purpose of clarity however, each will be outlined separately.

According to Fraser (1995) the remedy to socioeconomic injustice is redistribution. For example, because the problem lies in political-economic structures, aspects of the latter, such as income, need to be redistributed or changed in some way to be more equitable, thus minimising the differences among the various groups of people within society. For example, in New Zealand educational contexts, the implementation of the 1989 Education Act

amendments provided access to local state schools for disabled students, thus providing the latter with the same opportunity to enrol in schools as their peers.

Cultural injustice, according to Fraser (1995) may be remedied by recognition strategies. Examples of cultural injustice include cultural domination (e.g., Deaf individuals being expected to function in a hearing world without access to sign language), nonrecognition (e.g., the invisibility of disabled people within the representations of everyday life such as media -- and Fraser's article!), and disrespect (e.g., being subjected to derision in daily life and/or popular culture on the basis of stereotypical thinking). The impact of these forms of injustice on individuals' sense of self and identity has already been noted in the discussion of Priestley's (1998, 2003) disability framework (e.g., by Reeve, 2004; Thomas, 2004; Watson, 2004). In attempting to remediate such injustices, recognition strategies involve an acknowledgement and valuing (rather than de-valuing) of the diversity of specific groups and identities through positive accentuation of their differences. The passing of the 2006 New Zealand Sign Language Act in which sign language is recognised as an official national language is a recent example of the recognition of a marginalised group of people in New Zealand society.

Fraser (1995) referred to the "redistribution-recognition dilemma" (p. 74) to describe the situation in which certain groups of people experience both economic and cultural injustice, which therefore calls for both redistributive and recognitive solutions. The dilemma lies in the opposing aims of each, namely, redistribution requires the reducing of difference among population groups, while recognition highlights group differences. The term "bivalent" (p. 78) is used to describe such dually disadvantaged groups, in which disabled people, while unrecognised in this article, are certainly included. As already noted in the discussion of disability theorising, the history of disability is replete with examples of the ways in which people have been socioeconomically marginalised and rendered invisible within Western cultures. Possible solutions to the redistribution-recognition dilemma are offered by Fraser (1995) in the forms of affirmative and transformative approaches, which "cut across the redistribution-recognition divide" (p. 82). Affirmative remedies are defined as those which aim to correct inequities without changing the underlying beliefs and structures that generate them. In contrast, transformative solutions focus on resolving inequities by changing or transforming existing beliefs and structures.

For example, in education, the provision of extra resourcing for special education is a redistributive remedy that is affirmative of the status quo of school structures and values. Providing students with additional funding or teacher aides does nothing to address underlying hegemonic beliefs about disability and may actually generate cultural injustice, in drawing attention to students in terms of their perceived deficits and need for extra help. This in turn may reinforce the simplistic dichotomy of “ability-disability” and “regular-special” education. On the other hand, a transformative solution involves the questioning, or, in Fraser’s (1995) terms, “deconstruction” of these ways of thinking about and responding to human beings. Recognition of disability as a natural part of being human is necessary to address the cultural and socioeconomic injustices that derive from dichotomous thinking that constructs a conceptual and structural divide between normal and disabled. Accompanying such a shift or transformation in thinking is a transformation of the education system, from one that classifies and treats normal and special students in different ways, to an inclusive system in which the human diversity and complexity of all students is recognised, valued, and responded to in respectful and educative ways (Christensen, 1996). Such redistributive and recognitive transformations do not counteract each other in the ways described above, nor do they favour one group at the expense of another. Rather, they have the potential to enable a socially just education for all students.

Fraser’s (1995) analysis of some of the dilemmas of justice provides a broad framework in which to consider other theorists’ interpretations of social justice as they relate specifically to disability and education. Christensen and Dorn (1997) related differing individualistic interpretations of social justice to competing notions of egalitarian and meritocratic philosophies of education. Determining the outcomes of justice in terms of benefits to “decontextualised” (p. 183) individuals (as distinct from groups and/or society in general), these authors outlined Rawls’s (1971) theory of distributive social justice and Nozick’s (1974) libertarian philosophy as they apply to special education. Rawls focused on the issue of fairness and liberty, believing that, in order to limit inequality or unfairness and promote egalitarianism, resources could be distributed unequally (re-distributed), providing the most disadvantaged in society would benefit from this. Gale (2000) noted that the outcome of such distributive justice is to ensure that disadvantaged groups have access to the material and social goods basic to life in society. In educational contexts, Christensen and Dorn (1997) proposed that special education is an example of Rawlsian justice, in its redistribution of resources to a specific group of students.

According to Gale (2000), Nozick, on the other hand, asserted that individuals “are entitled to differential rewards in accordance with their differential contributions to productive and competitive processes” (p. 256). In other words, individuals deserve or merit justice on the basis of their talent and effort, evident in their ability to contribute to and compete in a market-based economy. Those identified as less able and therefore less deserving are considered to be “out of the running for the rewards that come with a full cultural competence” (McDermott & Varenne, 1995, p. 334). Educationally, the provision of special education for this group of students could be interpreted in Nozickian terms as a means of ensuring that deserving students are not distracted from their learning by the presence of less deserving students (Christensen & Dorn, 1997). These authors cited Shanker’s (1994) assertion that “if we allow one or two (problem) kids to stay in a class where they ruin learning for everyone else, we can forget about achieving world class educational standards” (Christensen & Dorn, 1997, p. 192). “What about the other 28 students?” is a question raised by many teachers (Gale, 2000; numerous personal communications with student teachers and teachers), reflecting meritocratic thinking and an unquestioned, false assumption that certain students are inherently problematic and thus, less entitled to educational rights. Current government policy and additional funding for “gifted and talented” students could also be interpreted as an example of meritocratic approaches to education, in which investment is made in the “top” students to facilitate their individual academic achievement and eventual contribution to a knowledge economy.

While egalitarian and meritocratic theories are contradictory in terms of who should benefit from justice, both focus on the individual, taking little account of the societal contexts in which individuals live. Such acontextual approaches to justice reflect the independent, individualistic ethos of Western societies, and are consistent with and perpetuate hegemonic deficit interpretations of disability that situate the “problem” within the individual, rather than considering the impact of barriers to doing and being (Thomas, 2006), external societal factors that disable people (Christensen & Dorn, 1997). Furthermore, Gale (2000) proposed that Rawlsian and Nozickian theories conceptualise justice primarily in terms of an individual good, a product, involving the individual having assets such as material and social goods. In Fraser’s (1995) terms, these approaches, which focus predominantly on socioeconomic structural injustices, merely affirm the status quo, rather than transforming it by examining and changing the deep structures that maintain injustice.

Numerous researchers have commented on the limited and tenuous impact that rights legislation has on individuals' daily lives (Baylies, 2002; Christensen & Dorn, 1997; Gale, 2000; Thomas, 2006; Ware, 2002). Young and Quibell (2000) highlighted this point in the title of their article, *Why Rights are Never Enough*, and claimed that the equality stated in written laws is too often unrealised in practice in people's lives. They questioned the "mechanical, individualistic concept of rights" (p. 758) that is privileged in Western culture, and suggested that, "rather than acting as atomistic individuals, people should attempt to understand each other, to 'do each other justice'" (p. 758). While recognising that structural and material (re-distributive) inequities also need to be addressed, Young and Quibell (2000) reasoned that the latter injustices can only be resolved if people understand each other, and therefore are able to recognise inequities in people's lives. Understanding each other involves a multi-dimensional appreciation of people, one which is informed by knowing individuals through relationships, and constructing their identities in terms of their humanness, rather than simplistic uni-dimensional labels (Bogdan & Taylor, 1992).

Watson (2004) presented similar arguments regarding the need to consider interpersonal relations in any discussion of justice and disability. He noted that "it is through such relations that people experience recognition as active, capable social agents or find such recognition denied" (p. 111). Furthermore, it is at the interpersonal or micro level that the effects of macro level laws, policies, systems and structures are enacted in people's lives, in just or unjust ways; it is at the inter- and personal level that the political becomes manifest.

Consistent with Young and Quibell's (2000) call for understanding, and Watson's (2004) recognition of the need for interpersonal relations in order for rights to be effective, Christensen and Dorn (1997) emphasised the primacy of relationships in their proposal of a theory of relational justice. They claimed that the "goal of social justice should be a just set of relationships" (p. 193). Echoing disability theorists' interpretations of the multi-dimensional nature of disability (e.g., Priestley, 1998, 2003; Shakespeare, 2006; Thomas, 1999, 2004, 2006), Christensen and Dorn stated that "people develop their identities in contact with other people and different environments, and it is that relational self that needs to be the foundation of a theory of social justice" (p. 193). They added that justice is evident (or absent) in the quality of relationships, a belief shared by Gale (2000) who noted that the measure of justice is the process of its enactment between people. Gale (2000) and Christensen and Dorn (1997)

also acknowledged the influence of the micro and macro level social structures that shape the quality of relationships (and vice versa). As well, the latter authors pointed out that a significant aspect of working for social justice is people's realisation that "the world *could* be a better place" (Christensen & Dorn, 1997, p. 194).

Rather than thinking of justice simply in terms of an individual good or product, the above forms of justice are considered mainly in terms of a process, involving relationships among interdependent members of a society, all of whom are influenced by the contexts in which they live. The common as well as the individual good matters. "Right" in this interpretation of justice is dynamic as in "doing right by each other," rather than static as in a legal "right." As Walker (2003) observed, "social justice is and must be a verb (about doing and acting) as well as a noun (theoretical descriptions)" (p. 185). Gale (2000) believed that all people (not only the disadvantaged or talented) benefit from recognitive justice, in terms of both being (e.g., capacity for human development and self-determination) and doing.

The final interpretation of social justice examined in this section is that outlined by Rosenau (2004). In contrast to the above theorists, Rosenau bridged the conceptual gap between academia and the "real" world in exploring the place of theorising disability in daily lives. Like the theorists already outlined (with the exception of Fraser, 1995), Rosenau agreed that "rights are not enough" (p. 264), and similarly called for a "relationship-based agenda as a necessary compliment to a rights-based agenda" (p. 264). Unlike these theorists, however, she took her analysis further, to consider the "personal operating theories" which are imbued with sociocultural meanings. These personal theories guide our thinking, shape our constructions of people and the world, and determine our subsequent ways of inter-acting in the world. Rosenau also recognised the role that feelings have in our relationships with others, and suggested that "the power of feelings can be put to work to change social arrangements" (p. 270).

In a way, Rosenau (2004) personifies the transformative approach suggested by Fraser (1995) as necessary for resolving the deep structures of injustice at a macro societal level. In considering the powerful influence of feelings and individual personal operating theories in determining the nature of relationships which in turn affect the effectiveness of a rights-based agenda, Rosenau (2004) provides a more comprehensive and complex understanding of what is required to address inequity. Looking inward to oneself as well as outward to others in

relationships and to societal structures and cultural values are critical aspects of transformative solutions to injustice. In comparison, Fraser's (1995) theorising focuses solely on abstract scholarly ideas about justice without recognising or really considering the role of relationships in promoting justice where it is enacted, in daily interaction with people in the real world. As noted by Thomas (2004), "theoretical agendas and contributions are only of value if they can inform a rights-oriented disability praxis" (p. 44). Rosenau's (2004) ability to put "theorising to work in everyday lives" succeeds because she realises the necessity of "not only tapping *ideas* of disability scholarship, but tapping *feelings* of everyday relational life" (p. 268). In a social justice context, the power of feelings helps us to understand and do right by one another (Young & Quibell, 2000).

### **Understanding Children, Disability and Human Rights**

*"She sees me as Anna (fictitious name), as a person. Because that's what I am"*  
(Swedish adolescent describing her assistant, as cited in Skär & Tamm, 2001, p. 924).

Having explored disability and social justice theorising, the final part of this chapter links these issues to current thinking about children and young people, which emphasises the importance of respecting their human rights and supporting the realisation of these rights in daily life.

### ***Thinking About Children: As If They Matter***

Historical and current developments in theoretical understandings of children parallel many of those relating to disability (Connors & Stalker, 2007; Kelly, 2005; Priestley, 2003; Shakespeare & Watson, 1998; Watson et al., 2000). Notions of passivity, vulnerability, dependence and relative powerlessness have characterised traditional thinking and practice regarding childhood and disability. For example, in reference to children, Smith (2007) noted their conceptualisation in terms of "needs" and as "incomplete beings who are not yet humans" (p. 152). Ditto disabled people. The traditional focus on the individual as the object of inquiry has tended to obscure the latter's subjectivity and agency, as well as rendering invisible sociocultural factors that interact to produce (in)dependence and (in)competence. Priestley (2003) referred to the "tyranny of 'normal' child development" (p. 64) in contributing to the construction of children as incomplete adults, and disabled people as incomplete people and/or eternal children, because of their deviance from the desired norm of

autonomous adulthood. Such thinking has justified children's and disabled people's subjection to control by non-disabled adults and social regulation through policies and structures such as schools and segregated facilities.

More recently, shifts in thinking about childhood and disability have followed parallel paths (Kelly, 2005), reconceptualising understandings of both in terms of voice, agency, competence, and rights (Priestley, 2003; Smith, 2007). The sociology of childhood and social models of disability recognise the socially constructed and political nature of childhood and disability respectively, and emphasise the crucial role of relationships and sociocultural contexts in influencing development, education, and the enactment of rights (Connors & Stalker, 2007; Kelly, 2005; Priestley, 2003; Watson et al., 2000). As noted by Smith and Taylor (2000) in their discussion of the integration of sociology of childhood and sociocultural theory in relation to child advocacy work, "children's capabilities are very much influenced by the expectations and opportunities for shared participation offered by their culture, and by the amount of support they receive in acquiring competence" (pp. 3-4). This statement applies equally well to disabled people, with an additional proviso, namely, the extent to which individuals are supported to *reveal* their competence in various contexts, which necessitates interaction with others who *presume competence* (Biklen, 1998, 2000b; Biklen & Burke, 2006) rather than assume a lack thereof.

To date, explicit links between the parallel paths of childhood and disability theorising have been limited (Davis, Watson, & Cunningham-Burley, 2000; Shakespeare & Watson, 1998). Kelly (2005) suggested that disabled childhood falls into an "abyss" (p. 271), standing outside the sociology of childhood (because of disability) and disability theory (because of childhood). On its own, each theoretical perspective is incomplete; the sociology of childhood needs to include *all* children, while disability theory needs to broaden its focus to incorporate the experiences of children *as well as* adults. Synthesizing the two can provide a deeper understanding of the diversity of children's experiences of impairment and disability, while recognising their capacities as competent social actors whose experiences of being and doing can inform and enhance adult ways of knowing (Connors & Stalker, 2007; Kelly, 2005; Watson et al., 2000).

The reconceptualisation of childhood is reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989), ratified by New Zealand in 1993. The



54 articles of UNCRC have been classified in terms of “3 Ps:” provision, protection, and participation rights (Smith, 2007), which are intended to apply to *all* children. Provision rights include the right to free state education, adequate health resources, and legal and social services, while protection rights include protection from discrimination, bullying, abuse and neglect, and the right to safety within the justice system (Human Rights Commission, 2004). Protection and provision rights have been generally accepted, perhaps because of their perceived alignment with traditional thinking that children (and disabled people) need care and protection.

Participation rights have been described in terms of respect for children’s “personhood and citizenship” (Smith, 2002, p. 74), and include, among others, the right to an identity, to be consulted, to access information, to freedom of speech, and to participate in public life. Article 12 focuses on children’s right to be consulted on matters concerning them, and to be heard and taken seriously. Despite its importance, Smith (2002) cited Shier’s (2001) claim that Article 12 is one of the most widely ignored in children’s lives. Reasons for the disregarding of children’s rights are unclear, however Smith (2007) referred to research which suggested that the notion of rights for children could be construed by some as “having gone too far” (p. 148). Questions of children’s competence and rationality lie at the heart of this resistance to their having, let alone exercising, rights (Davis & Watson, 2000; Smith, 2007). While Article 12 can be read as an example of current thinking about childhood, it is couched in “clauses of conditionality” (Slee, 1996), in that it applies to children who are “capable of” forming their own views, which are then “given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child” (as cited in Smith, 2002, p. 74). In ignoring the impact of relationships and contexts on the demonstration of competence by anyone at any time, it appears that the onus rests with the child to prove s/he is competent in order to be granted this right. The issue of who judges a child’s competence, for what, using what criteria is also problematic. Davis and Watson (2000) suggested:

... if disabled children are to be afforded rights in various settings, rather than searching for a universally accepted criteria by which to assess competency, it may be better simply to assume that all children of whatever age and maturity are capable of contributing to discussions concerning their lives, and place the emphasis on developing techniques and avenues of communication which make this possible. (p. 220)

The least dangerous assumption (Donnellan, 1984) is to begin with a presumption of competence (Biklen, 1998, 2000b; Biklen & Burke, 2006) about students, and to work with them in developing situations in which their competence can be revealed. Smith (2002, 2007) utilised sociocultural theory to highlight the importance of relationships and contexts in either hindering or facilitating children's opportunities and ability to exercise their right to participate in matters that concern them. She asserted that children must have appropriate support from adults who work within children's zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) to scaffold their learning of the skills required to participate in meaningful ways in social contexts. Working in such an interdependent manner leads to children developing their competence and ability to participate independently in future.

In addition to UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) there are other international conventions, national laws and strategies relating to children's rights. How these provisions are translated into practice varies considerably, particularly as far as disabled children are concerned (Bray & Gates, 2000; Human Rights Commission, 2004; MacArthur et al., 2007). Consistent with the theorists discussed earlier in relation to social justice, Davis and Watson (2000) recognised the limited power of treaties and laws. They suggested that, although legislation is important in acting as one of the drivers of change, it does not ensure that rights for children will be enacted. Rather, they claimed:

... what enables children to exercise rights is acceptance by other children and adults. Children's *rights are entwined with relationships* [italics added] and anything, which enables the establishment and maintenance of empowering relationships, will also act to support the rights of children. (p. 223)

### **In Summary**

Humanness, disability, social justice, childhood theorising: how can these theoretical concepts inform this thesis? Integral to the interpretations of these different aspects of humanity is the fundamental importance of relationships. The concept of the social construction of humanness provides a respectful and equitable way of understanding individuals' experiences of disability. This requires the development of relationships between people, which is accompanied by the understanding necessary to recognise experiences of cultural and/or structural inequity, and by the presence of feelings about such injustice that motivate individuals to do right by each other. In this study, disabled children and young people are understood to be competent social actors who have a right to education. How they are

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supported by teacher aides in accessing education will be interpreted using various components of the multi-dimensional theoretical framework outlined in this chapter. In Chapter Three, discussion focuses on the ways in which these theoretical concepts influence educational philosophy, policy and practice, which in turn shape individuals' experiences of school life.

## CHAPTER THREE

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Having positioned this study within a theoretical framework of Disability Studies, social justice, and the sociology of childhood, discussion turns to the educational context in which disabled students and teacher aides are situated. In this chapter I review research literature from three separate yet related bodies of knowledge: educational philosophies, policies, and practices; disabled students' experiences of teacher aides; and teacher aides' work with disabled students.

#### Education

*"... nowhere is education an uncomplicated 'good'; it produces both justice and injustice, equity and inequity and the issue is to understand why, when and how"*  
(Walker, 2003, p. 169).

The first part of this chapter focuses on the ways in which schools in Western societies have responded to disabled students. Key characteristics of special and inclusive education philosophies, policies, and practices are critically examined, and links made to theoretical frameworks of disability and justice that influence these dichotomous approaches to education. This part of the literature review concludes with a discussion of the current educational context for disabled students in New Zealand.

#### *The Purpose of Education*

Social justice and education are inextricably linked. Slee (2001a) cited Touraine's (2000) belief that "the clearest manifestations of a society's spirit and organisation are its juridical rules and its educational programme" (p. 385). In discussing the role of education in facilitating individual human development and collective social justice, Walker (2003) highlighted the power of education in shaping lives, in terms of developing our identities and capacities. That some people experience barriers to their being and doing (Thomas, 1999) is acknowledged by Walker, who claimed that education plays a critical role in both social reproduction and social transformation, processes that parallel Fraser's (1995) notions of affirmative and transformative justice, respectively. Whether education should reproduce

hegemonic values, structures, and practices or transform these is contested. For example, Ainscow (2007) argued that “the biggest challenge facing education systems [is] that of developing practices that will reach out to those learners who are failed by existing arrangements” (p. 3). Resistance to addressing this inequity may come from those with meritocratic philosophical leanings, who value individuals whose talents and effort enable them to contribute to and compete in knowledge economies (Gale, 2000).

While framing the purposes of education in a slightly different manner (namely, democratic equality, social mobility, and social efficiency) Skrtic (2005) suggested that these disparate beliefs reflect the underlying tension between democracy and capitalism, and noted that education is in the invidious position of having to “serve both masters” (p. 151). The role of education in maintaining the status quo or in bringing about social change raises the issue of the kind of society we aspire to through education (Skrtic, 2005; Walker, 2003). The extent to which social justice is a primary consideration of a society’s “spirit and organisation” may be evident in historical and current thinking, policy, and practice regarding special education and inclusive education.

### ***Special Education***

That public/state schools were never meant to have a place for every child has been argued by a number of researchers (e.g., Baker, 2002, 2004; Slee, 2001c, 2004). The questions “Who’s in? Who’s out? and How come?” (Slee, 2006, p. 112) pertain to past and present compulsory education systems which operate, explicitly or implicitly, dual structures for normal and special needs students respectively. The “baby-sitting and sorting functions” (Baker, 2002, p. 695) of schools became evident with the introduction of compulsory schooling in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Dunn, 1968; Ferguson, 2002; Skrtic, 2005; Slee, 2004). Children perceived as anomalies, as threats to the order and efficiency of public schooling due to individual problems of ineducability, behavioural concerns, and/or cultural differences (Kliwer & Drake, 1998) were identified, labelled, relocated, and contained in segregated special classes and schools (Reid & Valle, 2004).

Baker (2002) used the term *hunting* to describe such practices, which she argued reflected a new form of eugenics in seeking to remediate and/or control those who may be burdensome to a society. The linking of eugenics with educational practices has been documented by other researchers as well (Kliwer & Drake, 1998; McPhail & Freeman, 2005; Reid & Knight,

2006; Skidmore, 2002; Slee, 2006; Smith, 1999). Baker (2004) remarked that compulsory attendance legislation targeted “only those children thought of as properly *human*” (p. 12). Thus, one of the hallmarks of special education since its inception has been the attribution of failure to the child, rather than the education system’s failure to respond to the diversity of human capacity (Christensen & Dorn, 1997; Reid & Valle, 2004; Skrtic, 2005).

Special education has been variously described as a “legitimizing device” (Skrtic, 2005, p. 149), a “safety valve for the failure of schools to include all comers” (Slee, 1997, p. 67), a “safety net” (Pugach, 1995, p. 212), and “the repair shop” to which broken students are sent but not necessarily fixed (Biklen, 1989, p. 8). Barton (2000) proposed that:

... special education can be seen as a means of control, as a means of legitimating the dominant forms of discourse and interests of a given society, in particular a world of marketisation, competitiveness and selection. It makes sure the system continues as smoothly as possible by removing those difficult, objectionable and unwanted people to other spheres. It is, however, often justified on the basis of being in their interests, of meeting their needs. (p. 53)

The notion of “educational triage” (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, p. 14) is worth considering in this context, in that professional gatekeepers were able to allocate finite educational resources on the basis of who would benefit most from this financial investment. Within a meritocratic education system, those students considered to have the greatest potential were awarded the resources required for their success (Christensen & Dorn, 1997; Rice, 2006). Those less deserving of investment were dealt with by the mechanism of special education.

The propensity of schools to create disability categories to mark students as problematic (and, in effect, produce the latter’s failure) has been noted by a number of researchers (Dunn, 1968; Dudley-Marling, 2004; McDermott, 1993; Molloy & Vasil, 2002; Skidmore, 2002). As others have subsequently (Daniels, 2006; Foster, Ysseldyke, & Reese, 1975; Kliever & Biklen, 1996; Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007; Reid & Valle, 2004; Smith, 2006), Dunn (1968) commented on the harmful effects of labels not only on students, but also on teachers’ attitudes and expectations. The power of labels to focus teachers’ attention on students’ deficits and thereby limit teachers’ expectations of students’ competence contributes to a self-fulfilling prophecy for many students. Dudley-Marling (2004), McDermott (1993), and McDermott and Varenne (1995) described this process in terms of the acquisition of children by particular impairment

labels. They shared Ware's (2002) belief that much of how disabled children are known is narrated before them, that in schools "the scripts are written and repulsion is reified" (p. 149).

Labelling and classification practices also perpetuate the privileging of expert specialist knowledge, in the form of medical, psychological, and special educational professionals who have significant power to decide on the kind of educational services (e.g., additional support from teacher aides), treatments (e.g., medication such as Ritalin), and therapies (e.g., Applied Behavioural Analysis [ABA]) that can be provided, where, and by whom, in the best interests of the labelled individual (McPhail & Freeman, 2005). In each of the examples given (teacher aides, medication, ABA), the underlying purpose of the interventions is the control of students, in one form or another.

One of the outcomes of these sorting and separating practices was that, not only were children physically segregated, they were also subjected to a different curriculum than that taught to their normal peers (Kliewer & Drake, 1998; Skidmore, 2002; Slee, 2004). With an emphasis on remediation of individual deficits in body and/or mind and on the control of abnormal behaviours, special education was characterised by a narrow, reduced curriculum (Skidmore, 2002; Slee, 2004) and, from the mid twentieth century onwards, by an emphasis on behaviourism as the most appropriate means of delivering instruction and modifying behaviour (Berry, 2006; Kliewer & Drake, 1998; Smith, 1999).

Concerns about the efficacy and specialness of special education have been expressed by educators, researchers, families, and students for several decades (e.g., Brodin & Lindstrand, 2007; Dunn, 1968; Foster et al., 1975; Slee, 1997; Ware, 2002). The lack of evidence to support the superiority of special education has been documented by numerous researchers (e.g., Berry, 2006; Christensen, 1996; Dunn, 1968; MacArthur et al., 2004; Smith, 2006). To return to Biklen's (1989) analogy of special education as the repair shop, it might be argued that, in its failure to fix broken students, the shop itself is beyond repair.

These challenges to the dual system of education that has served the needs of the majority since the inception of compulsory schooling have raised heated and ongoing debate among those concerned with education. Slee (2006) used the metaphor of crossroads to describe the junction of special and inclusive education, the latter being the term used to describe an alternative way of educational thinking and practice that has the potential to move education

forward in a positive direction for all students. An examination of some of the key characteristics of inclusive education thus forms the focus of the following discussion.

### ***Inclusive Education***

As with disability, social justice and education, inclusive education has many meanings, depending upon one's worldview and the relational and sociocultural contexts in which education is situated (Mitchell, 2005). While it is beyond the scope of this literature review to provide a comprehensive analysis of inclusive education, it is important to consider some of its salient features as identified by leading researchers and educators. Possibly the most critical aspect of inclusive education is its focus on developing a socially just, democratic education system that serves *all* students (Ainscow, 2005; Kearney & Kane, 2006; MacArthur et al., 2004; Slee, 2001c; Slee & Allan, 2001). In doing so, the questions of who's in, who's out and how come become redundant (ideally). Instead, the starting place is that everyone has the right to be in (Connor & Ferri, 2007). The emphasis is therefore on students' *right* to education, rather than their special needs (Brodin & Lindstrand, 2007). Ainscow (2005) proposed the following definition:

... the aim of inclusive education is to eliminate social exclusion that is a consequence of attitudes and responses to diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability (Vitello & Mithaug, 1998). As such, it starts from the belief that education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just society. (p. 109)

A rights approach to inclusive education is supported by a number of international conventions. In addition to the already mentioned UNCRC (United Nations, 1989), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) was enacted by the United Nations in 2007. In 1994 the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education supported the concept of inclusive education (UNESCO, 1994). "Education For All" (EFA), to be achieved through the adoption of a philosophy of inclusion, was subsequently identified as UNESCO's first priority for education at the Dakar World Education Forum (World Education Forum, 2000).

Given that inclusive education is about the right of education for all, what are its key characteristics? In support of his definition, Ainscow (2005) outlined four main elements drawn from work carried out with colleagues over recent years. The first is that inclusion is a *process*, involving "learning how to live with difference and learning how to learn from



difference” (p. 118). Secondly, inclusion focuses on identifying and removing *barriers* to learning and participation. Thirdly, it is characterised by “the *presence, participation* and *achievement* of all students” (p. 118). As such it moves beyond tokenistic measures such as merely sitting at the back of a classroom filling in the day with a teacher aide, and focuses on meaningful, quality learning and social experiences with peers. The fourth element relates to the inclusion of *any learners* who are at risk of marginalisation, exclusion, and/or underachievement.

Disabled students’ presence, participation and achievement are hindered in numerous structural and cultural ways, at policy, school, class, and interpersonal levels. Ainscow (2005) has claimed that many of these barriers derive from conventional ways of thinking. The notion of “thinking otherwise” is raised by a number of researchers, Slee (2004) attributing the term to Ball’s (1998) critique of school effectiveness and school improvement studies. In numerous writings, Slee has encouraged educators to think otherwise about “the deep structure of disablement” (2004, p. 47). In his analysis of the Irish educational system, McDonnell (2003) suggested that educational systems consist of two structural levels, “deep structures of theories, values, assumptions and beliefs, and surface structures of day-to-day practices in the organisation and operation of schools” (p. 261). He argued that, because of their visibility, more attention is given to surface structures such as curriculum, student grouping, and allocation of resources. Underpinning these visible structures are, however, invisible yet powerful beliefs about the world, about human beings and their relationship to education and society, as shaped by macro level dominant discourses and micro level personal experiences. McDonnell (2003) suggested that the domination of medical-psychological discourses in special education has permeated the deep structures of educational philosophy and policy.

These received ways of knowing about disability continue to exert a powerful hold over educational practice, possible outcomes being that schools unconsciously reproduce positivist interpretations of disability (Ware, 2002). In other words, if educators’ taken for granted assumptions and beliefs about people, disability, education, and justice are not acknowledged or questioned, their practice will continue to reflect deficit ways of thinking (Bearn & Smith, 1998; Berry, 2006; Kugelmass, 2001). In their examination of ways of deconstructing deficit thinking in relation to students from low income and culturally/linguistically diverse communities, García and Guerra (2004) highlighted the importance of teachers’ shifts in

thinking as a significant prerequisite for effective systemic change. In a New Zealand context, Timperley and Robinson's (2001) study of achieving school improvement through challenging and changing teachers' schema recognised the significant role that teachers' beliefs have on their practice, for better or worse. According to Ainscow (2005):

... even the most pedagogically advanced methods are likely to be ineffective in the hands of those who implicitly or explicitly subscribe to a belief system that regards some students, at best, as disadvantaged and in need of fixing, or, worse, as deficient and, therefore, beyond fixing. (p. 117)

Biklen (1998, 2000b; Biklen & Burke, 2006) used the term "presuming competence" as a replacement for deficit social constructions that do not fulfil any meaningful educational purpose. Biklen (1998) wrote:

Presuming incompetence allows educators to dismiss students' learning, to overlook abilities and contributions, and to see nothing but failure. In contrast, presuming competence allows the educator to see the other person as a peer; it requires a democratic outlook, a commitment to justice. The presumption of competence allows education to begin. (p. xi)

Biklen acknowledged that this is not a new concept, referring to Blatt's (1987) central belief in the educability of all people and Goode's (1984, 1992) emic or insider perspective, in which personal ways of knowing individuals through engagement with them can reveal a much deeper understanding of their humanity. As already discussed, Bogdan and Taylor's (1992) social construction of humanness is consistent with such a disposition towards knowing people. Presuming competence is consistent with inclusive education's premise that all students have the right to be in from the start, rather than having to disprove educators' presumptions of incompetence in order to be allowed in (Biklen, 2000a). Biklen and Kliever (2006) noted that "if you are interested in seeing another's competence, it helps to look for it" (p. 184). Rather than hunting for disability (Baker, 2002) our time and energy would be more wisely invested in hunting for competence and creating opportunities and contexts in which it can be revealed.

Increasingly, the stories of teachers who presume competence are making their way into the research literature (e.g., Del Rosario, 2006; Grenier, 2006; Jorgensen, McSheehan, & Sonnenmeier, 2007; Kasa-Hendrickson, 2005; Kluth, 2003). Central to each is teachers' social construction of students' humanness as the primary way of knowing and understanding the

latter; choosing to focus on the *who* rather than the *what* of a disability label (Sacks, 1998). Common themes of these stories include teachers' recognition of the importance of relationships with students; high expectations; respecting and utilising students' interests; accepting and supporting students' different ways of participating; educational contexts that provide opportunities for students to reveal and demonstrate their competence; interactive learning activities that promote interactions with peers; understanding that teaching and learning can be hard at times; and honouring students' right to learn.

Teachers' ability to think otherwise, often while working within meritocratic school systems in which a presumption of competence is selectively applied to some rather than all students, is facilitated by their knowing, at a personal level, individuals who are disabled (Giangreco, Dennis, Cloninger, Edelman, & Schattman, 1993; Parasuram, 2006). This is consistent with Slee's (2004) claim that many people come to know disability "from a distance" (p. 50), through hegemonic discourses and practices rather than through personal interaction. The power of the latter in revealing alternative ways of thinking about disability is evident in Giangreco et al.'s (1993) study of teachers' transformational experiences. Out of 19 teachers who agreed to the placement of a student with severe disabilities in their classes, 17 underwent a significant shift in thinking over the course of a school year. Their initial concerns, based on stereotypical assumptions about students, were gradually replaced by positive attitudes and inclusive teaching practices, as teachers came to know and develop relationships with their new students. As one teacher noted, "I started seeing him as a little boy. I started feeling that he's a person too" (Giangreco et al., 1993, p. 365). In contrast, it was interesting to note that the two teachers who did not change their minds had minimal involvement with their students, thus denying both teachers and students the opportunity to reveal their competence to each other.

Teachers' presumption of competence in their students must be accompanied by their own competence as teachers. As Gaad (2004) observed, "teachers are the key agents of change; the locus of change is the mundane routine of daily classroom life. What they do on a day-to-day basis does make a profound difference" (p. 318). Similarly, the New Zealand *Schooling Strategy 2005-2010* draws on Alton-Lee's (2003) research in highlighting the significance of effective teaching for student achievement (Ministry of Education, 2005). How teachers do their core work of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (Lingard, 2007) plays a significant role in facilitating or preventing all students' participation and achievement (see also Rietveld,

2005; Skidmore, 2002). How teachers utilise teacher aides to support them in their core work with students may determine whether students experience an inclusive or special education.

This brief overview of two distinctly different understandings and structures of education has, I hope, highlighted the systemic inequities that predispose to failure those students who are known primarily in terms of their assumed incompetence rather than their competence. The necessity of a paradigm shift (Slee & Allan, 2001) in educational philosophy, policy and practice is recognised by advocates of inclusive education (e.g., Ainscow, 2007; Mitchell, 2005). Transformation of the education system by addressing the deep structures that maintain inequities parallels the transformative approach to injustice previously outlined (Fraser, 1995). Furthermore, the emphasis on the necessity of both individual and systemic change is consistent with researchers' calls for the need to better understand one another through relationships, to enable us to do right by one another (Christensen & Dorn, 1997; Gale, 2000; Rosenau, 2004; Watson, 2004; Young & Quibell, 2000). Rosenau's reference to critically examining our personal operating theories can be considered alongside Ainscow's (2007) belief that a critical aspect of educational change involves the questioning of assumptions that educators may hold about certain kinds of students. Challenging and deconstructing socially and physically constructed barriers is necessary to ensure students' right to presence, participation and achievement in our schools.

### ***Education in New Zealand: Special AND Inclusive?***

Having examined some of the key characteristics of special and inclusive education in general, discussion now turns to the specifics of the New Zealand educational context. In the following section significant laws, national policies, and actual practices are critiqued to provide the context for understanding disabled students' and teacher aides' experiences within the education system.

The national framework for the education of disabled students is characterised by a lack of coherence and consistency in thinking, policy, and practice (Kearney & Kane, 2006). Indeed, Higgins et al. (2006) used the term "higgledy-piggledy" to describe policy relating to special/inclusive education in New Zealand. Understanding the contexts in which macro level laws, policies and other Government initiatives are developed is necessary in making sense of the deep structures (McDonnell, 2003) that underlie practice. *Tomorrow's Schools* (Lange, 1988) formed one component of a series of political reforms driven by ideology that

privileged a market-based economy and consequent devolution of government control (O'Brien & Ryba, 2005). For education, this meant, among other things, parental choice and competition among self-managing schools (Higgins et al., 2006; Kearney & Kane, 2006; Mitchell, 2005; Rouse, 2006). This has several implications for who is in and who is out of school. Slee (2006) argued that policy "pivots around risk minimisation" (p. 116); schools operating in a competitive market need to minimise risk in order to maximise success (Slee, 2001a). In other words, where intelligence is the valued commodity, those identified as lacking intelligence represent a high risk or educational liability and are therefore a poor investment in the context of the school marketplace. Such a meritocratic approach to education favours excellence at the cost of equity, and creates winners (those perceived as most able in terms of intelligence and social capital) and losers (those perceived as least able) (Rouse, 2006). Special education therefore plays an important role in legitimising the identification and removal of students who may disrupt the learning and achievement of capable students (Kearney & Kane, 2006). Compounding the inequities of a market-based, decentralised education system is the difficulty in ensuring consistency and equity in the implementation of national policy regarding disabled students (Mitchell, 2001).

In such a context, it is not surprising that special education is officially defined in terms of the provision of "extra" resourcing, rather than in terms of rights (Kearney & Kane, 2006; Millar & Morton, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2007b; Prochnow, Kearney, & Carroll-Lind, 2000). Focusing on resource allocation reduces the complexity of education to a simplistic calculation of resources, in which, according to Slee (1997),  $E = DS + AR$ , where Equity (E) is the outcome of the allocation of Additional Resources (AR) to the Disabled Student's (DS) class (p. 62). Conceptualising access to education in terms of resource capacities provides a way for schools to exclude certain students, on the grounds that they do not have the resources required to provide for a student's needs (Kearney & Kane, 2006; O'Brien & Ryba, 2005; Ross, 2007).

While resourcing is often cited as the reason for the conditional acceptance or rejection of certain students, this masks the pervasive influence of deficit thinking about disability that is perpetuated by ambivalent Government policy. The inherent lack of understanding of and commitment to inclusive education is evident throughout Ministry of Education documents. The Ministry, while at times purporting to support inclusive education, nevertheless continues to fund a binary system of special and general education. The conflict of inclusive and special

education paradigms (Mitchell, 2001, 2005; O'Brien & Ryba, 2005) is most apparent in the discrepancy between the inclusive words and exclusive practices that characterise *Special Education 2000* (SE2000) policy, as noted in Chapter One. For example, in a world class inclusive education system (the stated aim of SE2000) there would be no place for special education, as the two are mutually exclusive. As Kearney and Kane (2006) remarked, talking of the two as if they were compatible components of one education system is oxymoronic.

Language is the means by which underlying assumptions and beliefs about the world are made public. It is worth noting that, although a body of research that contests the use of “special” has existed prior to the introduction of SE2000 in 1996, the Ministry of Education has not yet applied this research to its own practices, despite evidence-based practices being one of the three priorities outlined in a recent *Schooling Strategy 2005-2010* (Ministry of Education, 2005). For example, Fulcher (1995) claimed that use of the term “special educational needs” perpetuates a master status that is “a euphemism for failure” (p. 7). Nevertheless, the term special is used throughout Ministry documents and its website as the way of identifying students. The Ministry’s continued allegiance to special education is also evident in the existence of a special rather than an inclusive education policy (Higgins et al., 2006; Kearney & Kane, 2006), and in the maintenance of segregated special schools, in the interests of parental choice. As above, this is inconsistent with its commitment to evidence-based practice. The findings of a draft literature review prepared by MacArthur et al. (2004) for the Ministry provided strong research evidence that regular classes are the most appropriate place for all students. A disclaimer notes however that the Ministry of Education does not endorse the literature review’s findings.

Another source of policy inconsistency is apparent in the structure of SE2000 policy. The Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Scheme (ORRS) funding of individuals is dependent upon the verification of the perceived severity of individuals’ needs, devoid of any meaningful consideration of the contexts and relationships within which learning takes place. This serves as an example of an individual/deficit model of disability, in which “...political rights rest on the notion that students must be labelled in order to provide educational services. While rights are extended, they must be earned through proving disability status (i.e. deficiencies)” (Peters, 1995, p. 70). That is, students’ access to their legal right to education is conditional upon identification of their needs, rather than being unconditional and guaranteed as it is for most students. Shortcomings in educational contexts that may exacerbate

individuals' needs are not recognised, and therefore, remain unchanged. In addition, because funding is available for only a small percentage of the school population, there is no guarantee that all students who require such support will actually receive it (Wylie, 2002).

Slee (1996) used the term "clauses of conditionality" to describe the ways in which some students are kept out of rather than welcomed in to schools. Conditional words in policies are translated into conditional practices (Kearney & Kane, 2006; Mitchell, 2005). Although the 1989 Education Act may open the doors of local schools for disabled students, once inside, they may be excluded through the use of labels, special classes, special staff, and limited participation in school life (Biklen, 1989; Christensen & Dorn, 1997; Higgins et al., 2006; Kearney & Kane, 2006; Ross, 2007). Such "human resettlement" (Slee, 2001a, p. 388) of students, their aides and resources merely results in the relocation of the deep structures of traditional special education thinking and practices. Thus, although the boundaries of special and regular education may appear blurred on the surface, the binary structure of education remains firmly in place. As Christensen (1996) claimed, simply placing students in regular classes without fundamentally transforming schools does no one justice.

A final example of policy inconsistency is evident in the Ministry of Education's stated commitment to *New Zealand Disability Strategy* (NZDS) (Minister for Disability Issues, 2001) alongside its continued adherence to the deficit underpinnings of SE2000 policy. SE2000 was developed by professionals working in the education sector (mainly at Ministry of Education level, a top-down approach), while the development of the NZDS occurred through consultation with disabled people and their families/whānau/allies throughout the country, led by a group representing the disability community (a grassroots approach). The approaches adopted in each case reflect differing constructions of disability by the parties concerned. The professional approach to SE2000 may be viewed as an example of the "discourse of expertism" (McDonnell, 2003, p. 265), in which a power imbalance is created between experts who have the power to make policy, and those whose lives are affected by it. In contrast, the self-advocacy initiative demonstrated in the NZDS reflects a critical questioning of the status quo/taken for granted knowledge and assumptions, and a reframing of disability as a social justice issue.

This tension between entrenched and new ways of thinking is understandable; as Mitchell (2005) observed, inclusive education is situated in historical contexts in which "vestiges of

older beliefs co-exist with newer beliefs” (p. 13). To return to Slee’s (2006) metaphor, it would appear that in a New Zealand context, special-inclusive education is very much at a paradigmatic crossroads. To date, the signs have pointed to a rhetorical commitment to inclusive education, in which some changes on the surface have begun to alter the educational terrain without disturbing the underlying structures of what is essentially a meritocratic education system. Despite legislation that provides all students with the right to enrol in their local schools, the resource driven, deficit nature of SE2000 policy compromises this entitlement. This might be seen as analogous to Slee’s (2006) wry observations that special educators, after considering their options at the crossroads, merely repainted the signs on the bus and continued on in much the same way.

Special OR inclusive education in New Zealand? Whether we remain stalled at the crossroads, disoriented by paradigmatic problems; continue to head in the same direction, comforted by the familiarity of taken for granted views; or opt for a road not yet taken which leads to new possibilities for all students, remains to be seen. Understanding the views of those at the heart of our educational endeavours will help inform the educational decision-making process, and so it is to students’ perspectives that discussion now turns.

### **Students’ Experiences of School**

*“We want a world fit for children, because a world fit for us is a world fit for everyone”  
(statement made by child participants at the Special Session on Children, United Nations, 2002).*

In many Western cultures it has been traditional for children to be seen and not heard, much as disabled people were meant to be out of sight, out of mind. In the past two decades however, children have been increasingly visible and vocal in matters relating to their lives, and have made valuable contributions to formal and informal ways of knowing. In prioritising the participation of students in this study, I hope that their perspectives can further illuminate our understanding of students’ experiences of teacher aides. As the people on the receiving end of macro level educational policy and micro level professional practice, their insights can help us determine the impact of policy and practice on their lives. This part of the literature review critically examines extant research regarding disabled students’ perspectives and experiences of working with teacher aides. Discussion begins with a summary of research in which the sole focus has been disabled students’ perspectives of teacher aides, followed by an overview of the kinds of research in which reference has been made to teacher aides within



the context of a broader framework of investigation with disabled children. Major themes from both sets of studies are then reviewed.

### ***Students and Teacher Aides: Extant Research***

To date, little research focusing primarily on the role of teacher aides from disabled students' perspectives has been carried out. In Sweden, Skär and Tamm (2001) conducted a grounded theory study in which interviews were held with 13 children and adolescents with restricted mobility, aged from 8 to 19 years. Interviews focused on participants' perceptions of their assistants' roles and relationships; analysis of data resulted in five categories, relating to descriptions of the (a) replaceable assistant, (b) mother/father assistant, (c) professional assistant, (d) friend, and (e) ideal assistant. Relationships with the various categories of assistants were considered to be ambivalent, unequal, mutual, and non-mutual. Also in Sweden, from more of an occupational therapy perspective, Hemmingsson et al. (2003) conducted observations and interviews with 7 physically disabled pupils aged between 7 and 15 years, and with each pupil's teacher and assistant. The researchers identified three "assistant types," relating to the kinds of help provided to pupils: assistant as a stand-in for the pupil (providing extensive individual pupil support); a help-teacher (providing teacher support for a pupil); and a back-up resource (providing practical assistance as required by a pupil) (p. 91). That assistants could both help and hinder participation was a major finding of this study, as was the need to consider young people's prioritising of social participation with peers when considering how to offer help in ways that do not compromise what matters to pupils.

In Vermont USA, Broer et al. (2005) interviewed 16 young adults with intellectual disabilities, 14 of whom had completed high school within five years of the study, thus were recalling their experiences with paraprofessionals. Broer et al. noted that their qualitative study was the first American study to involve disabled students in research regarding paraprofessional support, and the first to focus on students with intellectual disabilities. Four inter-related themes were outlined, in which students perceived paraprofessionals in terms of acting as a mother, friend, protector, and primary teacher. Also emphasised was the primacy of students' relationships with paraprofessionals, who were regarded in positive, negative, and ambivalent ways by participants in this study.

These three qualitative studies represent the work carried out thus far regarding the focus of the present study. A number of studies exploring disabled students' experiences of other

matters concerning them have also generated findings relating to teacher aides. Skär (2003) examined peer and adult relationships in interviews with 12 adolescents with restricted mobility aged 15 to 19 years. As in her previous work with Tamm, Skär used Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development as a basis for her interpretation of students' relationships with peers and with adults, and the impact that these have on students' development. Several studies have been conducted utilising a similar theoretical framework as this doctoral study, drawing on current disability and sociology of childhood theorising as a means of understanding disabled young people's experiences of life (Connors & Stalker, 2007; Jones, 2005; Kelly, 2005; MacArthur et al., 2007). Within such a framework, the large British *Life as a Disabled Child* project generated numerous research articles (e.g., Davis, Watson, Corker, & Shakespeare, 2003; Priestley, 1999; Watson et al., 2000).

These qualitative studies ranged in size from 300 participants aged 11 to 16 in *Life as a Disabled Child* (Watson et al., 2000), to MacArthur et al.'s (2007) New Zealand research into disabled children's school experiences and agency, which involved seven students, aged 11 to 14, as well as parents, teachers, and principals. Observations and interviews were used in both Watson and MacArthur's research. In Northern Ireland, Kelly (2005) interviewed 32 learning disabled children (2-16 years), their parents and social workers, about their perceptions and experiences of impairment and disability. Similarly, in Scotland, Connors and Stalker (2007) met with 26 young people aged 7 to 15, as well as their siblings and parents, to explore their experiences of disability. Using alternative methodology, Jones (2005) developed a picture booklet designed to elicit disabled children's understandings of inclusion, to inform the writing of a Charter for Inclusion. Fourteen British children aged 6 to 14 completed the booklets, with adult support if required. Although not specifically referencing sociology of childhood theory, Bjarnason's (2005) theoretical underpinnings are very similar to those of this study, in its positioning within an interpretivist paradigm (e.g., Ferguson & Ferguson, 1995), social construction theory (e.g., Bogdan & Taylor, 1992; Ferguson, 1987), and social models of disability (e.g., Priestley, 2003). Thirty six young people aged 16 to 24, plus parents, teachers, and friends, participated in interviews with Bjarnason, who investigated ways in which education in Iceland prepared disabled people for adulthood.

The studies cited thus far are characterised by a questioning of the status quo as far as disabled children and young people are concerned. In contrast, some of the research with this group of participants appeared to affirm and reinforce the current inequities experienced by

students. For example, Norwich and Kelly (2004) interviewed 101 British students aged 10 to 14 about their experiences in mainstream and special schools. Participants' "moderate learning difficulties" and additional labels were specified, reflecting the researchers' implicit allegiance to deficit theorising. The interview process and questions seemed inconsistent with current research and practice regarding respectful engagement with students. Statistical analysis of some of the responses had questionable relevance in that they disregarded students' educational contexts. Norwich and Kelly's deficit underpinnings were echoed in Shah's (2007) interview study of 30 students with physical impairments (13 to 25 years old) in school or higher education. While a number of valid points were made in Shah's discussion of British students' experiences of special and mainstream education, her conclusions advocated an affirmation of a dual system of special and regular education, in the interest of students' "choice." Like the New Zealand Ministry of Education, Shah's interpretations of disability and inclusive education appear to be ambiguous and oblivious to entrenched inequities. Having noted my concerns regarding Norwich and Kelly and Shah's studies, I nevertheless value the students' insightful observations about support staff contained therein, and make reference to them in subsequent discussion.

Mention should also be made of research which examined the perceptions of "non-disabled" students regarding adults working in classrooms. Bowers (1997) investigated the responses of 713 children aged 7 to 14 enrolled in 27 schools throughout London. It appeared that students generally appreciated the additional assistance offered by adult helpers. Interestingly, younger children viewed the presence of aides in terms of help for busy teachers, while older students saw aides as helpers for students in need. Eyres, Cable, Hancock, and Turner (2004) also explored British children's perceptions of adults in their classrooms. Analysis of the views of 78 primary school children indicated that, as in Bowers' study, they were happy to work with different adults, and that they differentiated among adults in terms of their status. For example, an aide was "just a helper" and not a "proper teacher" (p. 155), the latter having more authority and higher status.

A number of themes have emerged from the research cited in this section of the literature review. Students' perspectives of the most significant ways in which teacher aides influence their academic and social participation as well as the development of their autonomy and identity are summarised in the following discussion.

***Students' Understandings of Teacher Aides: Research Themes***

One of the key findings of the *Life as a Disabled Child* project (Watson et al., 2000) was the high degree of adult surveillance, particularly by Special Needs Assistants (SNAs). Students in this and other studies reported and were observed spending a disproportionate amount of time in the presence of adults (Broer et al., 2005; Kelly, 2005; Shah, 2007; Skär, 2003; Skär & Tamm, 2001). Given that schools are worlds designed to foster children's development in relationship with peers and teachers, and are structured so that the typical adult: child ratio may be 1: 20 or more, the assignment of an adult on a one-to-one basis with a child can immediately signify and create difference. A lack of consultation with students about the nature of support they felt they required was common, as was the associated lack of control students had over who helped (Broer et al., 2005; Hemmingsson et al., 2003; Shah, 2007; Skär & Tamm, 2001).

Some students felt overprotected by aides (Bjarnason, 2005; Davis et al., 2003; Kelly, 2005). Adults' concern for students' safety was often prioritised over the latter's preferences, inducing in students a feeling of being babysat (Broer et al., 2005; Shah, 2007). As noted, the role of teacher aide as mother was outlined by Skär and Tamm (2001) and by Broer et al. (2005). Most students were not enthusiastic about support staff who treated them like children, limiting their opportunities to make decisions and act in autonomous ways. Having "double parents" (Skär & Tamm, 2001, p. 928) was potentially doubly restrictive, especially for adolescents in the process of developing independence and challenging the boundaries of their worlds. The presence of mothering teacher aides may have unconsciously perpetuated the stereotype of disabled people as "eternal children" (Broer et al., 2005), whose primary need is for care and protection rather than education by a qualified teacher.

Academically, the presence of a teacher aide has the potential to advantage all students and the teacher if the adults involved work in a collaborative partnership for the good of the whole class (Bowers, 1997; Eyres et al., 2004). In these contexts, teacher aides act as a "back-up resource" (Hemmingsson et al., 2003, p. 92), available to respond to students' requests for help while mindful of their desire to be as independent as possible. In contrast, the assignment of a teacher aide to one student can impact upon the teacher-student relationship, which is integral to effective learning. Skär (2003) reported that, when students were allocated to assistants, relationships between teachers and students were practically nonexistent, while

Hemmingsson et al. (2003) found that some teachers viewed the teacher aide and student as one and the same, effectively rendering the student invisible. What happens, then, to the potential of disabled students whose teachers' ignorance of them is legitimised by the presence of an untrained teacher aide?

Numerous studies cited situations in which the class teacher had little to do with the child supported by an aide, which meant that unqualified staff assumed responsibility for that student's education, while the qualified teacher taught the rest of the class (MacArthur et al., 2007; Shah, 2007; Watson et al., 2000). Broer et al. (2005) used the term "primary teacher" (p. 423) to describe this particular teacher aide role. Several participants felt unworthy of teacher time as a result of such attitudes, relying instead on their paraprofessionals acting as interpreters, in a sense working within students' zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) to enable them to understand teachers' instructions. That the teacher aide provided more help than teachers was also noted by students in Norwich and Kelly's (2004) study. Conversely, some students felt over-supported, in some instances, teacher aides actually doing students' work for them, so that they simply had to write their names on assignments (Broer et al., 2005).

Socially, the presence of a teacher aide could advantage and disadvantage students, depending upon the aide's visibility and discretion. Many students talked of wanting their "own space" (Shah, 2007, p. 435; see also MacArthur et al., 2007) rather than being constantly shadowed and monitored by a teacher aide in and out of class. Older students in particular seemed conscious of the stigma of having a teacher aide, and were faced by the dilemma of knowing they needed help academically, yet mindful that this could come at the cost of possible ridicule and isolation from peers (Bowers, 1997; Broer et al., 2005; Norwich & Kelly, 2004). Hemmingsson et al. (2003) drew attention to the tension between the teacher's and teacher aide's focus on learning and students' prioritisation of social participation. Students tended to resist support if detrimental to their interaction with peers, preferring to sacrifice their academic achievement for acceptance and social involvement. If, however, teacher aides worked proactively to facilitate interaction, then their presence and actions were appreciated by students (Hemmingsson et al., 2003). Not only did students benefit socially in such circumstances, having positive social relationships increased interactive learning opportunities with peers.

Students' willingness to trade their learning support for social opportunities is understandable given the social isolation frequently experienced by disabled students (Bjarnason, 2005; Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Shah, 2007; Skär, 2003; Watson et al., 2000). So too is the tendency for some students to regard their teacher aide as a friend (Broer et al., 2005; Skär & Tamm, 2001), to fill the void left by peers, particularly during break times. However the risks involved in such a "friend" relationship were illustrated by the experience of a student in Skär and Tamm's (2001) study, whose assistant essentially took the student's place in peer activities. This highlighted the critical importance of training for teacher aides that is informed by students' perspectives of receiving support, to minimise the potential of help being harmful to students. It also demonstrated the need to clarify the actual role of teacher aides, to enable them to work professionally within clearly defined boundaries.

Yet another role of the teacher aide in relation to students' peers was as a protector from bullying (Broer et al., 2005; Norwich & Kelly, 2004). Once more, the presence of an aide can be interpreted as a double edged sword, in that the stigma accompanying a teacher aide can trigger bullying by peers, and/or the teacher aide can act as a shield, advocate and negotiator on behalf of disabled students. Broer et al. acknowledged that, while this may be interpreted positively, having teacher aides assume this role may limit students' opportunities to develop their own ways of dealing with such situations. The often transient nature of teacher aide support, described in terms of the "replaceable assistant" (Skär & Tamm, 2001, p. 922), may compound this issue. Furthermore, in dealing with bullying on behalf of disabled students, aides' actions may mask the extent of the core problem that affects many students in schools.

The importance of professionalism was recognised by students in Skär and Tamm's (2001) study, in which students described their preference for a "professional assistant" (p. 924). Such teacher aides treated students respectfully, using their discretion to minimise students' dilemma regarding academic help and peer acceptance. The assistant also supported students in negotiating structural and cultural barriers, in ways that enhanced the development of autonomy and positive identity. These ways of working formed part of the overall make up of what students described as the "ideal assistant" (p. 925). Such a person would also provide confidence and security, be available on students' terms, and would be "kind and cheery" (p. 926). Students wanted to be able to choose their support person, preferring a younger assistant of the same gender, given the intimacy of support required by some students. An ideal

assistant would also act as a friend, which Skär and Tamm interpreted as compensating for difficulties encountered in establishing and maintaining relationships.

This review of literature clearly indicates that the presence of a teacher aide in disabled students' school lives makes a difference to the quality of those lives, in positive, undesirable, and ambivalent ways (Broer et al., 2005; Jones, 2005; Shah, 2007; Skär & Tamm 2001). Given that teacher aides are employed to support students, these research findings are worrying, in revealing significant discrepancies between intentions and outcomes. Too often, the practice of assigning a teacher aide to a particular child appears to alter the relationships that child has with teachers and peers, often in ways that diminish opportunities for participation in the academic and social life of school. In such circumstances, the relationship between student and teacher aide takes on greater importance, in lieu of the typical teacher-student and peer relationships that most children experience.

The studies reviewed indicate that disabled students are capable of identifying good and not so good practice (Watson et al., 2000). The adult watching and "deciding for" practices reflected traditional interpretations of children as passive creatures in need of care and protection, their disability status heightening the notions of vulnerability and dependence often ascribed to childhood. In contrast, some students' responses in distancing themselves from ever present adults as well as other cultural and structural barriers reflected current theorising of children as competent social actors and agents of change. As well, some teacher aides' actions suggested an understanding of students in terms of their individuality and competence, consistent with the sociology of childhood and disability theorising that underpins this thesis. In doing so, these aides acted in accordance with UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) provision, protection, and participation rights.

Whether children are supported to participate in the world of their peers, or are confined to a world in which they are shadowed by adults, depends on how the adults involved construct their identity (e.g., in terms of deficit or competence), how reflective they are in their work, and how they function within the structural and cultural forces that underpin school life (Davis & Watson, 2001). Teacher aides' perspectives therefore constitute the final part of this review of literature.

### Teacher Aides

*“There are people who need help ... yet, the offer of such help, or even the mere identification of someone who needs it, tends to remove a person from the human flock” (Blatt, 1987, p. 9).*

Giangreco, Broer, and Edelman (1999) referred to the uncontested reliance on teacher aides as the primary means of supporting disabled students’ education as the “tip of the iceberg” and argued that attention must be paid to the “whole iceberg” (p. 282). By this they meant the inter-related teaching, curriculum, staffing, training, and administrative issues that determine the functioning of schools. In the context of this study, the iceberg analogy may be interpreted in relation to McDonnell’s (2003) notion that education systems consist of visible surface level and invisible deep structures. The surface structures, which refer to structural organisation and educational practices, include the use of teacher aides as an accepted, indeed necessary response to the inclusion of certain students in schools. The deep structures include the ways in which disability is socially constructed by those who hold power in educational contexts, which in turn determines what happens at a surface level in schools. Perhaps even more aligned with the iceberg analogy is a Swedish researcher’s interpretation of deep structures being akin to a “frozen ideology” underlying educational practices like a “solid tundra” (Haug, 1998, as translated and cited in Göransson, 2006, p. 73). However conceptualised, the current use of teacher aides as a primary means of catering for disabled students is symptomatic of and masks deeper entrenched difficulties within education systems (Giangreco & Broer, 2005). Just as listening to students can inform us about the impact of what is done in the name of education, so too can teacher aides’ experiences illuminate and enlarge our understanding of educational practice and the thinking that underlies it (Cajkler et al., 2006).

This part of the literature review explores the complexities of teacher aide practice. It begins with an overview of research carried out thus far, followed by summaries of the New Zealand context and teacher aide roles and responsibilities. Research regarding the impact of aides’ work on students’ education is outlined, as are issues relating to training provisions.



***Teacher Aides: Extant Research***

Consistent with the interpretivist paradigm within which this study is situated, I have not included in my review of teacher aide literature studies that are underpinned by positivist special education assumptions. The bulk of research reviewed is American and British, the remaining from countries located at opposite ends of the globe, in Australasia and Scandinavia. While conducted in differing cultural contexts, the findings of international studies have much in common.

In the United States, some of the key figures in research regarding teacher aides are Anna Lou Pickett (instrumental in developing the National Resource Centre for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Services), Nancy French (University of Colorado) and Michael Giangreco (University of Vermont). Much of the American based research consists of smaller (e.g., 20 participants) descriptive qualitative studies involving interviews and observations with teacher aides and other school personnel. The majority of these studies are characterised by a pragmatic, practice related rather than theoretical focus. The prolific and generally larger scale studies of Giangreco and colleagues are particularly relevant to this thesis, in their consistent emphasis on questioning the widespread use of the least qualified staff to support students perceived as the least competent in schools. Giangreco's work is also influential in providing guidelines for the effective utilisation of paraprofessionals in schoolwide settings.

British research appears to have developed largely in response to educational reforms, in which teaching assistants are to play a more significant role in schools due to governmental strategies to develop a more inclusive education system and to reform the educational workforce (Garner, 2002; Howes, 2003). Methodologically, British studies range from small descriptive qualitative studies (e.g., Moran & Abbott, 2002; Rose, 2000) to larger multiple method longitudinal studies (e.g., Blatchford et al., 2007). Also of note are two systematic literature reviews relating to support staff, published by the University of London EPPI-Centre (Cajkler et al., 2006; Howes et al., 2003).

Research from Scandinavia (e.g., Hemmingsson et al., 2003; Takala, 2007) and Australasia (e.g., Howard & Ford, 2007; Lai et al., 2003) consists of smaller descriptive qualitative studies, with more of a pragmatic than theoretical focus. In New Zealand the Ministry of Education funded an evaluation of a professional development resource for teacher aides and

schools (New Zealand Council for Educational Research [NZCER], 2004). An NZEI (2004) survey focused primarily on employment conditions for its teacher aide union members. Unlike Britain and, to varying extents, the United States, the lack of government commitment to an inclusive education system is evident in the minimal attention paid to teacher aides and the role they play in supporting disabled students throughout the country. To date, I have found no New Zealand research in which both teacher aides and disabled students are the primary participants.

### ***Teacher Aides: New Zealand Context***

What do we know about teacher aides in New Zealand? It appears to depend upon the source of information. In terms of job titles, three separate names are used in the Ministry of Education (2007c) *Terms used in Special and General Education*. Teacher aides are defined as “people who help educators support children and young people who have special education needs, also known as kaiāwhina and paraprofessionals.” Paraprofessionals are “teacher aides and education, behaviour and communication support workers.” Education support workers (ESW) are defined as follows: “these paraprofessionals work in the early childhood sector and are employed by the Ministry of Education, Special Education. This term is sometimes used by schools to describe teacher aides.” The definition of teacher aide reflects a deficit special needs discourse, and specifies that students with special education needs are the focus of a teacher aide’s work (as distinct from supporting the teacher by working with the whole class). In an NZEI survey of support staff, over thirty different titles relating to the role of teacher aide were listed (NZEI, 2004), which suggests a lack of consensus and clarity about the actual role. Without a definitive occupational identity that is commonly understood, boundaries of roles and responsibilities are easily misinterpreted, blurred, and crossed.

How many teacher aides work in New Zealand schools? Again, estimates vary according to the source. In the evaluation of the *Introductory Professional Development Programme for Teacher Aides/Kaiāwhina* (NZCER, 2004) it was noted that 2,565 teacher aides/kaiāwhina, representing approximately one third of this workforce in New Zealand, participated in workshops. It is worth noting that this professional development programme targeted teacher aides *without* a recognised qualification who worked more than 15 hours a week. An NZEI report stated that more than 5,000 teacher aides belonged to the union (“Teacher Aides Face Difficult Working Conditions,” 2006). According to NZEI (2004), the majority were female. The total number of teacher aides in New Zealand remains unknown.

What is the role of teacher aides in New Zealand schools? In *Kia Tūtangata Ai: Supporting Learning* (2002b) the Ministry of Education stated that teacher aides/kaiāwhina “work under the supervision of a teacher and in accordance with defined school procedures to support teaching programmes and student learning” (p. 5). According to the final report summary of the evaluation of SE2000 policy, a teacher aide’s role may involve working on a one-to-one basis with students funded by the Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Scheme (ORRS), thereby verified as having “very high or high needs,” or with small numbers of students funded by the Special Education Grant (SEG), who are judged to have “moderate needs” (Massey University, 2002). The most common supports provided by teacher aides were implementing the Individual Education Plan (IEP), adapting curriculum, and “providing individual behavioural interventions” (Massey University, 2002, p. 32). It would be reasonable to expect that teacher aides would be required to have some kind of training to effectively support students with moderate, high, or very high needs in their role of adapting curriculum and providing “behavioural interventions.” As already stated however, other than a Police screening check, no training, qualification, or experience is required.

Having explored the somewhat sketchy and partial body of knowledge that currently exists about teacher aides in New Zealand, discussion turns to a broader Western educational context. Where possible, comparison will be made with New Zealand research findings.

### ***Teacher Aides: Roles and Responsibilities***

In a discussion of teacher aides, a high school special needs co-ordinator stated that “everyone knows what teacher aides do” and that conducting research in this area was “a waste of time” (personal communication, 12 April 2003). Examination of relevant literature indicated otherwise. In their literature review of research regarding paraprofessional support of students with disabilities from 1991 to 2000, Giangreco, Edelman, et al. (2001) noted that 23 (15 non-data based and 9 data based) out of 43 studies focused on roles and responsibilities. These studies documented the diverse range of roles performed by inadequately trained teacher aides in support of students with complex support requirements, and highlighted a continuing discrepancy between what professionals think paraprofessionals should do and what they actually do. These authors cited the position statement made by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (1999), that the function of paraprofessionals is “to supplement, not supplant” (p. 53) the work of teachers and other professionals.

The research reviewed indicates that teacher aide responsibilities can be broadly categorised in terms of academic, social, behavioural, and personal/physical support for students, as well as general classroom support for teachers. Academic support ranged from implementing programmes developed by teachers to actually developing activities and teaching students, with minimal or no direction from teachers (Downing et al., 2000; Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2001; Guay, 2003; Howard & Ford, 2007; Marks, Schrader, & Levine, 1999; NZCER, 2004; Takala, 2007; Wylie, 2000). Socially, numerous studies acknowledged the significant role played by teacher aides in facilitating interactions with peers in and out of class (Cajkler et al., 2006; Chopra, Sandoval-Lucero, Aragon, Bernal, De Balderas, & Carroll, 2004; Downing et al., 2000; Lacey, 2001; NZCER, 2004). Research suggested that many teacher aides perceived behavioural support and students' safety as an important aspect of their work (e.g., Downing et al., 2000; Howard & Ford, 2007; Marks et al., 1999; NZEI, 2004; Takala, 2007). In the NZEI survey of teacher aides, 60% of respondents stated that they worked with a student whose behaviour was violent or potentially so ("Teacher Aides Face Difficult Working Conditions," 2006). Assisting students with eating (including by tube), toileting (including catheterisation), dressing, personal hygiene, medication, seizures, specific therapies, lifting, and mobility were also some of the responsibilities documented in research (Downing et al., 2000; Guay, 2003; Lacey, 2001; Logan, 2006; NZEI, 2004). Teacher aides' role also incorporated general administrative assistance (Cajkler et al., 2006; Downing et al., 2000; Giangreco, Edelman et al., 2001; Logan, 2006; Takala, 2007). A number of studies indicated that aides working with disabled students were typically assigned to one or a small group of students, to whom they provided a range of direct supports (Garner, 2002; Howard & Ford, 2007; Lacey, 2001; Logan, 2006; Marks et al., 1999; Moran & Abbott, 2002).

The role of teacher aide is at once significant, ambiguous, demanding, unpredictable, rewarding, frustrating, and highly dependent upon the teachers and principals for whom teacher aides work. Given that their primary purpose is to support students' education, directly or indirectly, what difference do they make?

### ***Teacher Aides: Impact on Students***

"The classroom assistant can be an invaluable resource or can be a total disaster who can ruin children" (teacher cited in Moran & Abbott, 2002, p. 168). An invaluable resource or a total disaster? This observation very simply captures the impact that teacher aides can have on students' educational experiences. How do we know this? Researching "impact" in education

is fraught with difficulty, given that multiple variables interact in any context at any given time (Howes, 2003; Howes et al., 2003). Compounding the complexity of measuring impact are the ill-defined roles and responsibilities of teacher aides and the diversity of their work in schools. Howes (2003) argued that research evidence that is used to inform policy and practice must incorporate teacher aides' perspectives, to ensure that the complexities of their role can be revealed and interpreted in terms of impact on students. Part of the purpose of the present study is to provide a means by which these first hand perspectives can be documented in New Zealand research, in which teacher aides are thus far largely invisible. The following discussion examines research in which impact is conceptualised in a multi-faceted and in-depth manner, and in which evidence is provided, from a range of perspectives, about the difference that teacher aides can make in students' school lives.

### ***Helpful Practices***

Review of research literature suggested that perhaps the most fundamental positive impact that teacher aides had on disabled students' education was that of opening school gates and classroom doors. That this is necessary is neither positive nor equitable, yet is documented in research literature and reflects the current situation in many schools. Once "in," some teacher aides were seen to have a significant impact on students' academic participation and achievement through their support of individual students, teachers, and peers, which in turn was possible because of the relational impact aides had on those involved with individual students.

A recurring theme in the literature reviewed is that of the valuable connecting or linking role played by teacher aides through their relationships with students, peers, teachers, families, and the wider school community (Cajkler et al., 2006; Chopra et al., 2004; French & Chopra, 1999; Garner, 2002; Groom, 2006; Groom & Rose, 2005; Howes et al., 2003; Marks et al., 1999; Riggs & Mueller, 2001; Robertson, Chamberlain, & Kasari, 2003). Drawing on Powell and Tod's (2004) conceptual framework of the behaviours that underpin successful learning, Groom (2006) highlighted the value of teacher aides in supporting students' relationships with self, with others, and with the curriculum. As noted in several studies, teacher aides working mainly on a one-to-one basis with students acquired an in-depth knowledge of the latter as individuals, developing trusting, respectful relationships which laid the foundation for engagement in learning. Aides were then able to utilise their personal knowledge of students to scaffold their access to the curriculum, mindful that one size or approach does not suit all

(Cajkler et al., 2006; Chopra et al., 2004; Garner, 2002; Howes et al., 2003). Furthermore, aides' ability to judge when to assist and when to withdraw was critical in impacting on students' learning, development of autonomy, and social relationships (Cajkler et al., 2006; French & Chopra, 1999; Lacey, 2001).

In instances in which students did not verbally communicate, or used a different language from the majority, teacher aides were crucial in interpreting for peers and teachers (Chopra et al., 2004; Garner, 2002; Marks et al., 1999; Schnorr, 1997). In doing so, aides opened up a world of opportunities for all involved to come to know one another, as well as enabling learning to happen (French & Chopra, 1999). Participants in Garner's (2002) British study focused on the "social, interactional and broadly affective domains of schooling" (p. 16) in their conceptualisation of students' success. Their impact on students was measured in terms of the very small steps that equate to significant achievements for individual students whose cognitive, sensory, and other impairments presented major challenges to learning. In these situations, utilising predetermined measures of academic attainment would have been inappropriate and pointless.

Teacher aides who worked effectively acted as a crucial link between students and teachers, informing the latter of progress which could then be used to inform teachers' planning for students (Cajkler et al., 2006). Similar links were made with therapists and others involved with students, Marks et al. (1999) describing paraeducators as "the hub" and "the expert" (p. 321). While in their study such roles placed paraeducators in awkward positions with varying impact on students, Howes et al. (2003) found that support staff could be effective mediators, acting in ways that supported students' development, learning, and social interactions. According to Howes et al., this was more likely in schools in which teacher aides were valued, respected, and included. This was not the case for most of the paraeducators in Marks et al.'s study, who experienced numerous challenges in their work, which in turn affected students.

Studies conducted by Wilson, Schlapp, & Davidson (2003) and Blatchford et al. (2007) indicated that the presence of teacher aides can benefit teachers and classes. Wilson et al. evaluated the *Classroom Assistant Initiative*, a government programme that aimed to increase the number of assistants in Scottish primary schools, in an attempt to raise standards and improve support to teachers. Classroom Assistants (CA), appointed to classrooms, were

distinguished from Special Education Needs (SEN) auxiliaries, assigned to particular students. Although Wilson et al.'s research focused on CAs with little mention of SEN auxiliaries, it is included here because it demonstrates some of the positive impacts of utilising support in whole class contexts. Likewise, Blatchford et al.'s study was situated in an English context in which government initiatives focused on increasing support staff in schools as part of a remodelling of the education workforce.

Wilson et al. (2003) found that some teachers believed that the quality of their teaching had been enhanced by having an assistant. For example, thanks to the extra supervisory assistance, some teachers were able to teach more creatively, using practical and interactive activities that engaged students. Teachers could also focus more on individuals and groups while assistants helped particular students, and improvements in students' motivation, confidence, and self-esteem were evident. Similarly, Blatchford et al. (2007) noted that the presence of teaching assistants in primary schools made a significant difference in focusing students' and teachers' attention. Teachers paid greater attention to students in the class, and students participated more actively when an assistant was present. Blatchford et al. (2007) questioned however that this was achieved by teachers' delegating responsibility for the "neediest pupils" (p. 20) to the least qualified staff.

Discussion thus far suggests that the impact of the teacher aide on students and teachers is dependent upon the interaction of numerous variables, not least of which are the cultures, beliefs, and practices of schools and teachers (Howes et al., 2003). Perhaps one of the most significant aspects of teacher aides' work in some schools is that of advocate (Chopra et al., 2004; French & Chopra, 1999; Howard & Ford, 2007; Marks et al., 1999). This was particularly evident in the experiences of paraeducators in Marks et al.'s American study who were contracted to support students who presented challenging behaviours. Encountering resistance to these students and to the notion of inclusive education, some of these paraeducators found they had to educate teachers and peers about the students they assisted. Drawing on their knowledge and relationships with students, paraeducators sought to reveal students' competence to others, to help them to see the person obscured by label and reputation. By presenting students in their best light and speaking up on their behalf when necessary, paraeducators had a significant impact on students' inclusion in school life, as was evident in several other studies (Cajkler et al., 2006; French & Chopra, 1999; Howes et al.,

2003). Not all teacher aides have such positive influences on students, however. In the following discussion, some of the most common unhelpful ways of helping are outlined.

### ***Unhelpful Practices***

“I think there is some unnecessary mothering or hovering going on” (speech/language pathologist cited in Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli & MacFarland, 1997, p. 10). In 1997, Giangreco et al. wrote *Helping or Hovering? Effects of Instructional Assistant Proximity on Students with Disabilities*. Although prior research had been conducted into the work of teacher aides, this article may be credited with generating debate and further research interest in a topic that few had thought to examine. The qualitative study investigated the effects of assistants’ proximity on students with multiple disabilities in 16 general education classes in four American states. As the title of the article suggests, the findings indicated that the impact of teacher aides on students’ education was not always as intended. A decade later, its findings continue to ring true.

One of Giangreco’s more recent studies included a detailed examination of the use of paraprofessionals’ time and their perspectives of common paraprofessional practices, including proximity to students (Giangreco & Broer, 2005). One hundred and forty paraprofessionals indicated that approximately 86% of their time was spent within three feet of the students they supported. Only 15% expressed concern that this proximity could interfere with students’ social relationships. Almost 70% claimed that they worked autonomously, making academic decisions without teachers’ supervision. Special education teachers were found to spend less time teaching than the paraprofessionals who worked for them. As the authors observed, to think of any child spending a significant part of their school day within three feet of an adult takes a lively imagination. That only 15% of the paraprofessionals found this problematic is problematic in itself, and is compounded by the knowledge that so many worked with students in the absence of teacher supervision. Being taught by people other than qualified teachers, with whom much of the day was spent in close proximity, suggests that the quality of students’ education, both academically and socially, was in no way comparable with that of their peers. The following discussion of the negative impact of excessive proximity and reliance on teacher aides is structured using the indicators identified in research conducted by Giangreco et al. (1997), Giangreco, Broer, et al. (2001) and Giangreco, Yuan, McKenzie, Cameron, and Fialka (2005).



***Interference with teacher engagement and limited access to competent instruction.***

The presence of teacher aides can have an adverse effect on teachers' engagement with disabled students, resulting in teachers' relinquishing their teaching responsibility to their aides (Downing et al., 2000; Giangreco and Broer, 2005; Giangreco, Broer et al., 2001; Giangreco et al., 2005; Guay, 2003; Hehir, 2002; Howard & Ford, 2007; Marks et al., 1999; Moran & Abbott, 2002; NZCER, 2004). Essentially, such teachers took on the role of "host" (Giangreco, Broer et al., 2001; Marks et al., 1999), providing a space in class for teacher aides to occupy the students they were employed to support. In New Zealand, of the approximately 2,500 teacher aides who responded to a NZEI survey, 57% said that they "teach" or "supervise" whole classes or groups of students ("Teacher Aides Face Difficult Working Conditions," 2006, p. 7).

In her American study of paraeducators in art classrooms, Guay (2003) reported minimal interaction between art teachers and disabled students, some teachers rendering students invisible by talking to their paraeducators about them, as if they were not there, akin to Meyer et al.'s (1998) notion of students perceived as "ghosts." Planning and curriculum adaptation by teachers who would not or could not teach certain students tended to be inadequate or absent. Having to adapt lessons "on the fly" was particularly challenging for teacher aides who were unfamiliar with specialist areas of the curriculum, a finding documented in other studies (Cajkler et al., 2006; Giangreco, 2003; Howard & Ford, 2007). Guay observed that, in the absence of teachers' teaching, teacher aides had to do what they could to support students' learning, which in turn depended upon each aide's disposition, experience, and training (if any). Like teachers, some teacher aides were extremely committed and competent, and some were not. In other situations, Guay found that it was not unusual for some teacher aides to actually do students' work for them, possibly because they believed it was more important to accomplish specific tasks or outcomes, rather than support students' engagement in the process of learning (see also Howes, 2003; Moran & Abbott, 2002).

***Separation from classmates and interference with peer interactions.***

Teacher aides' presence could also compromise students' experiences of the important social dimension of school (Giangreco, Broer et al., 2001; Giangreco et al., 1997; Giangreco et al., 2005; Guay, 2003; Howard & Ford 2007; Lacey, 2001; Logan, 2006; Meyer, 2001; NZCER, 2004). Separation from peers occurred in several ways, including spatial location, in class (e.g., seated with teacher aide apart from the class) or in a separate room; temporal

arrangements (e.g., having a different routine or timetable, orchestrated by teacher aides); the use of alternative curriculum, vocational activities and resources; and limited participation in whole school life. Withdrawing students from class on a regular basis meant that they missed out on class work (NZCER, 2004), and were more likely to be perceived by peers as a “guest” (Meyer et al., 1998, p. 200). The academic efficacy of withdrawal programmes was questionable, particularly where aides were required to work with students with little direction from teachers.

Sometimes regarded as a “package deal” (Giangreco et al., 1997, p. 13), peers’ opinion of the teacher aide could influence their interaction with the student. If peers did not like the aide, they were unlikely to initiate or maintain contact. Similarly, Watson et al. (2000) reported that the adult surveillance experienced by the students in their study impacted negatively on relationships with peers. Meyer (2001) emphasised the role of adult mediation in either facilitating, blocking, or missing opportunities for peer interactions. By interrupting and taking over from peers, and by missing “teachable moments” to spark interaction, aides diminished students’ participation in the world of their peers.

### ***Feeling stigmatised.***

As outlined in the review of literature regarding students, the presence of a teacher aide could be accompanied by stigma, particularly for older students (Giangreco et al., 2005; Howard & Ford 2007; Howes, 2003; Howes et al., 2003; Logan, 2006; NZCER, 2004). Hehir (2002) suggested that the assignment of teacher aides to individuals tended to perpetuate stereotypical thinking that disabled students were incapable of doing anything without help. Perhaps in resistance to such thinking and its consequences of pity and shame, some students tried to distance themselves from the source of the problem (Giangreco, Broer et al., 2001; Hemmingsson et al., 2003).

### ***Insular relationships and unnecessary dependence.***

In contrast to resisting the presence of teacher aides, some students appeared to rely on their presence to such an extent that they had little interaction with peers and teachers (Ferguson, 1995; Giangreco, Broer et al., 2001; Giangreco et al., 1997; Giangreco et al., 2005; Guay 2003; Logan, 2006; Marks et al., 1999; Meyer, 2001; Moran & Abbott, 2002; NZCER, 2004; Prochnow et al., 2000). The terms “bubble kid” or “velcroed” to the teacher aide (Ferguson, 1995) reflect the almost co-dependent nature of this kind of relationship, in which the student

was separated from participation in the world of peers by an invisible yet powerful tether to an adult. In some instances, aides appeared to claim ownership for particular students, despite teachers' efforts to discourage this (Giangreco, Broer et al., 2001; Moran & Abbott, 2002). By "doing for" rather than supporting students to do for themselves, some teacher aides encouraged dependence which could lead to students' learned helplessness (Guay 2003; Logan, 2006; Slee, 1993). In contrast to these situations in which the actions of teacher aides precluded the development of students' autonomy, some aides and students seemed to be thrown together because of their non-acceptance by staff and peers respectively (Marks et al., 1999).

***Loss of personal control and loss of gender identity.***

Students whose severity of impairment limits their independence and/or students supported by staff who encourage dependence upon them may have limited opportunities to exercise control over their lives (Giangreco, Broer et al., 2001; Giangreco et al., 1997; Giangreco et al., 2005; Guay 2003). Those for whom means of alternative communication have not been provided or who are unable to move independently may be particularly vulnerable to having adults (and peers) make decisions for them. They may well want space from paraprofessionals, yet may be powerless to resist the constant presence of adults. Given that the vast majority of teacher aides are female, male students may experience awkward and confusing situations regarding their personal care needs in school contexts, especially as they move through their teen years (Giangreco et al., 1997; Skär & Tamm, 2001).

The evidence outlined thus far challenges the widespread assumption that teacher aides are the solution to the inclusion of disabled students in regular classes. Indeed, Guay (2003) suggested that the assignment of paraeducators to individual students constitutes the "antithesis of inclusion" (p. 36). Instead of supporting students to successfully access the curriculum and learn with and from their peers the skills required to participate in society, the presence of teacher aides in the above studies tended to amplify students' differences, and constrain their academic and social participation. Even in situations in which it appeared that teacher aides were effective in "managing" students' compliance with academic and behavioural requirements, Howes et al. (2003) cautioned that such short term approaches may, in the longterm, hinder students in constructing their identities as learners.

Who teacher aides are, how they relate with students and teachers, and what kind of schools they work in, appear to make a difference to the kind of influence they have on students' education. It seems ironic that possibly the greatest positive impact relates to those aspects of education which should be uncontested, namely, getting into a school, and, once in, having the chance to participate in school life. Review of the above literature indicates that aides can indeed be "an invaluable resource or a total disaster." Much depends upon the contexts in which they work, as determined at local school and national policy levels. Whether or not aides are trained is another factor to be considered in determining the efficacy of their work.

### ***Teacher Aides: Training Matters***

In most of the research reviewed, the same concern was repeatedly raised: teacher aides need to be trained in order to carry out their work effectively, safely, and professionally (Chopra et al., 2004; Downing et al., 2000; French, 2003; Giangreco, Edelman et al., 2001; Groom, 2006; Howard & Ford, 2007; Katsiyannis, Hodge, & Lanford, 2000; Logan, 2006; Marks et al., 1999; Massey University, 2002; Moran & Abbott, 2002; NZEI, 2004; Riggs & Mueller, 2001; Russell, Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, & Martin, 2005; Wylie, 2000). Many students who have complex support needs continue to have to rely on untrained, unsupervised teacher aides for much of their education. Is there a way of explaining this practice other than by a widely held presumption of incompetence, that certain students are incapable of learning much, therefore those employed to support them do not need to know much (Brown et al., 1999)? Would such a situation be acceptable for normal students (Giangreco et al., 2005)? It seems that the deficit discourse that dichotomises normal and special is well entrenched in the deep structures that underpin educational policy and practice.

A range of concerns about training matters are documented in the research literature. The need for a relevant qualification, thorough induction, ongoing professional development that is responsive to teacher aides' needs, and the development of a career structure were consistently identified by teacher aides and others involved with their work. The necessity of education for teachers and principals was also recognised. Barriers to teacher aides' accessing appropriate training were outlined in a number of studies.

The notion that training for teacher aides would engender greater respect and act as the solution to the problem of untrained aides must be considered with caution (Giangreco & Broer, 2005). To some extent, solely "improving" teacher aides' skills could be analogous to

remediating students' deficits with no consideration of contextual, cultural and structural influences. It places responsibility on the individual to change, to fit in with existing school structures and practices, essentially leaving intact the status quo that continues to be determined by uncontested underlying beliefs. Indeed, increasing paraeducators' level of competence could be a means of further legitimising teachers' delegation of responsibility for certain students to support staff (Giangreco & Broer, 2003; Giangreco, Smith, & Pinckney, 2006; Marks et al., 1999). With this in mind, the literature supports the need for initial and ongoing education, not only for teacher aides but also for teachers and principals (Cajkler et al., 2006; Chopra et al., 2004; Downing et al., 2000; French, 2003; Garner, 2002; Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Groom & Rose, 2005; Guay, 2003; Howard & Ford, 2007; Howes et al., 2003; Katsiyannis et al., 2000; Marks et al., 1999; NZCER, 2004; Riggs & Mueller, 2001; Takala, 2007; Wylie, 2000). Such education would help to develop a shared understanding of a range of legal, ethical, and professional practice issues relating to disabled students and education, and the role that teacher aides play in this.

Given that training obviously matters a great deal, why are so many teacher aides untrained? Systemic barriers that have effectively precluded teacher aides' engagement in study included low pay, lack of job security due to the short term contractual nature of employment, lack of financial support and incentive from employers, minimal recognition of qualifications in terms of pay, promotion, or status, difficulty in getting release time to undertake study, and lack of available, relevant training (Chopra et al., 2004; Howard & Ford, 2007; NZCER, 2004; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). In spite of these significant disincentives, teacher aides' commitment to learning was evident in their enthusiasm and willingness to make the most of any opportunities offered, often in their own time (Howard & Ford, 2007; NZCER, 2004).

The evaluation by NZCER (2004) of the Ministry of Education programme, *Introductory Professional Development Programme for Teacher Aides/Kaiāwhina*, in which only one third of schools in New Zealand participated, revealed a host of issues concerning aides and schools, indicating that the use of teacher aides is indeed the tip of the iceberg (Giangreco et al., 1999). In a list of factors that limited the effective delivery of the programme, providers noted the "lack of a unified voice from the Ministry of Education and ERO [Education Review Office] regarding special education" (NZCER, 2004, p. 93). Without clear national expectations and policies, teacher aides were at the mercy of their employing school, in which much depended upon school leadership. Professional development was seen to be most

effective in what researchers referred to as “clear” schools (p. 72), in which staff attitudes and organisation reflected a commitment to teaching all students well. In contrast, “murky” schools were disorganised and assigned teacher aides responsibility for special education students. A third category of participating schools was described as “cloudy,” meaning that these schools had yet to demonstrate consistency in their approach to special education. Interpreting the responsiveness of schools in this way is consistent with Howes et al.’s (2003) research regarding the impact of support staff on students’ education, and highlights the need to look beyond simply training aides in order to address the larger cultural and structural barriers to educational equity for disabled students.

### ***Teacher Aides: Closing Thoughts***

Exploring research relating to teacher aides has revealed much about the iceberg (Giangreco et al., 1999). On the surface, there are striking parallels in the ways in which disabled students and teacher aides are regarded and treated in some schools. It seems reasonable to claim that, in these schools, a deficit approach legitimates the assigning of the least qualified adult to the child deemed to be the least competent. Teacher aides’ inequitable employment conditions and students’ inequitable education reflect and perpetuate their second class status (Garner, 2002; Giangreco, Edelman et al., 2001) and marginalisation. The question, “would the practice be acceptable if the students did not have disabilities?” (Giangreco et al., 2005, p. 33) should be accompanied by the question, “would teacher aides’ employment conditions be acceptable for any other employees?” That such questions have to be asked reflects the continuing power of deficit discourses and discriminatory practices in educational contexts.

Developments in our emerging understanding of the role of the teacher aide can be likened to changing understandings of disability. Both involve a shifting of focus from an acontextual individual to the broader cultural and structural contexts in which we live. For example, teacher aides were initially (and continue to be) regarded as the solution to inclusion, that is, the means of solving the problem of special needs children as they exercised their right to attend regular schools. Then research evidence began to indicate that teacher aides might be a problem; rather than helping, some were hovering and hindering students’ learning and social interaction. As well, some students were becoming dependent upon their help. Now it appears that the problems do not necessarily lie within students or aides but rather with an education system and schools that have become dependent upon aides, and hinder their ability to work effectively with students and teachers. These developments in understanding are due in no

small part to the willingness of teacher aides and students to actively participate in research, to share their experiences of school. In doing so, they have helped to illuminate the inequities and ambiguities of both the surface and deep structures of education.

### **Situating This Doctoral Study in the Research Literature**

In conducting this study, I hope to extend our understanding of disabled students' and teacher aides' experiences of working together in schools. This research differs in several ways from that already published. To date, research involving both disabled students and teacher aides as primary participants has not been carried out in New Zealand contexts. In contrast to the three student-teacher aide studies cited (Broer et al., 2005; Hemmingsson et al., 2003; Skär & Tamm, 2001), I have not limited the selection of student participants in terms of a specific impairment or age group. While acknowledging the realities of the effects of impairment (Priestley, 2003; Thomas, 1999), I understand disability as a social construction that is determined by a range of cultural and structural barriers that vary depending upon contexts and relationships with others at any given time (Priestley, 2003). To be consistent with the theoretical framework of this thesis, it would not make sense to select students on the basis of one facet of their humanity. Like Connors and Stalker (2007), I am more interested in how students interpret their experiences of impairment and disability, rather than reinforcing the status quo by imposing diagnostic labels on their identity as participants. As well, I have tried to be inclusive in the selection of students by welcoming those who utilise alternative communication strategies, rather than seeking only those with fluent verbal skills. This has necessitated the development of flexible research methods, which also distinguish this study from those in which data were generated through a more traditional interview format. In terms of theoretical frameworks, while other researchers have utilised similar disability and childhood theorising, I have also drawn from social justice theory to inform my interpretation of participants' experiences.

As far as teacher aide research is concerned, the focus of many studies to date has been the nature of roles and responsibilities. While this forms part of this study, I have chosen to examine in greater depth the findings concerning the relational aspects of teacher aides' work, as well as the issue of education for adults involved in disabled students' education. I have drawn on an eclectic range of international research regarding teacher aides, in contrast to the tendency of a number of American and British studies to utilise primarily research conducted

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within their respective national contexts. While very much valuing the pragmatic nature of much of the existing teacher aide research, in this doctoral study I have sought to understand participants' perspectives and experiences within the context of the pluralistic theoretical framework already outlined. In learning from the knowledge already offered by accomplished researchers, I hope that, as a newcomer to the world of research, I can make some contribution that will illuminate our ways of knowing disability and humanness. I hope that my interpretations throughout this thesis do justice to the students and teacher aides who have so generously shared their time and wisdom with me.

The purpose of this chapter has been to review research literature regarding special and inclusive education, disabled students, and teacher aides, in order to provide a context for the present study. In Chapter Four, the methodological framework of the thesis is outlined.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### METHODOLOGY

*“Qualitative inquiry pervades human life, and qualitative thought is a requirement for maintaining one’s humanity” (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990, p. 367).*

Having reviewed research literature that is relevant to this thesis, discussion now turns to methodological matters. This chapter begins by locating my study within an appropriate philosophical context prior to outlining the qualitative research methods used to design and conduct the research.

#### **Paradigms: Options for Inquiry**

*“...scientific advances are merely the answer to specific questions—and ... our questions are determined by our view of the world, by what we believe is good or important” (Blatt, 1987, p. 10).*

Paradigms are human constructions (Guba, 1990) and may be thought of as belief systems which shape and determine different worldviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Each paradigm outlines a different way of looking at, finding out about, and understanding the world. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) stated that paradigms may be thought of as interpretive frameworks, or “overarching philosophical systems denoting particular ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies” (p. 6). Ontology focuses on the study of being, and on the nature of reality (Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). “What things are there in the world?” is an ontological question (Davidson & Tolich, 2003b). Epistemology “is a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know” (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). “How do we know?” is an epistemological question, as is “what counts as legitimate knowledge?” Epistemology also considers the relationship between the inquirer and the known, for example, whether the researcher adopts an objective, (allegedly) value-free stance towards the object of inquiry, or a subjective, interactive relationship with research participants, in which the role of values in inquiry are explicit. Epistemology is inherently linked to ontology, with some researchers proposing that the two concepts are inseparable. For example, Crotty (1998) proposed that “realism (an ontological notion asserting that realities exist outside the mind) is often taken to imply objectivism (an epistemological notion asserting that meaning exists in objects

independently of any consciousness)” (p. 10). Ontology and epistemology in turn determine a researcher’s methodology, the ways in which s/he will gain knowledge of the world. “How should the inquirer go about finding out knowledge?” (Guba, 1990, p.18) is a methodological question. Methodology focuses on the research design, the particular strategies that best fit the study being undertaken.

Different researchers conceptualise paradigmatic frameworks differently. For example, Guba (1990) framed major research paradigms in terms of positivism, postpositivism, critical theory and constructivism. More recently, Lather (2006) outlined a novel way of thinking about positivist, constructivist/interpretivist, critical theory, and deconstructivist (poststructural/postmodern) paradigms. She described each paradigm as if it were a colour, public event, game, sport, celebrated figure, or drink as a way of “humanising” these abstract concepts. For example, an interpretivist/constructivist paradigm is described as the colour green (natural), a community picnic (interactive, humanistic), Dag Hammersjold (receptivity to others and able to consider multiple viewpoints), and white wine (convivial, social, interactive).

The paradigms mentioned represent some of the current approaches to the process of inquiry. How we see the world determines how we go about making sense of it (Blatt, 1987; Eisner, 1998). In postmodern times, we are free to see, to inquire, and to conceptualise in different ways, without being constrained by the rigidity of positivism. As Peshkin (1993) observed, “no research paradigm has a monopoly on quality” (p. 28). In realising that there is no one right way to approach research (Davidson & Tolich, 2003b), I have the opportunity to make my own way, by drawing on those aspects of ontology, epistemology, and methodology that make sense to my study, that help construct a clear rationale for my actions throughout the research process, and that enable me to achieve the purpose of the study with integrity, particularly in my relationships with students and teacher aides I have had the privilege of coming to know. As noted by Davidson and Tolich (2003b) “research is primarily about forming and managing social relationships” (p. 2).

### **Situating the Study Philosophically**

*We may have entered a significant period of transition in human science research characterised by a profound re-appreciation of what it means to be human, and, therefore, what it means to be human beings trying to understand ourselves and our fellow human beings. (Anglin, 1996, p. 25)*

For many years now in my teaching, I have been drawn to, and draw on, the work of a number of researchers who write in illuminating and respectful ways about their research with disabled people. Steven Taylor, Robert Bogdan, Burton Blatt, Douglas Biklen, Dianne Ferguson and Philip Ferguson, among others, adopt an interpretivist and social constructionist approach in their attempts to understand ways of knowing in general, and ways of understanding the construction and experience of disability in particular. These ways of knowing have played a critical role throughout this study.

#### ***An Interpretivist Paradigm***

In seeking *understanding* of students' and teacher aides' experiences, and in interpreting disability in a multi-dimensional, socially constructed manner (Priestley, 2003), I have situated this study in an interpretivist paradigmatic framework. Ferguson and Ferguson (1995) noted that interpretivism may be variously described as "naturalism, conventionalism, constructionism, holism" (p. 107), with even greater diversity evident in its description of methodologies. Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, and Richardson (2005) described interpretive research as that which is framed within particular theories, such as Disability Studies. Interpretivism focuses on describing the ways in which human beings construct and interpret reality in different contexts, on how they tell their stories. The four basic tenets of interpretivism described by Ferguson and Ferguson (1995) are that (a) reality is socially constructed; (b) it is impossible to split subject and object; (c) facts are inseparable from values (facts "always come clothed in the wardrobe of social assumptions" [p. 110]); and (d) the goal of research is to "describe, interpret, and understand" (p. 112). A rationale for positioning the study within an interpretivist paradigm is outlined as follows.

The Fergusons (1995) claimed that interpretivism serves as "a guiding framework for the pursuit of social justice for people with disabilities and their families" (p. 106). They emphasise that individuals' stories can act as an impetus for social change. Paying careful attention to the individual within specific micro contexts, telling her/his story, can have the

effect of casting light in the shadows, in contrast to focusing only on a macro perspective which tends to obscure and shadow individuals' humanity. It is easy to discount or even fail to recognise the latter when distanced via systems/policy perspectives, in which human beings are often reduced to a number or a case. It is difficult to ignore people when confronted directly with their story, told on their terms, in which their humanity shines. I hope that the experiences related by students and teacher aides illuminate the present and have the potential to act as an instigator for change in our understandings of and responses to disabled students.

Interpretivist research embodies multiple perspectives. Multiple realities may be socially constructed by students and teacher aides, depending upon their values, beliefs and experiences, as formed through interaction and relationship with each other as well as with others throughout family, educational, social and cultural contexts. Furthermore, people's perspectives and experiences are influenced by and influence sociocultural values, beliefs, structures, and organisational practices. This consideration of micro and macro perspectives, of the relationship between individuals and their sociocultural contexts, is necessary in developing an understanding of individuals' multiple perspectives of educational experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Priestley, 2003; Thomas, 1999).

Interpretivist research has allied itself with the "underdog" in society (Beresford, 1997; Ferguson et al., 1992). Ferguson and Ferguson (1995) noted the importance of interpretivism in enabling those least often noticed and valued to be heard, and to challenge dominant voices in society. As already stated, both disabled students and teacher aides are relatively powerless entities within the New Zealand education system. Gaining an understanding of how both groups of people construct and make sense of their worlds by attending to the individual and the particular within school contexts may be helpful in questioning current and informing future educational practice. Collectively, individuals gain power in sharing their stories, and in so doing "pursue social justice one story at a time" (Ferguson & Ferguson, 1995, p. 119).

Interpretivism challenges medical model meanings of disability. Had I conceptualised disability objectively in terms of immutable individual pathology, consistent with special education underpinnings, I would have framed my research within a positivist paradigm, seeking to discover, for example, the most effective ways of treating abnormal children (such as teaching a child to smile using task analysis as the most effective means of instruction). An experimental, quantitative research design would have been developed which ensured

researcher objectivity and distance from participants, on whom the research would be done. Reporting results numerically would further objectify and reduce the possibility of knowing participants in terms of their heterogeneous humanity. Such an approach is the antithesis of my thesis, hence my alignment with interpretivism.

### ***Social Constructionism***

Paradigms, according to Davidson and Tolich (2003a) “provide the landscape in which individual theories can flourish” (p. 26). Having situated this study within an interpretivist paradigm, the next step is to narrow the focus to particular theoretical perspectives that are relevant to this study. Patton (2002) provided an informative overview of sixteen theoretical traditions or perspectives, in which he identified the foundational questions relating to each perspective. Of particular relevance to this study is the sociological perspective of social constructionism/constructivism, in which the following questions are central to inquiry: “How have the people in this setting constructed reality? What are their reported perceptions, ‘truths,’ explanations, beliefs, and worldview? What are the consequences of their constructions for their behaviours and for those with whom they interact?” (p. 132). These questions fit this study well. How do disabled students and teacher aides in New Zealand schools construct their realities? What are their perceptions, beliefs, and worldviews? Do teacher aides construct students’ identities in terms of their special needs or competence? What are the human consequences of such constructions? For example, how do students and teacher aides relate to and interact with one another, and what influence do the latter have on students’ school life?

Prior to discussing social constructionism, it may be helpful to clarify terminology. Depending upon the author, constructivism and social constructionism are given similar or different meanings. For example, Lincoln and Guba (2000) tended to use the terms interchangeably, while Burr (1996) suggested that constructivism and constructionism be considered as different levels of analysis, to be used pragmatically for their relevance in different contexts, a stance that I find useful. Constructivism (as in Vygotskian terms) has as its unit of analysis the individual and her/his cognitive processes and agency within relational and sociocultural contexts, in contrast to constructionism in which the unit of analysis is the interaction, what happens in *relationship* between individuals who are situated in sociocultural contexts (Burr, 1996; Gergen, 2001). In both cases, relationships are

fundamental to learning/known processes (Gergen, 2001), the key difference between the two being the status of the individual (Burr, 1996).

In this study, I have found it useful to think of social constructionism as a global term, a kind of wide lens that has as its focus the cultural, collective making of meanings and knowledge that are assumed to be “true.” The tendency to accept these meanings as truths has been described as “reification” (Crotty, 1998). Such taken for granted knowledge can be difficult to even recognise as social constructions and can have a powerful and sometimes oppressive influence on our actions. The taken for granted knowledge of childhood and disability respectively as “facts” rather than things that are socially constructed and variable in their meanings across time and culture are examples of reification. Similarly, sedimentation refers to “layers of interpretations” (Crotty, 1998, p. 59) being built up over time, obscuring realities so that construction of meaning involves engagement with these “theoretical deposits” (p. 59) rather than directly with the world they represent. It might be said that the “received notions” (p. 59) of disability distort understanding of the reality experienced by disabled members of society in general and disabled students in particular.

In aspects of this study, it has also been helpful to draw on constructivism, which I think of as having a narrower, close up lens that focuses on the individual’s making of meaning, first on a social/interpersonal level in relationship with others in sociocultural contexts, followed by the internalisation of meaning by the individual (Gindis, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). In its recognition of individual agency, constructivism is useful when examining the different ways in which individuals choose to think and act, while immersed in similar hegemonic cultural and structural contexts. For example, when considering the centrality of children’s agency in sociology of childhood theorising, Vygotsky’s constructivism is highly relevant to interpreting children’s experiences. Similarly, a constructivist approach can be used in the interpretation of teacher aides’ attitudes and actions towards disabled children.

As noted in Chapter Two, many researchers have highlighted the relevance of social constructionism to understandings of disability. The studies by Bogdan and Taylor (1992) and Ferguson (1987), on the social construction of humanness and the social construction of mental retardation respectively, have been particularly powerful in contributing to an understanding of the ways in which disability is constructed. In its focus on honouring multiple perspectives of socially constructed realities (those of disabled students and teacher

aides) and its questioning of taken for granted knowledge of the world (interpreting individuals' experiences in relation to macro level sociocultural influences), social constructionism provides a useful lens with which to approach this inquiry. Also, as noted, constructivist concepts may be relevant in interpreting data. I believe that conducting research with human beings is too complex an endeavour to be theorised in one particular way only, hence my drawing on a range of what I regard as compatible theories of knowledge, disability, childhood, education, and social justice.

### **Qualitative Research: Making the World Visible in Different Ways**

A qualitative research approach is consistent with inquiry situated within an interpretivist paradigm and social constructionist theoretical perspective. Eisner (1998) outlined six features of qualitative study which are useful as a means of clarifying my approach to research. These include the naturalistic and interpretive nature of inquiry, "self as instrument" (the researcher is the means by which data is gathered), giving voice to participants, attention to the particular, and credibility of research processes and outcomes. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) also include characteristics such as emergent design (being flexible and open to the unanticipated), purposive sampling (deliberate choice of participants to maximise participant heterogeneity), early and ongoing inductive data analysis, and a case study approach to reporting research outcomes.

As noted, there is no one right way to conduct qualitative research, and it claims allegiance to no particular paradigm, theory, or discipline (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Eisner, 1998). It does, however, focus on the:

... socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasise the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8)

Clearly, such knowledge can best be gained through direct interaction with students and teacher aides in their natural contexts (Biklen & Moseley, 1988).

***Research with Children***

This study has been shaped by my commitment to respecting students' right to participate in matters relating to their lives. The need to conduct research *with* rather than *on* children, has been emphasised in research literature (e.g., Cook, Swain, & French, 2001; Garth & Aroni, 2003; Messiou, 2006). Beresford (1997) claimed that prioritising the perspectives of disabled children "requires a 're-working' of the way we view children, and of the way we do research" (p. 69). As Alderson (1995) noted, ignoring children's views and not doing research with children is unethical, in failing to prevent harm or bring to public attention practices that may inadvertently act against children's well-being. She stated that, "when they ignore children's views, by default researchers reinforce common prejudices that children do not have views worth hearing" (p. 40). Learning directly from students provides an authentic understanding of their perspectives, which often differ from those of adults (Garth & Aroni, 2003; MacArthur & Kelly, 2004; Shah, 2007; Smith, 2007; Stalker & Connors, 2003). Children may attribute importance to things that adults consider less salient, thus emphasising the need to take the child's lead when interacting in a research context.

Children are in the process of developing physically, cognitively, emotionally, and differ qualitatively from adults in terms of their cognitive development and life experiences (Beresford, 1997; Gollop, 2000). Traditional explanations of cognitive development (e.g., Piagetian theory) have focused on a linear, age-stage model, implying that each child follows set patterns of development at particular ages, with little reference to the influence of context or environment. This kind of thinking has been both limited and limiting in its application to those children whose development deviates from such a norm (Hogan, 1997). For example, statements such as "a ten year old child functions at the level of a two year old" perpetuate stereotypical representation of disabled people as "eternal children." In contrast, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural approach to human development stressed the importance of context/environment and relationships in shaping development, and acknowledged the diverse, heterogeneous nature of human development. This suggests that researchers need to develop supportive relationships in a safe environment, and use questions or cues that are meaningful and contextualised, to scaffold participants' participation in the research process (Beresford, 1997; Morris, 2003; Stalker & Connors, 2003).



Children's means of communication may have a significant impact on the ways in which they are involved in research. While communication with all participants needs to be clear and coherent, flexibility in using a range of communication strategies is necessary in engaging with participants whose verbal communication is affected by age and/or impairment (Minkes, Robinson, & Weston, 1994; Morris, 2003; Stalker & Connors, 2003). As already noted, a presumption of competence provides the fairest starting place for interaction with others (Biklen, 1998, 2000b; Biklen & Burke, 2006). Furthermore, it is the responsibility of researchers and educators to find ways of effectively communicating and understanding children (Davis & Watson, 2001; Morris, 2003). The ways in which this was done in the present study are outlined in later sections describing the meetings with students, as is the range of inquiry strategies used to take account of participants' different ways of knowing.

Listening to students provides possibly the most valid source of data that can inform the development of more inclusive thinking, policy, and practice (Beresford, 1997; Cook-Sather, 2002; Garth & Aroni, 2003; Messiou, 2006; Mitra, 2003; Shah, 2007; Watson et al., 2000). It also helps to dissipate the power of stereotypes of the homogeneity and universality of disabled children (Connors & Stalker, 2007; Davis & Watson, 2001; Davis et al., 2000; Mitra, 2003; Priestley, 2003; Watson et al., 2000). Our knowledge is incomplete if we do not invite students themselves to contribute to the conversation about their education.

### ***The Role of the Researcher***

Janesick (2000) noted that "qualitative researchers have open minds, but not empty minds" (p. 384). In the *Preface* I outlined some of the most significant factors that have brought me to this study. The following comments may also be useful in identifying my biases (Janesick, 2000) or the "subjective lenses" through which I see, construct, make sense of the world (Glesne, 2006). In writing about some of my earlier experiences, I have become more aware of the underlying sense of fairness that has determined the paths I have taken, hence the situating of this study within a social justice framework. I believe that all students have the right to education that is inclusive rather than exclusive, and that has been the central purpose in my work within the New Zealand education system. I also appreciate, however, that not everyone shares this belief, and need to be wary of imposing my views upon others' realities (Morris, 1998).

In his discussion of understanding the meanings of children, Davis (1998) outlined different roles that researchers may assume in their interactions with children. These include the “non-authoritarian adult,” “friend,” and “least adult” (p. 329), all of which attempt to address the inherent power imbalance between children and adults. While such conceptualisations of the researcher’s role provide a helpful starting place for considering one’s disposition when working alongside children, I concur with Davis’ observation that there is no one universally successful role that researchers can adopt when working with young participants. As with other aspects of qualitative research, there is no single right way, and much depends on the context and the individuals involved (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Gollop, 2000).

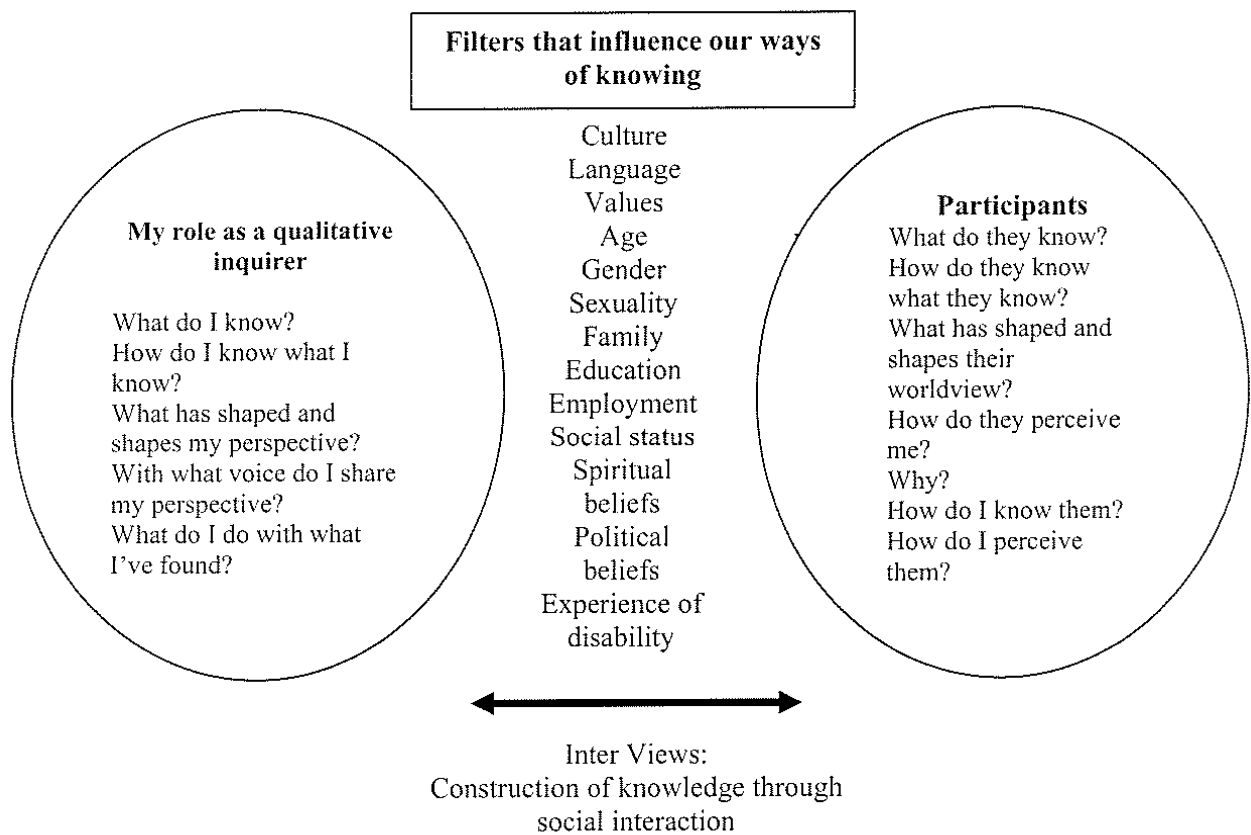
One way of consciously reminding myself of the influence of my experiences and values on my interactions with participants and interpretation of their perspectives is conceptualised in Figure 2. This has been adapted from Patton’s (2002) discussion of reflexivity and Kvale’s (1996) thinking about interviews. Describing reflexivity as a means of highlighting “self-awareness, political/cultural consciousness, and ownership of one’s perspective” (p. 64), Patton advocated continual questioning of what one knows and how one knows it. I am also guided by Wolcott’s (1990) suggestion to “be candid” (p. 131) about sharing feelings, while being cautious about making judgments. His observation that “little words of judgment creep into all kinds of sentences but can be rounded up and marched right off the page again” (p. 132) is an eloquent reminder.

### **Research Design**

*“Real research ... is messy, commonly characterised by numerous false starts, frustrations, and an ever-present fear that you’ve chosen the wrong method in the first place”*

*(Davidson & Tolich, 2003b, p. 5).*

Thus far, discussion has focused on providing a theoretical context for my study, an abstract positioning within research literature. I turn now to outline, in chronological order, the actual research process I engaged in.



**Figure 2.**

**Self as instrument: The role of the researcher.**

(Adapted from Patton's [2002] discussion of reflexivity and Kvale's [1996] thinking about interviews).

### ***Recruitment Strategies***

Upon approval of the University of Otago ethics application, I began the process of recruiting participants. An “opt-in” recruitment process (Alderson, 1995) was adopted, in which involvement in the study was initiated by potential participants in response to publicity about the research project throughout April 2004. People who responded to the advertisements were sent a Participant Interest Form (Appendices B and C), the purpose of which was to provide basic demographic details about themselves and their school or work. The form for students included questions regarding their main means of communication, consistent with Morris’ (1998) study: “this meant that we did not approach people in terms of their diagnosis or impairment but rather in terms of how they communicated, and what they and we required in order to meet their communication needs” (p. 13). This serves not to deny a person’s impairment, but rather focuses on what it may mean in terms of communication within a research context, so that I, in a researcher role, could be responsive to alternative ways of communicating (Booth, 1996; Morris, 2003).

Out of 16 inquiries from students/families about the study, 15 completed Participant Information Forms. Out of 39 inquiries from teacher aides, 30 registered interest. The information provided in Participant Interest Forms was then used to purposively select teacher aides (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) according to variability of age, gender, ethnicity, experience, training, number and ages of students supported, nature of supports provided, number of hours employed, type of school, and funding sources. In the case of disabled students, no selection was necessary, as only fifteen expressed interest in participation, and varied in ages and other ways.

Students were informed of their inclusion in the study by a letter addressed to either them or their parents, depending upon who had made the initial contact. An information booklet and consent forms, for student and parents respectively, accompanied the letter (Appendix D). Consistent with current literature that advocates for the accessibility of research material (Alderson, 1995; Barnes & Mercer, 1997; Booth, 1996), I adapted the format to make the content more appealing and meaningful to children and teenagers respectively.

The teacher aides selected to take part in the study were informed by letter, with accompanying study information (Appendix E). Those teacher aides who were not selected

were sent a letter thanking them for their interest, and advising them that they would be kept informed through formal reports arising from the study. Detailed records of all contacts with participants were kept as part of the audit trail recommended as one means of assessing the trustworthiness of the research (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

### ***Participants***

Of the 15 students who completed Participant Information Forms, 10 actually participated in the study, the remaining five withdrawing for personal reasons. Appendix F provides a summary of student participants who ranged in age from 8 to 17 years. Their teacher aide support ranged from 5 to approximately 15 hours per week. The 18 teacher aides ranged in age from 30 to 50 plus years, as detailed in Appendix G. All were employed from 10 to over 20 hours per week to support specific students, most of whom received Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Scheme (ORRS) funding.

### ***Meetings with Students: Logistics***

Arrangements were made to begin meetings with each student during July and August 2004. I met initially with parents to introduce myself, discuss questions or concerns about the study, as well as share information about their child's communication and interests to facilitate our getting to know one another (Beresford, 1997; Kelly, McColgan, & Scally, 2000; Morris, 1998, 2003). Appendix H provides the guidelines I used in my first visit with parents. I was kindly invited into the homes of nine student participants, with the tenth student choosing to meet with me in my office at work. The number and length of meetings ranged from three to six meetings of varying duration, from 40 minutes to an hour and a half. With some of the younger students, a series of short, frequent visits proved more effective. Appendix I provides a summary of meetings with students. The timing of meetings varied according to the preferences of students and their families (Gollop, 2000; Morris, 1998), and were planned in close proximity (e.g., weekly) to promote a sense of continuity. I was conscious of not getting in the way of families' busy lives, and needed to balance minimal intrusiveness (Stalker, 1998) with carrying out research meetings thoroughly. This meant managing the tension between consideration of human participants' rights and well-being, and the demands of research quality.

The presence of parents/caregivers in research meetings with children can be interpreted as helpful and/or problematic (Gollop, 2000; Moore & Sixsmith, 2000). I am indebted to the parents/caregivers whose children took part in this study (and, of course, the students themselves). Without exception, parents were supportive and willing to facilitate their child's involvement in the study. Essentially these caregivers scaffolded their sons' or daughters' participation in our meetings, and helped overcome the difficulties of having a stranger meet with their children. This was particularly helpful when we had a relatively limited time in which to work (Beresford, 1997).

The critical importance of developing and maintaining a rapport with students cannot be overstated (Beresford, 1997; Gollop, 2000; Stalker, 1998). Numerous strategies were used in this study to facilitate positive relationships with students from the beginning to the end of my involvement with them. I focused on interacting in a non-authoritative, warm, friendly and respectful manner, and my relationship with each evolved as we got to know one other, as did the research strategies used (Watson et al., 2000). I wanted each meeting with students to be fun and positive (rather than an extension of school, extra homework, or worse, an interrogation!), and for them to feel confident and good about themselves (Kelly et al., 2000). As well, consistent with sociology of childhood theorising, it was important that they have opportunities to exercise agency during the meeting process (Moore & Sixsmith, 2000).

The collaborative nature of qualitative interviews is possibly more evident in interaction with disabled students, the researcher tending to play a more active role in constructing meaning with participants in response to the latter's range of communication strategies (Booth, 1996). The parallel with teaching is worth noting, as I sought to make the most of the "teachable/researchable moment." Humour was an important and delightful part of our interactions (Gollop, 2000; Moore & Sixsmith, 2000). Students had an opportunity to tell me what they thought about each meeting by completing a brief evaluation form (Alderson, 1995) (Appendix J), so that I could make our next meeting more responsive to their wishes. I always asked if I could return, rather than taking this for granted (Kelly et al., 2000).

### ***Meetings with Students: Content***

A "funnel" approach was used in structuring the content of our meetings, ranging from broad to more specific topics as our meetings progressed (Kelly, 2002). A set of guidelines was developed for each topic, for use with younger and older students respectively. These served

to semi-structure our meetings, giving students scope to cover what was important to them within each topic area, without being overly prescriptive (Biklen & Moseley, 1988; Mactavish, Mahon, & Lutfiyya, 2000; Kelly et al., 2000). The first topic was entitled *Stuff About Me*, and focused on developing a profile of each student (Appendix K). The second topic, *Stuff About School*, provided opportunities for students to share their experiences of school (Appendix L), and the third topic, *Talking About Teacher Aides*, honed in on students' experiences of teacher aides (Appendix M). The topics were deliberately structured so that students started with an easy topic with which they were familiar, thus encouraging them to feel confident and competent in the research process (Gollop, 2000). While the content of each topic could be considered as "stand alone," each student moved through each topic in different ways and paces (Morris, 1998). Responses given by students in our initial meetings could be reviewed in later topics, to confirm accuracy and to elaborate discussion once students felt more comfortable with me (a kind of built in "member check").

A number of researchers who have successfully conducted research with children have emphasised the need for an eclectic approach to methods, involving innovative and interactive strategies (e.g., Beresford, 1997; Biklen & Moseley, 1988; Gollop, 2000; Kelly et al., 2000; Mactavish et al., 2000). Strategies included short open and closed questions and sentence completion tasks, charts detailing school activities, drawing pictures, and a board game I developed to provide a more engaging format in which to ask questions about teacher aides (Appendix N). Extensive use was made of picture symbols, photographs, and feeling faces (sad, neutral, happy) (Kelly, 2002; Stalker, 1998), as well as other interactive strategies derived from teaching and research experience (Beresford, 1997; Gollop, 2000; Minkes et al., 1994; Stalker, 1998; Stalker & Connors, 2003). To give one of many lovely examples of children's engagement, one student gave me a guided tour of his school, pointing out features on the photo I had obtained from his school's website. The same student later gave my dog an actual tour of his school.

Throughout the meetings, I tried to consciously build in opportunities for students to make choices (Kelly et al., 2000), such as whether they would like to write or draw their responses or have me act as scribe as we worked our way through each set of guidelines. Occasionally, when I sensed that a student may be "tricking" me, we used humour to check out the "real story," students responding to this in a good natured manner. I was mindful that "pleasing the interviewer" (Norwich & Kelly, 2004, p. 46) could be an issue in my meetings with students,

and reassured each one that there were “no wrong answers - whatever you tell me is helpful” (Gollop, 2000; Kelly et al., 2000). Rephrasing, providing additional cues, asking students to explain things to me in their words (such as some of the descriptors for teacher aides) (Gollop, 2000), paraphrasing, and reviewing questions in subsequent meetings were helpful in checking the veracity of our discussions.

***Recording and documenting meetings.***

All but one student agreed to audiotape our meetings (in this student’s case I took brief running notes during our meetings, then wrote more detailed notes afterwards). A digital recorder was used, enabling unobtrusive recording after an initial “getting used to it” period. While I infrequently made notes during discussions, preferring to focus wholly on the interpersonal interaction, I made brief notes after talking with each student, in an attempt to capture and reflect on those human aspects of interaction that are beyond the scope of a tape recorder (Kelly et al., 2000; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Morris, 1998). Meetings were transcribed and checked for accuracy with the original recordings. I then developed for each student a summary of our meetings entitled *What I Think About School and Teacher Aides* (Appendix O). I did this for several reasons. I was influenced by Booth’s (1996) observation:

Faithfully reproducing their spoken words as text may do a gross disservice to people with learning difficulties. Accuracy and truth do not always go hand in hand. Freed from their contextual supports, loose words easily tumble into chaos. The result may be a false impression of illucidity or the loss of whatever original meaning they carried in conversation. (p. 251)

The conversion of verbal to written text can be problematic for the most articulate and eloquent speakers, as they are two quite different mediums. For those for whom words do not come easily, this translation into decontextualised, fragmented prose may be meaningless, and “may feed perceptions of personal inadequacy” (Booth, 1996, p. 252). Choosing not to re-present our discussions in this way raised another dilemma, in terms of the extent to which I “loaned” my words to students, while striving to maintain the latter’s meanings (Booth, 1996). The “ethics of representation” (p. 245) are complex. I tried to remain faithful to students’ words and meanings, assuming a role somewhere between amanuensis and interpreter (Booth, 1996). Wherever possible, I used students’ actual words, using speech marks to do so, as I sought to re-present our discussions honestly (Stalker, 1998). Upon completion of all the summaries, I either met with students or posted their individual summary to them to check for accuracy. Four students requested minor changes. For example,



when reviewing his summary, one student informed me that “the goldfish is dead now. Sad, but we had to throw it down the toilet.”

Mindful of Beresford’s (1997) suggestion that we heed children’s evaluations of research, I asked each student what they thought about taking part in the study. Most expressed their enjoyment of our meetings, indicating that they would do it again. In appreciation of students’ contributions to the study, I gave each a *koha* (gift) (Beresford, 1997; Morris, 1998). In addition, one of the parents was pleased to be given a copy of the taped recordings of my meetings with her and her child. I was particularly mindful of the value of having audio records of children at different stages in their development. My young nephew had died during the research project, and any fragment of his life is treasured.

### ***Interviews with Teacher Aides***

“Interview” comes from the Old French “entrevoir,” meaning to “see each other” (Reader’s Digest, 1988, p. 804) and may be interpreted as “views between” people. Kvale (1996) noted that “the qualitative research interview is a construction site of knowledge. An interview is literally an interview, an inter change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest” (p. 2). This fits well within an interpretivist paradigm and social constructionist theory, both of which seek understanding of individuals’ socially constructed reality through interaction and relationship with one another. In his discussion of postmodern thought, Kvale (1996) claimed that “knowledge is neither inside a person nor outside in the world, but exists in the relationship between person and world” (p. 44).

In this study, I used semi-structured, in-depth interviews to guide my interactions with participants. I had previously developed my focus of inquiry and the four overarching research questions using the guidelines provided by Maykut and Morehouse (1994). These questions were based on a review of literature as well as my own professional knowledge as a teacher, and provided the framework within which to structure the interview guide. Using the four research questions as topics, I developed open ended questions that would encourage participants to talk freely about each topic, intending to provide sufficient structure to elicit rich discussion without seeming overly directive (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2002). I sought to understand and engage with participants’ perspectives and meanings rather than inadvertently impose my way of seeing the world on them. The interview guide used with teacher aides is included as Appendix P. Individual interviews with 18 teacher aides were scheduled during

October through December 2004, at times and places convenient to the latter. The length of interviews ranged from 1 hour 15 minutes to 2 hours 45 minutes, most lasting around 2 hours. Appendix Q provides a summary of the meetings held with teacher aides.

I consider interviewing, like teaching, to be a privilege. Integral to both is developing a positive, trusting, respectful relationship with those with whom one engages. In interview situations there may be a far shorter time frame in which to develop a sound relationship, yet this was a priority in my meetings with both teacher aides and students. I heeded Fontana and Frey's (2000) observation that "interviews are interactional encounters and that the nature of the social dynamic of the interview can shape the nature of the knowledge generated" (p. 647). Kvale (1996) noted that interviewers must establish an atmosphere in which participants feel safe to share their thoughts and experiences, and that this necessitates "a delicate balance between cognitive knowledge seeking and the ethical aspects of emotional human interaction" (p. 125). He suggested that interview questions have both a "thematic and a dynamic dimension" (p. 129), the former relating to the research content, and the latter to the interpersonal process of the interview. While my interview guide provided the framework for each interview, the equally important part of the interview process, that of the human relationship, was unwritten, and varied in response to the interpersonal dynamics that evolved with each participant.

In prioritising the development of a sound relationship with participants, I followed a set format in conducting each interview, involving introductions, an overview of the study and interview process and review of ethical commitments. As with students, questions were sequenced to enable participants to ease into the interview, yet I was responsive to participants' sharing of experiences in whatever order they emerged in our discussion (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Positive feedback was given to participants throughout the interview, about both what they were saying and how the interview was proceeding, as I wanted the interview process to be as positive as possible for each person. Participants had the opportunity to add whatever they wished at the conclusion of the interview (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2002). Some of the strongest opinions were expressed by several participants once the recorder had been turned off (Kvale, 1996). Several participants were quite humble about their discussion, making statements such as "I hope I haven't waffled on too much" or "I hope what I've said is of some use to you."

I came away from each interview heartened by individuals' respectful attitude and commitment to doing their best by students. I was struck by participants' professionalism, particularly regarding confidentiality. Each interview raised a number of significant issues. A range of positive and negative emotions were felt and expressed, and I felt genuinely honoured to have each participant share with me their time, energy, and experiences in such an open and honest manner.

### ***Recording and transcription of interviews.***

All of the teacher aides agreed to the taping of interviews. The procedures for recording and transcribing interviews were the same as those described for students. Upon receipt of the transcribed interviews, I listened to each one to ensure that the transcription was correct and complete. In doing this, I realised how much humour was threaded through most of the interviews, and noticed again the extent of thoughtful reflection by participants regarding their work with students. Transcripts were then sent to participants for checking; nine requested minor edits, which were made and a revised copy posted back to each participant. A gift voucher was given to each participant in appreciation for their contributions.

### **Data Analysis**

*“Data analysis is like teaching—there is always more you could do” (Hatch, 2002, p. 150).*

I began the process of data analysis by reviewing key texts and articles to gain an understanding of how best to make sense of the wealth of words offered by the teacher aides and students with whom I had spoken. Two things quickly became apparent: (a) data analysis processes have not been clearly articulated in research literature (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005; Hatch, 2002); and (b) there is no one correct way to analyse data (Anfara et al., 2002; Glesne, 2006; Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2002; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

Anfara et al. (2002) called for “the public disclosure of processes” (p. 29) in qualitative research, operating from “the basic premise that how researchers account for and disclose their approach to all aspects of the research process are key to evaluating their work substantively and methodologically” (p. 28). Other researchers have articulated similar thoughts about full, transparent accounts of data analysis procedures (e.g., Harry et al., 2005; Patton, 2002). The following discussion represents my attempts to clearly outline a sound

rationale for the framework within which analysis was conducted, and to thoroughly document the actual process of analysing the data that constituted the heart of this study.

### ***Framework of Analysis***

Data analysis has been defined in a number of ways by different researchers. For example, Kvale (1996) pointed out that to analyse is to separate something into parts. According to Maykut and Morehouse (1994), “the process of qualitative data analysis takes many forms, but it is fundamentally a nonmathematical procedure that involves examining the meaning of people’s words and actions” (p. 121). This search for meaning was iterated by Hatch (2002), in his description of data analysis:

... a way to process qualitative data so that what has been learned can be communicated to others. Analysis means organising and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories. (p. 148)

Maykut and Morehouse (1994) outlined Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) conceptualisation of three approaches to data analysis that vary according to the depth of interpretation and abstraction. The first approach involves the presentation of data without analysis, in which participants’ stories stand by themselves, without interpretation by a researcher. The second incorporates some interpretation in addition to description, while the third approach focuses on the development of theory, typically grounded theory.

As noted, “all researchers develop their own ways of analysing qualitative data” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 140). Having said that, to make sense of data, any process of analysis must occur within some kind of framework, the choice of which will be influenced by the focus of inquiry (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994), the theoretical basis of the study (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2002; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998), and “self as instrument” (Eisner, 1998; Kvale, 1996; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Peshkin, 2000), each of which has been outlined in earlier discussions. While qualitative inquiry is characterised by an inductive approach to analysis (Hatch, 2002; Patton, 2002) in which participants’ meanings emerge from the data, some researchers propose that analysis involves both inductive and deductive thinking (Harry et al., 2005; Hatch, 2002; D. R. Thomas, 2006), deductive referring to the analysis of data according to a predetermined, existing framework. In their explanation of their particular use of grounded theory, Harry et al. (2005) noted that, although their analytic process was “grounded” in data,

they “readily acknowledge that researcher interpretation begins early in the process and therefore sheds doubt on the notion that the ultimate theory will be totally ‘grounded’” (p. 7). They observed that in educational and other social science research which seeks to develop exemplary practice, those conducting qualitative studies are often insiders in their particular field, who bring to their data specific beliefs and knowledge of the topic. They therefore questioned the extent to which research in these fields can be purely inductive, while emphasising the importance of researcher reflexivity (in writing this, Janesick’s [2000] expression of researchers having open, rather than empty, minds comes to mind).

Consistent with the emerging nature of qualitative research and the eclectic nature of the data analysis process (Anfara et al., 2002), the particular process used in this study evolved as a result of exploring and adapting the approaches used by several different researchers (e.g., Anfara et al., 2002; Glesne, 2006; Harry et al., 2005; Hatch, 2002; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Wolcott, 1994). Given that the purpose of my study was to develop an understanding of the experiences of disabled students and teacher aides which could then inform future educational policy and practice, an interpretative–descriptive approach to analysis was followed, to enable me to both describe and interpret participants’ experiences. I used both inductive and deductive approaches in analysing the words and pictures offered by participants, as I sought to prioritise what participants identified as important, as well as consider their responses to predetermined interview questions. Although published after my analysis of data and writing of findings, D. R. Thomas’ (2006) description of a “general inductive approach” for qualitative data analysis broadly reflects the analytic strategy utilised in this study. Thomas recognised that not all researchers wish to be constrained by any one particular qualitative research tradition and methodology and that many researchers, especially in health and social science fields, utilise similar qualitative data analysis procedures that have not, until now, been explicitly labelled as a data analysis strategy. As a general inductive approach acknowledges that some research involves both inductive and deductive analysis, and involves a systematic and straightforward procedure for analysing data that is guided in part by the research questions, this appears to be an apt descriptor for the process used in the present study.

### ***Process of Analysis***

Ideally, data analysis begins early in the research process, informing the focus of ongoing data collection (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Hatch, 2002). However, the reality of juggling part time

PhD study with full time work commitments made this problematic. I was therefore reassured to read that these authors recognise that it is acceptable to commence analysis towards the end of data collection, particularly in the case of novice researchers, and in studies in which interviews are the primary means of data gathering. While I had engaged in informal analysis by noting observations and thoughts in field notes written after each interview, the formal process of analysis began upon the conclusion of meetings and interviews with students and teacher aides respectively. The following discussion provides an outline of this process.

### *Analysis of Interviews and Meetings*

Kvale (1996) evocatively suggested:

The transcript is a bastard, it is a hybrid between an oral discourse unfolding over time, face to face, in a lived situation - where what is said is addressed to a specific listener present—and a written text created for a general, distant, public. (p. 182)

My task was to transform oral discourse into a written text that enabled readers to gain an understanding of students' and teacher aides' school worlds, by faithfully re-presenting their words in as authentic a manner as possible. The first part of this task involved finding out what I had in the data.

In the checked transcripts, any identifying details about schools and students had been removed/changed, and each teacher aide given a pseudonym. The transcripts ranged in length from 25 pages for the shortest interview to 67 pages for the longest, totalling 734 pages of transcript data. I began the process of analysis by re-reading everything, to thoroughly re-familiarise myself with the interview transcripts, field notes, and the individual files compiled for each teacher aide (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Hatch, 2002; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Patton, 2002; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). This gave me a sense of the whole, prior to engaging in a process of data reduction (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

The next step involved importing the transcripts and field notes into *NVivo* (QSR International, 2002), a computer software programme used to facilitate the management of qualitative data. I am mindful of the debate regarding the use of computer-assisted analysis programmes, and regard *NVivo* as a tool that in no way replaces the careful thinking that is required in analysis (Glesne, 2006; Hatch, 2002). *NVivo* simply provided a more efficient way

of storing and organizing the data, performing electronically the manual functions of highlighting, copying, pasting, and rearranging data that coding requires. As well, I used paper and pencil/highlighter notes and hand drawn graphics to help me make sense of different aspects of emerging findings.

Having imported transcripts and field notes into *NVivo*, I systematically read each teacher aide's interview and notes, making pencil notes on the print copies about recurring topics, items of interest, and so on. I also created a memo file within *NVivo* for each participant, in which I noted thoughts that occurred as I read their transcripts and notes, such as links to research literature (Glesne, 2006; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Consistent with Maykut and Morehouse's (1994) suggestion, I set up a "discovery sheet" on which I noted common points that were emerging as I reviewed each teacher aide's interview.

I began inductively coding the first interview, focusing on topics that emerged from each participant's discussion and coding like "units of meaning" together, in much the same way as that described by Harry et al. (2005) and Maykut and Morehouse (1994) in their adaptations of the constant comparative method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). As a particular topic arose in the first transcript, I compared it to other topics/codes to see if this new topic related to/belonged with others; if not, a new code was created for the new topic. Paralleling this initial coding process, I highlighted potentially relevant quotes for subsequent reference when writing the findings. The first transcript generated 32 codes, for which brief descriptors had been written as a means of defining the criteria for including particular units of meaning in each code. This list of codes and their descriptors were printed and reviewed alongside a copy of the coded interview report. The codes and descriptors were compared with the actual coded data to check for consistency. For example, in the first interview coded, Ann had referred to "the other 28 children" in the context of recognising other students' rights regarding learning. A code using this term was created, providing an example of an "in vivo" code (Harry et al., 2005) in which participants' own words are used as code names. Review of Ann's coded transcript showed three excerpts coded under "the other 28 children," one of which is provided as an example as follows:

I mean everybody's different, but I won't speak while the teacher's speaking. I think we've got another 28 children in there that all need to be, you know... I know that it can be distracting if I'm talking, trying to explain to who I'm working with what's going on over the teacher. It's a distraction for the children in the class but very hard when you're mainstreamed.

The same process was repeated with the second teacher aide transcript, in which four new codes were generated. Copies of these two transcripts, their coding reports, and list of node descriptors were then sent to my supervisors as a means of checking the soundness of my coding and the credibility of interpretations thus far. After coding the fourth transcript, I reviewed my notes on the process of data analysis to check that I was on the right track; as well, I reflected on the relationship of the emerging codes and discovery sheet to the overall purpose of the study and its interview questions. I began to map out different ways of displaying the coded data (Glesne, 2006; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Wolcott, 1994), manually cutting out the code descriptors and experimenting with different ways of picturing their relationship to one another. Doing so lead me to refine and change certain codes, prior to continuing with the coding process as described for the initial transcripts. Simultaneously I kept a journal documenting points of interest and links to literature regarding the emerging data coding.

As observed by Maykut and Morehouse (1994), codes were developed relatively quickly with each transcript, increasing from 32 in the first transcript to 49 at the conclusion of the eighth of eighteen transcripts. Two more were created by completion of coding the fifteenth transcript, making a total of 51 codes, as listed in Appendix R. This number of codes corresponded to that suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (1998) and Maykut and Morehouse (1994) as a workable size of coding system. Each code was printed out to review and to check for internal homogeneity or the similarity of excerpts within each category, and external heterogeneity, the extent to which codes differ from one another (Patton, 2002). The smallest code consisted of teacher aides' references to "Group Special Education" (4 pages long) and the largest related to "working with teachers" (90 pages, consisting of a range of quotes from every participant about their experiences of working with teachers). That the largest code related to a topic not specifically asked in the interview guide reflected the inductive nature of this initial coding process. Upon completion of initial coding, I forwarded copies of four different transcripts and their coding and list of code descriptors to my supervisors, to again check the veracity of coding.

Similar to the approach utilised by Harry et al. (2005), the next part of the process involved grouping the codes that had been derived inductively into conceptual categories. Harry et al. referred to Strauss and Corbin's (1998) use of the term "axial coding," in which codes are



organised around specific axes or points, and noted that at this stage of processing data, the researcher has moved beyond straight description of data to beginning to structure it in terms of various meanings. Anfara et al. (2002) stated that a study's research questions "provide the scaffolding for the investigation and the cornerstone for the analysis of the data" (p. 31). In the present study, the second stage of processing the data involved my considering the 51 codes in relation to the four main research questions.

This marked a shift from the initial inductive approach to a more deductive way of processing the data, in grouping the codes according to the predetermined framework of the key research questions. Ten of the 51 codes did not appear to match directly to any one of the four research questions. Further examination of the content of these codes lead to their being included with other existing codes, as part of the ongoing process of revisiting the data. As well as physically organizing the printed codes in separate files for each question, I mapped out different ways of considering the codes allocated to each question, to facilitate my thinking through how the codes might relate to one another.

The third part of the process involved in-depth analysis of the codes allocated to each question, in an attempt to detect patterns, relationships, or themes within each category of codes. Harry et al. (2005) referred to this shift in processing data as that of thematic analysis (acknowledging Strauss & Corbin's [1998] term, "selective coding"), in which the researcher seeks to make sense of the underlying messages or stories held in the data. The intuitive nature of data analysis is probably most evident in this part of the process, Harry et al. acknowledging "the intuitive leaps that are an essential part of any analysis" (p. 4).

Beginning with Question 1, I read through the codes that related to the role of the teacher aide, at times re-coding to minimise overlap of coded excerpts and/or to re-code too general a code (e.g., Student Support) into more specific existing codes. I also reviewed field notes and the memos developed for each teacher aide, noting points of interest, relevant quotes, and intuitions in a memo entitled "The role of the teacher aide." As I reviewed each code, I made notes and diagrams to help me interpret the wealth of teacher aides' discussion about the various aspects of the teacher aide's role. Developing diagrams was a particularly useful way of further processing my thinking and clarifying my analysis of each topic/sub-topic. These activities provided a framework for writing about the role of the teacher aide, which I structured using headings for each part of teacher aides' work. Each of these headings had

subheadings to further structure discussion. Participants' words were threaded throughout the discussion, consistent with my commitment to re-presenting their perspectives and experiences as authentically as possible. As well, I found that in writing the draft findings for the first research question, I continued to engage in analysis, the process of thinking and writing alerting me to different ways of interpreting the data (Hatch, 2002).

The same process was followed for analysing the codes relating to Questions 2 and 4. When I reviewed codes for Question 3, the influence that teacher aides have on students' school lives, I found that I had already covered much of this question in my discussion of Question 1, so amended this draft chapter accordingly. In addition, the inductive nature of data analysis generated findings relating to teacher aides' work with teachers. The importance of this topic to teacher aides resulted in these findings being incorporated as part of Chapter Seven.

A similar process was utilised for analysing students' data. Nineteen codes were generated from the first set of student documents, increasing to 22 codes upon completion of the tenth student's data. The smaller and more homogenous grouping of codes was not surprising given the smaller number of student participants, and the more structured nature of our meetings in response to students' means of communication being less developed than that of adults.

Throughout the process of transforming data and the subsequent writing of findings, constant revisiting of codes, transcripts, field notes, and memos occurred to ensure that all of the data was thoroughly considered in relation to each of the four research questions. "Completing" my analysis of data was far from clear cut. I had however reached a point at which I felt that the research questions were answered, and was encouraged by Hatch's observation that "if you have too many good examples to report, that's a sign that your findings are well supported" (2002, p. 160). The "completeness" was further verified by supervisors' feedback and auditing of my data analysis and writing of findings (Glesne, 2006).

### **Ethical Considerations**

*"Qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict" (Stake, 2000, p. 447).*

If we accept that "... the point of research is to improve the situation of human beings" (Snook, 2003, p. 73), then it follows that research involving human beings must be conducted

with integrity, at all stages of the research process (Soltis, 1990). The required institutional ethics application provided an initial framework to guide my ethical responsibilities throughout the study (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2002; Powell & Smith, 2006; Snook, 2003). I then used a format developed by Kvale (1996) for considering ethical issues within each of seven research stages (Appendix S). Also useful were Alderson's (1995) practical guidelines for conducting research with children.

Soltis (1990) noted that "ethics is ubiquitous. It permeates all aspects of our lives" (p. 247). He made the distinction among three ethical perspectives, namely personal, professional, and public, while acknowledging the artificial nature of such categorisation. While adhering to the ethical code of conduct expected of me at a professional level, I believe that these formal responsibilities only become meaningful when put into practice at a personal level. Because I value the relationships I have had the opportunity to develop with participants since beginning the study, I consider ethics to be a very personal (and interpersonal) matter. I have tried to relate to each person in a respectful, positive, and genuine manner, and to be mindful of keeping the promises made during the consent phase of the study. At a public ethical perspective, "how we advance or diminish the rights or wrongs of our society by means of our work within it" (Soltis, 1990, p. 251), I hope that my conducting this inquiry with integrity may make some contribution to our understanding of an aspect of education, for the public good.

### **Research Credibility and Trustworthiness**

*Are these findings sufficiently authentic (isomorphic to some reality, trustworthy, related to the way others construct their social worlds) that I may trust myself in acting on their implications? More to the point, would I feel sufficiently secure about these findings to construct social policy or legislation based on them? (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 178)*

From the inception of this study, I have been concerned about the quality of research, in terms of both process and outcomes. How credible is my study, and how do I know?

I concur with Janesick's (2000) questioning of the trinity of validity, reliability, and generalisability as "valid" means of determining the quality of qualitative research. Such terms have been generalised from quantitative to qualitative research, and do not fit the latter. Wolcott's (1990) thoughts on "seeking - and rejecting - validity in qualitative research" (p. 121) similarly outlined a provocative argument for thinking anew about the relevance of this

construct to other than quantitative/psychometric contexts. As previously noted, different worldviews determine how research is conducted; similarly, each worldview has its own criteria for assessing research quality (Patton, 2002). It makes sense therefore that different languages are required to interpret each “world,” lest a positivist worldview continues to colonise new worlds of research.

Ferguson and Ferguson (2000) provided a thought-provoking discussion of the need to broaden the nature of the “game” and rules which currently determine what and how research should be done and judged, rather than continue to work in the shadows of an essentially objectivist, quantitative worldview. They outlined three dimensions of quality in interpretive research: “truth” value and accuracy; context and relations; and utility and relevance (p. 183). Each of these will be considered, with reference to similar means of promoting quality in qualitative research that have been identified by other researchers.

“Truth” according to interpretivists is less about getting things “right” than “not getting it all wrong” (Ferguson & Ferguson, 2000, p. 183). The strategies involved in not getting it all wrong are varied. Getting to know participants is necessary, which was accomplished in this study by a series of meetings with students, and various contacts in addition to interviews with teacher aides. Using a range of ways to collect data, (methodological triangulation) and using different sources (data triangulation) (Janesick, 2000; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Patton, 2002; Rossman & Rallis, 2003) helps to enhance research credibility. In the present study, as outlined, a range of methods were used with different groups of participants. A number of parents also made valuable contributions to these meetings, acting in the various roles of interpreter, clarifier, verifier, and so on.

Checking data and interpretations with participants is a means of showing respect and appreciation of their contributions. “Member checks” is the term frequently used to describe the process of verifying material with participants (Janesick, 2000; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Brantlinger et al. (2005) described two levels of member checks, the first involving participants’ checking of their transcripts, and the second consisting of sharing data analysis with participants. As well as checking transcripts with participants, a Summary of Teacher Aide Findings was written for teacher aide participants, to which feedback was encouraged (Appendix T). Another means of checking one’s interpretations is to seek critical feedback from one’s peers (Wolcott, 1990). The use of a

“peer debriefer” (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) or “critical friend” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) is advised, particularly when working solo as in PhD study. In this instance, PhD supervisors assumed the role of “intellectual watchdog” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 69).

Providing a transparent and thorough account of all aspects of the research process is achieved through the development of an audit trail (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Janesick, 2000; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). I have tried to be thorough in documenting the research process. In these ways, I sought to enhance the trustworthiness of each aspect of this study.

Ferguson and Ferguson’s (2000) second dimension of quality addresses context and relations. This seems especially pertinent to this study, in which relationships constitute the heart of the inquiry. The Fergusons noted that “in a methodology where knowledge and meaning are constructed through social interaction and understanding, the relationships that occur between researchers and participants are critical” (p. 183). My work has been underpinned by my sharing Janesick’s (2000) belief that “the individual is the backbone of the study” (p. 394). My efforts regarding relationships have been alluded to already. I have been very conscious of not wishing to “use” participants as a means to my end, mindful of the naiveté of such an aspiration: “... research either reinforces the unequal status quo or questions it” (Alderson, 1995, p. 42). The context in which this research was conducted, for the purpose of an academic qualification to be completed within a certain timeframe while working full time, placed constraints on the ways in which it was done. With student participants, I expressed my appreciation of their time and efforts in numerous ways, including “treats,” birthday and Christmas cards, and gift vouchers. With certain students we shared our love of animals by spending time with my dog at the end of our meetings. I developed a strong rapport with a couple of students in particular, and “left the door open” for ongoing contact, if they wished to do so, mindful of “... the dangers of parachuting in and out of people’s lives, especially if some of these lives are lonely” (Stalker, 1998, p. 17). While conscious of operating within professional boundaries, I believe that maintaining contact with participants if they wish to do so is not only acceptable, but constitutes a very real way in which I can act with integrity and reciprocity to those who have generously shared their experiences with me (Stalker, 1998).

The third dimension of quality proposed by the Fergusons (2000) is that of use and relevance. They outlined four kinds of utility: instrumental (applicability of research); enlightenment

(enhanced knowledge or understanding); symbolic (a new perspective which helps make sense of something); and emancipatory (that which gives people power in challenging structures and policies which disempower). Similarly, Maykut and Morehouse (1994) referred to Mischler's (1990) work on trustworthiness, noting that "...the ultimate test of the trustworthiness of a qualitative study is whether we believe the findings strongly enough to act on them" (p. 147). My motivation for undertaking this research was to increase understanding of an aspect of education that would be meaningful and of practical value to people. I therefore hope that this project has enlightenment and emancipatory utility in particular, in enabling the voices and experiences of disabled students and teacher aides to be heard, understood, and acted upon.

### **In Summary**

The purpose of this PhD study is to develop an understanding of the school experiences of disabled students and teacher aides, both of whom occupy marginalised positions within the education system. Situating the research within an interpretivist framework reflects my commitment to making sense of students' and teacher aides' multiple socially constructed and culturally embedded realities from a social justice perspective (Crotty, 1998; Ferguson & Ferguson, 1995; Patton, 2002). Consistent with the tenets of interpretivism, I wish to legitimise the voices of those who are, to use participants' words, "under recognised and undervalued," in the hope that their insights will inform the development of future educational policy and practice that is instrumental in addressing the inequities encountered by both groups of people.

Positioning oneself within a framework of ontological and epistemological pluralism, in other words, believing that there are multiple realities and ways of knowing, presents a challenge, in that any attempt to describe, interpret, and understand particular aspects of individuals' life experiences is characterised by complexity. There are many possible ways of telling and representing people's realities, and certainly no one right way. In writing this thesis, I hope that the interpretations I have chosen to present reflect the authenticity and integrity of students' and teacher aides' educational experiences. These interpretations are presented in the following three chapters, beginning with students' accounts of their work with teacher aides.

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## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **“JUST A TEACHER AIDE?”**

### **STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES OF TEACHER AIDES**

As noted in the *Introduction*, due to the breadth and depth of data generated by participants, I have limited the discussion of students’ experiences to those concerning teacher aides. As a context for this chapter, however, a summary of the overall student findings is provided, prior to examining students’ understandings of teacher aides.

The honest and candid nature of students’ accounts of themselves, their experiences of school and of working with teacher aides was both revealing and thought-provoking. As part of the mutual process of getting to know each other prior to inquiring about specific topics such as working with teacher aides, my initial meetings with students focused on their talking or drawing about themselves, to whatever extent they felt comfortable. These interactions were then presented using words and pictures as the first part of each student’s Summary of Meetings. Getting to know each child/teenager, albeit superficially within the context of the study, provided understanding of their uniqueness and complexity, and served as a basis for interpreting their varied experiences.

Analysis of the school experiences of the ten students who kindly shared their time and thoughts with me has provided insight regarding students’ sense of identity, their perspectives of school and teacher aides, and their ideas about how schools might change for the better. Certain aspects of students’ perspectives are of particular interest. Both primary and secondary students focused positively on their capacities and individuality when describing themselves, keen to identify their achievements and assert their independence. Few students referred to disability as a key feature of their lives, in contrast to this being the primary means by which they were defined and known in their school contexts. Students constructed their identities in terms of who they were as human beings and in terms of their similarities with others of like ages. Similarly, their thoughts about school reflected likes and dislikes that were typical of those of their peers (e.g., subject preferences, teachers, peer relationships). The key differences in these students’ experiences related to the ways in which schools marked them as different and treated them accordingly. Deficit thinking about disability that underpinned schools’ special education policies and practices was manifested in the stigma associated with

the use of teacher aides, Individual Education Plans (IEPs), and separate special classes. However, in spite of systemic inadequacies regarding the education of disabled students, those who took part in this study demonstrated considerable resilience and hope.

### **Helpers: Students' Understandings of Teacher Aides**

Discussion with students regarding their teacher aides generated a great deal of data, analysis of which resulted in the emergence of four inter-related topic areas. These are outlined as follows: (a) what teacher aides do; (b) differentiating teachers and teacher aides; (c) characteristics of a great teacher aide; and (d) concerns about teacher aides.

#### ***Teacher Aides: What They Do***

Students in this study considered that the role of the teacher aide was to help students. "Help" constituted a range of supports, depending upon students, teachers, and school contexts. Most participants were pragmatic in their explanations for having teacher aide assistance. For a number of students, the aide provided academic support in different curriculum areas. For some students, this could involve assistance in focusing on the task. Bella, for example, explained that "I'm kinda slowing down - Miss X, she made me catch up. Sometimes come around, remind me what to do - or else I wouldn't keep going - just do one to two lines. She helped you keep going." Other students explained that, due to their difficulties in writing, their teacher aides assisted by writing notes from the board. For Sophie, this was helpful because "I'm a slow writer," while Tim stated that his teacher aide would help "write things for me, 'cause I get very sore hands." Two of the high school students who had difficulties in reading and writing had teacher aides to write class notes for them. It was not possible to ascertain the extent to which these students understood and made use of these notes in their learning. Their understanding of class material may however have been enhanced by teacher aides' scaffolding of students' learning by explaining and interpreting teachers' instruction. Rachel noted that her teacher aides were "helping me process stuff that I don't quite understand." She appreciated having a teacher aide in certain subjects, and felt "definitely better about understanding what the teacher's trying to get across. It's like, 'ahhh, this is what the teacher's trying to explain to me.'"

Safety was identified as another aspect of a teacher aide's role in supporting some students. In Rachel's case, this was necessary in practical subjects like Technology/Home Economics



simply because of the inaccessibility of the kitchen for students who used wheelchairs. For Paul, the presence of a teacher aide in Metalwork was considered necessary to ensure his safety around machinery. Because of his physical fragility, Tim's teacher aide played a role in minimising his risk of injury in Physical Education (PE). He explained that "we don't play the games that the other children play. Every time we have PE, I do something else." Usually this involved doing some form of physical activity with his teacher aide, separately from his class and teacher. The reason for not remaining with the class while engaging in a less strenuous activity was not known. As well as supporting the safety of individual students in the above ways, some teacher aides also helped to ensure disabled students' safety during emergency drills.

Helping with students' organisation of school and homework, supporting students' participation in sports and other whole school events as well as community based learning activities were also identified as responsibilities of teacher aides. Mack's remark about his teacher aide's presence at a school sports day highlighted another important aspect of the latter's work. He was quite clear that Mrs B "won't be helping me. Nope. ... She'll just come and cheer me on." Encouraging students in various aspects of school life was considered important, giving some students the confidence they needed to become involved in an activity and/or achieve. For example, Jess appreciated the presence of a teacher aide when entering new situations, such as a new class or new work experience environment.

Several students spoke of teacher aides helping other students in their classes. In a primary school context, Mack said "sometimes, if Mr A's working with one group, people come up and ask Mrs B the questions." It was not uncommon that teacher aides, while assigned to work with particular students, could be very helpful in assisting other students and in so doing, alleviate pressures on teachers.

When discussing the extent of teacher aide support, nine of the ten students stated emphatically that there were times when they did not need any help. For example, in reference to school assemblies, Mack informed me that "I just look after myself." Sophie told me "I can do most things by myself. I don't always have teacher aides and I do fine on my own." Similarly, Jess declared "I am seventh form. I'm by myself - on my own two foot." When asked about teacher aides' involvement with students' social relationships, Sophie stated that "they don't get in the way. Definitely not." Similar responses were made by primary school

students. Ross, for example, when asked if his teacher aide went to playtime with him, replied, “no, never will, never will.” He asserted that he didn’t need help to make friends, because “I make them myself.”

Students’ accounts of what their teacher aides did demonstrated the diversity of their role. The ways in which this differed from the role of the teacher was clearly identified by these students, and forms the next topic of discussion.

### ***Teachers and Teacher Aides: What’s the Difference?***

Seven of the students articulated clear distinctions between teachers and teacher aides. The key differences focused on their respective responsibilities for teaching (teachers) as opposed to helping (teacher aides), as well as marked differences in authority. Students also described the nature of their relationships with teachers and teacher aides respectively, and considered which of the two were more helpful to them in their learning. The remaining three students appeared not to make a distinction between their teachers and teacher aides. There may have been several reasons for this, including difficulty in verbally communicating their thoughts and/or my difficulty in interpreting the latter. While not defining differences between the two roles, one of the high school students clearly knew who was a teacher and who was a teacher aide, and understood the power differential between the two. The other high school student worked with a range of teacher aides, teachers, and therapists in a learning support environment, in which professional roles may have been unclear and/or blurred. The third, primary school student was fully supported by a teacher aide, with whom he spent each afternoon engaged in community rather than school-based activities.

#### ***“The proper teacher” and “the helper.”***

In one of our discussions about school, Tim made reference to “the proper teacher.” When asked what that meant, he replied, in a tone reflecting his incredulity with my ignorance, “don’t you know? She teaches the class, and not lets them go naughty, you know!” Subsequent analysis of students’ discussion of teacher aides indicated that Tim’s definition had captured the essence of the differences between teachers and teacher aides, as understood by students in this study. It appeared that the teacher’s role was to *teach* and *discipline* the *whole class*, whereas teacher aides *helped* certain students, often out of class, and typically possessed little authority in their work with students. In Sophie’s words, teacher aides were “sort of like a back up.”

Such a conceptualisation of respective roles is evident in Bart's explanation that "a teacher tells you what to do and a teacher aide helps you." Sophie's response was remarkably similar: "the teacher teaches the class ... and tells you what to do" and a "teacher aide helps ... they're just a help." Ross referred to his teacher aide as a "student teacher." The significance of the positioning of teachers and teacher aides was reflected in Rachel's comment, "I think of a teacher as someone standing in front of the classroom. And a teacher aide sitting beside you, that's how I picked it out." Likewise, in a primary school setting, Bella thought that "they do the same job, kind of ... [however] a teacher aide doesn't teach the whole class (except once, when the teacher was sick). She works with children outside the class, in a spare room." Tim initially struggled to articulate ways in which teachers and teacher aides were different, then exclaimed:

I know! A teacher aide is different from teachers because they ... I lost my tongue ... oh, it peeked out of my mind ... it's, it's ... Teacher aides are the best because they go out of class all the time. They go to different classes, and help.

When asked whether teacher aides helped children or teachers or both, Tim asserted that teacher aides helped "some children." He said that "they help weak kids ... with disabilities. Kids that don't know how to spell or write." According to him, the teacher aide, not the teacher, helped these children. Similar deficit underpinnings were apparent in Mack's comments in our final meeting, when he stated that he now "does stuff with a boy just like me." He explained that although this boy did not wear glasses and had different coloured hair, he did have "special needs--he's got a teacher aide and I have a teacher aide." When asked what "special needs" meant, he replied, "[I] actually don't know what special needs is--you're special and need help?"

That the teacher aide's job was to work with one student or with small groups *in need of help* was a common perception. In our initial meetings, Mack, for example, had explained that a teacher is meant to "teach - the children" and the "teacher aide just helps me." He added that a teacher aide is meant to "do jobs for other teachers" as well as help students. He thought that teacher aides help some children if they need it, because teachers get "busy doing something else." Mack's comments suggested that teachers' teaching of "regular" students was considered their priority, and that teacher aides enabled teachers to do so by taking care of students who, for whatever reason, could not keep up with the class. He observed:

If Mr A doesn't want me to do something, that's actually a bit hard for me, well, I do something with Mrs B. If the class is busy with Mr A, then I've been missed out, then I go up to Mrs B.

Our conversation about why he had a teacher aide reinforced the notion that, for some teachers, having an aide in the class absolved them of their responsibility to teach all students. Mack said he had a teacher aide:

- Mack      Because of my eyes, I can't see really far, for a distance. Like if there's something big on the board, I can't actually see it, it's too small.
- Gill        What about if Mr A wrote bigger and you sat at the front of the class?
- Mack        That would be great.
- Gill        Could you do that?
- Mack        Well, yes I could. But, some people need to be up close to the board.
- Gill        Yeah, but don't you too?
- Mack        Yeah, but Mr A doesn't let me.
- Gill        Why not?
- Mack        Oh, 'cause he knows Mrs B's gonna help me. So I can't.
- Gill        So where do you sit in the class?
- Mack        I just sit in the back.

Mack's generous acceptance of his teacher having "to do work with the rest of the class" was genuine. This teacher's practice of transferring responsibility for Mack's education to his teacher aide, without guidance or planning, was nevertheless unfair and unethical, for both student and teacher aide.

***"The disciplinarian."***

In addition to distinguishing between the teaching and helping roles of teachers and teacher aides respectively, students clearly understood who held power, or who, in Tim's words, "not lets them go naughty." That the teacher was "the boss" was undisputed. An indicator of the differentiation of authority was the use of titles rather than first names when addressing teachers. One of the high school students, while hesitant to talk about the differences between teachers and teacher aides, firmly stated that referring to teachers by their first names was not permissible. In contrast, he called his teacher aides by their first name, as did several other students in the study. Although a different policy was in place at Sophie's high school in that

all adults were referred to by title, Sophie, in typical teenage fashion, took great delight in breaking this rule, telling me that “I *adore* using the teacher aides’ first names.”

The extent to which teacher aides were involved in disciplining students varied according to each school’s policies and different teachers’ practices. Paul explained that in his high school, teachers were “the boss” because only they can “yellow slip,” a process of removing students to other classes if necessary because of disruptive behaviour. This was not the case in Jess’ school, where teacher aides had authority to carry out disciplinary procedures. While teachers were regarded as having greater authority, Rachel described a situation in which the teacher had “had enough of the students and they were being really naughty and stupid and stuff like that.” The teacher left the class for a couple of minutes, during which time the teacher aide tried to “calm the class down.”

When asked to consider other differences between teachers and teacher aides regarding discipline, two students, in primary and high schools respectively, identified “yelling” as something that teachers did to exert their authority over students. Mack understood that teachers “get grumpy when people don’t get their work done,” but wondered whether yelling was the best way of dealing with “naughtiness.” Instead, he thought it might be better for teachers to “just talk.” Rachel described certain teachers as “scary” at times, and viewed teachers in general as “disciplinarians really.”

### ***Teachers and teacher aides: Working together?***

Given that students outlined quite distinct roles for teachers and teacher aides regarding teaching, helping, and discipline, it was interesting to hear their accounts of how teachers and teacher aides actually worked together. A shared understanding of their respective roles was not always evident, which in turn affected how students were supported in their learning, and by whom. Rachel’s experience at high school illustrated the adverse effect that adults’ confusion over their roles had on her motivation and achievement in a subject class:

Like when I was in third form, I kept sending teacher aides away because of the teacher. I just didn’t know quite how to handle the teacher aide and the teacher was in the same situation and they were trying to teach me something and I was just confused and I didn’t like the subject in the end anyway.

Ironically, the supports put in place to facilitate Rachel's learning had the opposite effect. In contrast, Sophie's subject teacher and teacher aide worked collaboratively to support her learning. The teacher "helped me with like pronouncing words and words I didn't know and [teacher aide] helped me with the writing." By working in partnership towards a common goal, that of Sophie's achievement, these adults not only facilitated her learning but also her enjoyment of the subject.

### ***Relationships with teacher aides.***

The role of teacher aide as "helper" for certain students on account of their "needs" while the teacher focused on teaching and managing the whole class had implications for the kinds of relationships students experienced with each. In supporting particular students on a one-to-one basis, sometimes outside the classroom, the teacher aide sometimes inadvertently acted as a means of distancing these students from their teachers. For example, Bella observed that she knew her teacher aide better than her teacher, and appreciated the former's interest in her as a person. Looking forward to finishing high school at the end of the year, Rachel planned to meet her teacher aides for coffee, noting that:

It's just a thing that you do because you get so used to working with them and you have got that personal bond with them as well. I've seen that thing with teachers that you can't have relationships with them, so you have got to be really careful.

Rachel also believed that teacher aides "are more approachable sometimes, than the teachers are," a view shared by other students. In general, she considered teacher aides in terms of "a friend." At primary school, Bella shared this perspective, noting that her teacher aide "was sort of like a teacher and a friend." Certainly, for the most part, students in the study enjoyed positive relationships with their teacher aides.

### ***Teachers and teacher aides: Who helps more?***

Five of the ten students were unequivocal in their belief that their teacher aides helped them more than teachers. One primary school student stated that the teacher helped more, and the remaining four students did not comment directly on this question.

At primary school level, Bart, Sam, and Tim agreed that their teacher aides were more helpful than their teachers. Similarly, at high school, Paul favoured his teacher aides, explaining that

although teachers and teacher aides both showed you how to do your work, teacher aides helped explain things better. Rachel concurred:

I think with a teacher aide you have got the help there and then. With teachers you have to wait and wait and wait and wait. One time I had to wait half the period before that teacher actually came and talked to me with a problem I was getting stuck with and then yelled at me because I hadn't done the work.

Rachel felt that “teacher aides are totally under estimated and they get paid less than teachers. I think they deserve equal pay with teachers really.” She believed that teacher aides had a harder job than teachers, in that they had to compensate for certain teachers' lack of preparation. She noted that “sometimes some teachers are really well organised and resourced and some teachers aren't.”

While understanding and not minimising Rachel's frustrations with some teachers, such situations need to be considered within the larger context of systemic school structures and practices, in which increasing bureaucratic, academic, and behavioural/disciplinary demands are placed upon “the proper teacher.” Particularly at high school level, these systemic demands may be prioritised over (albeit in the name of) students' interests and well-being, leaving insufficient time for teachers to develop the relationships that are considered critical in underpinning effective learning by all students. In such circumstances, it is not surprising that, in lieu of significant relationships with teachers, students in this study developed positive relationships with their “helpers,” whom several students considered more supportive than their “proper teachers.”

### ***A Great Teacher Aide***

Because teacher aides are increasingly utilised within schools to provide additional support to certain students, I was eager to find out from the students in this study what, in their opinions, constituted a “great” teacher aide. Several students took delight in drawing such a person, their illustrations and descriptions focusing chiefly on personal characteristics and professional knowledge and skills.

#### ***Personal characteristics.***

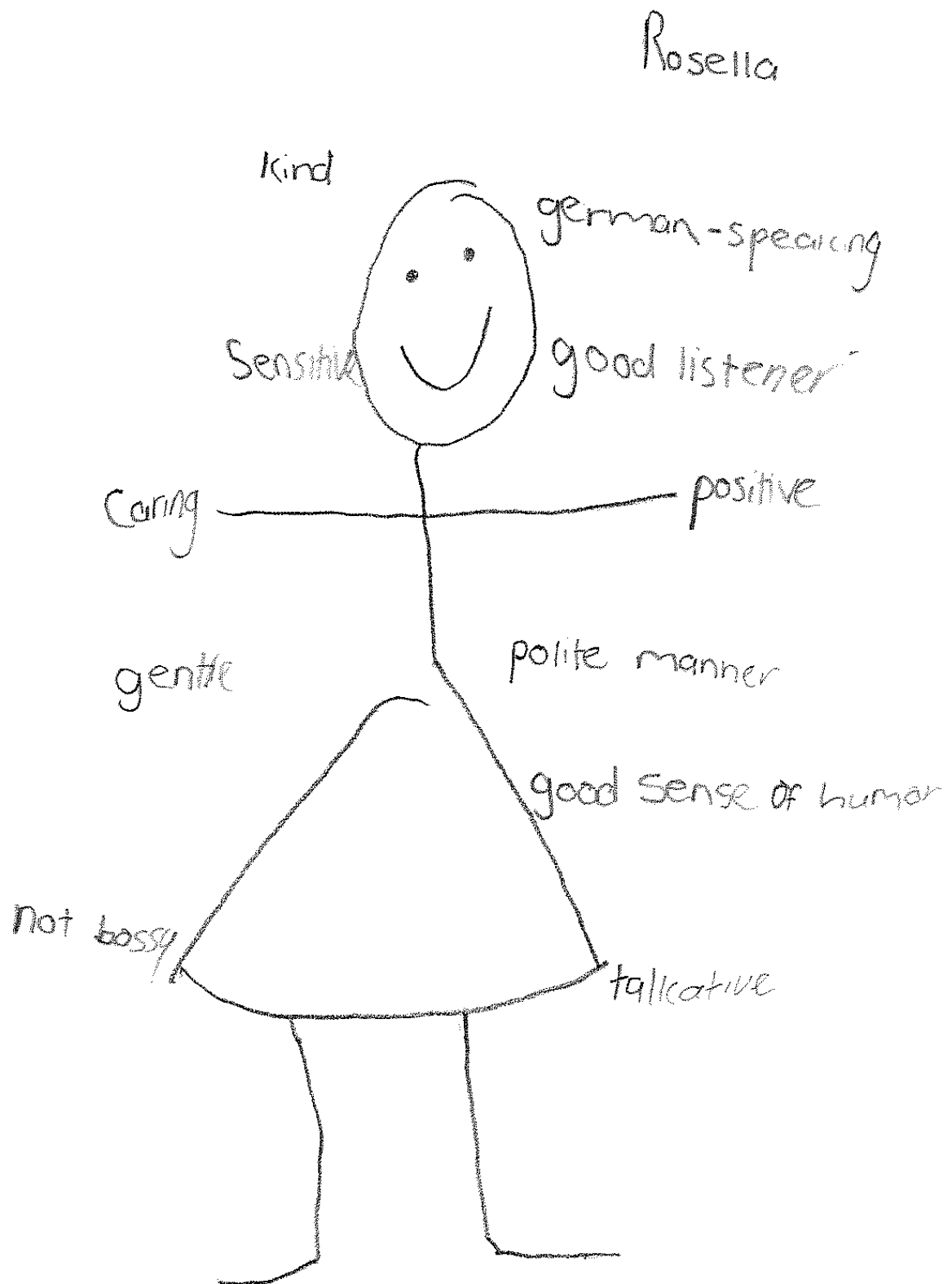
Students identified a range of positive personal attributes that a great teacher aide would possess. Some of the younger students found it easier to consider what they liked about their

actual teacher aide, this being a more concrete/less abstract task for them. In doing so, several identified kindness as an important quality in a teacher aide. Mack, for example, explained, “well, you see, she’s been really, really kind to me and she’s been a great teacher aide because she, when she wants me to do something, I’ll do it, actually do it for her.” When asked what kind meant, he said, “being friendly,” and added that his teacher aide “helps me with lots of work. That’s why she’s kind.” Ross and Tim also mentioned being kind, Tim interpreting this to mean “really good.” Bella thought it was important that a teacher aide “like you, and say kind things.” High school students placed similar emphasis on the value of kindness.

Being happy, friendly (Tim said “course [teacher aide] is!”), having fun and a good sense of humour were considered by most students to be desirable characteristics of teacher aides. Paul thought teacher aides should be “fun to be with, and have a joke and laugh with,” while Rachel explained that “you just want a nice, bright, cheery person, so if they just come and be themselves really. You don’t want someone hiding themselves behind the mask.” When asked what advice she might give to teacher aides as a “consumer” of their services, Rachel replied, “just be approachable. Relate to your students and just be friendly, I think that would be about it.”

Interpersonal skills and the ability to relate well to students were mentioned by other students in the study. Bella thought that “getting to know you and what you like” was important so that teacher aides could make learning more interesting for the students they supported. Actually liking students was also raised, one primary school student expressing doubt as to whether or not his teacher aide liked him. In outlining the attributes of “Rosella,” a sketch of a great teacher aide as depicted in Figure 3, Sophie explained, “I guess, I mean by sensitive is that Rosella would be like a really good listener. And she’d be caring.” Rachel raised the issue of respect, believing that “you have got to show respect to get respect.” She appreciated working with teacher aides who were respectful of students, and who were “willing to work with people with disabilities.” Overall, students’ remarks reflected their awareness of the quality of teacher aides’ interpersonal skills and the ways in which the latter interacted with them.





**Figure 3.**  
Sophie's picture of Rosella, a great teacher aide.

Not surprisingly, being helpful was frequently mentioned by students. It was interesting to note a primary school student's comment that the teacher aide should be "helpful just to me," perhaps implying a sense of ownership or possessiveness of the person providing additional support? He also thought that teacher aides should be "bossy to other children" but not to him. Conversely, many students clearly stated that bossiness and grumpiness were highly undesirable characteristics in a teacher aide. Paul, having experienced both, was quite definite in his view that a good teacher aide should "not talk too much at you" and should "not be grumpy or lose their temper."

Only two students raised age as something that mattered in their thinking about great teacher aides. Rachel thought that having some "life experience" was valuable, whereas Bella believed that "a teenage teacher aide would be cool, 'cause they're still like a kid and know what we like." Teacher aides' gender was immaterial to all but two students. Ross stated that a teacher aide should definitely "be a boy," while Bella said that she would not want "a man teacher aide, 'cause sometimes you want to talk about different things."

The personal characteristics outlined above were the first things mentioned by students in their descriptions of a "great" teacher aide. Also identified however, were factors relating to the professionalism of support staff, as outlined in the following section.

### ***Professional characteristics.***

Having a good work ethic was considered a necessary characteristic of effective teacher aides. This was referred to in a number of ways by both primary and secondary school students. For example, when drawing a picture of a great teacher aide, Tim commented, "I'll put a watch on her, to see what the time is." A teacher aide's punctuality was important to him, as it was to Sophie and other students. Similarly, being well organised was valued, especially by younger students, who made several insightful observations about this. Tim defined "organised" as meaning "has all her stuff", and, upon reflection, decided that his teacher aide was only "sometimes organised" because "she is sometimes forgetful." Bella thought that a teacher aide needed to be organised: "that means they're ready ... if they're not, you get bored and might start playing up and then get told off." She liked that her teacher aide was organised, and brought "wolf stories" to "help me think about writing. Miss X asked me things and gave me choices."

High school students commented on the need for teacher aides to be, in Sophie's words, "good at the subject." She added that they also needed to "spell right." Rachel too believed that teacher aides needed to be "intelligent," and defined this accordingly, "that they have like the knowledge of their subjects and what their strengths are. And what subjects they dislike." Having relevant training was identified as important, to enable teacher aides to, in Sophie's words, "do things the right way." This included knowledge of subjects and of effective support strategies, such as knowing when and how to help. Paul wanted teacher aides to give "just enough help ... not be in your face or hang round you all the time ... not get in the way of your mates ... [and] sit in the class, but not right next to you." Likewise, Ross thought that teacher aides should sometimes "let children do work by themselves." Sophie explained:

I've always been like this, sometimes I guess I just want to try things by myself and try and fix my mistakes up by myself, and I can't try and do that if someone's always telling me what my mistake is. And then it's okay if I don't realise what it is, but if I do then I want to try and fix it up by myself.

Respecting students' autonomy and right to make choices, rather than disempowering by helping too much, were seen by students as helping "the right way." So too was being positive. As Sophie noted, "by positive I guess something like if you do something well then she says. Then she'd congratulate me a wee bit."

In addition to professional knowledge and skills, two students believed that the way that teacher aides presented themselves mattered. When asked to explain why she thought it important that "they dress really nice," Rachel replied, "well, you don't want teacher aides turning up to school in baggy track pants and yeah, stuff like that, just baggy clothing, just really puts you off. It feels like they don't actually take care of themselves." She then qualified this, acknowledging that, in some practical subjects, it was appropriate for teacher aides to dress accordingly. Bella's pictures of a "cool" and "not cool" teacher aide, presented in Figure 1 at the beginning of this thesis, reflected a similar attention to desirable (and undesirable) aspects of personal appearance and presentation. The "cool" teacher aide was young, trendily clothed (e.g., wore a t-shirt with "girls rool!" on the front), wore a big smile, and carried a bag with all her "stuff" in it, indicating that she was well organised. In contrast, the "not cool" teacher aide looked messy. Bella had noted the following on her drawing: scruffy hair, angry face, sweaty neck, dull clothes, loose laces, fat body, wearing a t-shirt with "I am cool - not!" She also included "mean" talking, with a speech bubble, "I hate you girley kid!" and a note, "I do not like this talk at all!" As well, she described "all his stuff all messy,"

scattered around his feet. That presentation (in addition to other characteristics) mattered to Bella was indisputable.

The perceptive observations made by students regarding a “great” teacher aide provide a wealth of relevant material that could inform both the selection and training of teacher aides. So too could their concerns about teacher aides, which are explored in the ensuing discussion.

### ***Concerns about Teacher Aides***

The difficulties students experienced in working with some teacher aides could be categorised in terms of individual and systemic issues respectively. Concerns about individual teacher aides tended to relate to personal and/or professional matters, whereas some of the problems identified by students derived from school and Ministry of Education policies and practices.

#### ***Personal and professional concerns.***

Occasionally, as in any activity involving human interaction, difficulties arose through differences in personalities. Rachel recalled that, out of the many teacher aides with whom she had worked throughout her school years, “I had one bad one and that was about it.” She explained that in primary school:

[Teacher aide] was just like, two different personalities, we just didn’t quite gel together. She was kind of over protective as well so if I wanted to do something a little bit different ... and a bit more extreme, she would always be on my case. It’s like mmm, I’m not used to this, I need space.

Rachel did not like teacher aides “being overprotective and stuff like that and when they are grumpy. I don’t like grumpy teacher aides.” In a similar vein, Sophie’s only criticism of a teacher aide related to her being “too strict.” Paul’s comments revealed the importance of teacher aides’ getting to know individual students and finding out what they consider is helpful to them. He expressed his discomfort in being told by teacher aides that he had done a good job, preferring that they say “nothing. Say something else.”

Aspects of teacher aides’ professional behaviour were highlighted by students as problematic. Ross was concerned that his teacher aide gets to class “at 9.40 sometimes, and that’s late, she should be there at 9.30. I tell her off! You’re a very naughty teacher.” He sometimes did not like his teacher aide helping in Art, “‘cause she started doing a mistake when I did it right.”

Tim too was forthright in “correcting” his teacher aide, stating that “I sometimes growl at her because she puts things in the wrong place. And she forgets things sometimes. I tell her to go back and get it. I ask her--and say please.”

Students' understanding of what constituted professional behaviour was further illustrated by Rachel's concerns regarding “the way that some teacher aides actually interact with kids and sometimes the disciplinary side.” She believed that they should “not be quick to react to a student's naughty behaviour.” Leaving their baggage at the door or “at the gate when they get to school” was strongly advised. Rachel added that failure to do so was:

... kind of off putting. Very strange but you can tell when they have had a really bad class with another student because just the way they come into the class and their body language. And the looks on their faces, so you're thinking, oh ...

Rachel dealt with such situations in a very astute and mature way: “oh you just have to smile at them and tell a joke or something and then they will just start laughing. You have got to make them laugh.” While Rachel could clearly articulate her “reading” of teacher aides' dispositions and skilfully redirect their attention, for some students this was more challenging. Paul's difficulty in understanding a particular subject was exacerbated by his teacher aide's obvious impatience with his “failure” to complete a task. Rather than facilitating his learning, her attitude and actions further limited his understanding of a subject in which he already struggled.

### *Systemic concerns.*

Students identified a number of concerns arising from educational policies and practices. Not being informed of decisions about the allocation of teacher aide support was considered problematic. For example, Rachel recalled that in Form Two “they put a teacher aide in and that was kind of like, hmm, who made this decision? I didn't get, mum and the principal must have talked about it but ...” When asked if she felt she needed teacher aide support at that time, Rachel replied, “I kind of did and kind of didn't. Some days I was just like, what are you doing here, just get out of my hair and leave me alone, and then some days it's like help, I'm stuck.” The turnover of teacher aides was also of concern to Rachel. She explained:

I had teacher aides leave and then they had to try and find someone to replace and all the rigmarole, and then the Ministry of Education actually tried taking my

hours away, so there was a big huge battle for me to get those back and that took about six months.

She felt as if she was “just being tossed between two teacher aides, it’s like mmm, what’s going on here, but I was pretty young and didn’t quite understand.” She noted that she was not always informed of teacher aides’ leaving, nor was she always introduced to new teacher aides. Rachel preferred “actually to be introduced first and actually get time to get used to them” and said that she would like to have an opportunity to discuss how they could best work together. She observed that “I’ve been able to say that since I have been at high school but at primary school you just didn’t really get the chance to have a say.” At intermediate school, Mack expressed his concerns about not being told of his teacher aide’s absence from school. He recalled that “I was a little bit angry and a little bit happy.” He was a little bit angry “because she didn’t arrive” and a little bit happy “that Mr A [teacher] helped me.”

Having to share teacher aides was frustrating for some students. Ross did not like his teacher aide “helping other children, when I’m stuck at a word.” Tim’s interpretation of the shortcomings of funding for teacher aides was evident in his observation that, instead of sometimes having to share his teacher aide, there should be “two teacher aides helping—one for [student] and one for me.” When his mother noted that the former student “doesn’t get teacher aide time,” Tim quickly replied, “he should though!”

The vagaries of funding and timetabling in high schools were identified as having an adverse impact on students’ learning. Rachel believed that:

It just comes down to funding and then the timetable thing and how many staff members you have got. They have overdone us in one particular day--we have just got too many teacher aides on one day, then other days we just don’t see much of them at all.

Assigning high school teacher aides on the basis of timetabling convenience rather than individual students’ support requirements contributed to less than optimal allocation of support, characterised by either too much or too little help for students. Such a mismatch in terms of teacher aide-student numbers was sometimes accompanied by a mismatch of teacher aide knowledge and expertise in particular subjects. As Rachel explained:

[The school] somehow swapped the timetables about. All the timetabling this year got pretty messy and the teacher aides were quite grumpy. Some of them were not

happy at all. Like they were kind of getting put into areas that they didn't know anything about. They were getting quite frustrated.

Understandably, students shared this frustration. When asked what she considered her greatest frustration regarding teacher aides, Sophie responded "when you have got a teacher aide that just does not know their subject." She said that in one of her favourite academic subjects, she has different teacher aides, which can be "... helpful and unhelpful. If I get stuck on a [subject] word, they can't really help me."

Paul raised concerns regarding the absence of teacher aides from school. It seemed that, in the event of teacher aide absence at his high school, a student sometimes had to "stay in the unit" rather than go to a main school subject class unaccompanied by a teacher aide. Lack of relieving teacher aides meant that students had to forego their participation in a subject class, their learning thus disrupted by systemic factors beyond their control.

High school students sought changes in the amount and nature of support offered by teacher aides and teachers. Rachel felt that more support was required at times, to "help you learn more and get things completed and stuff like that." She wanted "more one-to-one time with [teacher aides]. Seven hours didn't quite stretch. I needed a couple more hours. I sort of would have been fine, especially when I was younger." On the other hand, Rachel noted that if teachers adapted work in response to students' levels of understanding, this would reduce the need for additional adult assistance. Sophie agreed, saying that if her work was adapted for her, "I can sit there and do it all by myself."

The presence of a teacher aide had implications for students in their interactions with peers, in both positive and negative ways. Mack, for example, believed that school would be "hard" without his teacher aide, "'cause no one will get on with me." In this instance, the teacher aide acted as a shield in protecting Mack from bullies, either preventing or intervening in such incidents. For high school students, the benefits of having a teacher aide had to be measured against the costs of such support. Rachel appreciated that extra adult assistance meant that "I don't have to struggle and pester other students to help me." At times, however, she said that there was stigma in having a teacher aide, "like with your friends and they start hassling me and stuff like that. ... You're dumb, you're stupid, stuff like that." She explained how she dealt with such situations:

I go, sometimes at least they help me and I don't just sit there dumbfounded at work and don't understand anything. And then, like one of my friends was like that for about six months and then she actually starting asking my teacher aide's help, so she was actually able to understand stuff that the teacher was trying to get across.

Although not articulated as specifically as Rachel, Paul also appeared to be conscious of the stigma associated with the presence of a teacher aide. He definitely preferred that the latter meet him in class, rather than walk into the room with him. In both cases, presenting and utilising the teacher aide as a whole class rather than an individual resource would have minimised potential stigma, and would have ensured that more students had ready access to the additional support they required.

The concerns voiced by students about teacher aides, whether stemming from individual or systemic factors, are valid and worthy of attention if the efficacy of teacher aide support for students' learning is to be maximised. Appropriate training for all teacher aides, that incorporates subject knowledge, effective support strategies, and professional conduct, would help to address the issues outlined by students in this study. So too, would the review of school policies and practices that prioritise systemic functions over students' needs, thus currently disadvantaging certain students in some schools, particularly at high school level.

### **In Summary: Helping or Hovering?**

The students with whom I had the privilege of working in this study provided insightful understandings of teacher aides, conveying a sense of the importance and value of the latter's role, if clearly defined and carried out in a positive, professional manner within the context of a supportive school. Given the study's focus on the ways in which students' education is influenced by teacher aides, it seems fitting that the closing words of this discussion are those of a student. When asked to comment about what school would have been like without the support of teacher aides, Rachel responded:

That would have been a huge struggle. I don't think I would be here today without those teacher aides. They pushed me and stuff like that. You have got to have someone that can push you beyond that next boundary.

Those who did so are the focus of the next chapter.



## CHAPTER SIX

### “YOU DO IT FOR THE CHILD”: TEACHER AIDES’ INTERPRETATIONS OF THEIR ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS

Having considered students’ thoughts and experiences of teacher aides, discussion turns to aides’ perspectives of their work with students. This chapter consists of two inter-related parts, the first of which examines teacher aides’ accounts of their roles and responsibilities. This is followed by an exploration of the relational aspect of aides’ work with children and young people. In order to delve more deeply into the latter topic about which less is known, discussion of roles and responsibilities will be presented in a summary format, as a context for interpreting the findings outlined in this and the following chapter. This summary is excerpted from a larger Summary of Teacher Aide Findings (Appendix T) which was sent to each teacher aide participant (a) for their information and (b) as a basis for further feedback by those who wished to provide it. For the sake of brevity, the following synopsis does not include participants’ quotes. Teacher aides’ words are however used extensively to illuminate their understandings in the second part of this chapter and in Chapter Seven.

#### Roles and Responsibilities

*The role of the teacher aide should be to assist the teacher in the learning of that child. But what happens a lot is, I think there’s a very, very fine line. As teacher aides, I know we’re not trained, but in a lot of the situations we end up, we make the resources, we teach the child, and we just basically report to the head of department who looks at what you’re doing. [Coordinator] does not actually teach the student I work with, my head of department does not teach that child at all. So I’m with that child, status quo, bang that’s it. She might take him for cooking one period, but when it comes to the actual teaching, that child is taught by me, not the teacher. (Liz, high school teacher aide)*

#### ***Teacher Aides’ Definitions of Their Role***

Teacher aides offered various definitions of the teacher aide’s role. Although all were employed to support students funded through the Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Scheme (ORRS) some thought of their role as that of a *teacher* aide, while others saw themselves as a *student* aide.

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***Understanding the Scope and Influence of Teacher Aides' Work***

All teacher aides agreed that the teacher aide's role was wide ranging, and that there was often a tension between what they were supposed to do and what they actually did. Much depended on the contexts in which teacher aides worked, as well as the students and teachers with whom they worked.

***Academic support.***

In supporting students academically, teacher aides' experiences could be considered in one of three ways. Firstly, some aides worked in partnership with teachers to support students in accessing the curriculum. In this situation, teachers and aides had a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities, with the teacher aide working under the guidance of the teacher to support students' learning using a range of strategies. While employed to support a specific student, aides were also available to help out other students if required.

Secondly, some teacher aides worked in situations in which their roles and responsibilities were not clearly defined or understood. They were expected to use their initiative in supporting their assigned students, with little help or supervision from teachers who were involved in teaching the "other 28 students" in the class. As well, aides in these situations acted as a safety net in helping those students who struggled academically but who were ineligible for additional support.

Thirdly, some teacher aides were required to take on the role of untrained teacher for "their" students, with minimal or no support from teachers. In these situations, despite their best efforts, aides with limited knowledge of curriculum or teaching strategies struggled to occupy students in meaningful ways each day, at times feeling as if they were simply babysitting.

***Individual Educational Plans (IEP).***

Participation in the IEP process raised a number of concerns for teacher aides. Not all were paid to attend IEP meetings, and did so out of their commitment to the students concerned. Some found themselves in the position of having to take responsibility for the IEP process, with minimal support from teachers, while others felt that their working knowledge of the student and school context was not valued by specialists and parents. The usefulness of the IEP in individualising students' education appeared to depend a great deal upon the adults

involved, and the extent to which they worked collaboratively within their professional roles to develop, implement, and evaluate meaningful programmes of learning for students.

### ***Social interaction.***

Teacher aides played significant roles in supporting students' social involvement in school life. In some situations, teacher aides seemed to act as surrogate friends, taking the place of students' peers during break and lunchtimes. Although most aides discouraged such dependence on adult company, students appeared to be drawn to aides in the absence of friends of their own age, and, in some instances, because they felt safer and more comfortable in the presence of adults who could act as a shield from teasing and bullying.

The role of social connector was considered important by many teacher aides, who showed initiative and resourcefulness in subtly making the most of opportunities to support students' social interaction with peers, as well as accurately judging when to get out of the way. Acting as a social interpreter to help students make sense of jokes and the dynamics of informal student interactions was also considered an important part of an aide's role. Some aides actively taught students relevant communication and social skills to enable them to relate to their peers. They also used incidental learning opportunities to teach peers about understanding and accepting students' differences in a positive way, in an attempt to bridge the social distance between students and peers.

### ***Discipline and behaviour.***

Teacher aides' role in responding to students' behaviour was similar to that outlined under *Academic Support*. A few teacher aides worked within clearly defined boundaries in partnership with teachers to share responsibility for students' behaviour. In these situations, aides were accorded the same respect as teachers, and were supported by school staff in dealing with any students' inappropriate behaviour. In providing an extra pair of eyes to monitor classroom behaviour, aides were well positioned to support the smooth functioning of the classes in which they worked.

Some teacher aides had to work within far more ambiguous boundaries regarding discipline and behaviour. A lack of clarification of teacher and teacher aide roles and responsibilities placed aides in awkward positions in which they witnessed inappropriate behaviour but were powerless to respond to it and/or not supported by teachers when they did respond. Aides'

lack of authority and vulnerability was recognised by students, some of whom openly referred to them as “just a teacher aide.”

In some situations, teacher aides were required to take full responsibility for controlling “their” students’ behaviour, essentially acting in the role of a minder or behaviour monitor with minimal or no back up from teachers. In slightly different circumstances, some aides were temporarily assigned to students who did not have an impairment, but whose behaviour presented challenges to teachers. In both circumstances, the primary role of the teacher aide was to keep certain students under control, to minimise disruption to the rest of the class. There seemed to be little effort by schools to address the actual causes of students’ behaviour (which may have included frustration or boredom with academic demands), and there was a lack of training and support for aides charged with the responsibility of dealing with the students that trained teachers found difficult.

Teacher aides’ discussion indicated that the majority demonstrated understanding, initiative and skill in responding to students’ behaviour. They sought to understand the possible causes and meanings of behaviour rather than simply trying to control students. All made an effort to develop trusting relationships with their assigned students, which formed the foundation of their work together. Where necessary, aides taught students alternative ways of communicating that were more effective than using behavioural means of interacting with others, and supported students in learning about the consequences of certain behaviours. In some situations, aides were required to remove students from classrooms if their behaviour was judged to be disruptive to the rest of the class, thus taking on a minder role to occupy the student until s/he could return to class. In a few extreme situations involving behaviour that could be harmful to the student and/or others, teacher aides were involved in the use of physical restraint of students, often with little support from teachers.

### ***Personal care and health.***

Supporting students who received ORRS funding involved teacher aides in a range of personal care and health matters. This included helping with eating, toileting, personal hygiene, lifting, moving, dressing, medication, physiotherapy exercises, and care of accidents and seizures. Some supported children with high health needs, occasionally providing in-home support for families. Concerns were voiced by some aides about health, safety and privacy issues for both students and aides when assisting with students’ toileting. A lack of

adequate and accessible toilet facilities placed these children and adults in literally awkward positions, and necessitated aides engaging in advocacy to bring about any improvement. A few teacher aides spoke of supporting extremely fragile children, their experiences providing insight into the enormity of the responsibility expected of and carried by some aides.

### ***Safety.***

Keeping students safe was a priority for some teacher aides. This involved keeping students physically safe, as well as protecting them from peers' teasing and bullying, and, in rare instances, ensuring that a student's behaviour was not harmful to peers. Keeping students physically safe involved monitoring their physical and medical well-being and ensuring that "runners" stayed within school grounds. While in some situations aides appeared to act in the role of a minder in the absence of any real risk, most were aware of the need to give students space, by looking out for them from a distance. As with other aspects of the aide's role, the extent to which they were supported by teachers varied a great deal.

### ***Extracurricular activities.***

Teacher aides were involved in supporting students' participation in a range of whole school and outside school contexts, often on an unpaid, voluntary basis. Helping with students' arrival and departure from school by taxis, supervising students in break times, form time and assemblies, and supporting students' participation in sports and cultural activities were some of the additional duties carried out by aides. Out of school, teacher aides took part in camps, transported students in their own vehicles, supported students in their homes, and, in one instance, voluntarily organised an out of school recreation group for disabled high school students. While some of the above duties fell within the scope of aides' job descriptions (if they had one), other tasks were performed out of goodwill. The extent to which this was recognised and compensated for varied from school to school. In some situations, the unpaid work of teacher aides in supporting extracurricular activities appeared to be taken for granted, and obscured the extent to which certain school activities relied upon voluntary labour.

### ***Transitions.***

Supporting students in their move from one class and/or school to another was an important role identified by almost all teacher aides in the study. Aides' relationships with and knowledge of students meant that they were often the best person to support students in shifting to new environments and to help teachers (and peers) to understand the new students.

In a sense, aides acted as guides and interpreters, particularly for students who needed support in their communication with others. In a few instances, transition of students and aides was carried out very effectively, in that sufficient time and planning were provided for all involved to become familiar with one another. More often however, transition arrangements were less satisfactory, with insufficient thought being put into communication and planning for the move of students and teacher aides from one school to the next. In some situations, it appeared that students and aides were regarded as a kind of convenient package deal who would move together; in other situations, the aide simply lost her job when the student she supported moved schools. Not only did this affect teacher aides financially and emotionally, it had a potentially larger human cost for the students and schools involved, in terms of the loss of valuable support, knowledge and experience.

This summary of roles and responsibilities reflects the participants' commitment to supporting students to the best of their abilities, to do the right thing by each person. Underpinning and enriching their work were sound, caring relationships. Positioned between students and their peers, teachers, specialists, and parents, how teacher aides defined and managed their relationships with students is the focus of the remainder of this chapter.

### **Understanding Student-Teacher Aide Relationships**

*“It’s a different kind of relationship, it’s sort of between, well, not being a parent, but it’s sort of more of a nurturing relationship and between a teaching relationship so it’s sort of like a half way between really” (Esther, primary school teacher aide).*

At the heart of work involving people are relationships, the means by which individuals come to know each other in particular contexts. Each relationship is unique, depending upon what each person brings to it, receives from it, and how each person understands and values their affiliation. Impossible to empirically measure or precisely define, relationships are nonetheless fundamental to our understanding of each other as human beings. Through relationship, we have the opportunity to learn different ways of seeing and making sense of our worlds.

In educational contexts, the development of positive relationships between teachers and students forms the foundation of effective learning and teaching. Given that teacher aides are frequently put in the role of teachers, and that they are required to support individual students

on a one-to-one basis, the development of sound relationships is equally important in underpinning the work of aides and students. When asked to describe their relationships with the students they supported, the majority of participants in this study concurred with Esther's articulation of "a different kind of relationship." Analysis of participants' responses to the second research question, *what kind of relationships develop between students with disabilities and teacher aides?* resulted in the emergence of six inter-related topics. Findings are therefore structured as follows: (a) getting to know students; (b) terms participants used to describe students; (c) participants' thinking about students; (d) relationships with students; (e) students' responses to teacher aides; and (f) peers' responses to teacher aides.

### ***Getting to Know Students***

"You'll know who they are, you'll know your students, you'll be able to pick up which ones they are" was the response given by a high school teacher to Ellen's question about the students with whom she would be working. Participants described a range of experiences in initially meeting and getting to know the students to whom they had been assigned. Esther was the only teacher aide out of 18 participants who had had an opportunity to spend time getting to know the child prior to actually working with him in his primary school class. Conversely, Ellen had no introduction at all to the students with whom she had been employed to work in a high school. It was assumed that she would "know who they are." The information provided to Brodie about the primary school student she was to work with consisted of "only what [the principal] was allowed to tell me, that [child] was autistic. That was about it." The information given to Ellen and Brodie possibly revealed more about the speakers' assumptions and understanding of disability than about the students concerned.

Most participants' initial contact with students lay somewhere in between these extremes. Several teacher aides met with students and parents prior to working with students in class. Some participants had to either request and/or rely on student reports and Individual Education Plans as a means of preparing to support students. The usefulness of such documents depended a great deal upon who had written them, as evident in Liz's comment about information provided by a student's previous aide:

The teacher aide that she was with gave me two A4 pieces of paper like that, full of what she couldn't do. So, I didn't even read it, I ripped it up. Well, I had a rough look at it, but I ripped it up and put it in the rubbish bin and I thought, I'm starting from scratch with you, because I don't want to know what you can't do.

Liz questioned and resisted the former teacher aide's deficit construction of the student's identity, preferring to get to know the student in terms of her capacities, within the context of a new relationship and educational environment.

***Taking time to understand students.***

The value of taking time to observe, to "suss out" students was mentioned by numerous participants. As Ann emphasised, "with someone new, you've got to suss them out, no matter who it is and say, 'look, I'm not here to make you feel stupid in front of your friends,' because that is massive." Ellen, also in a high school context, explained that "I tend to often sit and just look at the class before I do too much." She added that taking time to get a sense of the student, class, and teacher was a strategy born of experience. Similarly, Kate stated that "I've learnt now that when you go to work with a child that it takes at least six months to settle in. And that's hard in an intermediate because you've only got two years." During these initial periods of carefully reading students and teachers within classroom contexts, participants worked on developing rapport with students in nonthreatening ways. They appeared to be mindful of students' feelings, making an effort to understand how the latter may wish to be supported. For example, Ann's account of working with "behaviour kids" illustrated the pragmatic yet sensitive way in which she negotiated a working relationship with a teenager:

I took this boy out and I said "I've got to be here with you for the next nine weeks. How can I make it easier for you, because I've got to do this." And I actually said to him, "I'll lose my job if I don't do this good anyway so are you going to help me or are you going to ..." you know. But I knew after meeting him that I could say that, without him sort of laughing at me or whatever. In the end I think he thought, oh well, I'll try and make it easier for her 'cause she's obviously, you know...

[These students] get me coming in and they don't actually know why I'm actually there. I'm not there to report back as such, I'm there to try and find out why they don't want to do their work and try and help them to do their work. Is it too hard? What is it? I don't know but what's making it so horrible that they don't want to do it?

Ann quickly recognised that this student had "a really good sense of humour" and used it as a means of clarifying why she was required to work with him. She also gave him responsibility for identifying the most effective way of working together, seeking to understand and respond to his difficulties in learning. Her proactive focus on the latter, the possible *cause* of his



behavioural “problems,” proved to be more constructive than reacting in an authoritative manner to the student’s behaviour. According to Ann, she was “trying not to be like a dictator sort of a person.”

A slightly different student-centred approach was called for in the support of a high school student who had a hearing difficulty. Already very conscious of “looking different,” the teenager initially rejected teacher aide support on the basis that such help further separated her from her classmates. She chose instead to distance herself from the aide, preferring to forego the latter’s assistance with learning rather than risk being seen as even more different by her peers. In other words, the social cost of having an adult help her outweighed any academic benefit. Ann responded in the following way:

I really pretended for the first week that I was there for all the kids and just wandered around the class. When she saw the other kids speak to me and accept me and actually talk to me or put their hand up and say “could you help me Mrs \_\_\_\_\_ with this,” she’d start looking and you’d see it, she’d start thinking, maybe I want her.

I had to let her see that I was cool with the other kids, that they didn’t think I was too bad so she didn’t need to either. At the start she didn’t want to know who I was. She was going to dig her toes in and say “I don’t need you” sort of thing, that’s what she wanted the other kids to see. In the end she got a little bit possessive and said “no, you sit here.”

In this and other instances in high schools, the teacher aide’s acceptance by the class as a whole was a prerequisite to the student’s acceptance of support. Ann’s understanding of this led her to respond in ways that not only benefited students in the class as a whole, but also facilitated the development of acceptance and trust by the student to whom she was assigned. Furthermore, working as a class aide diffused the power of stigma that can be associated with teacher aide support, particularly in high school contexts in which adolescent pressures to conform to certain teenage identities are extremely powerful.

Consideration of other participants’ accounts of getting to know students revealed a number of constraints with which teacher aides had to contend. These included a lack of clarification of each party’s roles and responsibilities, a lack of time in which to develop a sense of trust upon which effective working relationships were founded, and even a lack of introduction to each other. Getting to know students proved more difficult in intermediate and high school environments in which different groups of students moved around the school at regular

intervals each day, to be taught by a range of subject teachers and supported by different teacher aides. In situations in which aides were temporarily placed with “behaviour kids,” with little information about the student and/or specific training in responding constructively to behaviour considered challenging, much depended upon the aide’s ability to relate to the student as to whether her/his behaviour was ameliorated or exacerbated. Despite such barriers, almost all participants demonstrated initiative and resourcefulness in developing understanding relationships with students. Moreover, they focused on getting to know each student in terms of their individual personalities, rather than allowing disability labels to narrow or taint their understanding of who the person was.

### ***Terms Used to Describe Students***

During the process of reviewing participants’ transcripts, the ways in which they described students became a point of interest that warranted the creation of a separate code. Having concluded the above section by noting participants’ focus on the heterogeneous nature of students, this particular set of findings appeared anomalous, in that the majority of terms used reflected a more homogeneous disability/deficit mindset.

Generic terms such as “special needs,” “high needs,” and “a high grade of need child” were representative of the most frequently used descriptors of students. More specific terms in which explicit reference was made to disability labels were also commonly used by participants. These included “she is Down’s,” a little girl ... who was spina bifida,” “he’s scoliosis,” and “she was Down syndrome and severely autistic.” Several participants described “behaviour kids” using terms such as “she was a scratcher, biter, type of thing,” “a bit of a runner,” and “a thrower and destructive.” A sense of ownership was evident in some participants’ descriptions, for example “she is probably worse than my one,” “our kids,” and “somebody like my child.” Sometimes ownership and “problem” descriptors were combined, as in “my wee Down’s girl,” and “my little seven year old that was autistic and Down’s.” Occasionally, more neutral language was used when discussing students, such as “like every other kid.”

One way to interpret this apparent contradiction between participants’ use of deficit language (what they *say*) and their commitment to understanding and relating to students in respectful ways (what they *do*) may be as follows. The deficit language reflected prevailing dichotomous thinking of special and normal, disabled and able-bodied that permeated most

participants' school cultures as evident in their special needs policies and practice. Working in any organisational culture requires knowledge and use of the language that is specific to that culture. Most participants working in schools became familiar with educational discourse in general and with deficit special needs discourse in particular. Unless they had encountered an alternative discourse through education or other means, they had no reason to question the dominant discourse. The power of deficit labels was however diminished as participants got to know students in terms of their capacities and humanity, as Brodie noted, "like every other kid." Through relationship, teacher aides' understanding of *who* the student was appeared more significant than their knowledge of *what* kind of label had been assigned to the student.

### ***Thinking about Students***

While participants' language reflected the prevailing special needs discourse of most of their schools, this belied a depth of thinking and insight regarding students' capacities that underpinned their relationships and work with the latter. Review of participants' interviews revealed that, for the most part, these aides constructed students' identities primarily in terms of their humanness rather than deficit. The findings that emerged from this part of the study will be presented using examples of each kind of thinking and their implications for teacher aides' work with students.

#### ***Construction of humanness.***

Participants who focused on knowing and understanding students in terms of their humanness and diversity shared a number of characteristics in their thinking. An appreciation of students' personalities, recognition of their feelings, their likes and dislikes, and their strengths was evident in participants' discussion. As Mae observed, "they're all so different." Her description of a primary student richly conveyed the child's personality through comments such as "she's a classic, a wee character, just personality. She's lovely, adorable." While acknowledging a student's multiple impairments, Leah emphasised that "he can laugh, he sings, he knows responses, he loves lots of noise." She was also mindful of his feelings, describing how she adapted her reading of a Harry Potter story so as not to scare him, "because I can't gauge the effect -- how fully he understood the story."

Paying attention to students' capacities did not involve a denial of students' impairments, but rather an acceptance of and responsiveness to their difference in constructive and supportive ways that enhanced rather than diminished their humanity. Leah's description of the child she

supported conveyed a sense of what he could do, what he enjoyed, and how she utilised this knowledge as a means of socially involving his peers:

He has got a really good sense of smell because, you know, he can't see. He loves Wednesday because it's chips and chicken and things like that, he can smell it everywhere. So I always get the kids to come over and give him sniffs of their lunch so he can sniff the doughnuts.

In a very natural way, Leah brought the children closer together (both physically and socially), and facilitated the child's peers knowing him as a child like them, who shared their enjoyment of chips and other favourite foods, albeit using a different sense.

Understanding others in terms of what we have in common tends to promote relationships characterised by mutuality and reciprocity, which in turn reduces the social distance between people. When referring to one of the teenagers with whom she worked, Jo's positive regard for him was obvious in her enthusiastic description: "this year we've had a blind Year Nine boy who's really lots of fun, you get a lot back. He loves [subject] and he loves singing so he's always coming out with these wonderful songs." In contrast, she admitted that she found it difficult to relate to another student with whom she (and others) had very little in common:

I just feel guilty that I feel like this towards [student 2]. Whereas [the student who is blind] your heart sort of goes out to him because you can have a laugh and reciprocate. Whereas [student 2], he's sort of got nothing, he's got nothing to endear himself to other kids, it's a shame. If it was my own kids it would be dreadful.

Lucy expressed a similar ambivalence in her relationships with the two primary school children she supported, attributing this difference largely to their different personalities and the extent to which each student engaged with the world of school. Jo's and Lucy's experiences suggested that students' personalities and interests played a far more significant role than their impairments in determining the quality of their relationships with others. Teacher aides' relationships with students with whom there was a sense of connection and from whom they "got a lot back" appeared to be mutually beneficial. As Esther observed, her relationship with a student was "really good" because "it's one that works for both of us."

*Believing in students' educability.*

Thinking constructively about students in terms of their human potential while responding in a supportive manner to specific difficulties encountered in their schooling was particularly apparent in several participants' transcripts. These teacher aides shared a belief in students' educability and an understanding of the importance of positive learning environments and effective teaching strategies in optimising learning. They appeared to have an intuitive belief in students, as suggested in Brodie's thoughts about working with a primary school student who initially used aggressive behaviour as a means of interacting with her teacher aide and others in her world:

I'd never worked with, I didn't even know what autistic was, or anything like that. And I just wanted to see whether I could. And I thought there was a kid in there, and all it needed was for the little windows to open up for that kid to come out.

Brodie's belief that "there was a kid in there" enabled her to withstand the child's behaviour and to gradually develop a trusting relationship with her. Through trying to understand rather than control, Brodie witnessed her becoming the child she believed her to be. An equally powerful example of the importance of teacher aides' thinking about students was outlined by Kate, in her support of a student who did not talk: "[I learned] that she was actually a communicating, thinking person." As with Brodie, Kate's coming to know this student as a "communicating, thinking person" evolved through their developing relationship, which enabled Kate to conceive of the student in terms of her capacities as a human being. From this experience, Kate observed:

It's made me realise that other kids that I have worked with since, that they had to be started on at a very early age. Particularly this last year, I've sort of come across it and thought, this child needed something a lot earlier.

She identified this "something" as "communication for a start. Your expectations definitely, and behaviours, just the whole lot."

Liz was similarly convinced of the need to recognise and support the development of students' potential early on in their education. She referred to a teenager who had Down syndrome and who did not use many words, believing that:

If I could have got him, like five years ago, I really could have done so much with him. Because he can speak, he can say “no” really clearly, and he can say “yes” really clearly, and I thought, oh, he can actually talk, but he chooses not to talk. And he “uh, uh, uh, uh” points to everything, so, I think down the track he’s never had the work put into him. They’ve just left him, he’s just a product of his environment basically.

Liz’s personal knowledge of disability in having grown up with her disabled sister placed her in a strong position from which to contest the prevailing deficit discourse she encountered in various schools. She stated, “I know that given the chance these kids can be so capable. If they’re given opportunities. And it’s like I have expectations of them.” While realistic about the impact of different impairments, Liz was nevertheless convinced that students had the capacity and the right to learn. She noted of one student, “I feel he understands a lot but because of his communication he can’t get it out. You know, it’s just that part of the brain that’s affected by the autism.” Regardless of communication difficulties, she believed that students who have autism “should still have choice.”

Rosie’s experiences with primary school students bore a close similarity to those related by Liz. Rosie too was familiar with disability through family members, which shaped her thinking about and acceptance of difference as a natural part of being human. Her belief in students’ inherent capacities determined how she worked with them to enhance their development as human beings. She rejected the hopeless predictions documented in a student’s early childhood centre report, “that he is not going to be any good at school, there is no way he should be at school, he should just stay at kindy ‘cause he just runs around all day and he’ll trash the place.” She noted with satisfaction that the child had settled into primary school as well as his peers, observing that this was “a different thing than was predicted for him.” When asked why she thought some people focused primarily on students’ deficits, Rosie replied:

Probably their appearance and that, and people think people who can’t speak are thick. My mother had an illness at the end of her life where she couldn’t speak. She lost her speech and people would sit and talk in front of her about her and that proved it to me. They would go and visit her and say “doesn’t she look awful, look at her” and I used to think, how ignorant is that, just because somebody can’t talk. And that’s how I knew. I wondered about the wee girl I worked with. I thought, I wonder if there’s, she just can’t get it out and I mean that proved to be true and it will be the same with [this student].

Like Liz and some other participants, Rosie conceptualised students' impairments in a pragmatic and hopeful way. She interpreted children's differences as meaning that she (and others) had to work differently in order to maximise opportunities for learning. She resisted the use of labels as a rationale for giving up on students. She described ways in which she supported the student's learning to read and write:

*In, the, but, you know and I go like that, so how do I know he doesn't know what that word is? And he points to them on the chart too so he might already know it, so people who are thinking "well, he can't tell you so therefore he doesn't know" could be selling him short. Because you could be filling his mind with up with all sorts of things that are one day going to come out and that's what I think. It's better to fill him up and it's not going to come out and at least you are trying and giving him an opportunity, than cut the opportunity because you don't think he can do it, so that is what I just think.*

I think these kids have got more to them than people know, they just think a different way. They just do, it's like their brain is wired a bit different and they get there by going a different way but they get there. You could just say "oh well, look he has Down syndrome and autistic so let's forget about him," but I don't think that's right and I think he knows a lot.

Rather than writing the student off, Rosie chose to teach him to write. Her beliefs and approach to supporting students were characterised by a focus on what might be possible, on problem-solving ways "that you can bypass the blocks to their learning, so you find something that will work for them." She also noted "whereas some people just think 'oh well, they don't do that so we won't do it' and so I think, well, he might do it if we do it a different way or we do something else."

### ***Construction of deficit.***

While the majority of participants held similar beliefs to those articulated by Rosie, a minority seemed to accept students' impairments as a universal determinant of what they could not and could do. In her work with a high school student, Pip was explicit in attributing his spectator status at school to his having Asperger's syndrome:

There's lots of hi's and they know who he is, and any association he has had with other kids has been fine, but they are just not interested in having a social burden, because that's what [student] is, he is a social burden. He can't be in a group because he can't handle the different reactions and emotions that go on within a group of people.

Pip's consideration of the student as a "social burden" seemed to reflect a deficit construction of his identity in which disability had the master status, obscuring the complexity of who the student was as a human being. Attributing his social difficulties to his impairment appeared to justify his segregation from most aspects of school life. For example, Pip's rationale for the student's not attending tutor time was that he "has Asperger's so he is not very good in groups so tutor time is not a good thing for him." Such thinking and actions were illustrative of the attitude described by Rosie, "oh, well, they don't do that so we won't do it." While recognising that there are genuine difficulties experienced by individuals who share this label, it appeared that Pip understood these as fixed parameters within which the student could function. She did not seem to, as Rosie described, "bypass the blocks to their learning" by reframing what might be possible, and by gradually teaching the student strategies to help him get along in the world beyond that circumscribed by special education. Rather, Pip's comments about "special needs at both ends of the spectrum" ("difficult special needs" or gifted children) suggested that they had no place in the mainstream, and would be better served in units where they could receive "special attention." In stark contrast, Ellen articulated her longterm wish for the students with whom she worked as "just to be accepted in society really, to make them not feel out of society." As Rosie observed, "it depends on what teacher's aide [students] get how well integrated they can be."

***The impact of different constructions on students' school lives.***

How we think about people is complex and impossible to neatly and accurately analyse. The above analysis of participants' thinking about students is rudimentary, yet attempts to provide a framework within which to consider contrasting conceptualisations of human difference that underlie these teacher aides' relationships with students. While all participants in this study appeared to have an authentic commitment to serving students well, how they actually did so varied according to their beliefs and ways of knowing students.

Participants who accepted the dominant special needs discourse of their schools tended to privilege the *what* over the *who* way of knowing people, in which disability labels masked students' individuality. Rather than recognising and responding to students' diversity, there was a tendency to homogenise and objectify their identities according to specific labels or needs-based categories. This process of differentiation resulting from students' perceived failure to fit into the norm of school life not only separated these students physically by the use of aides and/or special units, it also distanced them socially from their peers. While acting



with the best of intentions, participants who understood students primarily in terms of their deficits/labels appeared to have a diminished understanding of their human potential and value.

Conversely, participants who focused on *who* the student was in terms of their humanness recognised the heterogeneous nature of people: “they’re all different.” They appeared to accept difference and imperfection as inevitable aspects of the human condition that enhanced rather than impoverished their understanding of what it is to be human. As Ellen remarked:

I don’t think of [students] as special needs, because I find things quite hard sometimes to pick up. I’m having trouble sometimes too, you know. I just think that sometimes they need a lot of things turned around to make it a bit easier. I think a little bit of confidence and that they can actually achieve it, it’s all they need.

Moreover, several teacher aides thought that students’ presence in schools provided other members of the school community with valuable learning opportunities. Leah’s work with a student with multiple support requirements had led her to believe:

That child has taught me so much and I’ve seen him teach lots of children, lots of things. They have learnt tolerance, they’ve learnt compassion, you know. Some of them have learnt, like me, appreciation and to be grateful for what we have got. [Student] has got a lot less, and he can still laugh about it.

In schools we are so limited in what we can teach [children]. It’s only because we have people like [student] in school that they get the opportunity to learn more important things and really enlighten, you know. I mean, one of the big problems in schools is social behaviour. And you need to probably have more lessons in that kind of thing, more kids like [student], and they are invaluable you know. So no matter how much money you spend on them you can still keep teaching. He’ll be teaching for as long as he lives.

In a high school setting, Jo reflected on the difference between her and her children’s school experiences of disabled students, concluding that: “it’s better for my kids, it’s educating [daughter] and [son] better, being with [student]. When we were at school we never had any special needs students around us.” These aides not only appreciated students’ differences, they recognised the latter’s power to make a difference to others’ understanding of human beings.

***Relationships with Students***

Teacher aides who are employed under ORRS funding to support individual students are uniquely placed to develop in-depth relationships with the latter over time. Unlike teachers, who typically interact with large numbers of students through engagement in academic learning for limited time periods, participants were involved in intensive support of students not only in academic tasks, but in a range of personal, social, behavioural, and extracurricular activities. Some were also employed to support the same student over several years in the same and/or different school sectors. As such, participants' relationships were characterised by a holistic and more personal way of knowing students. Esther described her relationship with a six year old as "a lot more personal than a teacher-child relationship. Because we spend more time together you get to know each other." Pip considered that her relationship with a high school student was "far beyond a teacher-student relationship, and also you are working one-on-one with somebody. It's so much different than having 30 kids in the class." In this set of findings, participants' management of the unique, close nature of student-teacher aide relationships will be outlined, as will the kinds of relationships that participants described, and the strategies they used to maintain their relationships with students.

***Providing support without creating dependence.***

The intensity of working on a one-to-one basis with students necessitated careful management to minimise the likelihood of students becoming dependent on adult support. Many participants were mindful of maintaining clear boundaries in their work with students, Ann commenting that "without being standoffish" she was "very careful not to get too close." She was aware that students could "become very reliant on you and you can become their sounding board for things that are going on in their personal lives." While willing to listen, Ann also made an effort to redirect the student to engage socially with her peers, conscious that she occupied a transient place in the student's life. For similar reasons, Ellen observed that "you have to make sure you distance yourself."

Mae was particularly thoughtful about the primary school child she supported, stating that "I don't think she's solely dependent on me in any way. If I thought that, I'd probably have to be honest and suggest we have a job sharing situation, for her sake." Mae was prepared to reduce her hours if required, to ensure that her presence did not get in the way of the child developing healthy peer relationships. While Mae had a clear understanding of professional boundaries

and the limits of her role, Pip's relationship with "her" student did not seem to be as clearly delineated. The student's apparent dependence on Pip was not countered by any attempts on her part to facilitate interaction with his peers during his brief time in mainstream classes. Pip also mentioned:

Whenever I'm packing my children's lunch and I'm working down at the high school I will pack a couple of muffins for [student] because he is, you know, he is a child in a sense. He will be very disappointed if I hadn't brought him something.

As she observed, "the relationship is not cold, hard, clinical. I'd say the relationship is one you wouldn't find in the Ministry of Education description, I don't think."

Several participants spoke emphatically about their setting boundaries regarding physical contact with students. Kate described one child's tendency to "give you a bit of a nuzzle type thing if you were doing something" and stated "I'm not into hugs and cuddles. I'm there to get on with it and I think I probably kept my distance a wee bit in the end." Lucy too discouraged close physical contact with students: "I had seen this wee girl at assemblies the year before, curled up into the teacher's aide and sitting on her knee like, sucking her thumb. And just, like a mother, and no, I thought, I'm not going there." These teacher aides appeared to have an instinctive understanding of their role as one of supporting students to make their own way in the world of school, rather than getting in the way of their doing so. In literally keeping their distance, the teacher aides managed to walk the fine line that separates too much from too little help, both of which are unhelpful.

### ***Kinds of relationships.***

Embedded in each participant's discussion of their relationships with students was a genuine sense of care and empathy. Leah articulated this most explicitly:

The only really important thing is that you make them happy. For every little bit of happiness you can give them, you're making them into a better person, and the end result is the amount of happiness they have through childhood, which is a really short time, so you can do a lot of damage in a short time. As well as do a lot of good.

Most participants also focused on developing understanding rather than controlling relationships with students, intuitively knowing that this would be more effective in getting alongside students. As Jo remarked, "you can't build a relationship with the kids when you're

there to help them if I'm going to stand there and say shut up, stop talking, ra ra ra and go on like that." Nell's empathic understanding of the primary school child she supported was evident in the way she responded to his sometimes challenging behaviour. She interpreted his distress in terms of frustration and unhappiness, rather than naughtiness or non-compliance. As such, she used:

Just a gentle approach. If you raised your voice, it didn't work with him, it would just make him more and more wound up and then he would just explode, he used to have some behavioural problems. But if you just kept it cool, calm, collected, small, small steps every day, then you just built up this relationship.

Brodie worked in comparable ways with a student whose behaviour was initially problematic. Although she was supposed to implement a strict Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) regime with the child, she questioned its value, and chose to work with the child in a more intuitive way. When asked to describe her relationship with the student, Brodie replied, "it was pretty hard to start with, but in the end when we decided 'oh, this [ABA] was a load of crap' and we did it our way. We were starting to have a really, really good relationship." She noted that the relationship improved as she tried to treat the child "like a normal eleven year old. I tried never to raise my voice with her and always tried to talk quite calmly with her and, I don't know, [be a] kind, safe person to be around."

### ***The importance of trust.***

The notion of students feeling safe and having trust in their relationships with aides was referred to by several participants. Rosie believed "I always feel like I have got trust with them. And they feel quite safe." Nell recognised with the child with whom she worked that:

He used me as his sounding board. He used to tell me lots of things that would happen in his life; he needed someone to talk to. Sometimes it came out inappropriately, but he still needed to come and sound it out, he couldn't keep it in.

In this instance, Nell took on a surrogate parent role, to compensate for the child's struggles in his home life. She had clearly earned his trust, and was an adult with whom he felt safe and secure. His use of her as a "sounding board" was paralleled by students in other contexts. Ellen observed that in her work with teenagers "a lot of kids will open up to you and tell you a lot more than the teacher ever gets told." The extent to which a particular student felt safe with Ellen was evident in his informing her that "I better go home and have a sleep because I

was very growly and that I'd had far too many late nights!" She doubted that he would be quite so direct with his teacher.

While being put in a position of confidante tended to occur more frequently with the students with whom participants worked on a one-to-one basis, this occasionally happened with students' peers as well. Grace remarked that in her intermediate class, "the girls will come to me and talk to me about personal things." Although she attributed this to being the female adult in a male teacher's class, her discrete and professional way of working with students may also have led to the girls placing their trust in her. In fostering positive relationships with students' peers, participants indirectly enhanced their students' acceptance by others.

### ***Friend or mother?***

Relationships characterised by caring, understanding, and trust were evident in most participants' discussions. Participants were divided however in the extent to which they conceptualised their relationships as synonymous with that of a friend or a mother. A clear distinction was made by some participants between being a friend and being friendly. For example, Jack stated:

I am not there to be their friend. I'd like to be friendly you know, yes, I would like them to like me I suppose, but that's not my main focus. I'm there to try and get them to make friends with other kids and things, that's my role.

Likewise, Ann discouraged a student's perception of her as a surrogate friend, and made a determined yet futile effort to orchestrate peer friendships. She sadly added that "she has left school now and I know is really struggling out there because she hasn't got a teacher aide anymore."

In contrast, some participants perceived their relationships as paralleling that of a friend. Mary remarked, "we're good friends. Even on a bad day, I still get the wave from the car window as they drive away." With her customary humour, Brodie described her relationship with a primary school student: "we were mates. I got invited to his birthday. Much to mum's horror we gave him a cookbook with an apron and his own cooking utensils. He really loved cooking at manual, he was good." With a junior primary child, Esther considered that "he probably sees me as a friend but he also knows that there are boundaries too so there's a respect there

as well.” She added, “I’m really proud of him in some ways, almost like a parent is proud of their child.”

Other primary school participants likened their relationships to that of a mother-child, Nell describing herself as “a bit of a mother figure really.” Like Rosie, she had no qualms about drawing upon her maternal instincts to physically respond to children in caring ways, giving “reassuring hugs” if appropriate. Leah highlighted the tension between “not touching” children and responding in ways that showed they were cared for:

I feel that, even though it probably is against the rules to hug children when they are falling down and hurt themselves and blah blah blah, teacher aides will often do it because they can get away with it. Well, I do anyway. You know, if a child has hurt themselves and they are crying and I feel that putting an arm around them would be comforting. ... And 90% of the time it is, so we do that maternal thing too, which is a difficult role for teachers to do. They can’t really do that, so that is an important thing in a school, to make children feel secure and safe, especially younger ones. You know, to have someone that they know is not necessarily looking out to make sure they don’t get hurt, but caring, in that way.

Leah and Rosie supported children whose verbal communication was minimal, and so physical contact constituted a natural part of their interaction patterns. Coincidentally, Nell, Leah, and Rosie worked with children whose family lives were significantly disrupted, and so in some ways they acted very much in a loco parentis role.

Kate and Lucy expressed similar opinions about not being motherly in their relationships with the children they supported. For example, Kate stated, “I usually tell them I am not their mother because I have got kids of my own. I said, ‘I don’t need any more.’” The need to establish unambiguous guidelines for all teacher aides to adhere to in their support of students was alluded to by Ellen in her observation:

It’s a trap that a lot of new teacher aides fall into. They are so enthusiastic and wanting to do their job that they are there over top of [students] and “I can do it, I can do it” sort of thing so you have to be careful that you don’t smother.

It appeared from participants’ experiences that there was no one “right” kind of relationship, that each was dependent upon the individuals involved and the contexts in which their relationships evolved. There seemed to be a greater tendency for primary school aides to befriend and/or “mother” students, however this could be understood in terms of the nature of

support typically required by younger children. Most of the high school participants respected the need to relate to teenagers in ways that did not further accentuate their difference from peers. Participants used a range of strategies to maintain their working relationships with students, as outlined in the following section.

***Maintaining relationships with students.***

Not surprisingly, effective communication with students was fundamental to participants' development and maintenance of relationships. Participants supporting students who did not communicate verbally provided particularly interesting accounts of how they interpreted and facilitated understanding of students' communication, which in turn influenced their relationships with the latter. Rosie described the role of communication with a primary school child with whom she had previously worked. She stated that initially, the child appeared "to have no intelligence until we did this picture exchange." The student quickly learned that using pictures was an effective tool that enabled her to access what she wanted:

She was that clever, she could look through a book with probably 50 pictures in it and find what she wanted. So it shows that in here, you imagine how frustrating that must be if you know what you want to convey to people and nobody can understand you. No wonder they throw a wobbly.

In providing the child with a means to demonstrate her understanding, her "intelligence," Rosie came to know and relate to her as a thinking person. Unfortunately, the next teacher aide did not continue using the communication strategy:

[The child] has gone back and she doesn't do the picture exchange anymore, so that was really disappointing because that was her communication. We had her to the point with the picture exchange where she would put "I want," she would make a sentence, rip off a sentence strip, bring it to you. "I want raisins" so you read it to her. I reckon we could have got to doing attributes as well. I'm disappointed that we didn't see how far she could go with it, because it was a real communication tool for her. Because she may never talk, and as she got older, she could have put "I want a hamburger" and given it to the person at MacDonald's.

She added, "imagine how liberating that is for a child who can't. I think it's just a shame she is not getting the best education she can because somebody's too lazy or somebody is just not into that, for whatever reason."

Like Rosie, Kate also recognised that not speaking was not synonymous with not thinking. Her realisation that a student she supported was “actually a communicating, thinking person” informed her relationship with that individual and with subsequent students. Cognisant of the fundamental importance of communication, Kate surreptitiously sought help from the special school satellite class teacher so that she could use her time meaningfully with the student in further developing her communication. Kate felt that she was “starting at the grassroots basically, and we built up communication and it was successful. ... It gave me satisfaction that I was doing something.” Like Rosie, she noted that her efforts were not sustained by subsequent aides: “now I don’t think anybody bothers and the family certainly never bothered with the communication.” She expressed her frustration with the actions of a previous aide who simply gave the student a colouring-in activity when she ran out of things to do. Kate observed that “we’ve lost six years of what could have been good communicating time.”

Rosie explained teacher aides’ and teachers’ reluctance to involve themselves in the development of students’ communication in terms of “people just look at these kids and think there’s nothing upstairs, but there actually is, there is quite a bit, it’s just a communication problem really.” She noted that the child with whom she currently worked “can communicate in lots of other ways” and described her efforts to interpret his nonverbal communication and to enhance his skills by using picture exchange cards, despite the reluctance of the class teacher and other aide to do so. She recalled with particular delight one example of the student’s developing communication skills:

The other thing that he did the other day which was so cute. When they go outside on a sunny day they have to have a hat on of course, so I put his hat on him and I said, “do you want to go outside?” And he loves outside, he usually just runs, and he went “mmm” like this at me and pointed to me. I thought, why doesn’t he want to go outside, and he ran over to the cupboard and pulled my hat out. “You haven’t got your hat on, you need your hat on today” so that’s what he was trying to tell me.

The junior primary child’s actions demonstrated his ability to initiate interaction, as well as illustrating the mutuality of the student-teacher aide relationship. In a reversal of roles, he was looking out for his teacher aide.

While some participants’ relationships were maintained by their ability to listen in a visual way and to act as an interpreter of nonverbal communication, others talked about the



importance of listening to students who could verbalise their thoughts. Liz explained that with teenagers:

I've always got a listening ear, because kids, especially at that age, they have a lot of problems. They'll come and say, "oh, you know, Liz, this has happened or that happened" and I think you've just got to be there to listen. I don't give a lot of advice, because I don't think it's my place to be giving them advice. I just listen to them.

Similarly, while mindful of maintaining professional distance with students, Ann was prepared to advocate on their behalf if appropriate, using her discretion to gauge when students needed support to have their voices heard.

Liz recognised that showing an interest in students' everyday lives was an integral part of sustaining an effective working relationship. Ellen too commented on the value of social chat with high school students, stating "even though I'm in the class there is a lot of chit chat between us that goes on." Taking part in activities outside the class also helped participants relate to students in less formal ways, Liz commenting "I love to join in the activities with him, I find that's really important." Coming to know students in these informal, personal ways helped aides relate to their interests and strengths. This in turn informed their support of students' academic work, by enabling them to use examples that were meaningful to students' lives.

Being responsive to and respectful of students' wishes and feelings was mentioned by several participants as critical to the success of their relationships, especially with high school students. As did Ann and Jo, Ellen responded to a student who "was very negative with me" by giving him time, space, and the choice to request assistance from her. She said, "I just left him. I let him work. And let him call me, and that is one of the ways to build up a relationship, is not be there and hovering." With another teenager, Ellen negotiated how best to assist him: "I've often said to him 'am I doing this right, is this what you want me to do' because if it's not, it's a bit of a waste, isn't it." Similarly, Jack explained that with a high school student:

I had talked about that with him as well, about how are you going to feel about me being in there. Where would you like me sit in relation to you? I am not going in there to make you feel stupid but you know, are you okay about me going in

there? And he had sort of said that yeah, he was alright about that, he did actually quite want somebody to be in there with him and did want me to sit with him.

Threaded throughout participants' interviews were references to the power of using encouragement and humour as a means of relating to students. Jo identified the highlight of her work as a teacher aide as "having a laugh and seeing [students] grow." As did other participants, Jo skilfully used humour as a way of getting alongside students. She made learning fun, and was able to diffuse potentially tricky behaviour through humour. In a different role, Kate described how, when helping a student with toileting and personal care, "we try to make it as fun as possible so that they are not embarrassed." Using a sense of humour thoughtfully can be a powerful way of breaking down barriers between people, by providing a common, nonthreatening space in which to engage with one another. It seemed to be a tool that most participants used to good effect in their relationships with students.

The relationship strategies identified by participants were in no way special or extraordinary. What may be significant however is that most participants' relationships were characterised by a knowing of students in terms of their complexity as human beings, rather than simply in terms of disability status. In many cases, participants knew students better than their respective teachers and peers did, placing them in a unique and expert role. Such relationships could be beneficial or detrimental to students, depending upon the people involved and the contexts in which relationships developed. Students may benefit from teacher aides' using their knowledge to interpret their communication, to provide appropriate academic and social support, and to advocate on their behalf if necessary, so that others may know them in more meaningful and accurate ways. For example, Ellen believed:

I think you are always looking out for them, for the students that you work with. If their name comes up in staff meetings, do you think they are really as bad as what that staff has [said]? Maybe you could change things around for them so therefore you're kind of looking out for your kids.

Conversely, teacher aides' relationships with students may get in the way of the latter developing relationships with peers and teachers. Such substitute relationships may absolve other members of school communities from forming the kinds of teacher-student and student-student relationships that many students "without special needs" enjoy. In this study, Pip's relationship with a teenager seemed to preclude the development of relationships with others in his high school.

The amorphous nature of relationships in general defies a neat conclusion to these findings. Rather, participants' experiences pointed out the diversity, complexity and significance of their relationships with students in different educational contexts. Thus far, the focus has been on participants' thinking and practice regarding relationships with students. How participants interpreted students' responses to teacher aides forms the next part of the study findings.

### ***Students' Responses to Teacher Aides***

Naturally, as in any interaction involving human beings, students responded in diverse ways to having teacher aide support. Review of this aspect of the data suggested that one way of conceptualising participants' perceptions of students' responses was in terms of a continuum of help. How students reacted to teacher aides ranged from resistance to help, to acceptance of help, to dependence on teacher aide help. In a simplistic sense, these responses can be thought of in terms of the physical distance between student and teacher aide. Students who resisted support sought to distance themselves as much as possible from the extra adult in the class, while students who accepted help seemed happy to work alongside teacher aides when they felt they needed assistance. Students who came to depend on teacher aide help appeared to prefer to work in very close proximity to the latter, to the exclusion of interaction with others in the class.

#### ***Resistance to teacher aide support.***

While resistance to teacher aide support tended to be more common among teenage students, it was also evident with children as young as five years old. Rosie described the young student she supported: "sometimes because he wants to be an independent little boy--'you go away', but it's not 'go away because I don't like you' it's just 'go away because I am doing this myself' sort of thing." She added, "it must be so annoying to have someone right on your tail or sitting right beside you all the time." Nell told of a comparable situation with the junior primary child with whom she worked:

She wants to be part of her class and she doesn't really want me to be there. She would tell you, "go away." She's six now. And she would rather be with her friends than come over to you. So I just sit in the background and support her in that way.

Her parents don't want her to be taken out of the classroom; don't want her to be seen as special. They want her to be in the classroom with the other students, that's their wishes and that's what she wants too. She doesn't want to be taken

away, she doesn't feel comfortable with being away; she put her head down and refused to do something. She just wants to be one of the other kids in the class.

Mae's and Mary's experiences with primary students were similar. Rosie, Nell, Mae and Mary respected the students' wishes, and in doing so encouraged the children's developing sense of autonomy. Furthermore, in keeping their distance by not hovering (or, in Jack's words, "sticking like a limpet") they honoured the children's implicit desire to be "like other kids" and created space for each child to develop relationships with their peers, which, in the longterm, may be more significant than those developed with aides.

Participants working in high schools appeared to be aware that their support came at a high cost for some students. Both Jack and Liz talked about taking care not to, in Jack's words, "stigmatise the child" by the teacher aide's presence. Liz emphasised that "I never velcro myself to the hip of that child. I always say to the teacher, 'I'm here to assist Joe Bloggs but I'm not a person that likes to sit beside my pupil,' so I roam the class." Ellen remarked "I guess it's just not cool to be different," and believed:

You have to respect that [students] don't want you there and they don't want to be singled out in their bunch of friends at lunchtime. They don't want to be singled out as the one that has the teacher aide, so you have to just not see things and just kind of let them go.

She had empathy for the dilemma faced by students in simultaneously knowing that they needed help while conscious that having such help differentiated them further from their peers. Similarly, Liz described her experiences with students who resisted aides' presence:

The kids would say "oh, don't sit here" or you know, like, "I don't need help, what do you have to sit here for? Don't sit beside me." Because it's like singling them out because you're right there beside them. So they like space. You've got to give them their space.

A number of high school participants were conscious of the teasing and "snide comments" aimed at students who were accompanied by teacher aides. Ellen described a typical scenario in her school:

I try not to sit with [student] all the time. Because sometimes when they are having a pick at him that will be another thing they can fire and just put the boot in a bit further. The rest of the kids are having a go at him, you know, "you have got the teacher aide all the time" or something like that.

In a way, the teacher aide's presence heightened students' visibility in terms of difference in a student culture in which it was not "cool" to be different. As Jo observed, "they'd rather look smart than dumb." Students' attempts to distance themselves from their teacher aides were therefore understandable and logical ways of managing the situations in which they found themselves. In turn, most participants respected students' claim for space, keeping their distance and working as invisibly as possible. Although referring to an early childhood context, Jack's description of the optimum kind of support was equally applicable to high schools: "if you do it right you are just kind of there, they don't even really see that you are there just for that child." Ellen had worked out a covert signal for her students to use if they needed help: "you move round and you kind of get a wee look between you. They will give you a wee wave or something so that you can just sort of get round there without actually ...". Other participants had developed comparably discrete ways of helping students academically without harming them socially.

#### *Acceptance of teacher aide support.*

Positioned midway on a continuum of help were those students who accepted teacher aide support in terms of their being a "helper." Caroline considered the students with whom she worked as happy to have assistance, and thought that they viewed the aide's presence in class as nothing out of the ordinary: "they know the teacher takes the class, that's the teacher and it's Miss, or Mrs or Mr but they just call me Caroline, by the first name. I am there for them and I help the other children." Nell's experiences with a primary student were similar: "he certainly didn't see me as his teacher. He knew who his teacher was, and I was just Nell to him. He knew that I was there to help him and support him." Jack believed that students considered him to be "a helper yeah, sometimes in the primary sector in a little bit more of that teaching role, but certainly don't see me as being as on an equal with the teacher."

Several participants commented on students' awareness of teachers having more authority than teacher aides. Grace observed that the intermediate school student with whom she worked would "sometimes try to play the teacher and play us off one against the other, to get what he wants. He knows who's in charge of the classroom and that's definitely the classroom teacher." From a slightly different perspective, the student Lucy supported described her as "not as scary as the teacher," and as someone who could help them if required. Students' perceptions of the aide as less authoritative were also articulated by Esther, who believed that

“a teacher aide is probably not quite as, I don’t know, probably a little bit gentler because they are not the ones throwing out the discipline when it’s needed.”

Rosie’s experiences with the junior primary child provided a lovely example of a student learning how to manage his teacher aide, and her responsiveness to his agency. She observed:

He thinks that I am someone he likes. He will get me to do things with him and help him with things, but I think he knows that I teach him things. Because when he doesn’t want taught he’s like “you buzz off.” He knows if I buzz off he can be left to his own devices, and lately I’ve been trying to sometimes just go somewhere else and watch him from a wee distance and see what he does.

Her observation suggested that the student was developing an understanding of the aide’s place and purpose in his life at school, and that he was making decisions about how and when she should help him. At a young age, he seemed to be working out a kind of interdependent relationship with his helper, in contrast to those students whose relationships with their teacher aides were characterised by dependence.

#### ***Dependence on teacher aide support.***

At the other end of the continuum of help were students who, for various reasons, had come to rely on having a teacher aide in close proximity to guide them through school life. A student being encouraged by Jack to complete a task independently made his beliefs known very clearly: “‘no, you have to help me because I am autistic.’ What can you say to that? Yeah, that’s my role, I have got to help them and they have got this helper because they are autistic.” Jack did his best to dissuade the student of this belief, noting that “I’ve tried carefully to not get into that role of like being the filter between the teacher and the child. It’s better it comes from the teacher.” In contrast, Pip did not question her student’s similar assertions about having a teacher aide helper. She stated that, in the absence of a teacher aide, the student would be required to stay at home. The rationale for such action was that “you can’t put him into a classroom because he is entitled to have a teacher aide and we are very adamant about that,” “we” referring to the student and his understanding of his rights. She noted his conviction that “‘I don’t have to go to a classroom, I don’t have to do that,’ that was sort of beginning of the year talk, but that is his belief as well.” The source of the notion of entitlement to teacher aide help was not known, yet it remained uncontested. Indeed, the aide seemed to act as a substitute for or in place of the student’s full time attendance in classes with his peers. The student’s dependence on his aide was evident in a range of situations, such

as wanting her to remain with him at lunchtime in their separate room, and expecting her to bring him muffins from home. In the few subject classes he did attend, Pip noted that “there is really little interaction with any other students,” which suggested that he had few people within the high school community with whom he could relate. Interestingly, Pip considered that other students might view her as “a little bit like an oddity and like his keeper in a sense.”

A less intense sense of dependence or possessiveness was expressed in Brodie's account of a student she had supported for several years. She recalled:

I was [his teacher aide] for about three and a bit years, and then I got [girl]. I had to share, and he wasn't happy about that. “What's wrong with her, what do you have to be with her for?” I'd say “she needs me.” “Oh, she's a bitch” or something, he'd come back.

Like Jack, Brodie sought to discourage such possessiveness, using humour as a means of negotiating with students about sharing support. In a different situation, Jo sought to share the student with whom she worked intensively on a one-to-one basis, concerned that he was becoming literally too close to her:

I'm losing my patience with him and it's not very good for him or me. Perhaps if I got two periods away doing something else and someone else was with him when we're in the learning centre. Especially when he started saying, “I love you.”

Jo's vulnerability in such situations was also recognised by Meg, who had consciously worked on distancing herself from a student she had supported from primary through to high school in an attempt to minimise the latter's dependence on her. A final kind of dependence identified by Kate resulted from students' previous aides doing too much for the children with whom they worked.

Consideration of the ways in which participants described students' differing responses to support highlighted the need for clear guidelines regarding teacher aide practice. It appeared that at each end of the help continuum, problems arose for students that could have been avoided with thoughtful consideration of teacher aides' position and place. Students seeking to be independent of teacher aide help were sometimes placed in awkward, compromising situations in which they felt they had to choose between academic support from adults and social acceptance by peers. At the other end of the continuum, students became dependent on teacher aide support, often at the cost of their academic and social participation in school life.

It seemed ironic that the intended help in the form of a teacher aide could in practice become a hindrance to students' learning and social involvement, depending upon how aides interpreted and enacted their role. These findings suggested that utilising the teacher aide as an assistant within the class as a whole may be the most effective way of providing support, positioning the aide to assist designated students, peers, and teachers. Working in this way would be advantageous in providing additional adult support in busy classrooms and in reducing the stigma often associated with teacher aide help.

### ***Peers' Responses to Teacher Aides***

While focusing on the students with whom they worked, participants also made reference to the ways in which students' peers responded to their presence. Review of this aspect of the data resulted in the categorising of peer responses in terms of aides being a help or a hindrance to "the other 28" students. As Brodie remarked, other students viewed her as "a bit of a helper I suppose, or a hindrance, depending on what they were doing."

### ***Valuing teacher aide support.***

Although specifically assigned to individual students, most participants were prepared to, in Brodie's words, "help anybody who asks, if they want." Rosie explained that in a junior primary class she was introduced by the teacher as "'this is Rosie and she is going to be working in our classroom' and she always says '[Rosie's] a teacher.'" Like other participants, Rosie commented on the apparently increasing number of children who "need support but aren't eligible." Leah commented that "there'll be some days, especially in Room 100, when they'll be calling out because they want help. So you'll hear these little voices, 'Leah, Leah.' They need help with things, so helper would probably be the main role." In a sense, these teacher aides acted as a magnet for students, Ellen observing in a high school that "it was amazing the amount of kids that would come around you just to get a little bit of extra help." She believed that it "was good for [student] to be seeing that she wasn't [the only student] needing the teacher aide." Ellen also mentioned that "I'm always the one that has the pencils and the pens that will give them out without [students] getting a rark up." Acting as a supplier of resources that students needed, Ellen, who was "not as scary as the teacher," was seen as a "go-between" the students and teacher.



*Devaluing teacher aides.*

In contrast to the positive identity of teacher aide as helper, participants experienced a range of negative responses from students. “Nah, you’re just a teacher aide” was representative of the disrespectful and dismissive reaction of some students, who accurately interpreted the relative powerlessness of the teacher aide role. Mary described senior primary school students’ response: “when you tell them off, they turn around and say, ‘you’re not a teacher, I don’t have to listen to you.’” She lamented the lack of respect shown by students, commenting “you know, usually when an adult speaks, a child will listen. But nowadays, some of them don’t, they’ll stand there and question you, which is scary. Really scary.” Similar sentiments were expressed by Kate and Ellen in intermediate and high schools respectively. Kate noted that some aides at her intermediate school felt “a bit intimidated at times” despite students being informed that teacher aides “are teachers, they have the same rights to discipline as everyone else.” Referring to the dismissive responses of certain students in the playground, it was as if aides were invisible to these students, who discounted their presence on the basis of their powerlessness. In Ellen’s high school, aides were not allowed to discipline students, which placed them in vulnerable positions when confronted by students’ disrespectful behaviour. She believed that “we sometimes just don’t have enough power or not power, that’s not the right word, enough resources to get the back up that we need sometimes.” This inability to deal directly with students’ inappropriate behaviour sometimes placed her and other aides in the role of an informant for teachers, whose support of aides varied.

The hostility expressed by some students towards teacher aides mirrored that experienced by some students who were allocated teacher aide support. Jack recalled the comments made by high school students prior to his starting work with a student: ““oh, have you come to work with so and so? Are you working with him because he’s psycho?”” Despite his efforts to educate these teenagers in terms of understanding people’s similarities instead of judging individuals’ differences, he concluded that such stereotypical thinking represented the “pervasive attitude” of teenagers. The stigma associated with teacher aide support stained not only the identity of students receiving such help, but also the identity of those providing it, who were regarded as “just a teacher aide.” Given that some aides as adults felt intimidated by students, it is troubling to consider how students may feel in the face of similar hostility from peers.

*Changing perceptions of teacher aides.*

These findings suggested that as students moved through the education system, their responses to teacher aides changed. Younger students tended to accept teacher aide help willingly and respectfully, while some older students were less respectful and dismissive of adult support. The ways in which “the other 28” students responded to aides may have depended on a range of factors, including the students, teacher aides and teachers involved, the extent to which teacher aide roles and responsibilities were clearly articulated and understood, and the nature of the school culture and behavioural expectations. In particular, the role of relationships between students and aides may have been significant in determining whether the latter were valued or ignored. For example, Leah recognised that, in addition to teacher support, the extent to which she knew students made a difference in how they regarded her. She explained, “I have been in other situations where [students] will just completely ignore me, you know, or kids from other classes that don’t know me think ‘you’re just a teacher aide.’” Likewise, Ellen’s experience in working with a whole class suggested that having opportunities to develop relationships with students made a considerable difference in their acceptance of her support:

By the time you get say to the fourth form, [students] are fine with us going in, but third form classes, they see it as a real put down to have a teacher aide in their class. By the end of the year they come right, they grow with it but at the start, I don’t think that they liked having a teacher aide.

Over time, students in these classes realised that aides were a very useful resource, and no longer considered them in terms of a “put down.”

Participants’ accounts of the ways in which students in general responded to them led to similar conclusions as those documented for students who were assigned teacher aide support. Whether teacher aides helped or hindered students’ academic and social development depended a great deal upon their relationships with students and teachers, how and where they were positioned in classrooms, and how they were supported within schools as a whole.

### **In Summary: Making a Difference?**

The primary purpose of schools is teaching and learning, and teacher aides are employed to support students in this endeavour. While much depends on the nature and professionalism of teachers and schools in determining what teacher aides and students do, it appears that the aides in this study played an important role in facilitating students' education. When asked "if you weren't there, what learning do you think would be happening?" numerous participants said "none" or "very little." Several attributed this to teachers not having sufficient time to teach all students in their classes, to work being too hard for some students, and to difficulties in accessing suitable resources for high school students. A further and even more fundamental constraint on certain students' learning potential was pointed out by thirteen year old students in their conversation with a teacher aide about a peer who had moved onto high school: "the third formers used to come over and say 'it's not the same, Mrs \_\_\_\_\_. They don't think she [disabled student] can learn.'" In the absence of this aide's advocacy, fuelled by her belief in the student's educability, there appeared to be little hope that the student would have an opportunity to reveal her competence and demonstrate her potential to learn. Most of the aides in this study made a difference in students' learning, primarily because they thought that the students with whom they worked could learn and had a right to do so. In relationship, with humour and thoughtfulness, participants tried to do right by students.

This chapter has attempted to capture the depth, breadth, and complexity of teacher aides' work with disabled students. In dealing with the routine and unforeseen, the perfunctory and the deeply human aspects of relational work, participants in this study have revealed that they are so much more than "just a teacher aide." How they aided teachers in their work with students is the subject of Chapter Seven.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### **“IT DEPENDS ON THE TEACHER”: TEACHER AIDES’ AND TEACHERS’ WAYS OF KNOWING AND THE NEED FOR SHARED UNDERSTANDINGS**

Working with teachers and the education of adults were not specific topics included in the initial scope of this thesis. That they became an integral part of the findings is a demonstration of the emergent nature of qualitative research, and its privileging of the experiences and meanings that participants bring to the process of inquiry. In the first part of this chapter, teacher aides’ thoughts on their relationships and work with teachers are explored. Discussion then turns to participants’ perspectives of the pressing need to address current deficits in the education of adults involved with disabled students. In closing, reference is made to the significant commitment and contribution offered by teacher aides, who, in Caroline’s words, “do it because of the child.”

#### **Working with Teachers**

*“It depends on the teachers that you’re dealing with. I think it’s an individual thing, and there’s good and bad” (primary school teacher aide).*

While recognising that both teachers and teacher aides share a common purpose, Esther described her role as a primary school teacher aide as “definitely a job that is really different than being a teacher.” She considered that:

Teachers have got so much happening, you’ve got curriculum to organise, they’ve got a trip next week, they’ve still got to write up a report from that, and they’ve got a review coming up next week -- they have just got so much happening. All I have to do is go to my job and actually do it. That’s why I think there should be more teacher aides in schools because they can really focus more than teachers can in one certain spot. Teachers do a fabulous job, but it’s just harder for them to drop everything and focus on one area, whereas I can do that.

Esther’s conceptualisation of two quite distinct roles for teachers and teacher aides highlighted the importance of having a shared understanding of their respective roles and responsibilities to enable them to complement each other’s work in students’ best interests.

Participants highlighted the importance of developing positive working relationships with teachers, and provided insightful observations regarding the characteristics of teachers they considered effective and problematic.

### ***The Importance of Relationships***

That the quality of teacher aide-teacher relationships matters was emphasised by Esther:

If you haven't got a good relationship with your teacher and it's not working in the classroom then you're wasting your time, so you shouldn't be there. At the end of the day you are there for the child and the child's got to benefit from you being there.

Numerous participants described similar thoughts about their relationships with teachers. In a primary school setting, Mae described her relationship with her teacher as "excellent" and added, "I hope that continues. It could make the job quite difficult if it didn't."

Relationships in any human endeavour are characterised by complexity. Consideration of participants' interviews suggested that teacher-teacher aide relationships involved, among other factors, an intricate interaction of personalities, communication skills, and ways of knowing and thinking about students and education. In Liz's words, "you need to know where each other's coming from." Through interacting in relationships, teachers and aides socially constructed their respective knowledge and understanding of students and of each other, with positive as well as problematic outcomes for students.

The influence of personality in forming relationships with teachers was noted by several participants, each referring to instances in which personalities had "got in the way" of harmonious relationships. Pip described a dispute with a high school head of department regarding access to laboratory resources, noting that "it was a personality thing, and because of that we've worked around not having to work with her [teacher] as much as we possibly can. That is a problem that all teacher aides have had with this particular person." The power imbalance inherent in such a relationship compounded the difficulties Pip faced in accessing the resources required for her to "teach" her student separately from the mainstream class and teacher, thus further disadvantaging this student's education. As Pip pointed out, "rather than confront the issue and say 'hey listen, you have got it written that you have to take special needs children and work with them,' we shied around it."

Pip's comments underlined the fundamental importance of communication in building or hindering working relationships. As Ann noted in her work with high school teachers:

I really think it's about communication, it is. If the teachers will give you a guideline to what their expectations are of you as a teacher aide it's massive, and with the discipline in the class. If you can have an hour with the teacher before you spend any time with them and say, "look when I see something, should I speak to you or just come and tell you? Do you want me to say something to that child? How do you want me to work with you within your class that is going to mean you're happy and I'm happy?"

As with the examples regarding personality, participants' comments related to problematic situations in which communication was conspicuous by its absence or its awkwardness. For example, in her first year at intermediate school, Grace expressed her concern that "I feel completely out of the loop, not being told when other people are coming into the classroom. Like I don't want to know everything, but there's certain things that I think I should be told that I'm not." Given that the teacher took little responsibility for "Grace's student's" education, it was all the more imperative that Grace be kept in the loop to enable her to support the student to the best of her considerable abilities. Ellen experienced similar communication difficulties with teachers when she started working as a high school aide some years ago:

I think they [teachers] didn't know what we were there for and didn't know how to use us. So it has been a long learning curve for the teachers, but most of them are very good to us now and really like us being there. I actually don't think I feel unwanted in any class now, but there have been times and I know that I really shouldn't be here. [*How did you know?*] Just the lack of communication really, that lack of communication.

Whether simply an oversight or symptomatic of an underlying unease with the presence of another adult in the classroom, ineffective communication between adults involved in students' education precluded the development of effective working relationships which in turn may have adversely affected students' learning.

*Different ways of knowing.*

A less apparent yet significant influence in the development of working relationships was that of different ways of knowing that informed and shaped teachers' and aides' thinking about students and education. The formal academic and professional knowledge acquired by teachers in pre-service and in-service education programmes contrasted with a lack of formal training available to many teacher aides. Aides, however, tended to have valuable informal experiential knowledge of the students with whom they worked. Liz, working in a high school, expressed this difference in the following way:

Time is a huge factor in teaching. Teachers don't have the time to, you know, be namby-pamby to the kids as much. They're there to teach the kids and they teach them and then they walk out of the classroom when the period's finished and they're off to their next period. Whereas, in the unit, we'll have time, you know, there might be five minutes at the end of the period. So, because we spend a lot of time we get to know them better too.

Kate also remarked on the differences she had noticed in teachers working in high schools, stating that "they tend to be more removed from the person side of things. They teach their subject and they walk away and the next lot come in, and I don't know that they really stop and think." Other participants expressed concern about the disparities created through teachers and aides working separately within their respective knowledge of curriculum and students. For example, Lucy noted her frustration with her lack of curriculum knowledge; although she was given resources for "her" child, they were of little use in the absence of teacher guidance. This situation was compounded by the teacher's lack of knowledge of the student, as illustrated in Lucy's account of working with the child in Physical Education (PE):

I mean she can't do a forward roll, but she was put in forward rolls. She would sit there with her head on the ground and her two hands on the ground, and that was it. She stayed there like that for ten minutes until [the teacher] who was around, said "oh, can she not do forward rolls?" "No, she can't." "Oh, so where will we put her?"

In this situation the teacher seemed more concerned about where to "put" the student than how she might actually teach her the skills outlined in the PE curriculum. The teacher's failure to utilise the teacher aide's knowledge of the student to inform her own knowledge of the curriculum constrained rather than facilitated the student's learning.

Meg raised another potential difficulty in privileging one way of knowing over another. She expressed concern about teacher aides who claimed ownership of children, who resisted teachers' input on the basis that they (the aides) knew what was "best" for particular children. Ideally, the synthesis of the teacher's professional curriculum and pedagogical knowledge with the aide's personal understanding of particular students ought to enhance the latter's education. Esther provided a very positive example of an effective, collaborative working relationship in which her knowledge of the student complemented her teacher's knowledge of what and how to teach.

*Different understandings.*

Although Esther and her teacher brought different ways of knowing to their work with the student, they shared similar understandings of the student as having the capacity and right to learn with his peers in a regular classroom, and shared a commitment to supporting the student to do so. Comments made by other participants indicated that difficulties in developing and sustaining effective working relationships occurred where teachers' and teacher aides' understandings of students and educational rights differed. Liz believed that "a lot of the teachers don't necessarily understand, they've never had anything to do with special needs kids, so they're not really interested, they're just like 'oh, they're the unit kids.'" Her explanation of such categorical thinking about certain students was that "maybe they've never had the life experiences with these kids." Understanding someone through developing a relationship with her/him is quite different from understanding that is derived from taken for granted "truths" about socially constructed categories of people within a society. Where teachers appeared to construct students' identity in terms of stereotypical labels such as special needs, participants noted a tendency for teachers to distance themselves from such students by assigning them to the care of aides. For example, Ann observed that in a high school context "some teachers are fabulous, and some really, as you know, just want to get on with teaching and you do your job and look after that child correctly because I'm busy." Similarly, Ellen felt that sometimes teachers adopted an attitude of "'oh well they [teacher aides] are looking after him, it means I don't have to' and a lot of times I sort of see that 'oh you just keep him happy and that lets me off, sort of.'"

The notion of the teacher aide "looking after" students rather than supporting the teacher to teach students was repeated throughout interviews with participants. Such a practice may be underpinned by teachers' deficit constructions of disabled students which legitimised their



prioritisation of the educational needs and rights of the “28 other children in this class,” the majority who were perceived as educable. In a sense, the labels imposed on students acted as a filter that distorted some teachers’ understanding of students’ competence and right to learn. Mae’s experiences with relieving teachers reflected such thinking and practice: “I know when we’ve had relievers in, oh just give her a bit of paper to scribble on, ‘cause she can’t do this. That sort of attitude, ‘cause they don’t know how.” She added:

I mean it’s a terrible thing to say, but because this little child’s got no speech, they’re not going to argue with what you tell them to do, and it’s easier, just sit there with your drawing. Right, now I can focus over here, that’s her dealt with. But it’s only relievers that I find will leave me solely to deal with her.

At high school, Liz observed that “secondary trained teachers do not know how to adapt the curriculum for special needs children. I’m sorry, but that’s true.” The tendency for some teachers to plan for “the middle,” with the expectation that students will fit into this plan, rather than teaching in ways that are responsive to students’ varying knowledge and skills appeared to be more evident in high schools, in which greater emphasis was placed on subject knowledge. When Liz offered to help teachers adapt the curriculum to make it more meaningful for certain students, their response was that:

“We have enough trouble doing the work for the class, let alone trying to adapt the curriculum and teach at their level.” And I said, “but you have a cross section in the classroom and this child has got just as much right to learn as any of the others.”

Meg echoed Liz’s beliefs about teachers’ responsibility to teach all students in their class:

I know that there’s 30 kids in this person’s class, but that’s not the point. They’ve known from the start of the year that that person with special needs is in their class, and they know what their curriculum is, so they have to.

Meg did not accept the “30 other students” justification for ignoring the needs of certain students, noting that teachers who were responsive to the diversity of students also had 30 other students to teach. It appeared that much depended upon teachers’ understanding and interpretation of students’ educability and educational rights which in turn determined the role of teacher aides as student minder or *teacher aide*.

***Every Teacher is Different: Characteristics of Effective Teachers***

Ann noted emphatically that “every teacher is different.” She added:

It’s all very sensitive. You’ve got to keep a lot of people happy, you’ve got to keep the people that are watching you happy, got to make sure you’re teaching the child something, you’ve got to keep your teacher happy, that you’re not mucking up what they are doing. You’ve got to be a thousand different personalities to get on with everybody.

She felt that “the percentage of really good teachers is way up here but then you always get the odd one that you find a little bit harder to work with than others.” The need for teacher aides to continually use discretion in order to be responsive to the interests, needs and expectations of students and adults was recognised by other participants. Analysis of interviews revealed very clearly what participants believed characterised an effective teacher as distinct from a teacher with whom it was difficult to work. Outlining these respective characteristics contributes to an understanding not only of the impact of teachers on the roles played by aides, but also the impact teachers have on the education or lack thereof of students who are supported by aides.

***Personal qualities.***

When asked about working with teachers, Meg commented:

There are teachers and teachers, actually. And the teachers at the high school I’m in that are clearly empathic and interested and motivated are fantastic. And the bulk of them are like that. It’s more the ones that don’t that stand out than the ones that do.

Participants’ interview transcripts revealed that a combination of personal qualities and professional knowledge was instrumental in determining teachers’ effectiveness with students and aides. Several aides identified compassion and caring as significant characteristics. For example, Ann believed that teachers with compassion made a difference: “I think one teacher may care and so they will take that extra five minutes.” Mae described her teacher’s attention to the small details that make a difference in individuals’ lives, noting that a student “always has a grubby face, just the way she eats and I always make a point of wiping her face when she comes in after play or after lunch but if I’m not there, the teacher will do it.” Leah noted her appreciation of her teacher being there for her following a distressing ambulance trip with

a very sick student to a local hospital. The thoughtfulness evident in this teacher's actions was also apparent in her teaching.

In addition to the personal qualities of caring and commitment, participants also emphasised the importance of respect as an attribute of effective teachers. This was manifested in teachers' equitable relationships with aides, and in their appreciation of the latter's contribution to school life. Mae observed that "anything extra that I do is really appreciated and she's always telling me, she'd be lost without me." Kate noted that with a particular teacher "there is a respect and we have a bit of fun." The need for a sense of humour as well as respectful interaction was echoed by Brodie, who insisted that teachers have "got to have a sense of humour, and they have to be flexible, and they have to be able to talk to a person like a person."

### *Professional attributes.*

According to participants, effective teachers' personal qualities underpinned sound professional skills and knowledge. Participants appreciated teachers who had a clear understanding of their respective roles and responsibilities, and who articulated their expectations of teacher aides in a coherent and consistent manner. While providing leadership and direction, effective teachers worked in partnership with aides, with whom they developed a shared understanding of their common purpose. Participants enjoyed working with teachers who valued their input regarding students' education. For example, Caroline noted that "there might be differences but we have managed to work it out, and I or they might suggest something, and we just put our heads together and work it out together." Likewise, Mae valued her teacher's approachability and responsiveness:

If I have questions the teacher that I'm working with is fabulous, very supportive. She'll work with the little girl too at times. Like she'll take her for reading and then I'll just carry on supervising the kids with their activity or whatever, so it's not solely me. We probably share the disciplining of her; sometimes the teacher will say "no, I'll do it" so that she's not just used to me.

Numerous participants recognised that effective teachers tended to utilise aides as a resource for all students. Leah described her teacher as "very willing to recognise the teacher aide as a human resource. And get the best for the class and the kids." Jo's experiences with certain high school teachers were comparable: "they just treat you as one of the class, like you're a valued part of the class. And the kids pick up on that because it's all positive."

Jo and Kate recognised that teachers who valued their presence set positive expectations for respectful student interactions with adults, and facilitated acceptance of aides as helpers for all students. Such a power sharing approach by teachers also minimised the likelihood of students adopting a “just a teacher aide” attitude towards the latter, and helped reduce any stigma associated with working with an aide, particularly at high school level. Ellen described her way of working with a teacher she considered to be effective:

It means me working with more capable students and letting the teacher go to the ORRS students. So that they can get a balance and I think that was quite an important thing to almost teach the teachers to do that. So that we could work with a variety too and then it stops that labeling.

***Mutually inclusive: Students and teacher aides.***

Teacher aides in this study who felt “quite inclusive in this classroom” (Leah) or “fully immersed in the classroom situation” (Mae) noted that the students they supported were similarly involved as participating members of the class. Effective teachers ensured that each had a place in their classes and had opportunities to have their voices heard. These teachers tended to be more inclusive and responsive to the diversity of students in their classes, recognising and responding to the heterogeneous nature of students. They demonstrated flexibility and versatility in their teaching, and made an effort to get to know individuals so that they could plan work that reflected students’ interests and abilities. Effective teachers were also described by many participants as being extremely well organised. Developing consistent routines and clear expectations regarding behaviour was also identified as a critical aspect of being a good teacher. Mary stated:

Some of them can control behaviours. I think that is a major battle, and once they have got the respect of the kids, the kids know where they stand. They are not there to muck around, they have got the structure, the routine.

Analysis of the data indicated that the extent to which teachers included aides as participating members of their class/school mirrored the extent to which disabled students were actively included in class/school life. In the case of effective teachers, this had positive implications for students’ education and experience of school life.

***Every Teacher is Different: Characteristics of Other Teachers***

All of the participants had experienced effective teachers at some time in their employment as aides. Most had also worked with teachers with whom they had to carefully negotiate their roles and place within classrooms. Mae commented “they’re all different all the teachers, and you’ll soon learn what ones want you involved and other ones that will just want you solely to work with that child and nobody else.” As with effective teachers, participants identified both personal and professional attributes that characterised teachers with whom it was less easy to work.

***Resisting students.***

Teachers’ ambivalent attitudes towards human diversity were frequently mentioned by participants as getting in the way of students’ education. Pip noticed that in her high school “some of the younger ones [teachers] just seem to be a bit oblivious about the whole thing. It’s hard enough teaching a classroom, let alone having to deal with someone who’s got a problem, is the perceived attitude.” The implicit notion that certain kinds of students do not belong in regular classes was evident in participants’ descriptions of teachers’ teaching preferences. Caroline, for example, noted that a teacher in her primary school “likes to have the perfect class.” She observed that the teacher was not very tolerant of “everyday” students who struggle, let alone disabled students, and was similarly unwelcoming to teacher aides. Caroline explained “I just don’t think that I could be included in it, as part of the class” and therefore decided to leave, “because I couldn’t work with this person. There is no give or take in that situation, I find. You could not have a joke with her or have a laugh, that’s my opinion.”

An intermediate teacher with whom Kate worked “has a reputation unfortunately, does not involve themselves with a special needs child, will not, does not, will not.” He hosted, rather than taught the child in his classroom. When asked if he interacted with the child, Kate replied that “we sort of conspired to get that to happen.” She explained that she would prompt the child to initiate interaction with the teacher, and recognised the irony of a “special needs” child teaching a teacher how to communicate. The teacher’s reluctance to engage with the student socially and academically not only affected the latter, but also implicitly legitimised peers having “nothing to do with her.” Kate recognised the importance of relationships in her observation that in “this other class where the teacher has nothing to do with the kid, I don’t

particularly like the kids in the class but that is because there is no relationship between any of us.”

***Questioning the worth of teacher aides.***

Negative attitudes towards students labeled as special needs were sometimes accompanied by a lack of respect for teacher aides and their work. Jack summarised his experiences of some teachers:

[The] teacher ignoring you, the teacher making negative comments about things that you did, sometimes from other staff making negative comments about the child you're working with. Just sort of "oh well, you know, they need to buck their ideas up." In fact, just negating your role rather than it being anything against me, just kind of meaning that your presence is a bit of a waste of time really. Sometimes you have them treating you that you have no formal training or whatever. So therefore you can't really be a worthwhile person to have in the classroom.

These comments reflected a dismissive approach to both student and aide, and implied a negating of the value of both. Pip's thoughts about high school teachers reflected a similar differentiation of value:

I do believe there is a class distinction between teacher aides and teachers, because the teachers have done so many years and have got a qualification. They do have a huge job, a lot of planning, but yeah, the teacher aides get the dirty end of the stick.

In a primary school context, Rosie concurred, acknowledging that teachers have "been really appreciative of what I do but it's like you feel a bit undervalued still, because you're the bottom of the pile really, that's the way I feel."

A lack of respect for teacher aides was manifested in several participants' accounts of being reprimanded by teachers. Liz's attempts to support a high school teacher resulted in her being admonished by the latter in front of students:

One boy was playing up so she sent this child to stand by the door. So he went and stood, so he was actually standing behind her. She was trying to teach and behind her back he was giving her the fingers and saying "you f'ing old troll." So anyway, she turned around and said to him, "what's going on?" And I said, "I think because of his behaviour that he needs to leave the room." And she turned around and said, "don't you tell me what to do! I am in charge of this class, not

you.” I just stood there with my mouth open. I was like, oh, okay, that’s me told. So I sort of sat there and shut up. But look, it was so detrimental, because after that those kids--“got you now, you’re only a teacher aide and you can’t tell us what to do.”

Rosie had a similarly unpleasant experience with a relieving primary school teacher, who rebuffed her efforts to help with a child. The relieving teacher’s hostility towards the teacher aide and student resulted in Rosie taking on an advocacy/protector role on behalf of the child. Their spending the day elsewhere resolved the immediate difficulty, but did not address the cause of the problem, that of the teacher’s attitude and behaviour and the impact on the student’s learning.

### *Contesting the role and place of the teacher aide.*

In addition to teachers’ attitudes, participants identified aspects of professional practice that constrained teachers’ responsiveness to teacher aides and the students they supported. Teachers’ lack of clarification of roles and expectations was commonly experienced by participants. Leah believed:

Basically that’s probably the hardest part of the job. Your job is to aide the teacher so the first thing you have to do is find out what the teacher requires of you. And a teacher is often too busy to spell it out, so you have to sort of sit back and observe and then take it, like wait to be asked. And if you do it the same way as them they tend to be more receptive to you joining in than if you do it differently.

Other participants adopted similar approaches to working out what teachers wanted, cannily and diplomatically trying to find their place within each class. Leah described an incident in her first week in a primary school teacher’s class:

I got into trouble because [student] is down the back of the classroom and there are only a few windows up high and sometimes he can see colours and shapes and we often hold the books up because of the bright colours, just in case. And there were no lights on, it was really dark and I didn’t know at the time but [teacher] hates this lighting. I was holding the book up to [student] and I said, “he can’t see it.” One of the other children said, “oh, should I go and turn the light on?” And he was up and turned it on. The next thing: “who turned that light on??” Then that child said, “Leah told me to.” I didn’t tell him to, he just went and did it. But she went, “this is my classroom...” and I thought, oh okay, see that’s the boundary.

Leah’s and the peer’s initiatives to make it easier for the child (and other students) to see were not appreciated by the teacher, who was quick to claim her space and delineate the boundaries

within which the aide should work in her classroom. Lucy also referred to way in which classroom space was used to marginalise her and her students. She recalled, “I didn’t really like it, because I thought, you’re at the back, you don’t really belong here.”

Mae voiced her concern that some teachers’ broad interpretation of the aide’s role could lead to their being taken advantage of, at the expense of students’ support. Lucy concurred, noting emphatically that “we’re not dogsbodies.” The ways in which teachers utilised teacher aides was also commented upon by Jo, who was mindful of the impact that teacher aides can have on high school students:

I was going into the science class and [student] didn’t want a teacher aide. I said I’d just go and sit at the back and he’d be sitting at the front, and when they started doing work that he needed a hand with, the teacher would say, “why don’t you pop back?” “No, I don’t need [the teacher aide]. No, I’m fine, no.” [The teacher] would end up having to make him and, oh god here we go, this is really good. So I’d be sitting here and half the time he’d sit over there with his back to me. “Want a hand there?” “No, I’m right. I don’t need your help, I don’t like it Jo.” I mean it’s no good saying, right I’m here, now come on, we’re going to do it. Then I think, oh well, I’ll just go and help someone else and hopefully he’ll want me tomorrow.

The student’s resistance to teacher aide help was understandable, and could have been avoided had the teacher utilised the aide as a support for the whole class, thereby minimising the possibility of certain students being embarrassed and/or bearing the stigma of having help.

Like some students, some teachers resisted teacher aide support in their classes. Mary recalled a tricky situation with an older primary school teacher, who, in front of his class, refused to let her in. The notion of teacher aides being a threat to teachers was mentioned by other participants, particularly those working in high schools. Ellen commented, “I think staff felt quite threatened that there was a pair of eyes watching.” Liz believed that teachers might feel this way because, as far as curriculum adaptation was concerned, “they don’t know how to do it.” Teaching at high school level is typically a private act, in which teachers may be unaccustomed to having adults in their classrooms on a regular basis. Depending upon their personal and professional knowledge and understanding of disability and education, teachers may not feel confident in effectively teaching all students. They may also be concerned about being seen to be in control of their classes, the notion of control being a significant aspect of teaching discourse and practice. They may not wish to expose their vulnerability as teachers in front of aides, and so resist the presence of both the student and accompanying aide.



Alternatively, they may accept the student into their classes with the proviso or expectation that a teacher aide will have responsibility for that student. As with situations outlined above, lack of clarification and direction from teachers sometimes put aides into awkward positions in which they tried to keep both students and teachers happy.

***“The teacher aide does everything.”***

Teachers whose understanding of the teacher aide role was unclear tended to abdicate their responsibility for special needs children to the aide. Numerous participants commented on having to plan and teach students, taking on a surrogate teacher role to compensate for the lack of teacher involvement with certain children. In a primary school, Caroline explained that the teacher “doesn’t do a lot of the work for the child, that is planning, the teacher aide does everything. We are not paid, we are not trained to do all that.” Lucy simply said that as far as planning went, “I’m it.” She shared Caroline’s concerns about the inequities of aides having to shoulder teachers’ responsibilities, admitting “it’s challenging. I’ve really floundered this year. I do feel that it’s not fair. It’s not fair on the girls and it’s not fair on me. And it’s not fair on the other kids in the class either.”

In Rosie’s case, the extent to which she was involved in teaching the student was acknowledged by teachers and the principal, whose inaction effectively condoned this situation, apparently in favour of the needs of the other 28 students in the class. Like Caroline and Lucy, Rosie recognised the unfairness of these circumstances, admitting that “sometimes I sort of resented it. I know the teachers are under pressure as well but I feel like there is a lot expected when you’re paid so poorly and you have no job security either.”

At intermediate Kate noted that “at this stage I’d say the teacher has absolutely no involvement at all, they did nothing.” She and another aide made up for the gaps in the teacher’s planning and teaching by having nightly phone calls in which they organised the following day’s activities. With another teacher whose provision of adapted work was variable, Kate commented that “I’m getting pretty good at sort of playing dumb as well and getting them to come up with something.” When employed as a general teacher aide in an intermediate school, Kate remarked, “probably of all the classes I have been in, three [out of nine] of them would give me planned work for these children and that’s all.”

Grace’s experiences in her first year at intermediate school were similar. She explained that

on her first day at intermediate, “it was about 11 o’clock before [the teacher] introduced me to the class and said that I was the teacher aide for that child.” She learned from this teacher that “I belong with that child, that’s how the class was told. Yeah, the two of us, we are together. I belong to him and he belongs to me.” As the year progressed, Grace expressed her concern:

The child was not being taught by the teacher at all. I was doing all the planning and teaching, and I was responsible for him. In the afternoons when I wasn’t there, there was just absolutely no work being done. He wasn’t even included in say theme work for the class, or if he was, there were no modifications made to it other than it being enlarged.

Participants working in high schools had similar experiences. When asked if she worked with any teachers who took responsibility for adapting work for students, Liz replied “none.” Liz attributed high school teachers’ difficulty in adapting curriculum both to a lack of time and a lack of knowledge about how to meet the learning needs of diverse groups of students. Like other participants, she observed that this was problematic not only for students labeled as special needs but also for other unlabeled students who struggled with learning.

Lucy’s account of a teacher’s planning approach illustrated the difficulties generated by teachers whose lack of responsiveness to individuals’ learning was not limited to those with labels. She explained, “we work sort of in the middle. And there’s a few behaviour problems that are coming now that I think are because a lot of the kids aren’t being pushed enough and are bored.” Lucy’s frustration with this teacher’s approach to teaching was shared by the mother of one of the children with whom Lucy worked, who “knows what [teacher’s] like. I think [mother] will just be grateful when the year’s over. It’s horrible, isn’t it? I had a daughter in there who was having nightmares about going to school.” As well as having to assume a teaching role, Lucy acted in an advocacy role, discretely advising the mother to seek out a particular teacher for the next school year, “so that [student] gets a good year of really good teaching.”

### ***Discipline matters.***

Certain teachers’ beliefs and practices regarding discipline were also identified by participants as problematic, in terms of how teachers managed their classes as a whole and how they dealt with individuals’ behaviours. In classes in which, in Ellen’s words, “the discipline isn’t as good,” the teaching and learning process was disrupted for many students. Occasionally a participant was expected to control a class during a teacher’s absence. Grace found such

situations challenging, explaining that “if I’m left in charge of the classroom at intermediate it’s very hard. I can tell that at that age, yes, I am just a teacher aide and it’s very hard to get the class to be quiet.” Fellow participants commented on their diminishing authority or power in intermediate and high school settings, in which they were frequently known as “just a teacher aide,” thereby placing them in awkward if not vulnerable positions, particularly if not supported by teachers.

Participants also described situations in which the presence of the student they supported was conditional upon their compliant behaviour in class. Kate remarked that “we were floundering for a start, because the teacher said, ‘if she makes a noise she’s out of the room, you take her out.’” Teachers who perceived certain students as “not my problem” expected teacher aides to remove “the problem,” placing aides in a minder or behaviour monitor role. In extreme instances, such as Leah being locked in the cloakroom with a five year old student whose behaviour was incomprehensible to the teacher, Leah assumed an advocacy role:

In the end I spoke to the parents about the attitude of the teacher because I knew I was going to leave and I thought they needed to know that the child wasn’t going to be very happy in that class. I mean, [teacher] was going to make life difficult for her.

Whether the teacher’s locking out behaviour was motivated by a lack of understanding and acceptance of the student’s difference or by a concern that other students’ learning was potentially disrupted is not known. As in other situations, the teacher’s behaviour may have actually exacerbated students’ difficulties in managing their behaviour, leaving the teacher aide in the invidious position of having to resolve the behaviour issues without the benefit of specific training and authority.

### ***Understanding the Complexity of Teachers’ Work***

Ann observed that, as a teacher aide, “you see so much sitting back.” Lucy concurred, noting that teacher aides were in a position to witness teachers’ practice, “warts and all.” Despite participants’ difficulties in working with certain teachers, most were extremely understanding of the complexity of teachers’ work, and acknowledged the reality of teachers having to be many things to many people. They recognised the significant constraints of time and the systemic barriers that precluded the development of optimal working relationships that underpin effective teaching and learning for all students. In an intermediate school, Meg

found that she had to take much more responsibility for “her” student’s learning, yet understood that this was not the fault of the teacher, who did his best under difficult circumstances.

Notwithstanding her somewhat negative experiences of working with teachers, Pip admitted at the end of her interview, “even though they do treat us a little bit like second class citizens [teachers] have a hard road to hoe as well.” Jack proposed a possible way of responding to the pressures currently placed on teachers:

I think you are going to have to move more towards a system of having at least two adults in the classroom, particularly when you have got 30 kids. To think that you can have one adult and somebody else comes in maybe a couple of hours every now and again to help out with the classes is not really going to do it.

He added that having two adults in a class “monitors the teaching as well to an extent doesn’t it? I think in some ways you’re going to be more focused and more in control with your teaching when you know that there are other adults there as well.”

Perhaps the most significant finding to emerge from analysis of participants’ comments about working with teachers was that so much depended on the teacher in terms of defining the teacher aide’s role, which in turn affected the kind of education the student received and from whom. How teachers constructed students’ identities, in terms of their capacity or incapacity to learn, in turn influenced the extent to which the teacher aide role was one of assistant to the teacher or surrogate teacher for labeled students. Also of significance was the nature of the relationships that developed among teachers, aides, and students. Teachers whom participants identified as effective and inclusive tended to develop positive, equitable relationships with teacher aides and students that formed the basis of their inclusive teaching practice. Conversely, teachers considered to be less responsive to disabled students placed less importance on developing constructive working relationships with aides. Whether deliberately or inadvertently, these teachers used aides as a means of distancing themselves from the students whose impairment marked them as different from the other 28 students in their classes. Participants noted that such teacher behaviour placed teacher aides and students in inequitable positions in terms of their employment and education, respectively.

Given that, according to participants, so much depends on the teacher, it was not surprising that the topic of teacher education (as well as education of other adults involved with disabled

students' education) was identified as a serious issue by aides in this study. Their perspectives on this matter make up the second part of this chapter.

### **Education of Adults**

*Even though society's getting better, there's still a stigma about disability, which is part of young people, because that's the kind of society they've grown up in, and they take that into school and teachers' college with them. So unless someone teaches them differently about disability, they're taking their life experiences with them. And of course training higher up, I think principals can make an enormous difference in a school, so they also need training. (primary school teacher aide)*

Participants realised that part of the problem of inadequate educational provisions for disabled students derived from inadequately educated adults. Collectively, participants targeted teacher aides, teachers, teacher education providers, and policy-makers as the key educational sectors in which education was necessary to address current inequities in disabled students' schooling. Each of these will be discussed in turn.

### **Education of Teacher Aides**

Prior to outlining participants' perspectives on teacher aide education, it may be helpful to provide some background details about these teacher aides' qualifications and training opportunities. Eight of the eighteen had completed a formal teacher aide certificate qualification, and two were enrolled in such programmes. Of these ten teacher aides, nine had initiated and funded their studies, some receiving partial financial support from their schools to do so. Ten participants had had a range of professional development opportunities, which typically consisted of one day workshops on various topics. Several had experience and/or formal qualifications in health or disability related fields. All were parents, and believed that such experience was helpful, some participants noting that parenting skills were the main criteria stipulated by some employers. Whether parental experience provided sufficient expertise to work as a teacher aide was arguable according to participants. Lucy, for example, believed that "you have to be a parent -- that's the best training," while Jo commented "I was just a mother. I think that stands you in good stead but there must have to be a standard." The parallel between "just a mother" and "just a teacher aide" is worth noting in terms of the implied value placed on both roles, each of which has a fundamental and significant impact on the lives of children.

The question of teacher aide training generated considerable discussion by participants, who articulated a strong rationale for training and their own reasons for undertaking formal study. They identified a number of personal and professional benefits of having a relevant tertiary qualification and outlined the kind of training that they believed to be most relevant and accessible in terms of both delivery and content. As well, they recognised the significant barriers that discourage or prevent teacher aides from pursuing formal study. These topics provide the framework for the following discussion.

*A rationale for teacher aide training.*

All but one of the participants believed that teacher aides needed to have some form of training. Liz captured the essence of participants' views in her statement: "I would like to see teacher aides having qualifications. [Students] don't really deserve to have someone off the street. I think they deserve to have the right to have somebody that really does know what they're doing." Framing teacher aide training in terms of an equity issue for students was evident in several participants' discussion. Grace voiced her concerns in her account of a visiting teacher aide who was accompanying a student on a transition visit to Grace's school:

So often I hear other teacher aides talking and they are responsible for [the child's programme], and that's just so wrong. But they think it's right. And that it's fair, but it's not, it's not fair to the child. Whereas if they had had some training they would know that it wasn't right.

Not knowing the right thing to do was echoed in Esther's description of the negative impact that an untrained teacher aide had had on her niece at primary school. Esther explained, "it wasn't that she had done anything wrong, it's just that she didn't know that there was a better way to do it." Knowing "a better way to do it" was a prime reason for training. Participants suggested that education made the difference between an aide minding or babysitting a student and actually supporting learning and social involvement. Jack's reflections on some of the aides with whom he had worked revealed the impact that uninformed support staff could have on students:

I felt that they still worked on a deficit model really. They were still a bit of "keep the patient comfortable" kind of attitude to some of the children with more challenging behaviour or severe disabilities. They weren't trying to proactively get this child to achieve the best they could, or to improve their level of acceptance and integration into the school community. It still tended to boil down

to, they would be withdrawn and come and work one-to-one in the little room with somebody and not cause too much trouble.

In contrast, Esther's remarks about importance of inclusive education reflected her thoughtful understanding of knowledge gained through her training:

I think we all have to live together in one world so why break us up into little pieces, which society seems to understand when it comes to things like race and gender, but it's a bit slow on disability. But it's the same, you can't have females here and males living there or you know, people with dark skin in this corner and light skin in this corner, I mean it's not going to work, we've already tried that. It's the same with disability. You can't say well, let's have disability here and everybody else over here because we are all on the one planet. We are sharing the same space really, so we have just to learn to accept everybody as being different, but difference is normal which, maybe we should change the words different and normal.

Jack's and Esther's quotes revealed a stark contrast in thinking about human difference which shaped the ways in which individuals supported disabled students. Quality training that is underpinned by current thinking about disability and education has the potential to significantly impact on teacher aides' practice. As well, Rosie believed that training "would weed out people that were unsuitable." She and other participants expressed concerns about the kind of people employed as aides, making an implicit distinction between those who were there for the child and those for whom teacher aiding was simply a casual job. It appeared that different employment practices operated for teacher aides, it being highly unlikely or desirable that a teacher's position would be filled by a volunteer, by someone off the street or because of their relationship to a staff member. Jack noticed this distinction, commenting:

The teacher aides need to be better qualified really. If you're saying that to be a teacher you need to be qualified, experienced, well trained and a particular kind of person, then you also need that same criteria for teacher aides. If you are just going to employ somebody to kind of mind a child and to keep them occupied within a classroom -- that's not integration, that's just having a body in a particular place isn't it?

Given that training is not currently a prerequisite to employment as a teacher aide in New Zealand schools, it was instructive to learn about participants' reasons for undertaking formal study, particularly as this was usually at considerable personal cost. Their responses reflected their genuine commitment to learning to enable them to do a better job by children. Jack said, "I just wanted to be better at it really. If I was going to have the parents paying me to work

with their children I wanted to feel like I knew what I was doing.” Only one participant commented that her training had been a determining factor in her being employed as a teacher aide.

***The personal and professional benefits of training.***

Participants who had completed or were in the process of completing a teacher aide qualification were unanimous in citing both personal and professional benefits of training. Gaining confidence in themselves and their ability to work professionally was repeatedly mentioned by teacher aides. For most of these participants, undertaking tertiary level study was a significant challenge and a somewhat daunting prospect. For example, Kate admitted that “part of it was believing in myself, ‘cause I don’t think I did all that well at high school.” Grace was unequivocal in her beliefs about the value of training:

I can’t say strongly enough how important I think it is. I would say that probably a big difference I would notice would have been just in my personal growth, which in turn affects what you do. [The course] gave me a lot more confidence to do things.

The range of ways in which participants’ increased confidence infused their work was described by numerous participants. Brodie’s training enabled her to approach her work in a more reflective and sure manner, willing to question and stand up for herself and the students with whom she worked should situations warrant this. Grace observed, “I know right from wrong. It’s knowing what should and shouldn’t happen, whereas if I hadn’t been at that course I wouldn’t question some of what’s happening.” She cited situations in which untrained teacher aides acted in less than professional ways, routinely overstepping boundaries and treating confidentiality lightly. Being more reflective about one’s actions was also mentioned by participants as a positive outcome of training. Although Kate continued to carry out many of the same tasks with students, she had developed a deeper understanding of not only what they were doing, but how she could better support their learning. Interestingly, Esther observed that without training, “I suspect I probably would have over supported,” a tendency noted by other participants regarding “new” and untrained teacher aides, particularly those working in situations in which they had little guidance from teachers.

A number of participants very much valued the networking opportunities that formal study offered. While some aides experienced a sense of belonging in their schools, others did not.



The tertiary classroom therefore provided aides with a safe, confidential forum in which to share their joys, angst, and practical experiences with those in similar roles. Brodie noted that the benefits of such networking continued beyond the end of the certificate programme. She also alluded to teacher aide training and experience as the basis of a pathway into teaching, reflecting that, had she been younger, “I might have looked at going to teachers college. It gives you an insight. If you had that training and did then go on to be a teacher, I think you’d be much better at it.”

Brodie also noticed, as did others, that having a qualification appeared to raise their status within schools:

After I’d graduated, there were some that would talk to you sometimes, but after I got my little piece of paper, I was, not an equal, but went a few steps higher. I’d done something, I wasn’t just mum from down the road, filling in time—I’m studying and I’m doing it more seriously.

It is interesting to note that respect accompanied teacher aides’ educational attainment, raising their worth in the eyes of those charged with facilitating students’ educational achievements.

### ***Characteristics of effective training.***

Participants had clear ideas about the kind of training they felt would be most relevant for teacher aides, in terms of both content and delivery of courses. Having an initial general course that served as an orientation to teacher aide work was recommended. Those who had completed formal training definitely saw the value in sustained periods of learning leading to a qualification. In addition, as is the case with teachers, having ongoing professional development opportunities was considered desirable. Differentiating training to teacher aides working in primary and high school contexts was seen as important.

Understanding school structures and systems was one of the training content areas identified by participants. Lucy’s frank opinion reflected her recent experiences in working with a teacher who took little responsibility for the education of two disabled students in her class: “I definitely think teacher’s aides should have some sort of training, even if it’s just training them how to deal with slack teachers. The chain of command and how to go about getting change.” Learning about teacher aide and teacher roles and responsibilities was regarded as critical content material by participants, as was working within professional boundaries.

Working in a professional manner with parents and caregivers was also seen as important knowledge to include in teacher aide training.

A range of topics relating to teacher aides' work with students was outlined by participants. These included human development; understanding disability in terms of what it means for people; safe, ethical practices in supporting students in primary care and health matters; behavioural concerns; and friendships. While actually teaching reading or particular subjects is beyond the role of the teacher aide, having a basic knowledge of the New Zealand Curriculum Framework and teaching processes was considered helpful, to enable aides to support students in a more informed manner.

### ***Barriers to training.***

A number of systemic barriers precluded teacher aides from gaining a qualification that would inform their practice. One of the major disincentives was cost. Pip noted, "there is a course that you can do for teacher aides which takes two years and at the end of it entitles you to an extra 44 cents an hour." Unlike the majority of vocational and professional tertiary education programmes in which the benefits (i.e., qualification and ability to earn more over a period of time) outweigh the cost of fees, the situation of teacher aide qualifications tends to be the reverse, in that the costs of training are not recovered by a significant increase in pay. This situation is compounded by the relatively low pay earned by teacher aides, as well as their fluctuating hours and lack of job security.

In some situations, having a qualification was of either no advantage or a disadvantage in terms of teacher aides' employment. Liz's qualifications were ignored when her high school underwent a review process. Another participant recalled that "we had one teacher aide who, when she got a pay rise, lost an hour." Mary's experience in forfeiting her job so that an unqualified aide could be employed at a lesser rate to support a student for a greater number of hours was an example of training actually working against both aide and student. Mary expressed her disgust with such a situation, claiming that "you can't take time off a child because a teacher aide's more qualified, that's one that really bugs me."

Some participants were discouraged from training through a lack of knowledge about professional development provisions available through their schools. Caroline commented that "one school that I was at teacher aides knew everything, you would get weekly notes,

everything. At present we don't get anything, and don't really know what is going on." Not being informed of courses that were offered, nor of school funding to pay for the latter, was mentioned by a number of aides. Getting time to go to day workshops was also problematic for many aides, in that accessing relieving teacher aides was usually difficult. Actually putting into practice what was learned through professional development was sometimes an issue, in that some teachers and schools resisted changes in the ways in which teacher aides were traditionally utilised. For example, Ellen found that her participation in the Ministry of Education teacher aide professional development project was of limited value, "because it's in such a wee square box that it's quite hard. Like you're not allowed to go off and do some of those things because it doesn't fit into the classroom."

The training issues discussed by participants revealed that much depended upon individual aides' initiative and ability to fund their own education. That participants were prepared to do so with little incentive other than gaining knowledge and skills that enabled them to work professionally and effectively was a measure of their commitment to serving students. That there was little systemic support for training is troubling, given the extent and complexity of many teacher aides' work. The lack of recognition of the need to educate teacher aides is paralleled by a lack of teacher education about working in partnership with aides to effectively support the education of disabled students. This forms the focus of the next set of findings.

### ***Education of Teachers***

Comments about the adequacy of teachers' abilities to work with teacher aides and to teach students with a wide range of abilities were made by participants throughout their interviews. Grace asserted that "every child that's in that classroom deserves to be taught by the teacher, not the teacher aide." Others shared her belief that teacher education needed to include a compulsory component in working with disabled students and with teacher aides. Failure to do so resulted in inequitable situations such as that experienced by Rosie. She explained, "as teachers have said to me, 'we're not trained in special needs either,' so they're stuck with these kids they don't know what to do with. So off you go, here's a kid, get on with it." In an intermediate school, Kate wondered whether the satellite class was used by some teachers "as an escape route" that freed them of their responsibility to teach certain students.

Similar kinds of attitudes and actions were evident in high school contexts. Meg described the hardest part of her work as “teachers who don’t have a handle on these children and waste these children’s time by either putting it back to me to do something about it, there and then on the spot, or they are, what’s the word, disinterested.” Liz attributed the difficulties encountered with some high school teachers to their training:

I think the secondary school level of teacher training is not satisfactory. They only have to go and do one year of teaching, and I do not feel that that’s enough. I don’t think the kids are getting a fair deal in that respect, and it’s not the teachers’ fault, because they’re just not being trained in those areas.

Ellen shared Liz’s and Meg’s concerns about teachers’ abilities to scaffold students’ learning appropriately, noting that “I think that the learning has to be at their level. What is the point of teaching something if they haven’t got to here?”

### *Thinking and teaching differently.*

These accounts revealed significant issues that need to be addressed through teacher education if disabled students are to receive quality education as is their right. Deficiencies in teachers’ abilities to adapt curriculum and teaching strategies in response to the diversity of students in their classes are relatively easily addressed within teacher education. Of deeper concern however was teachers’ thinking about certain kinds of students. Throughout this study there were many examples of teachers’ constructions of disabled students in terms of their perceived deficits and ineducability. For example, Liz recalled her conversation with a teacher visiting the high school learning support unit:

This lady that comes in and does the reading programme with some of the kids said to me, “you’re wasting your time teaching things like that, does he really understand?” I said, “excuse me, he does understand, he’s quite an intelligent child. He understands a hell of a lot more than you think he does, just because he can’t communicate.”

Such presumption of incompetence was not uncommon. In primary school settings, Rosie and Mae both spoke of relieving teachers’ low or nonexistent expectations of the students they supported, which legitimised these teachers ignoring the students in favour of aides’ taking care of them. It was as if such students were invisible, or simply not worthy of the time and attention given to the rest of the children in a class. Kate’s discussion with a primary school

teacher conveyed the contentious understanding that some teachers had of disabled students' educational rights:

And [the teacher] had actually pointed out to me at the time that, "if we all said we aren't prepared to take this child then the school could turn it down." I said, "well, I don't know that you're allowed to under the mainstreaming rules of the child being eligible to attend." "Well, if we refused to teach them then that's what would happen." There was a bit of a debate...

It is interesting to consider Liz's teacher's reference to "wasting time" alongside Meg's earlier remark about teachers wasting children's time through their disinterest and/or tendency to transfer their teaching responsibility to the aide. The significant challenge to teacher education is to teach future teachers to think and act inclusively rather than exclusively, so that no one's time is wasted. This involves supporting student teachers to examine their assumptions about human difference, and, if necessary, to shift their thinking from a simplistic deficit understanding of difference to a more thoughtful and respectful understanding of the complexity of being human. It also involves instilling in future teachers their responsibility to teach all students to the best of their ability, as if each one matters.

Education of teachers occurs within sociopolitical and cultural contexts. The shortcomings of teacher education as manifested in individual teachers' attitudes and actions towards disabled students were influenced by educational policies which in turn were shaped by political forces. Participants spoke of the need for change at the educational policy level, targeting in particular those responsible for developing policy relating to the education of disabled students.

### ***Education of Policy-Makers***

The extent to which policy-makers and Ministry of Education officials understood the daily realities of children's school lives was questioned by several participants. Caroline commented, "I know they [Ministry officials] never will, but I think it's very important if they spend a day in a school with special needs children and just sit at the back of a classroom and see what happens." Esther, referring to the Ministry of Education's stated aim "to have a world class inclusive education policy for the next decade" queried the Ministry's understanding of inclusive education. She recommended that "they should all go and do [certificate course] before writing policies." She continued:

Because I think the people that are writing policies don't actually understand disability, but they pretend to ask people with disabilities their opinion and then just interpret it the way they want to because they don't really understand the issues. I think they really actually need to see, rather than hear, just see what's going on, they need to have an understanding. You can't make change unless you know what you're changing.

Esther's remarks were borne of frustration in witnessing the consequences of inexplicable, potentially unsound educational decisions made by experts whose knowledge of the children they purported to serve was limited to names on pages. She and other participants (representative of one of the least powerful groups in the education sector) astutely recognised the need for decision makers (those who exercise power within the education system) to gain a real and realistic understanding of school life as the foundation upon which informed and equitable decisions about children could be made.

### **In Summary: Commitment and Contribution**

*It puts you in a bit of a tricky situation in that I don't think I want to do this forever, but where do you say well, I can safely hand you over to someone else who's going to watch you blossom or who's going to just let you glide. That's quite scary. (Lucy, primary school teacher aide)*

What happened to students mattered to the participants in this study. Repeatedly, they justified their commitment and contributions as teacher aides "because of the child." A number of participants were prepared to put students' educational interests ahead of their own employment concerns, in some instances, losing work hours or their job as a result. The ways in which these aides resolved the tension between students' educational rights and their own employment rights revealed their strong commitment to doing their best by students. Whether explicitly articulated or not, most participants' work appeared to be underpinned by a sense of social justice and caring.

In contrast, it is worth noting participants' thoughts on the education system's commitment to equitable employment conditions for teacher aides. Liz posed an interesting question: "is it that the schools aren't getting the funding, is that why teacher aide wages are so low? Or is it because we're not valued?" Rosie remarked:

I think we are undervalued, that is the really greatest frustration, because I am willing to do all those things, I don't mind doing them and I'll do them because I think it's really great for the kids. I do probably as much as the teacher does

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everyday, and she can tell kids to go and sit over there whereas I can't. Although I enjoy doing it, it would be nice to be reimbursed for it. Because I just feel that teacher's aides are just undervalued really.

She concluded, "I think they do heaps around the place. If you took them all out of the school, imagine what would happen." Rosie, like Liz, has asked a thought-provoking question. Analogous to the contribution of volunteers within our communities, the work of teacher aides could be described as similarly invisible, impossible to accurately measure, and vital to the functioning of most school communities. It would indeed be instructive to imagine what would happen in schools in the absence of teacher aides. Such a situation may highlight the shortcomings of the education system that the presence and goodwill of teacher aides obscure. In this sense, as Grace suggested, who teacher aides are and what they do are not merely special education issues, but concerns for the compulsory education sector as a whole. As participants have emphasised, developing shared understandings of disabled students and socially just education that then inform adults' educational practice may help to make a difference in students' lives.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### DISCUSSION

*I feel as a teacher aide I'm doing the teaching and I'm getting paid a lousy eleven dollars sixty five an hour and I'm basically teaching a child and I find that frustrating. I had a teacher that actually set the programme out for me and I just assisted in that. That would be really great and very easy, but it's just not the way it is. And I often feel bad in that, okay, I'm teaching this child, am I doing any justice to this child, because this is a child who's ORRS funded, who comes with point whatever of a teacher. Am I doing too much? Should I be standing back and saying "no, to hell with it, I don't get paid to do this." But then it's not in my nature to be like that. But sometimes it does concern me to think I'm not a teacher and I don't profess to be one by any means, and sometimes I struggle with that line. Am I doing the right thing, am I doing this right? (Liz, high school teacher aide)*

The purpose of this chapter is to interpret participants' perspectives and experiences in relation to current research, and to identify and make sense of comparable and contrasting findings at both practice and theoretical levels (what McDonnell [2003] might refer to as surface and deep structures respectively). The chapter begins with an examination of students' understandings of teacher aides (Chapter Five), followed by interpretations of teacher aides' role(s) and their relationships with students (Chapter Six). Discussion then turns to teacher aides' and teachers' relationships and ways of understanding disabled students, as well as the issue of education for adults involved with disabled students (Chapter Seven). The chapter concludes with my interpretation of the teacher aide's role in terms of supporting the reproduction of the educational status quo or possibly contributing to the transformation of educational thinking and practice regarding disabled students.

Collectively, the analytic points made in this chapter represent the most significant themes of this thesis—that disability is an inherent part of being human, and involves a complex, dynamic, relational interaction of micro and macro level factors (MacIntyre, 1999; Priestley, 2003; Thomas, 1999); that how we come to know disability matters (Slee, 2004); that relationships and contexts are fundamental in constructing our ways of knowing the who and what of the world (Bogdan & Taylor, 1992; Goode, 1984; Kittay, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978); and that relationships are also integral to enacting social justice, to doing the right thing by people (Christensen & Dorn, 1997; Gale, 2000; Rosenau, 2004; Young & Quibell, 2000).



### Students' Understandings of Teacher Aides

*“In my opinion, a teacher aide is a person who helps someone who, a student who needs help” (Sophie, high school student).*

The contribution made by students in this and other studies reveals their competence as social actors whose unique perspectives and diverse experiences illuminate our understanding of some of the realities of disabled students' school lives. Their insight challenges traditional thinking about childhood and disability in terms of incompetence, passivity, dependence, and incompleteness. Students' emphasis on the role of *relationships* and school *contexts* in influencing their education reflects key aspects of current childhood and disability theoretical frameworks (Connors & Stalker, 2007; Smith, 2007). In sharing their views, students in these studies shed light on the efficacy of current educational policies and practices, and offer thoughtful experiential knowledge that can inform the development of future educational policy and practice. The following discussion synthesises and analyses significant findings from the present study, drawing on relevant literature reviewed in Chapter Three, together with theoretical insights explored in Chapter Two.

#### *Helpers*

Students in this study regarded most of their teacher aides in a very positive light. There was little evidence of the pervasive adult surveillance found by Watson et al. (2000), nor an indication that students experienced an asymmetrical relationship with aides, as noted by Skär and Tamm (2001). Participants' perspectives regarding the role of the teacher aide and their identification of the benefits and shortcomings of having teacher aide support revealed an astute appreciation of this aspect of their school life. Like the participants in Watson et al.'s (2000) research, students in this study demonstrated skill in identifying good and not so good practice.

The role of the teacher aide as “primary teacher” (Broer et al., 2005) was not actually specified by students, even though this was their experience at various times. However, half of this study's participants believed that the teacher aide was of greater help than the teacher, a finding similar to that documented by Norwich and Kelly (2004). Whether this was because of the amount of time spent with teacher aides acting in lieu of teachers, or that aides proved to be effective interpreters and clarifiers of teachers' instructions and subject material is unclear. It appeared that students appreciated the teacher aide's scaffolding role, in working

within each student's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) to help them make meaning of the teacher's delivery of curriculum. At other times, like some students in Broer et al.'s (2005) research, several participants were insistent that they did not need support in certain subjects, preferring to go to classes unaccompanied.

The key differences between teachers and teacher aides articulated by participants were echoed in the research literature. Nine year old Tim's observation that the "proper teacher teaches the class and not lets them go naughty" while the teacher aide was "just a helper" for certain students appeared to be a common understanding (Bowers, 1997; Eyres et al., 2004; Hemmingsson et al., 2003; Shah, 2007; Skär, 2003; Watson et al., 2000). Indeed, it is striking that the terms "proper teacher" and "just a helper" mirrored those used by students in Eyres et al.'s British study. Further parallels were evident in the explanations of the role of the teacher aide. While aides could help other students when the teacher was busy, their primary role was to help "needy" students, described by Tim as the "weak kids" and by Mack as "special needs" (even though Mack admitted that he did not actually know what this meant). Students in Bowers' (1997) and Eyres et al.'s (2004) research gave similar explanations. All of these students' matter of fact use of special needs discourse (Priestley's [2003] cultural disablement) suggests that this way of thinking about human difference continues to be reproduced and largely uncontested in numerous schools and communities. Such thinking may be reinforced by the structural organisation of schools, in which the concept of special needs is often realised in the use of physical space (Priestley's [2003] structural disablement). For example, participants referred to the use of space and location as a means of differentiating teacher aides from teachers, in that teacher aides often work with students outside the classroom, and/or sit next to a student while the teacher stands at the front of the class. Similar observations were made by children in the reviewed studies, one observing that an assistant "takes people out when they are less good" (Eyres et al., 2004, p. 156).

The teacher aide as friend (Broer et al., 2005; Skär & Tamm, 2001) was mentioned by two students, although others implied that they were friendly with their teacher aides, with whom they enjoyed positive relationships. The majority did not have teacher aide support at break times, and were quite emphatic that the role of the teacher aide did not include helping to make friends. Like some students in Broer et al.'s study, however, Paul tended to spend lunchtimes in the library or in the unit, where teacher aides were based. A teacher aide's role as a "protector from bullying" (Broer et al., 2005; Norwich & Kelly, 2004) was articulated by

only one student, even though bullying had been experienced by all. Contrary to the findings in some of the research reviewed, the students in the current study did not appear to feel unduly dependent upon teacher aides, even though school structures and practices seemed to encourage such dependence.

The personal and professional characteristics of the “professional” and the “ideal” assistants (Skär & Tamm, 2001) related most directly to those identified by the students in this study. In terms of personal attributes, I find it interesting that kindness and respect were considered important by students at opposite ends of the world (Sweden and New Zealand). Similarly, in Davis et al.’s (2003) research with children and young people in Scotland and England, many spoke of their wish for respect. Whether or not this desire is related to students’ experiences of the opposite of these human qualities is unknown; my interpretation is that students wanted to be treated with humanity. Supporting students by offering “just enough help ... the right way,” and only when required, was essential to students. In the present study, Rachel’s reference to not wanting people to feel sorry for unit students is echoed by a participant in Davis et al.’s study, who said “it’s like you want help, but you don’t want charity” (p. 208). Respecting students’ autonomy and right to make choices was also commonly valued. Involving students in the selection and direction of their support staff was considered necessary, and reflects students’ wishes to actively participate in matters concerning them, as stipulated by Article 12 in UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) and Article 7 in UNCRPD (United Nations, 2007).

Students also made thoughtful observations about the less helpful aspects of teacher aide support, consistent with those outlined in published research. They did not want to be over-supported (Bowers, 1997; Broer et al., 2005; Jones, 2005; Skär & Tamm, 2001) or over-protected (Bjarnason, 2005; Kelly, 2005; Skär, 2003), and stated unequivocally their need for their “own space” (MacArthur et al., 2007; Shah, 2007). Systemic concerns about the need for funding for more teacher aides, greater stability in their employment (Skär & Tamm, 2001), and the lack of relieving teacher aides reflected an understanding of the political constraints that impacted on their education, and paralleled the comments made by teacher aide participants. It is worth noting that students in this study raised the issue of training for teacher aides, to enable them to “do things the right way,” which included having sufficient curriculum knowledge when supporting high school students, a concern shared by teacher aide participants and one that has also been raised by researchers (Cajkler et al., 2006;

Giangreco, 2003). Training, according to several scholars, would help ensure that all teacher aides worked consistently in a safe, positive, and professional way with students, which includes respecting students' right to be involved in matters concerning them (Hemmingsson et al., 2003; Skär, 2003; Skär & Tamm, 2001).

Finally, despite their appreciation of assistance offered, two high school students in the present study felt the stigma that can accompany the presence of a teacher aide (Bowers, 1997; Broer et al., 2005). One way of interpreting this is as follows: the nature of students' impairments affected their education in varying visible and invisible ways; school sorting and labeling practices made students known in largely deficit terms; the assignment of extra adult help made students even more visible and left no doubt as to their inadequacy in the eyes of those deemed normal. Particularly in the worlds of high school teenagers, such nonconformity to an idealised notion of what being a teenager involves invoked rejection, derision, or other forms of banishment. Not surprisingly then, students in such circumstances found themselves in a dilemma. Accepting the academic help they required could significantly hinder their social inclusion in the worlds of their peers (Bowers, 1997; Broer et al., 2005; Hemmingsson et al., 2003; MacArthur et al., 2007; Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Skär, 2003; Watson et al., 2000), as well as affect opportunities to co-construct knowledge through interaction with other students.

It seems extremely unjust that, in the first instance, an education system condones the practice of assigning, albeit implicitly, the responsibility for the education of some disabled students to unqualified personnel. That this educationally unsound practice can result in distancing students socially from their peers further compromises the quality of their education and the development of a positive identity. That these barriers to doing and being (Thomas, 1999) are pervasive and uncontested in the very institutions that are intended to develop children and young people's capacities to be and to do reveals the extent of injustice experienced by some disabled students. Like Giangreco and Broer (2005), we need to question whether such practices would be acceptable for *normal* students.

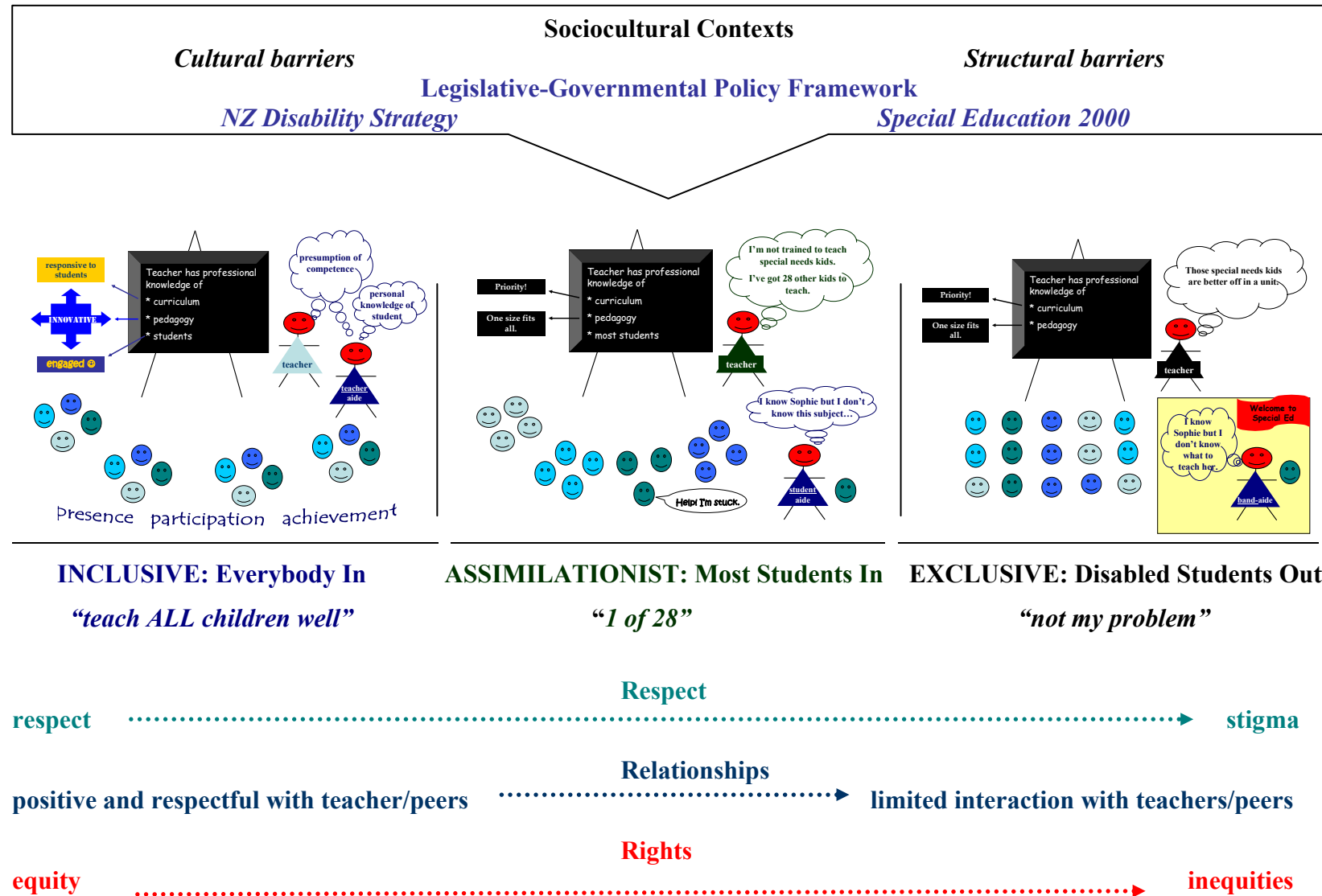
### **Interpreting the Role of the Teacher Aide**

*“I asked the principal ‘how do you become a teacher aide?’ and she said ‘as long as I could walk on water she would find me a job,’ and I said ‘I can do that’” (Brodie, primary school teacher aide).*

What is a teacher aide? Just an extra pair of hands, or an untrained surrogate teacher and parent and therapist and protector and nurse and friend and advocate? A teacher aide or a student aide? A respected member of staff or merely a dogsbody (Garner, 2002; Howard & Ford, 2007; Kerry, 2005)? Participants in this study experienced the ambiguity that characterises teacher aides’ roles and responsibilities. Like aides described in other research, the gap between what they were supposed to do and what they actually do was an ongoing source of tension. The causes of uncertain, inconsistent practices stem from both micro and macro level factors. These were identified by participants as including teachers’ attitudes and competence (Giangreco, Broer et al., 2001; Guay, 2003; Howard & Ford, 2007), the nature of schools’ cultures and policies (Davis et al., 2003; NZCER, 2004; Ypinazar & Pagliano, 2004), and the Ministry of Education’s lack of commitment and leadership regarding a national inclusive education policy (Higgins et al., 2006), clarification of the role of teacher aides, and the necessity of having qualified teacher aides. Despite these barriers to exemplary practice, teacher aides in this study showed extraordinary goodwill, based largely on their commitment to doing their best by the students with whom they worked.

### ***Constructing a Continuum of Teacher Aide Support***

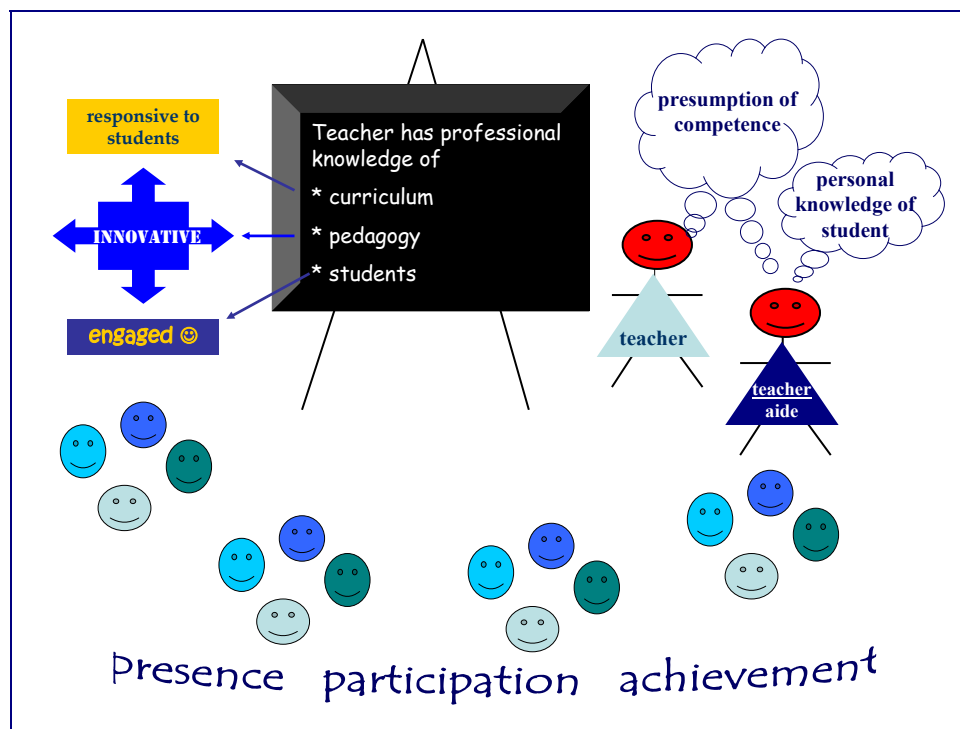
This part of the discussion focuses on analysing participants’ accounts alongside those documented in current literature regarding the role of teacher aides in students’ schooling. The process of analysing this aspect of the data led to the construction of a continuum, in which teacher aides’ responsibility for particular students ranges from that which is shared with teachers through to having sole charge of a student, with little or no support from teachers. While acknowledging that each aide works under different conditions even within the course of a school day, three general positions on this continuum are outlined, to provide a possible framework for understanding the range of factors that influence aides’ work with students. I wish to emphasise that this continuum is simply one way of interpreting and synthesizing data and extant research, and represents the way I have constructed meaning through engagement with teacher aides’ and students’ accounts of their experiences. Figure 4 provides a visual representation of the whole continuum. To enhance readability, Figures 4a, 4b, and 4c are presented alongside the discussions of each of the three positions on the continuum.



**Figure 4.**  
Continuum of teacher aide support.

***Everybody in: Inclusive educational contexts.***

*“I often see that I will keep a student on track and so you are just kind of in between the teacher and the student” (Ellen, high school teacher aide).*



**Figure 4a.**

**Continuum of teacher aide support: Inclusive educational contexts.**

The optimum use of teacher aides can be found in situations in which they work in partnership with teachers in inclusive contexts in which all students are “in” (Slee, 2006). Interestingly, only one of the 18 participants had consistently experienced such working conditions, while one third described somewhat similar experiences with certain teachers at various times, as documented in Chapter Six (*Roles and Responsibilities*) and Chapter Seven (*Every Teacher is Different*). The main features of these inclusive contexts are outlined with reference to supporting literature as follows.

In inclusive contexts, teachers work from a presumption of competence (Biklen, 1998, 2000b; Biklen & Burke, 2006) and hold high expectations for all students, with whom they develop respectful relationships and for whom they assume responsibility and ownership (Giangreco, Broer et al., 2001). Teachers are responsive to the heterogeneity of their students’ approaches

to learning, and plan accordingly so that each student can access the national curriculum in meaningful ways. Using a range of interactive and student-centred pedagogical strategies (Blatchford et al., 2007; Giangreco, Broer et al., 2001; Kasa-Hendrickson, 2005) that engage and promote interactions with peers, these teachers intentionally facilitate *all* students' participation and achievement in safe, positive learning environments. As Grace remarked, "that's it in a nutshell, that when they're good, they're good all round."

In such circumstances, teachers and teacher aides develop a positive working relationship and a shared understanding of their responsibilities, which involve aides being available to help in the class while not compromising their support to the student(s) they are employed to assist. As Mae observed of her role in a busy junior class, "I always make sure that the child I'm working with is finished first, then I'll move onto other children." In this way, the presence of teacher aides can benefit the class as a whole, as described in the literature review (Blatchford et al., 2007; Cajkler et al., 2006; Moran & Abbott, 2002; Rose, 2000; Wilson et al., 2003). Working collaboratively within clearly defined professional boundaries, the teacher aide also supports the disabled student in a range of academic, social, behavioural, and personal care tasks, being mindful of giving students space and time to engage with peers as well as with academic requirements. As noted, almost all the participants were acutely aware of achieving the delicate balance of being invisibly present in response to students' comfort levels regarding extra support.

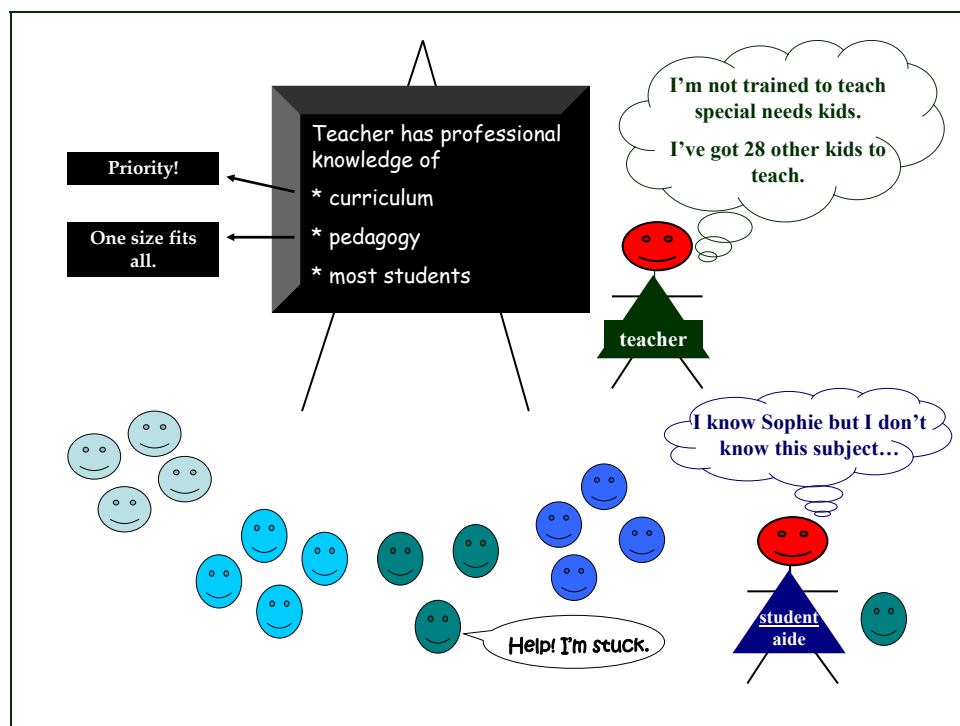
In these circumstances, the teacher aide is valued by the teacher and students as an extra human resource. Her role may best be described as a *teacher aide*, a helper, a scaffolder, and a connector or mediator, in facilitating interaction between students, teachers, and peers. For students who use communication strategies other than verbal, the teacher aide may also act as an interpreter or translator, role modeling appropriate ways of communicating to encourage peers to engage with rather than avoid particular students (Schnorr, 1997). In this respect, Rosie, Kate, Leah and Ann played particularly significant roles in revealing students' competence to their peers, enabling them to see that the students they supported were "just like us." Teacher aides who work in an interdependent manner with teachers in the circumstances described generally have a positive impact on students' learning, socialisation, and identity, as well as providing teachers with valued assistance in busy classrooms. Furthermore, as documented in Chapter Seven, such contexts are mutually inclusive of both disabled students and teacher aides, a finding comparable to that documented by Howes et al.



(2003) in their review of research regarding the impact of adult support on the participation and learning of students in mainstream schools. Howes et al. noted that teacher aides were most effective when working in positive, inclusive contexts in which they were respected and valued.

***Most students in: Assimilationist educational contexts.***

*The teacher's policy then and I'm a wee bit disappointed, that she is one of 28, she deserves one 28th of my time and that's what she will get. So she felt that she had achieved when she taught the child to say hello in the mornings and greet properly, but the rest of it was us. She was a very good teacher but she didn't really want this child there. (Kate, primary school teacher aide)*



***Figure 4b.***

**Continuum of teacher aide support: Assimilationist educational contexts.**

As was the case for the student participants in this study, the most typical circumstances for the majority of teacher aide participants were those in the middle of the continuum, in classes in which most students are “in,” and disabled students, while physically present, are differentiated by their absence from aspects of school life (Ypinazar & Pagliano, 2004). The assimilationist practice (Slee, 2001a, 2001c) of requiring special needs students to fit into the status quo normative framework of schools is achieved largely by the presence of teacher

aides, who act as a kind of admission ticket for students' entry into regular classes. For example, Pip and Paul (student) spoke of students not being able to attend classes in the absence of teacher aides. Teachers in these classrooms may act as more of a host (Giangreco, Broer et al., 2001; Marks et al., 1999) to the disabled student and teacher aide, who are often regarded as a package deal (Giangreco et al., 1997), the term used by two teacher aides in the present study.

Participants' experiences of assimilationist contexts are strikingly parallel to those documented in a range of studies. In these circumstances, teachers' presumption of competence does not necessarily apply to all students, and the education of the majority, "the other 28," is prioritised over the responsibility to teach all children (Lai et al., 2003). Several aides made reference to teachers' privileging the other 28 or 30 students, reflecting a particularly meritocratic educational disposition (Gale, 2000). In these instances, the teacher aide is required to assume ownership and responsibility for "their" student or a small group of struggling students, whose presence is often conditional upon behaving in ways that does not disrupt other students' learning. Teachers' planning for students' diversity does not extend to differentiating the curriculum or teaching strategies to ensure learning is accessible for all students, leaving the teacher aide in the difficult position of trying to adapt on the run in class (Guay, 2003; NZCER, 2004) while simultaneously managing student behaviour.

Almost all of the participants had experienced assimilationist situations, some on a daily basis, and more especially in high school settings. A New Zealand high school teacher in Hulston's (1999) research explained his approach: "I see my role as teaching as though they [teacher aides] are not there" (p. 50). His "one size fits all" teaching style meant that all students were given the same amount of time and same explanations; the teacher aide's role was then to provide any extra explanation, so that the teacher "probably shouldn't need to spend much time with the disabled student." Thus, although in the same room, the teacher effectively distanced himself from certain students through an explicit reliance on the teacher aide. The use of a narrow set of teaching strategies and lack of curriculum differentiation parallels the experiences of participants working in high schools, who encountered and had to compensate for teaching practice that failed to recognise the heterogeneity and diversity of all students in their classes. As noted in the discussion of students' perspectives, aides' lack of knowledge in certain specialised curriculum areas was problematic for both the aides and students receiving assistance (Howard & Ford, 2007).

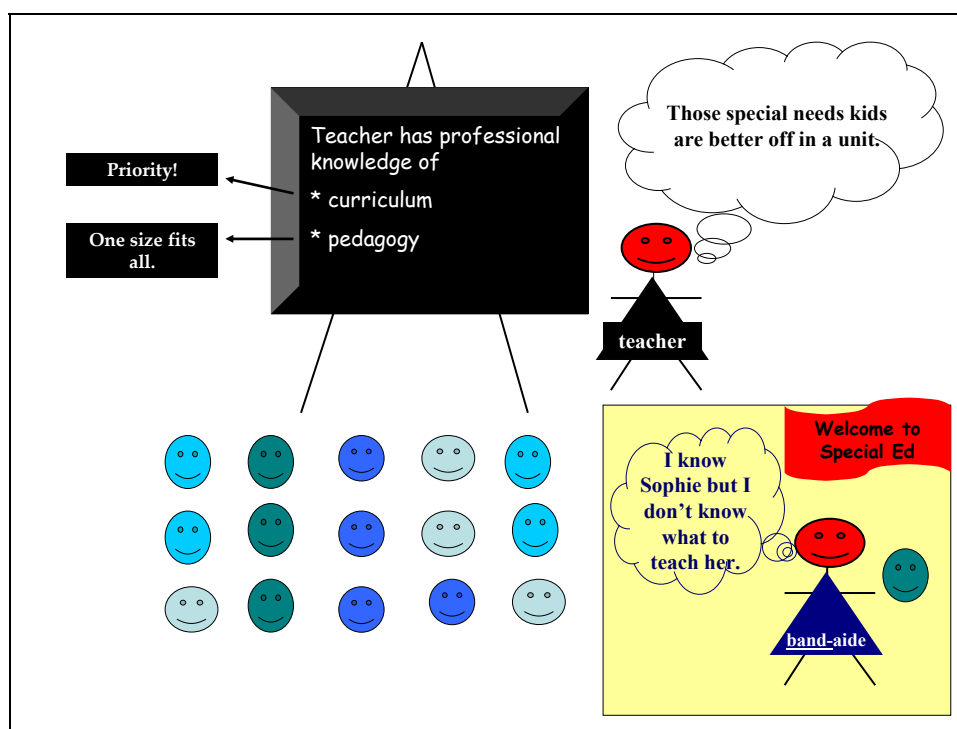
The above barriers to learning may be compounded if students feel that the presence of a teacher aide is stigmatising (Broer et al., 2005; Giangreco, Broer et al., 2001) as did two of the student participants in the present study. Thus, students already distanced by the teacher may try to distance themselves from the teacher aide; in doing so, their opportunities for learning are further reduced, resulting in the dilemma described by Hemmingsson et al. (2003) and others. A similar dilemma may be experienced by aides, whose obligation to support students' academic progress sometimes conflicts with their empathy for students' desires to be like, liked by, and with their peers (Howard & Ford, 2007). As Ann explained regarding her work with a high school student, "as far as her learning goes I'm sure one-to-one is better, but it's not better for her socially, so we have to balance all that out." In some cases, counter intuitively, the role of connector or mediator means disconnecting from students, to make space for peer interactions to flourish, a strategy used by numerous participants. Similarly, teacher aides' responsibility for individual students' and class discipline and behaviour can be a source of tension in some classes. While teachers have the overall responsibility, authority, and training, aides are often expected to deal with students' most challenging behaviours without any training, support, or power. Numerous examples of this were provided by Ann, Liz, Kate, and Jack. In the event of potential or actual disruption to the class programme, the standard response is for the teacher aide to take the offending student for a walk (Guay, 2003). Some students do a lot of walking. The control and surveillance role was perhaps the most challenging and least liked aspect of participants' work.

Teacher aides' roles and responsibilities lack definition and consistency in assimilationist situations. Essentially they are a *student* aide, which involves several inter-related roles such as quasi-teacher, behaviour monitor, social connector, and general helper for whatever else is required to support certain students (e.g., personal care). They act not only as a pressure valve in enabling teachers to do their core work of teaching the rest of the class, but also as a safety net for students who struggle academically yet are ineligible for additional assistance. Liz's chance discovery of a young teenager's inability to read was the most significant example of such a safety net in action. The nebulous and complex nature of teacher aide work is perhaps most evident in this part of the continuum, in which teacher aides are both required and resisted by teachers and students. Some teachers want aides, knowing that their presence will excuse them from dealing with certain children (as Kate observed, some teachers had an

attitude of “rather you than me”). Some teachers view aides as a threat and therefore want nothing to do with them or their student (as Mary experienced in being refused entry to a teacher’s class). Some students rely on teacher aide support and some, as noted, feel stigmatised by their presence and distance themselves from aides. These interacting and shifting dynamics require teacher aides to move shadow-like through schools, alternating between states of visibility and invisibility, experiencing respect and disrespect, all the while unsure of their actual role, yet working well beyond its boundaries.

***Disabled students out: Exclusive educational contexts.***

*I didn’t really know the level. No, I didn’t know the level, so I just sort of floundered away and found out sort of where he was at. And this is a bad thing too, because I mean we’re not teachers, I’m not trained. But that’s status quo. (Liz, high school teacher aide)*



**Figure 4c.**

**Continuum of teacher aide support: Exclusive educational contexts.**

The third part of the continuum is characterised by teachers who, unconsciously or consciously, regard disabled students as “not my problem,” thus they are “out” (Slee, 2006). Teachers’ reluctance to engage with such students results in teacher aides’ assuming primary responsibility for them, the default position of numerous participants. Just as teachers are “in

loco parentis” for students, teacher aides are placed in a similar “in loco teacher” role, as was the experience of several participants. Often working in separate locations within and outside the school, such “out of sight, out of mind” special education practices could be considered as the current educational equivalent of institutional practices, with teacher aides acting as the minders for students whose competence is not recognised, let alone presumed, by teachers. With minimal contact with qualified teachers, students’ access to the curriculum and effective pedagogy is minimal, if existent at all. In lieu of this, they are dependent on teacher aides who, to use Lucy’s words, are “floundering” in their efforts to act as a teacher while often feeling like a babysitter. “Filling in the day” with various activities that may or may not be related to the curriculum is the common experience of teacher aides in these circumstances. This end of the continuum is also distinguishable by a paucity of students’ relationships with peers, further impoverishing their education, as well as ensconcing them further in an adult rather than child centred world (Watson et al., 2000). Thus, in addition to the role of “in loco teacher,” aides could also be perceived as “in loco friend.”

While teacher aides’ enacted roles and responsibilities are unambiguous in that they are “it” (or “everything” according to Jo) as far as their students are concerned, this inherently flawed form of student support involves unqualified, unsupported aides working beyond the boundaries of safe, professional practice. In these circumstances, teacher aides could be considered in terms of a *band-aide*, a temporary first aid measure used as a quick and superficial fix for the “problem” of disabled students. Clearly, this would not be acceptable for students whose competence is uncontested. It was, however, sanctioned for a number of this study’s participants.

Teachers operating in the assimilationist and exclusive educational contexts, who regard disabled students as a problem or “not my problem,” act in the role of a “judge” (Biklen, 2000a, p. 345), essentially deciding which students are worth teaching. Those regarded as “qualitatively different” (Kugelmass, 2001, p. 62) become the responsibility of teacher aides, who are then appreciated for removing the problem from teachers, or disregarded in much the same way as the students they support. Their second class status was commented upon by Jack, Pip, Rosie, Kate, and others. Just as some participants and students enjoyed mutually inclusive contexts, so did they experience mutually exclusive situations, again paralleling Howes et al.’s (2003) findings.

The above circumstances typify those experienced by teacher aides in this and other research studies. A distinction needs to be made however between teacher aides who felt uncomfortable about some of the situations in which they had to work due to factors beyond their control, and those who appeared unaware of the detrimental impact of their practices on students. For example, all but one of the participants in this study demonstrated their understanding of the unhelpful teacher aide practices (Giangreco, Broer et al., 2001; Giangreco et al., 1997; Giangreco et al., 2005) outlined in Chapter Three. They were aware that their presence could absolve certain teachers from their responsibility to teach all students, and that they were not qualified to teach. They understood that their mere presence could get in the way of students' social interactions, and respected students' need for space and autonomy. They actively discouraged students' dependence on them, and encouraged the development of friendships. They knew students would not always have an aide by their side, and made a genuine commitment to offer the kind of support that would stand students in good stead as they made their way through school. In contrast, one participant seemed to work in a very controlling manner with "her" student, using his impairment to legitimate his separation from teachers and peers. She seemed to cultivate his dependence on her, and appeared to enjoy the insular nature of her relationship with him (Giangreco, Broer et al., 2001; Howes et al., 2003). While ostensibly helping him academically, this teacher aide seemed to have a negative impact on the student's development by isolating him from the range of sociocultural contexts in which he has to live his life.

Whether the teacher aide's primary role is that of a teacher aide, student aide, or band-aide depends on the circumstances of her work at any given time. Within these roles, a teacher aide may be expected to carry out many responsibilities, relating to learning, social interaction, behavioural concerns, physical well-being, and whatever else arises. She may work with one or several students, or a whole class; independently or collaboratively with teachers and other staff. She may help or hover (Giangreco et al., 1997) or hold her own (Marks et al., 1999). She may be an invaluable resource or a disaster (Moran & Abbott, 2002). She may make a significant or negligible difference in students' experiences of school. Because of and in spite of the structural and cultural constraints in which they worked, the majority of participants in the present study appeared to make all the difference for the students they supported. Several claimed that, in their absence, students would learn and do very little, if anything.

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***Some Theoretical Interpretations of a Continuum of Teacher Aide Support***

It is obvious that the roles of teacher aides working in inclusive educational contexts differ qualitatively from those in exclusive contexts, particularly in terms of relationships with students, teachers, and peers, which in turn impacts upon the quality of education available to students (Rietveld, 2005). Furthermore, “the relationships between students and curriculum and its delivery (pedagogy) may be enabling or disabling” (Slee, 2001b, p. 117). Howes et al. (2003) used the term “effective sociocultural mediation” (p. 5) to describe what teacher aides do by mediating between students and teachers, students and students, and students and the curriculum and culture of a school. Greater understanding of the impact of these disparate teacher aide practices on students’ experiences of school may be gained utilising a Vygotskian theoretical framework of human development. Such a perspective is consistent with current disability and sociology of childhood theorising, in focusing on the child/person as a competent social actor, and the centrality of relationships and sociocultural contexts in facilitating education and development (Connors & Stalker, 2007; Kelly, 2005; Priestley, 2003; Watson et al., 2000).

Vygotsky (1978) believed that education *leads* development, and that learning is “a shared-joint process in a responsive social context” (Gindis, 1999, p. 334). Conversely, in unresponsive contexts in which relationships are limited in quantity and quality, “education” could retard development. Vygotsky’s identification of disability from a point of strength rather than weakness (Gindis, 1999) can be likened to Biklen’s (1998, 2000b; Biklen & Burke, 2006) presumption of competence as the starting place for education. The notion of adults or capable peers scaffolding learning by working in relationship with a student within their zone of proximal development is of particular relevance to this discussion of teacher aides’ work in different school contexts. As referred to in the education part of the literature review, effective pedagogy is critical in facilitating genuine engagement with and understanding of the curriculum, and in enhancing student achievement (Lingard, 2007; Rietveld, 2005; Skidmore, 2002).

In order to scaffold learning effectively, the adult must (a) believe that the child can learn, (b) structure appropriate, engaging learning contexts and activities, (c) know the child well enough to identify their current knowledge and understanding, and (d) have the knowledge and skill required to guide the child to a new level of understanding and competence (Gindis, 1999; Skidmore, 2002). In other words, the competence of those in teaching roles and the

contexts in which education occurs are significant determining factors in the extent to which a student's developing competence can be demonstrated (Goode, 1992; Jorgensen et al., 2007). In the inclusive contexts outlined in the continuum above, teachers, operating from a presumption of competence, structure interactive learning contexts and draw on teacher aides' personal, informal knowledge of particular students to enable them to work within students' zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers' professional, formal knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy enables them to guide students to reveal their emerging competence, what Gindis (1999, p. 336) termed "the hidden potential" of a child. The teacher may also scaffold the teacher aide's understanding and knowledge which then develops her capacity to support students in an educationally sound manner. This was particularly evident in Esther's collaborative work with her teacher, in the context of a shared commitment to optimising students' learning.

In assimilationist contexts, teachers' minimal interaction with disabled students and limited involvement with teacher aides compromises the former's learning and the way in which it is supported by aides. Without specifically knowing students' current knowledge, teachers cannot work as effectively within students' zone of proximal development; with little knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy, teacher aides are limited in their ability to scaffold students' learning to develop their human potential. Moreover, limited interaction with peers limits access to another vital source of scaffolding, and so students' competence remains unknown (Gindis, 1999). Such a situation (one of many voiced by participants) was apparent in Rosie's teacher having as little as possible to do with "Rosie's" student, leaving Rosie to teach the student separately from peers, without the required curriculum or teaching knowledge. Finally, in exclusive contexts, despite teacher aides' best efforts, students' lack of opportunity to engage with teachers, peers, curriculum, and effective pedagogy means that they may lack proximity to any formal learning zone. During regularly scheduled time with a student in a high school unit, Jo did her best to occupy him, in the absence of any teachers, peers, or curriculum. Thus, while physically on school grounds, the student was, according to Jo, being babysat rather than educated.

While these changes directly affect disabled students, they also impact indirectly on the majority of students. Participants' concerns about some teachers' "teaching to the middle" rather than responding to students' heterogeneity, as well as some teachers' ineffectual class management strategies indicated that learning environments that were inadequate for disabled



students were less than optimal for all students. It seems reasonable to consider that *any* students in contexts other than positive, respectful learning environments would be similarly disadvantaged. Furthermore, what are students learning about the value of human beings if school structures and teachers' attitudes and practices make such transparent hierarchical judgments about student worth? The practice of "siphoning off" certain students serves to "impoverish and distort the individual development of every student, for they diminish our understanding of human difference" (Skidmore, 2002, p. 129). Similar observations were made by several participants, who commented on the positive contributions that disabled students made to peers' and teachers' understandings of being human.

In addition to shifts in the quality of education, some further observations can be made regarding the continuum of teacher aides' experiences. In moving from inclusive through to exclusive contexts, respect for students and teacher aides tends to diminish or mutate into stigma (Howes et al., 2003), paralleling the shift from a presumption of students' competence to an assumption of incompetence or deviance. For example, most of the participants who worked in assimilationist or exclusive contexts spoke of a lack of respect for both the children they supported and themselves. Similarly, students' right to equitable education moves from the realm of reality to rhetoric in the shift from inclusive to exclusive environments; this was a common experience for participants. As Kearney and Kane (2006) noted, "the more value, the more rights" (p. 206). Within a meritocratic education system, students perceived as being of lesser value cannot necessarily assume the unconditional nature of their rights. Stigma, deficit assumptions and conditional access to education and justice are indicators of special education discourses that continue to permeate the deep structures of the education system.

With the diminishing of respect, competence, and equity, the need for advocacy on behalf of students increases. This role is often assumed by teacher aides, as evident in the literature reviewed (Chopra et al., 2004; French & Chopra, 1999; Howard & Ford, 2007; Marks et al., 1999), despite their lack of power within school structures (Davis & Watson, 2001). Participants in the present study, working mostly in assimilationist and exclusive contexts, provided many examples of their advocacy for students (as well as for themselves). Other than bullying, which is not confined to disabled students, every issue mentioned by participants related to cultural and structural barriers experienced by the students they supported. Davis and Watson (2001) proposed that:

... adults in schools, like many children, are subjected to labeling processes which create pressure for them to conform to other adults' expectations. Their everyday work experiences are fluid and involve constant interactive moments where they have to decide whether to act in a manner which is true to their selves or a manner that is best appropriate to the expectations of those they work with. (p. 681)

The teacher aides with whom I spoke were very conscious of their precarious, relatively powerless positions in schools, yet chose to respond to the inequities they witnessed regarding students' education, thus challenging barriers to students' being and doing (Thomas, 1999). In doing so, I believe that they were not only true to themselves, but to the students they served.

The continuum shifts might also be interpreted in relation to social justice and disability theorising (Fraser, 1995; Priestley, 2003). In assimilationist and exclusive contexts, disabled students experience structural and cultural disabling and injustice by way of limited access to the national curriculum by qualified teachers, and disrespect via labeling, stereotyping and so on. Redistributive solutions such as assigning teacher aides to special needs students are affirmative of the educational status quo, in that such surface solutions do not require any consideration of the deep structural reification of the social construction of special needs. As Fraser (1995) recognised, such responses may engender further cultural injustice by heightening students' perceived "neediness" in the eyes of the majority, who may interpret, as did a teacher in MacArthur's (2002) study, that a particular child was "a waste of resources" (p. 13). Liz, Kate, Rosie, and Jack gave examples of such attitudes and comments made by teachers, the "28 others" argument being aired frequently in defense of their positions. In contrast, in inclusive contexts, both redistributive and recognitive forms of justice are apparent, in ways that do not counteract each other. For example, Esther experienced working with a teacher who recognised and appreciated students' diversity and every child's right to learn in ways that are meaningful to them. Working from a presumption of competence to scaffold children's learning, with the help of a teacher aide who was available for the class, increased the likelihood of all students having opportunities to achieve, thus promoting excellence and equity in education.

The notion of relational justice (Christensen & Dorn, 1997) must also be considered in regard to teacher aides' work in assimilationist and exclusive contexts in particular. The latter authors shared Gale's (2000) belief that justice is enacted in the relationships between people. Similarly, Rosenau (2004) argued that both relationships *and* rights are necessary to challenge and bring about changes in deficit thinking and discriminatory social arrangements. Thus, the

power of relationships in generating respectful knowledge and feelings about students was instrumental in aides advocating for students when faced by instances of injustice in schools. There were many instances of this: Leah advocated for a child who was locked in the cloakroom by her teacher; Liz frequently defended students' competence when faced by doubting teachers; Ellen was consistently "on the look out" for students; Meg stood up for a student when teachers wasted the child's time; Grace ensured that a student accessed much needed help with literacy; Kate secretly sought help so her student could learn to communicate in ways others understood; Brodie advocated against continuation of ABA therapy when she saw her student regress rather than progress; Rosie's unshakeable belief in students led her to fight for appropriate resources; Mary gave up her job to provide a student with increased hours, albeit from a less experienced aide; Jack tried to counter teenage peer and teacher ignorance about disability, so that school would be a less hostile place for a student. In relationship with students, they did what they could to minimise the occurrence and impact of injustice.

### **Teacher Aides' Relational Understanding of Students**

*"I let him work, and let him call me. That's one of the ways to build up a relationship is not be there and hovering. You have to be careful that you don't smother"*  
(Ellen, high school teacher aide).

That respectful relationships constitute the heart of teaching and learning is one of my core convictions, hence my interest in exploring the nature of student and teacher aide relationships in this research project. To date, relatively few studies have focused specifically on teacher aides' thinking about and relationships with students, although both insular and positive relationships have been identified in some research (e.g., Giangreco, Broer et al., 2001; Groom, 2006; Marks et al., 1999). The development of relationships is largely invisible, unstructured, informal work, yet it has a critical impact on students', teachers', and teacher aides' experiences of school. Howes (2003) emphasised the importance of respecting the "pedagogical value of the relationships that support staff have with children and young people" (p. 152), noting that they carried out "extremely important work in the spaces left by the structures and formalities of schooling" (p. 150).

Teacher aides typically come to their work without formal knowledge of teaching and its inherently relational nature, and with varying understandings of disability, depending upon

their life experiences within different sociocultural contexts. How then do they come to know the students they support, and how does this affect the relationships that underpin their work together? This part of the discussion explores teacher aides' ways of knowing and relating with students.

### ***The Development of Accepting Relationships***

*"I think when you actually start to know a person, the label becomes irrelevant" (Esther, primary school teacher aide).*

Almost all of the participants in this study developed very positive, respectful, trusting relationships with the students they supported, while working within clearly defined professional boundaries. Their relationships can be described as accepting, in that they chose to focus on students in terms of *who* they were, rather than *what* they were deemed to be by unknowing others. According to Bogdan and Taylor (1987), accepting relationships unfold in stages, in which the power of the label or stereotype recedes as individuals become familiar with each other. Esther, like other participants, considered the process of getting to know students as a "natural progression," adding the realisation that "this wee person's actually a person and there's cool things about them and some challenging things about them too, but they're very much their cool things and their challenging things."

As with most relationships, a sense of connection and liking is necessary for relationships to flourish. Spending time and doing things together facilitates knowing the person in terms of her/his capacities and individuality. Getting to know the person and her/his experiences of isolation and discrimination enables the partner to construct an alternative way of knowing about human difference that exposes the false nature of stereotypes. Rosenau (2004) explained that, in coming to know individuals, in making an "emotional connection the negativity of disability lost its power" (p. 269). These teacher aides were effectively constructing students' identities in terms of their humanness, rather than the special needs' discourse often used within education systems.

### ***The Social Construction of Humanness***

*When he first read his book to the class, all the children were amazed. “He can read!” “Yeah, he’s just like you.” He does these little brilliant things and the kids see with their own eyes—oh, there is something there... (Rosie, primary school teacher aide)*

Bogdan and Taylor’s (1992) conceptualisation of the social construction of humanness provides a useful framework for interpreting participants’ understanding of students. The experiences of this study’s participants parallel those of teachers documented in research conducted by Kasa-Hendrickson (2005) and Kliever (1998), who similarly believed that students were thinking individuals with whom they shared reciprocal relationships and a shared social place. Each of the four components of this framework is considered in the following discussion.

Rosie’s frank assertion that “people think people who can’t speak are thick” reflects the not uncommon assumption that some disabled people cannot think, have no intelligence, and are incapable of learning (Bogdan & Taylor, 1992; Kasa-Hendrickson, 2005). These pessimistic constructions were resisted by most participants, who interpreted students’ identities in more optimistic ways. They chose to operate from the least dangerous assumption (Donnellan, 1984), in presuming students’ competence and capacity to think (Biklen, 1998, 2000b; Biklen & Burke, 2006; Broderick, Mehta-Parekh, & Reid, 2005; Jorgensen et al., 2007; Kasa-Hendrickson, 2005). In doing so, teacher aides set expectations and provided opportunities and contexts in which they supported students to demonstrate their competence (Kasa-Hendrickson, 2005).

Perhaps the most powerful examples of teacher aides’ initiatives in revealing students’ competence and humanness are those relating to communication. Rosie’s and Kate’s resourcefulness in facilitating the development of students’ communication are particularly noteworthy, albeit short-lived. In both cases, even though the students had proven their ability to think and use symbolic language, subsequent teachers and teacher aides effectively silenced them by no longer using their communication systems. As Rosie observed, “we’d found a way to communicate with her, and that’s taking away her right to communicate.” Other aides spoke of similar concerns about the damage that had been done to students through false assumptions of ineducability, which legitimated their being denied access to the most basic means of social engagement which is necessary for the development and emergence of

competence within a Vygotskian framework. Furthermore, Kittay (2001) claimed that a failure to recognise someone's capacity to think "is to deny an individual's personhood. When we do so, we cut ourselves off from those who enlarge our relational possibilities, and we lessen ourselves as persons" (p. 568).

Instead of disability being the most salient characteristic that set students apart from others, participants focused on each student's individuality in differentiating them from other people. The heterogeneous nature of personality, likes and dislikes, feelings and motives (Bogdan & Taylor, 1992) as well as strengths and interests were identified in respectful ways by participants. Like Kasa-Hendrickson's (2005) teachers, these aides utilised students' interests and capacities to engage them with their peers and in their learning. Leah's description of encouraging a student's peers to "give him sniffs of their lunch so he can sniff the doughnuts" provided an especially lovely example of "rethinking performance and participation" (Kasa-Hendrickson, 2005, p. 64), thus involving someone with multiple impairments in the everyday aspects of school life. Howes (2003) also noted the positive impact that support staff can have if they possess and use personal knowledge of children to engage them in school life.

Disabled students may often be on the receiving end of helper-helpee relationships in which their contribution is unrecognised (Meyer et al., 1998). The relationships which formed the focus of Bogdan and Taylor's (1992) work were however marked by reciprocity, as were those described by this study's participants. Some spoke of the invaluable philosophical contribution that students made to others' understanding of what it is to be human, just as Kittay (2001) noted that her daughter provided people with "new perspectives on what it means to be a person" (p. 567). Others took joy in witnessing students' achievements, as did participants in other research (Bogdan & Taylor, 1992; Garner, 2002). Some really enjoyed students' sense of humour and the fun they shared in their work with students (Bogdan & Taylor, 1992). When talking about students, participants' faces lit up, conveying the strength of their feelings for those who constituted the heart of their work.

Reflecting on her experiences with her disabled niece, Esther observed, "I suppose that's where my understanding comes from, wanting to make a better place for her. If I could do that in a wee way somewhere, then I'd have done my job." Teacher aides' advocacy in finding and securing a place for disabled students in places where they were not always wanted was evident in numerous ways. In their role of connector, they facilitated opportunities for

students and peers to interact, and played a vital role in subtly educating peers and teachers to move beyond labels or appearances to see and understand the ways in which students were “just like you,” “just another kid” (Meyer et al., 1998, p. 201). In some respects, teacher aides’ efforts in enhancing students’ visibility, acceptance, and place in schools were more successful with students than with teachers. While attributing thinking, individuality, and reciprocity can be achieved by one person choosing to regard others in positive and respectful ways, defining a place for students involves macro level factors beyond teacher aides’ control. For example, Liz’s attempts to involve a student in school assemblies and certain mainstream classes were unsuccessful because of cultural and structural barriers that dictated that certain kinds of students had no place in the centre of school life. Indeed, their place was beside their teacher aide, preferably away from the heart of the school. The need to consider both micro and macro level factors in determining disabled students’ place in school was evident in this and other participants’ experiences.

In his interpretations of the Duke family’s lives, Taylor (2000) observed that “small worlds can exist that do not simply reproduce the broader social contexts in which they are embedded” (p. 84). Members of this family drew on “firsthand knowledge” (p. 84) of one another to construct identities that differed from those constructed and imposed by official agencies. Firsthand knowledge can be likened to “local understanding,” the term used by Kliewer and Biklen (2001) to describe “... a radically deep, intimate knowledge of another human being. ... born out of caring, interactive, and interdependent relationships in which both participants infer valued capacities and competence on the other” (p. 4). Working closely with students for sustained periods of time enabled most of the teacher aides in this study to develop a firsthand knowledge or local understanding of students as complex human beings. Such personal ways of knowing were far more useful and accurate in guiding aides’ actions than the master status by which students were more commonly identified. Participants seemed to have a tacit, or, in some cases, explicit understanding of disability not as a fixed intrinsic entity, but as a social construction, influenced by the nature of relationships and contexts in which individuals’ lives unfold (Jorgensen et al., 2007).

Why did almost all of the teacher aides work from optimistic standpoints which often contradicted official, professional ways of knowing students? Sikes, Lawson, and Parker (2007) believed that “understandings and actions are mediated by personal, subjective and emotional experiences rooted in the things that have happened to people in the contexts they

inhabit” (p. 358). One third of the aides were familiar with disability through family members, which seemed to inform their understanding of students (Parasuram, 2006; Rice, 2006; Rosenau, 2004). Like participants in Bogdan and Taylor’s (1992) research, some aides knew intuitively that “there was a kid in there.” Some showed empathy for the difficulties experienced by students who were treated inequitably; some seemed to be motivated by a strong sense of justice and hope. These teacher aides were willing to work in a “terrain of tacit uncertainty” (Kliwer & Biklen, 2001, p. 9), never knowing the possible outcomes of their efforts with students, yet committed to giving them as many opportunities as possible to actively engage in learning and school life. As a student teacher noticed about a disabled child in Rice’s (2006) study, “he might not make it, but if I never give him the chance, he definitely won’t” (p. 258). This echoes the beliefs voiced by Rosie, Liz, Esther, Kate, Leah, and Brodie, that it was better to “give things a go” than give up on a child. Kugelmass (2006) observed that an “internalised sense of agency” (p. 288) was required to “resist dominant ideologies” while having to work within with organisational structures. A number of participants demonstrated this sense of agency in their prioritising the well-being of the students they supported.

Why did one participant differ from the other 17 in her deficit interpretation of “her” student? Regarding him as a “social burden,” this aide attributed his differences to his impairment, thus narrowing, indeed resisting, opportunities for this student to engage in relationships and contexts in which his potential could develop. A possible explanation for her deficit construction might lie in her relative inexperience in working as a teacher aide (she was the least experienced of all participants), and in her lack of a relevant qualification to inform her work.

Why does it matter how teacher aides construct the identities of the students for whom they often have considerable responsibility? Goode (1984) suggested that, in the absence of “competency granting social relationships” (p. 244), individuals may have no one who knows them in terms of all they can do. Without anyone to defend their competence, much less support them in revealing it, individuals may be treated as less than they are, and in turn, become less than they could be, consistent with Thomas’ (1999) notion of barriers to being and doing. Thus, teacher aides who develop competency granting relationships with students can make a significant difference in illuminating their humanness and capacities, and



correspondingly, their right to an education that enhances rather than diminishes their human development.

### **Teacher Aides and Teachers: Different Ways of Knowing?**

*“What makes it effective is the classroom teacher, the whole thing comes back to the classroom teacher really, I think” (Ellen, high school teacher aide).*

One of the primary school teacher aides remarked, “it depends on the individuals that you’re dealing with. I think it’s an individual thing, and there’s good and bad.” The findings of this study reflect those in current literature regarding teachers; there are “good and bad.” Biklen’s (2000b) observation that “the obligation of educators is always to presume competence or educability and then to discover ways a student may achieve it” (p. 446) was demonstrated by some teachers and not by others. Interestingly, participants’ identification of teachers’ personal and professional attributes were remarkably similar to those made by students about their teacher aides.

### ***Teacher Aide - Teacher Relationships***

*“If you haven’t got a good relationship with your teacher and it’s not working in the classroom then you’re wasting your time, so you shouldn’t be there” (Esther, primary school teacher aide).*

The profound influence of teachers in enhancing or diminishing teacher aides’ work with students was evident in the emergence of this topic in the inductive analysis of participants’ interview transcripts. This proved to be the largest code, in which every participant commented, even though no questions about teachers had been included in my interview guide. Teacher aides in studies examined in the literature review expressed similarly strong views about working with teachers, their experiences ranging from situations in which both they and students were treated unprofessionally, to those in which they were genuinely appreciated and respected (Giangreco, Broer et al., 2001; Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2001; Howard & Ford, 2007; Howes et al., 2003; Marks et al., 1999; NZCER, 2004). Effective working relationships were characterised by teachers and teacher aides synthesizing their respective formal knowledge of pedagogy and curriculum and informal knowledge of students in order to best serve the latter. Shared understandings of students’ capacities and

entitlement to education, as well as their respective roles and responsibilities in the classroom also contributed to good relationships (Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2003; Kugelmass, 2001). In Liz's words, "you need to know where each other's coming from." As in many relationships, compatibility and respect, as well as a sense of humour, were considered important by participants.

Having sufficient time to communicate effectively and to develop a positive working relationship in which teachers and teacher aides had a shared understanding of their respective roles and responsibilities were recurring themes in this and other research. As witnesses to teachers' practice, participants were generous in understanding the demanding and complex nature of their work, and were cognisant of the extra pressures placed on good teachers who assumed an advocacy role in their attempts to access the resources required by students to enact their right to education. They were less tolerant of, in Meg's words, "teachers who don't have a handle on these children and waste these children's time by either putting it back to me to do something about it, there and then on the spot, or they are, what's the word, disinterested." Naturally, the nature of teacher-teacher aide relationships affected not only the quality of students' education but also teacher aides' levels of job satisfaction. It is worth noting that of the seven participants who are no longer working as teacher aides, at least three left their jobs because of teachers' attitudes and actions, either towards them and/or the students they supported. Clearly, who the teacher is and how they act makes a difference.

This part of the discussion focuses on teachers' ways of thinking and how they come to know disability, in an attempt to understand their responses to and influence on students' and teacher aides' experiences of school. Reference is made to the continuum of teacher aides' experiences in inclusive, assimilationist, and exclusive contexts as one way of interpreting teachers' understandings of disabled students as evident in their practices. In doing so, I am mindful of the ease with which generalisations can be made, which can so readily shift into assumptions that are unquestioned. Obviously this is not my intention. I reiterate that the following discussion represents my interpretations of data in light of relevant literature. Others may well construct different meanings.

### ***Teachers' Ways of Knowing Disability***

*I think you go in sometimes with the expectation that there is not a lot going to happen for that child, not just with the teacher but because they don't know what's going on or where they are at and they are not really sure if they want to.*  
(Kate, intermediate school teacher aide)

How teachers think about students matters a great deal (Ainscow, 2005, 2007; Bearn & Smith, 1998; Biklen, 1998, 2000b; Biklen & Burke, 2006; Broderick et al., 2005; Cook-Sather, 2002; Davis & Watson, 2001; Gaad, 2004; Grenier, 2006; Jorgensen et al., 2007; Kasa-Hendrickson, 2005; Kearney & Kane, 2006; Kliwer & Biklen, 2001; MacArthur et al., 2004; Rice, 2006; Rouse, 2006; Sikes et al., 2007; Slee, 2004; Ware, 2001). Unlike most teacher aides, teachers have been socialised into the profession of teaching through completion of an academic qualification that incorporates multiple opportunities for teaching practice in several schools, whose cultures may range from inclusive to exclusive. In a three year primary or one year secondary teaching qualification, opportunities to develop an in-depth, current understanding of disability are extremely rare. Thus, the formal knowledge acquired by teachers tends to reflect and perpetuate the status quo within a society. In this study, most of the participants had encountered teachers who experienced what I term "label effects" (as opposed to Thomas' [1999] "impairment effects") in which their judgment and actions were tainted by unquestioned and unchallenged positivist beliefs in entrenched taken for granted truths about the dichotomy of disability and normalcy. Participants had also worked with teachers who thought otherwise about disability, and with whom they had a shared understanding of a child's capacities and right to learn.

How can two adults working in the same educational context construct such antithetical identities for the same student? The most striking example of this situation was provided by Lucy, who supported two primary school students whose only commonalities were their gender, age, ethnicity, and impairment label. The latter characteristic was the one that determined that these two children would be best served by having teacher aide assistance. In one year, Lucy and the two students were included as respected members of the class in all respects, reflecting the first set of inclusive circumstances outlined in the continuum of teacher aides' experiences. The following year, all the children, along with Lucy, moved to the classroom next door. That year, Lucy and her two students spent much of their time separated from the class, with minimal contact with the teacher. Their circumstances were

more like those outlined for assimilationist and almost exclusive contexts, with Lucy, an untrained aide, more often than not acting as the two students' teacher. The only difference between the first and second years was the change in teacher. Recognising that some teachers are great and others not so, a mother observed, "I think it just comes back to that basic innate thing that people decide whether these kids are worth it, or not worth it" (Ypinazar & Pagliano, 2004, p. 432).

So how do teachers come to know disability? Slee (2001c) claimed that many people, including teachers, come to know disability from a distance, rather than from more personal ways of knowing. Similarly, Kliewer and Biklen (2001) contrasted "distant or institutionalised understanding" with "local understanding" (p. 11) that develops through interdependent relationships. Many practicing teachers currently working in New Zealand schools have had little opportunity in their pre-service training to think about, let alone know students whom the education system separates into special education. These teachers may or may not have had an opportunity to acquire formal knowledge of disability and, depending on the teacher education provider, this knowledge may reflect deficit special education thinking and practice, or more current understandings of inclusive education underpinned by research conducted within a Disability Studies framework. Similarly, professional development relating to special or inclusive education is not widely available and/or prioritised, as the NZCER (2004) evaluation of the teacher aide project indicated. The continued existence of special schools, units, and classes, as well as the widespread use of teacher aides means that many teachers, particularly in secondary school contexts, do not have to have contact with disabled students unless motivated to do so. Moreover, the very real demands placed on teachers through large class sizes, an increasingly diverse student population, the implementation of new curricula and qualifications, large administrative workloads, and other pressures limit the time that teachers have for getting to know and teach all students. As well, as Meg and Esther pointed out, teacher aides have the opportunity to focus solely on one child if required, whereas teachers have multiple and constant demands on their time and attention. Thus, within the profession of teaching in its broadest sense, opportunities to come to know disability in ways other than deficit and special need are limited, and possibly, for some, irrelevant. Under such circumstances, many teachers will continue to know disability from a distance, physically, cognitively, and emotionally.

From a distance, the powerful “bricolage of segregation, the canons of medicine, special education and popular mythologies” (Slee, 2001b, p. 119) shapes public knowledge of disability in terms of the pathological wrongness of individuals. “What’s wrong with her?” represents this deficit discourse; the asking of such a question, however benevolently, misplaces and obscures the location of the problem. As García and Guerra (2004) noted in their research regarding the deconstruction of deficit thinking in schools, the majority of teachers are well-intentioned, yet may not be conscious of the power of deeply embedded cultural beliefs in influencing their own identity, worldviews, and teaching practices. Likewise, Carrington and Robinson (2006) claimed that “cultural constructions of difference” (p. 324) are re-presented in teachers’ thinking and attitudes, yet many are not cognisant of these assumptions and the ways in which they determine their work with students. They made the distinction between teachers’ “espoused theory” (what they say they believe) and their “theory in use” (p. 325). The latter refers to what they actually do, which may differ to their espoused theory. Ainscow (2005) referred to teachers’ use of “tacit knowledge” (p. 115) in their intuitive work with students, in which their actions are determined by unexamined taken for granted assumptions, which can have a negative impact on students’ education. The tendency to locate failure in individual students rather than in institutional cultures, structures, and practices, can result in students’ potential being underestimated (Timperley & Robinson, 2001) or “written off” (García & Guerra, 2004, p. 160) before they step or wheel through the school gate. This was evident in participants’ numerous accounts of teachers’ thinking of certain students as problems that the presence of teacher aides would solve (as documented in Chapter Seven).

As previously noted, Rosenau (2004) used the term personal operating theories to describe “our own ever-present ontology and epistemology” (p. 264). In other words, our personal theories about how the world *is* and how we *know* what we know. In the case of the teacher aides in this study, their firsthand knowledge or local understanding of disability developed through their often close relationships with students, which resulted in most of the participants constructing students’ identities in terms of their humanness (Bogdan & Taylor, 1992). In Rosenau’s (2004) words, “identities that mattered were *relational* categories rather than descriptive categories of appearance” (p. 269). She suggested that our ways of being with others depends not only on how we *think* but how we *feel* about them. This in turn is influenced by social contexts and current and past experiences of relationships.

In contrast, the personal operating theories of many teachers did not appear to be grounded in firsthand or local relational ways of knowing disability, and so their distant knowledge was not challenged or interrupted (Ainscow, 2007) by evidence that contradicted their existing understandings. In the absence of in-depth relationships and their associated emotional component, some teachers seemed to rely on the surface features of appearance, impairment, and/or label and the attendant deficit assumptions to inform their thinking about and responses to disabled students. Although Kliever and Biklen (2001) argued that local understanding is as valuable as institutionalised knowledge, the power imbalance between teacher aides and teachers privileges the perpetuation of distant knowledge as the way of interpreting disability in many school contexts. That this is problematic is articulated by Slee (2001b) in his observation that “in reducing the person to the textbook accounts of defectiveness we deny possibilities for learning and active citizenship lying within their complexity” (p. 117). Biklen (2000a) reminds us that the role of teachers “... is not to define who people are and aren’t, or, for that matter, what they can be expected to be, but to be supportive in seeking strategies that could foster an unfolding life” (p. 351).

The accounts of teacher aides in the present study highlight the deficits in the education of disabled students, which derive significantly from shortcomings in the ways of knowing of teacher aides, teachers, and those who have power over their education and employment. The next part of this chapter focuses on the education of adults involved with disabled students.

### **Educating Adults: The Need for Shared Understandings**

*“Every teacher I’ve worked with has said, ‘well, I’m not trained to deal with those children either, so you know as much as I do’” (primary school teacher aide).*

One of the most significant concerns that emerged from analysis of the data was the critical importance of education for teacher aides, teachers, and policy-makers. It appears to be such a fundamental requirement, yet has been and continues to be ignored by those in positions of power who could remedy this systemic deficiency. Research studies have repeatedly called for the education of aides (Chopra et al., 2004; Downing et al., 2000; French, 2003; Giangreco, Edelman et al., 2001; Groom, 2006; Howard & Ford, 2007; Katsiyannis et al., 2000; Logan, 2006; Marks et al., 1999; Massey University, 2002; Moran & Abbott, 2002; NZEI, 2004; Riggs & Mueller, 2001; Russell et al., 2005; Wylie, 2000), however the gap between research and policy appears to be as cavernous as that between policy and practice. It

is hard to fathom why this should be so, other than it being due to the devaluing of the worth of disabled students, in which case, according to Jack, “just having a body in a particular place” will do, a kind of “keep the patient comfortable” mindset. Such an approach represents an affirmative redistributive solution that suits a meritocratic education system, in which greater investment (e.g., competent teachers and resources) is made in students regarded as more deserving and most likely to produce a good return (e.g., academic excellence and future economic productivity).

Merely educating teacher aides is insufficient however, as evident in the limited success of the Ministry of Education (2002b) *Kia Tūtangata Ai: Supporting Learning* professional development (NZCER, 2004). Once more, the perspectives of participants, both teacher aides and students, were consistent with those documented in recent literature (Brodin & Lindstrand, 2007; Cajkler et al., 2006; Chopra et al., 2004; Downing et al., 2000; French, 2003; Garner, 2002; Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Groom & Rose, 2005; Guay, 2003; Howard & Ford, 2007; Howes et al., 2003; Katsiyannis et al., 2000; Marks et al., 1999; NZCER, 2004; Rietveld, 2005; Riggs & Mueller, 2001; Takala, 2007; Wylie, 2000). Pre-service and in-service education, particularly for secondary teachers, was emphasised repeatedly. In addition, a few teacher aides and a student referred to the need for education for policy and decision makers as well, to develop an understanding of disability and inclusive education that is informed by both students’ and aides’ experiences and by current theoretical interpretations of disability and social justice.

Having emphasised the crucial need for (re)learning by adults involved with disabled students, two cautions are in order. Simply training teacher aides may in fact exacerbate the existing inequity of the least prepared personnel having responsibility for students with complex learning support requirements; that is, a “now that aides are trained, we can leave them to it” attitude (Giangreco & Broer, 2003; Giangreco et al., 2006; Marks et al., 1999). Secondly, as indicated by students and aides in this study, not just any training will do. While many of the studies cited above rightly recommend practical knowledge and skills such as working collaboratively, differentiating curriculum and pedagogy, and positive behaviour strategies, several participants recognised that attention must be paid to the deep structures underlying these surface level skills. Policy and decision makers, teachers, and teacher aides need to develop a shared understanding of not just *how* to do things, but *why* they do what they do in the ways that they do, as well as how this affects those who are done to (Ware,

2002). As some aides observed, education is necessary to develop knowledge and understanding of “the right thing to do” and “better ways of doing things.” Having sustained opportunities to develop understandings of current thinking about disability, inclusive education, and children’s rights is imperative, given the growing awareness of the need to think otherwise about disabled children and education (Ainscow, 2007; Slee, 2004). Failure to do so will widen rather than narrow the gap between the rhetoric of inclusive conventions and laws, ambiguous policies and the daily assimilationist or exclusive realities of many students.

Furthermore, these new (for many people) ways of knowing must be informed by firsthand knowledge of students and teacher aides, the kind of knowing that comes from engagement with people rather than textbooks and/or socially constructed “theoretical deposits” (Crotty, 1998, p. 59) (Bourke & Carrington, 2007; Cajkler et al., 2006; Hargreaves, 2001). According to many participants, they and their students were often physically and socially distanced from teachers, precluding the development of any relationships that would form the basis of constructing new ways of knowing one another. As Kate observed, changes in education depend first and foremost upon “changing people’s attitudes and perceptions.”

### **Teacher Aides: Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution to Educational Inequities?**

*“It’s not the same, Mrs K. They [teachers] don’t think Mary [disabled student] can learn”  
(comment made to Kate, Mary’s former teacher aide, by Mary’s peers, upon their move to  
high school).*

In seeking to understand the school experiences of disabled students and teacher aides, I have had the privilege of learning firsthand from people who have in varying ways been treated as second class citizens in numerous school contexts, in spite of legal sanctions. Coincidentally, at the time of writing, IHC, the largest disability service provider in New Zealand, is preparing a complaint to the Human Rights Commission “against practices that exclude disabled children from full participation at their local school” (“IHC Invitation to Families letter,” 2008). Clearly, while the 1989 Education Act grants disabled students the right to cross the school threshold, it does not assure the quality of education therein (Young & Quibell, 2000).

While it was heartening to hear of great schools, committed teachers, excellent teaching practice, and well supported students and teacher aides, that this was not the norm raises a



number of questions. Why is funding for disabled students inadequate and deficit based? Why are teacher aides treated so poorly in many instances? Why are teacher aides not trained? Why is it acceptable for disabled students to be taught by teacher aides instead of teachers? Why are many teachers and policy-makers not up to date with current thinking and practice regarding disability and education? Why do we have a special education policy instead of an inclusive education policy? If we were to substitute “teacher” for teacher aide and “student” for disabled student, would we be asking the same questions? If not, how come? Is it because some students/people are known to be so ontologically different that they do not really matter? How do we know that? Might Slee’s (2004) question, *how do we come to know disability?* help us to examine and question what we think we know (Longmore, 2003)? Might that in turn, help us to change our minds, to think otherwise of disability (Ainscow, 2005, 2007; Slee, 2004; Ware, 2001) and, in so doing, enlarge our limited view of humanity (MacIntyre, 1999; Ware, 2002)? Can we show that students are human by “proving that we are capable of showing humanity to them” (Bogdan & Taylor, 1992, p. 291)?

Throughout the process of working on this PhD, I have continually returned to the notion of the social construction of humanness (Bogdan & Taylor, 1992), and believe that it constitutes the heart of this thesis. Interestingly, in her discussion of social justice in education, Walker (2003) contrasted the individualism of Western worldviews with southern African notions of *ubuntu*, which “place human connection at the heart of what it means to be a person” (p. 181), a view consistent with a number of theorists cited in this study (e.g., Bogdan & Taylor, 1992; Goode, 1984; Kittay, 2001; MacIntyre, 1999). While cognisant of the complex interaction of the myriad of macro and micro influences that determine disabled students’ experiences of school, my interactions with both groups of participants have lead me to an understanding that how we come to know disability and how we think about disabled students matters a great deal, to all of us. Whether we hunt for disability (Baker, 2002) or presume competence (Biklen, 1998, 2000b; Biklen & Burke, 2006) depends on how we construct the identity of individuals who have an impairment, a difference that matters within particular cultural contexts. How we think of individuals depends in turn on how we come to know them, through firsthand knowledge that being in relationship affords, or via more distant, institutionalised, professional ways of knowing. Sikes et al. (2007) recognised the crucial role of personal beliefs and actions in determining how macro level influences are enacted on a daily basis in their assertion:

Whilst policy, structure, and culture might shape the broader social and institutional contexts in which teachers and teaching assistants operate, it is their *personal interpretations and understandings* [italics added], their day-to-day enactments, how they perform inclusion, their agency which determines how the policy is formulated and re-formulated in practice. (p. 366)

In this study, the same international conventions, national laws and policies applied to all schools, yet were inconsistently put into practice in participants' schools, indicating that much depends on the individuals charged with the responsibility of educating children and young people.

Research regarding the role of teacher aides in supporting disabled students has emphasised the connecting and mediating function that many aides perform, in relating disabled students to teachers, students' peers, the curriculum, and the wider school community (Cajkler et al., 2006; Chopra et al., 2004; French & Chopra, 1999; Garner, 2002; Groom, 2006; Groom & Rose, 2005; Howes et al., 2003; Marks et al., 1999; Riggs & Mueller, 2001; Robertson et al., 2003). A Learning Support Assistant in Garner's (2002) study considered herself to be:

... a kind of connecting link, a connecting bridge between two parts which, if it wasn't for me, would never come together ... the advantage is that I, as "the bridge", can act as a go-between. I'm sure that it works because, in a way, I am neither a teacher nor a pupil ... I see things from both sides. (p. 15)

Having the ability to see things from both sides places teacher aides in a unique role. How they actually view things, that is, whether they see disability as an individual problem or as a natural part of being human, determines how they work within a system that is riddled with inconsistency and ambiguity regarding the educational rights of disabled children and young people. I wonder whether the role of teacher aides can be conceptualised as being of greater significance than simply *teacher aide*, *student aide*, or *band-aide*. I suggest that aides may act, albeit in small ways, as mediators or agents of reproduction or of transformation of the education system. My reasons for thinking thus are outlined in the following discussion.

### ***Teacher Aides: Bridging Understandings of Humanness, Competence, and Relational Justice***

The current practice of depending upon teacher aides as the optimum means of “including” disabled students in a meritocratic education system provides a cost effective, surface level solution to students known by many in terms of their so-called special needs. Adapting Slee’s (1997) equity equation cited in Chapter Three (Equity = Disabled Student + Additional Resources), it might be said that  $I = DS + TA$  (Inclusion = Disabled Student + Teacher Aide). In the hunt for disability (Baker, 2002) via the sorting and assimilating practices of schools, teacher aides play the role of minders or babysitters, who control those considered to threaten, disrupt, or burden the efficient functioning of schools that privilege the norm and achievement within a relatively narrow academic curriculum. While in a different context, Danforth and Navarro’s (1998) observation may be relevant to this discussion. It may be that teachers feel threatened by “having to encounter these categorical objects [students] as subjects without the intermediary help of the caretaker [teacher aide] who can ‘control’ the situation” (p. 40). It is worth recalling participants’ comments about having to remove potentially disruptive students from class, about students staying home or in a unit in the absence of teacher aides, about aides having to assume responsibility for occupying students in the absence of teachers’ teaching them. As well, aides’ implementation of normalising “treatments” such as the administration of medication and special therapies such as Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) is reminiscent of the eugenics practices described by Baker (2002) and others (Kliwer & Drake, 1998; McPhail & Freeman, 2005; Reid & Knight, 2006; Skidmore, 2002; Slee, 2006; Smith, 1999). Whether or not one agrees with the comparison with eugenic thinking and practices, the findings of this and other studies provide evidence for the controlling function of teacher aides and for the paucity of educational quality for some disabled students (e.g., Guay 2003; Watson et al., 2000).

The use of teacher aides in the above ways, in combination with the redistributive practices of SE2000 policy (Ministry of Education, 1996), enables and affirms the reproduction of the meritocratic status quo, the binary system of special and regular education in which disabled students encounter barriers to being and doing, and in which their rights are largely conditional. Teacher aides’ presence means that schools and teachers have no need to question or change their thinking and practice; there is no need to look beyond the surface, to

examine what lies beneath the tip of the iceberg (Giangreco et al., 1999). There is no need to consider the following:

... we are faced with many unanswered questions that cut to the core of how we think about and value our students with disabilities. Is it acceptable for students with disabilities to be educated by paraprofessionals, whereas students without disabilities receive their instruction from certified teachers? Are we willing to make the changes in our schools that are illuminated by the presence of students with disabilities that, if adopted, could benefit a wide range of students with and without disability labels? Are we willing to acknowledge that the challenges we face may have less to do with individual student characteristics and perhaps as much to do with our own attitudes and practices? Are we willing to create the working conditions that allow teachers, special educators, and related services personnel to do their work rather than pass it along to undertrained and underpaid paraprofessionals? (Giangreco et al., 1999, p. 289)

In contrast, I am reminded of Longmore's (2003, pp. 13-14) assertion that "unless we examine what we think we know" we will never really understand disability experiences and identities. Coming to know disability from a distance (Slee, 2004) as it appears many teachers do is quite different from the more personal ways of knowing that characterise many teacher aides' experiences of disability. As discussed, all but one of the teacher aide participants in this study came to know students through the development of positive, respectful relationships. These aides recognised students' humanness (Bogdan & Taylor, 1992) and competence (Biklen, 1998, 2000b; Biklen & Burke, 2006), and provided opportunities for this to be revealed and further developed (Gindis, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). Essentially they challenged hegemonic positivist interpretations of disability, and provided alternative understandings of students. The significance of this was noted by a parent, who stated, "if there's one thing I could tell a para, I would tell them that the rest of the world is going to treat my daughter the way you do" (French & Chopra, 1999, p. 265). As did support staff in Schnorr's (1997) study of belonging and membership in middle and high school classes, participants "helped teachers and students see [students] as capable of understanding" (p. 12). In doing so, it could be said that they interrupted the hunt for disability, or changed its focus to that of competence. In Timperley and Robinson's (2001) study in which they challenged and changed teachers' schema/beliefs about children's underachievement, they noted that schema revision is supported by "creating surprise through exposure to discrepant data" (p. 283). By supporting students to surprise teachers with demonstrations of their competence, teacher aides may play an important role in "interrupting existing discourses" (Ainscow,

2007, p. 4) and in scaffolding the development of teachers' capacity to think otherwise (Slee, 2004; Ware, 2001), to help them to unlearn the stereotype and (re)learn the student.

Ironically, given the injustice of assigning unqualified teacher aides to students whose learning support requirements often challenge teachers, teacher aides may contribute to the development of a more just education by virtue of their relationships with disabled students. According to Christensen and Dorn (1997), "we grow up and live in a complex of relationships with others, and it is in the quality of those relationships that we identify justice or the lack of it" (p. 193). Young and Quibell (2000) posit that inequities derive from a lack of understanding of people's complexity. I would add to that a lack of caring as well. Hehir (2002) reminds us that "there is more than one way to walk, talk, paint, read, and write. Assuming otherwise is the root of fundamental inequities" (p. 3). However, simply instituting rights to address injustice fails to address the misunderstandings that caused the inequities, as is the case with affirmative solutions to socioeconomic and cultural injustice (Fraser, 1995). Moreover, rights on paper are simply words. They remain thus in the absence of relationships with people who understand and care enough about a person or situation to recognise and enact rights in the face of injustice, to move from the noun, a right, to the verb, do right by (Davis & Watson, 2000; Rosenau, 2004; Young & Quibell, 2000). Christensen and Dorn (1997) claim:

Social justice is the active search for better sets of relationships, at both the individual and family level (where we call it intervention) and at some larger level (where we call it social change). The process of social change begins by removing the sense of inevitability in a specific set of structures and pointing to some better alternative. (p. 194)

Relationships have been the core recurring theme of this thesis. At a practice level, student participants highlighted the value of relationships in their school lives, articulating their desire for positive connections with peers and the hurt that accompanies nonrecognition, disrespect, and rejection by peers, the cultural injustice of which Fraser (1995) speaks. Teacher aide participants spoke with feeling of their relationships with students, and of their ongoing attempts to connect students with peers and teachers, to enhance their social and academic presence, participation and achievement in school life. In many respects, one of the most important aspects of aides' work was that which was beyond the scope of any job description, in challenging the "sense of inevitability" in the education of disabled students and in advocating for "some better alternative" for these students. In other words, they harnessed the

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power of their feelings (Rosenau, 2004) to act on students' behalf, to enact their rights to communicate, to learn, and to develop reciprocal relationships. In doing so, they facilitated opportunities for teachers and peers to come to know disabled students on a more personal and human level (Robertson et al., 2003), thereby increasing the possibility that, alongside recognising and respecting students' individuality and difference, they might also recognise and respect their rights as human beings.

## CHAPTER NINE

### CONCLUSION

*“Educational research doesn’t so much prove anything or establish ultimate truth as much as it reduces our uncertainty and hopefully helps us to better understand our world so that we can strive to improve it” (Giangreco & Taylor, 2003, p. 134).*

I hope that this thesis will be helpful in enhancing understandings of disabled students’ and teacher aides’ relationships and their work together in the context of New Zealand schools. I have tried to re-present students’ and aides’ accounts as authentically as possible in Chapters Five, Six and Seven. In interpreting these findings in Chapter Eight, I have attempted to thread together participants’ experiences with relevant research and in relation to the multi-dimensional theoretical framework of disability, social justice, and childhood in which this study is positioned. In this final chapter, limitations of the study are outlined, followed by discussion of some of the implications for policy, practice, and future research. Closing thoughts “end” the thesis.

#### ***Research Limitations***

In seeking to understand, interpretive qualitative research is inherently incomplete, partial, and contextual. Qualitative inquiry, indeed any research, is infused with limitations, and so perhaps this part of the thesis is more about highlighting the most obvious and significant. These are as follows.

In my original research design, I planned to include observation in schools as well as interviews with participants. This was not possible due to difficulties in accessing schools willing to have “yet another researcher” come in and out of classes. The data is therefore based on what participants told me, without additional observational data of what they did in schools.

As noted at the outset, the scope of the research was limited to predominantly European educational contexts, experiences and perspectives. In light of differing cultural

interpretations of disability and education, the findings outlined in this study may be of limited relevance for non-European students and teacher aides.

Conducting research in order to meet specific academic requirements places certain constraints on the research design, as do factors such as time, costs, and the responsibilities of full time work. For example, I would have liked to have spent more time with student participants, but this was not possible. I would also have liked to have worked in a more collaborative way with participants in all aspects of the research (e.g., in jointly developing the initial focus of inquiry).

### ***Implications for Policy, Practice, and Future Research***

*“You can’t change the past but you can make sure the future’s better” (child participant, cited in Allan & I’Anson, 2004, p. 134).*

In some respects, disabled students and teacher aides may be likened to canaries in the mineshaft in exposing the shortcomings of an education system in general. I wonder whether students and teacher aides can help guide the ways out of or bridge the educational abyss that artificially divides some kinds of children/people from others, and limits our understanding of our shared humanness. Rachel’s observation that we need to work on “changing people’s attitudes and perceptions” echoes Ainscow’s (2005) claim that many of the barriers experienced by disabled students derive from “existing ways of thinking” (p. 109). Ainscow (2007) asserted that, to improve outcomes for students, “the starting point must be with staff members: in effect, enlarging their capacity to imagine what might be achieved, and increasing their sense of accountability for bringing this about” (p. 6). Changing our minds, and with this, our policies and practices, has implications for policy-making, teacher and teacher aide education, and school communities. It would necessitate a commitment to enacting existing conventions, laws, and the *New Zealand Disability Strategy* (NZDS) (Minister for Disability Issues, 2001). Providing “the best education for disabled people” (Objective 3, NZDS) may, eventually, result in students being able to enjoy their right to be, as Rachel wishes, “treated like everybody else.”



*National policy.*

The findings of this research indicate a need for both clarification and development of national educational policy regarding inclusive education and teacher aides. As discussed earlier in this thesis, current SE2000 policy (Ministry of Education, 1996) is characterised by inconsistencies (Higgins et al., 2006; Kearney & Kane, 2006) that perpetuate the dichotomizing of students in terms of normal/special. SE2000 policy needs to be replaced by an inclusive policy that is underpinned by respectful, socially just ways of thinking about disability and childhood, and is consistent with relevant United Nations Conventions, legislation, and the NZDS (Minister for Disability Issues, 2001). As well, there is a need to develop a coherent research based policy framework regarding the deployment and training of teacher aides. This would facilitate greater consistency and equity in teacher aide employment in schools throughout the country. As has been noted throughout the thesis, the development of such policy must be informed by those whose lives are most affected by it (Ainscow, 2005, 2007; Bourke & Carrington, 2007; Cajkler et al., 2006; Cook-Sather, 2002; Davis & Watson, 2001; Davis et al., 2003; Howes, 2003; Slee, 2001b; UNCRC, United Nations, 1989).

*Teacher education.*

As a teacher educator and former high school teacher, I have strong views about what is currently happening in pre-service teacher education. I can relate to Ware's (2001) claim that "many teacher preparation programs are institutionally sanctioned to perpetuate educational apartheid" (p. 120). I recognise too well the emptiness of mission statements that claim commitment to social justice and other such values. Once written and institutionally sanctioned, however, there appears to be little evidence of honoring this commitment in practice as far as disability is concerned. Over the last decade, I have witnessed the steady eroding of disability education for teachers and teacher aides in a tertiary institution, despite strong advocacy by students and some staff. I understand Cook-Sather's (2002) observation that "most power relationships have no place for listening and actively do not tolerate it because it is very inconvenient: to really listen means to have to respond" (p. 8). Along with participants and other researchers (e.g., Downing, 2006; Giangreco, Broer et al., 2001; Kearney & Kane, 2006), I will continue to advocate that teacher education has a responsibility to ensure that graduating primary and secondary teachers have, among other knowledge and skills, a clear understanding of their professional responsibility to teach *all* children and have a commitment to developing respectful relationships that underpin their working with students

in equitable ways. It is not right for teachers to have a choice of which children they will teach, even though the experiences of teacher aides in this study indicated that this does happen, either explicitly or implicitly by transferring responsibility for certain students to teacher aides. It is not right for teacher educators to teach about social justice in ways that fail to recognise that such justice applies to *all* students.

Teacher educators have a critical role to play in informing new generations of teachers of alternative ways of thinking about and knowing human difference that in turn enables teachers to presume, respect, and respond to each student's competence. To be consistent with transformative changes in educational policy, the deep structures of teacher education need to reflect current thinking about disability, social justice, and children's rights. Working from such a shared understanding, teacher educators can then scaffold the development of student teachers' knowledge and skills regarding a range of effective curricular, pedagogical, and behavioural strategies and collaborative work with teacher aides (among other aspects of teacher education). In their comprehensive review of literature regarding support staff, Cajkler et al. (2006) noted Straker's (2003) prediction that learning to work effectively with support staff will be "a significant and challenging part of learning to be a teacher" (p. 7). It would be worth considering the notion of bringing together the educational sectors (early childhood, primary, and secondary) in various ways throughout pre-service teacher education, to provide opportunities for future teachers to develop an understanding of each other's work with students as they move through the education system. Teacher aides could be incorporated in some way in this process of education, as outlined by Petrie (2005) in his discussion of the European pedagogic model. He noted that Swedish educational reforms have included an integrated system of teacher education in their commitment to focusing on the whole child, and in recognition of the importance of relationships, children's rights, and social participation in school communities.

### ***Teacher aide employment, deployment, and education.***

Participants' highly casualised employment status and generally poor working conditions reflected those outlined by NZCER (2004) and NZEI (2004), and are comparable with their counterparts in other countries (e.g., Ghore & York-Barr, 2007; Howard & Ford, 2007; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). In their review of literature published between 1991 and early 2000, Giangreco, Edelman et al. (2001) claimed that disabled students and paraprofessionals include "some of the most marginalised people within school hierarchies" (p. 59). They, like some of

the participants in this study, used the term second class to describe the status of both groups, and wondered whether the education system has created a “permanent underclass” (p. 59) of students and support staff. In the absence of national policy and employment standards, some teacher aides are placed in extremely vulnerable positions, which in turn can affect the students they support (NZEI, 2004; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). The urgent need to address the paucity of employment conditions was emphasised by all teacher aide participants and by one student participant.

I hope that the importance of having an educated teacher aide workforce has been made sufficiently clear throughout this thesis. I appreciate that the main obstacle to mandatory training would relate to financial cost, even though the inestimable human costs of assigning the least prepared staff to students with complex support requirements appear to be seldom considered. It would be interesting (and extremely challenging) to analyse and compare short and longterm financial, educational, and human costs and benefits for students and schools were teacher aides required to have a qualification. Several participants spoke of the need to raise the profile and develop career prospects for teacher aides, in order to attract and retain quality staff. Education would help to do this, and would need to be accompanied by a comprehensive review of teacher aides’ pay structure, sources of funding, job (in)security, and working conditions. Esther’s suggestions are well worth considering, in that they address a number of issues faced by teacher aides:

I think if we created a whole different model of being a teacher aide it would change. If a teacher aide had to be qualified, with the same conditions as a teacher—not saying earning the same money. They’re employed to support the school, classrooms, and teachers knew that that person was there for the full school day, every school day, every school year, [then] attitudes would change. If you were working for a school, you could share time with different students. And the teacher aide’s role becomes really diverse, instead of focused in a certain area.

Assigning a teacher aide to each class was mentioned by other participants as well as researchers (e.g., Kugelmass, 2001, 2006; Prochnow et al., 2000). Rietveld (2005) questioned whether the challenges of teaching complex curriculum to large classes of diverse learners can be effectively accomplished by one teacher. Jack, a participant, felt that some teachers “lifted their game” in the presence of teacher aides, who acted almost as a witness to their teaching practice. Appointing class aides would also minimise the stigmatising effect of teacher aide help, as well as providing a stable source of support for all who required it. Having teacher aides allocated to a cluster of schools was also suggested by a participant, as a way of

providing greater job security, a pool of relieving teacher aides, and networking opportunities across schools.

Participants' suggestions of centrally funding teacher aides in the same way that teachers are funded make sense, and may help reduce pressures on schools to find additional funding. As a primary school aide commented, "well, it's a bit degrading, when the Board [of Trustees] sits down, and puts your name down with the toilet paper, and works out how much money they're going to spend in each area." Centrally funding teacher aides would also necessitate a review of student funding, as recommended by participants, who observed that resourcing should be based on students' best interests and rights rather than cost effectiveness. Such an approach would be consistent with educational policy that is underpinned by a commitment to social justice, in contrast to the current resource driven SE2000 (Ministry of Education, 1996). Wylie (2002) has outlined the shortcomings of individualised student funding such as ORRS, and highlighted the advantages of moving to a model of systemic funding support, in which the capacities of teachers and schools are enhanced in relation to serving all students.

Re-thinking the role of the teacher aide, as recommended by several participants, is fundamental to the implementation of the above surface level changes regarding employment issues. Rietveld (2005) challenged the Ministry of Education in her claim that "the deployment of minimally trained teacher-aides for children with impairments may need to be reviewed" (p. 137) if the government is serious in its commitment to provide quality teaching and learning. As mentioned above, Petrie (2005) has provided a sense of alternative possibilities in his description of the pedagogue's role in supporting students in schools.

I leave the last words on this particular topic to Kittay (2001). While referring to caregivers, the following quote can be read with teacher aides in mind:

If we want to remove the prejudice and lack of understanding that blights the lives of people with mental retardation, we can begin by treating their caregivers as if their work mattered (because it does) and as if they mattered (because they do). To do this we need to provide caregivers with conditions that allow them to do their work well and receive just compensation. They need appropriate training, the opportunity to grow in their work, a voice in the care of their charges, compensation that matches the intensity of their labor, and encouragement in their sympathetic and empathic responses to their charges. (p. 573)

***School policies and practices regarding disabled students and teacher aides.***

Schools are the sites where laws, national policies, and teacher education converge and are enacted by individuals whose practices are influenced by their own beliefs and attitudes. The findings of the present study generate both a sense of hope and disquiet, and provide evidence that all schools are not equal, nor are all students and teacher aides treated equitably. As outlined in the continuum of teacher aides' experiences, this differential valuing and use of dividing practices also occurred within schools, across different classrooms, depending upon the teachers involved. Knowing this, schools have a responsibility to address the inequities experienced by certain students and the staff who support them. The existence of inclusive school contexts and teachers is evidence that this is not impossible or even unrealistic. Meg's observation is relevant here - that the effective teachers also have 30 students in their classes.

Ainscow (2000) has suggested that in most schools, the knowledge required to teach all students effectively already exists but is not always used. Participants in this study, both students and teacher aides, demonstrated a wealth of understanding and knowledge that could enhance teaching and learning. One way of bringing together and utilising a school's collective knowledge is provided in the *Index for Inclusion* (Booth, Ainscow, Black-Hawkins, Vaughan, & Shaw, 2000), in which members of the immediate and wider school community examine the school's culture, policies, and practices. By starting with what is already known, priorities for change to more inclusive ways of functioning as a school can be identified and implemented as part of an ongoing, longterm process. More specifically, Ainscow (2000) and Howes (2003) recommended the development of policy regarding teacher aides, which is based on and respects the experiences of those in that role. Such locally developed policy would be consistent with that developed at a national level by the Ministry of Education. The use of a screening tool (Giangreco & Broer, 2007) and guidelines for the effective use of teacher aide supports (Giangreco et al., 2003) could also be useful for schools as part of their examination of educational practices.

The importance of ongoing school-based professional development for teachers and teacher aides was emphasised by participants, who were eager to continue to develop their skills and knowledge. Like teacher aide participants in the NZCER (2004) study, they realised that this kind of education was most effective if carried out in conjunction with teachers, with whom it was necessary to develop a shared understanding of their work with students. Professional development initiatives which have focused on shifts in teachers' thinking, from assumptions of student deficit to presumption of competence, have emphasised common factors in

facilitating change. These include the involvement of an external agent/facilitator or critical friend, the use of discrepant evidence to challenge teachers' assumptions (akin to Ainscow's [2007] notion of interruptions, to make the familiar unfamiliar), and support in developing and sustaining alternative thinking and practices (Carrington & Robinson, 2006; Jorgensen et al., 2007; Timperley & Robinson, 2001). These studies provide valuable examples of ways of bringing about changes in school cultures that will benefit students. Bringing teachers and aides together in an ongoing process of learning also provides opportunities to develop the kinds of relationships that participants noted were crucial in their work with teachers (Robertson et al., 2003).

A final point to be considered in discussion of school policies and practices is that of incorporating opportunities for all students to develop their understanding of disability, children's rights, and social justice. Participants' comments indicate that more can be done in schools to enable all students to come to know and understand disability as a natural part of being human. Clearly, this would also depend on significant changes in teacher education and Ministry of Education policy, to ensure that students had opportunities to develop coherent and respectful understandings of human difference, based on their relationships with disabled students and socially just thinking about disability and inclusive education. A recent New Zealand initiative, *our stories* (<http://www.ourstories.co.nz/>), has potential for introducing children to such thinking, in its provision of website and print teaching resources that link to the New Zealand Curriculum. The development of self-advocacy groups in schools is another means of providing opportunities for disabled students to develop positive identities in which impairments and their effects are recognised without diminishing students' humanity. Moreover, in relationship with others who experience similar barriers to being and doing, students may be better placed to resist them (Thomas, 2006).

### ***Future research.***

I hope that this thesis provides a starting place for further New Zealand based research involving disabled students and teacher aides. As noted, while there is an emerging body of literature regarding disabled students in New Zealand (particularly that carried out by Jude MacArthur and colleagues), research about teacher aides is conspicuous by its absence. Conducting this doctoral study has made me aware of the many avenues that exist for future research regarding disability and education in New Zealand contexts. As a teacher, I am interested in research that is useful to people, and would very much like to work alongside

disabled students in carrying out research in an area initiated by students, while guided by a framework of sociology of childhood and disability theorising.

Research regarding teacher aides needs to have practical application, such as informing the development of national and school policy and practice, and of effective initial and ongoing teacher aide education. Research with teacher aides and teachers working in primary and secondary contexts is warranted, to develop in-depth understanding of the dynamics of collaborative work, the impact on students' education, the impact of joint professional development on teaching/support practices, and the differences that working in either primary or secondary schools have on adults' work.

Again with a practice based focus, working collaboratively with schools to bring about changes in inclusive cultures, policies and practices in general and in working with teacher aides and disabled students in particular is an area of future research. It would be particularly interesting to work with teachers to examine, as did Jorgensen et al. (2007), ways of teaching and learning to presume competence. Given this thesis' focus on the social construction of humanness (Bogdan & Taylor, 1992) and the ways in which we come to know disability (Slee, 2001c), such a study could act as a natural follow up to the present one.

Research that focuses on teacher education regarding disability and inclusive education is very much needed. Multiple opportunities exist in this field, including investigation of the development of an inclusive education culture amongst teacher educators; longitudinal study of the development of students' understandings of disability and inclusive education; ways of effectively linking theory with teaching practice; and the impact of pre-service education regarding disability and education on beginning teachers' practice.

Having identified possibilities for subsequent research, which I think offer exciting opportunities, my enthusiasm dissipates when I consider Fox's (1999, p. 17) question, "why do these kids have to wait for us to do what research says we should do?" Why are we not putting into practice what research has so clearly made evident since at least the 1960s (e.g., Blatt & Kaplan, 1966; Dunn, 1968; MacArthur et al., 2004)? Blatt and his colleagues at Syracuse University (e.g., Biklen, Bogdan, Taylor) have long questioned our thinking about humanness and disability. Dunn clearly articulated his belief that "much of our past and present [special educational] practices are morally and educationally wrong" (1968, p. 5). Slee continues to ask "who's in, who's out, and how come?" Giangreco continues to be prodigious in his ongoing exploration of the work of teacher aides and persistent in his analysis that their

presence obscures and perpetuates deep rooted educational inequities. The research carried out by British researchers (e.g., Davis, Priestley, Watson) with disabled children and young people consistently provides evidence of their agency, competence, and rights. Numerous researchers in different countries have documented the efficacy of inclusive education for students, the need for disability and inclusive education as compulsory components of teacher education, and the similar need for the education of teacher aides. How much evidence do we need before we begin to think and act otherwise? Or is it that ramping school entrances (the visible surface structures) is much easier than ramping our minds, the starting place for change?

I hope that the evidence provided by participants in this thesis is useful in encouraging teachers, teacher educators, and policy-makers to examine what they think they know about “the deep structure of disablement” (Slee, 2004, p. 47), how they came to know it, and, if necessary, to think otherwise in order to do all students justice in an education system underpinned by a commitment to excellence *and* equity.

### ***Closing Thoughts***

*There is always the “glass half empty”—“glass half filled” decision to be made. This is the most important decision to be made about people. We can improve the world immeasurably if we would but look for the best in each other. (Blatt, 1987, p. 355)*

Much of this chapter has focused on macro level systemic implications of the study’s findings, some of which lies beyond individuals’ immediate capacity to change. To close on a note of hope, I return to the interpretivist commitment to seeking social justice at an individual, micro level, by reiterating the thoughts shared by participants, who represent perhaps the least powerful of students and employees in the New Zealand education system. I remember the students in this study emphasising the importance of teacher aides showing kindness and respect. I can hear Mack earnestly explaining that his teacher aide “has been really, really kind to me.” I am reminded of Rachel’s belief that “you’ve got to show respect to get respect.” Similarly, teacher aides spoke of respect, in terms of its presence and absence in their work with teachers and students. They agreed with Grace’s observation that “teacher aides need a lot more respect.” Offering kindness and respect in our relationships with others is something that is within our capacity as individuals, and represents one way of enabling us to better understand and do right by one another. As participants in this study have demonstrated, thinking and acting in such ways can make an immeasurable difference in our worlds.



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## **APPENDICES**

## **Appendix A**

### **New Zealand Educational Policy Context**

#### **Legislation**

1989-1990 were significant years in terms of educational reforms in New Zealand. Amendments to the 1989 Education Act required state schools to enroll disabled students, thus providing the latter legal access to local primary, intermediate and secondary schools for the first time in New Zealand history. Concurrently, the implementation of *Tomorrow's Schools* (Lange, 1988) began. This major government reform involved the transfer of responsibility for funding, management and governance of schools from central government to Boards of Trustees which were established in every school in New Zealand. As well, an independent Crown agency, Specialist Education Services (SES), was established to provide guidance and support in special education (O'Brien & Ryba, 2005). In 1993, disability was recognised explicitly for the first time within the scope of the Human Rights Act. Discrimination in a range of contexts on the basis of disability became illegal. Section 57 applies to educational settings, from early childhood through to tertiary education, except in situations in which reasonable accommodations or services cannot be provided. A year later, the enactment of the Health and Disability Commissioner Act 1994 established a Code of Rights for all users of health and/or disability services. In 2006, following extensive lobbying and advocacy by the Deaf community, New Zealand Sign Language became an official New Zealand language.

The above Acts demonstrate an increasing recognition of the rights of disabled children and adults in New Zealand society over the last eighteen years. New Zealand's commitment to United Nations conventions and initiatives (as outlined in Chapters 1, 2, 3) is also a positive indicator of concern for equity, as are the developments in 2001 of the *New Zealand Disability Strategy* (NZDS) and the inaugural appointment of a Minister for Disability Issues. Underpinned by current thinking about disability that recognises cultural and structural barriers to participation and justice, the strategy aims to develop an inclusive society, utilising a framework that specifies 15 objectives and related actions (Minister for Disability Issues, 2001). While all of the objectives relate in one way or another to disabled children, Objective 2, "ensure rights for disabled people," Objective 3, "provide the best education for disabled people," and Objective 13, "enable disabled children and adults to lead full and active lives" (Minister for Disability Issues, 2001, pp. 11 and 13) are particularly pertinent to education. As

part of the implementation of the strategy, government departments are required to file annual work plans outlining actions taken to meet specific objectives.

Integral to these laws, conventions, and the NZDS is the *Treaty of Waitangi, Te Tiriti o Waitangi*. Signed in 1840, the founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand articulates principles of participation, partnership and protection that guide the development of this bicultural nation. These principles are consistent with the social justice underpinnings of inclusive education practices, as are the national and international provisions already outlined. The means by which they are supposed to be enacted, through national educational policies, is the focus of the next discussion.

### **Government policies and research**

Numerous policies regarding special education have been developed since the 1989 Education Act. The implementation of policies has been accompanied by a number of government commissioned research initiatives and evaluations. Policies and research reports of particular relevance to this study are outlined in chronological order as follows. The terms used to describe students and special education contexts reflect those used in the policies and research reports.

While *Tomorrow's Schools* (Lange, 1988) promoted the development of self-managing schools, the development of curriculum and overarching educational goals and guidelines occurred at a national level. *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (Ministry of Education, 1993) made specific reference to schools' responsibility to ensure that all students had access to the curriculum, including those with special educational needs. This document forms part of the National Education Guidelines, which also includes the National Education Goals and National Administration Guidelines, all of which provide schools with a common national direction for effective policy and practice (Ministry of Education, 2007b). Each of these documents makes mention of schools' responsibilities for children with special needs.

Specific policy regarding special education was introduced six years after the 1989 Education Act. *Special Education Policy Guidelines* (Ministry of Education, 1995) outlined seven principles for the Government's *Special Education 2000* (SE2000) policy (Ministry of Education, 1996). In the original SE2000 document, the government's aim was "to achieve, over the next decade, a world class inclusive education system that provides learning opportunities of equal quality to all students" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 5). Eleven

years later, in the Ministry of Education's website, the stated aim of "the Government's special education policy is to improve learning outcomes for all children and young people with special educational needs at their local school, early childhood learning centre, or wherever they are educated" (Ministry of Education, 2007b). Special education is officially defined as "the provision of extra assistance, adapted programmes or learning environments, specialised equipment or materials to support children and young people with accessing the curriculum in a range of settings" (Ministry of Education, 2007b). The definition of inclusive education provided in the Ministry of Education's *Terms Used in Special and General Education* is as follows:

Inclusion in education is about valuing all students and staff. It involves supporting all children and young people to participate in the cultures, curricula and communities of their local school. Barriers to learning and participation for all children, irrespective of their ethnicity, culture, disability or any other factor, are actively reduced, so that children feel a sense of belonging and community in their educational context. (Ministry of Education, 2007c)

SE2000 consists of a multi-component framework designed to serve students identified as (a) having very high, high, or combined moderate needs, and (b) moderate needs. Since its inception in 1996, changes have been made to the policy on the basis of evaluative research; these are included in the following description of the main components.

Resources for individuals with higher needs include the Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Scheme (ORRS), Supplementary Learning Support (SLS) (introduced in 2004 for students who are not verified as eligible for ORRS yet whose needs are significant and ongoing), Severe Behaviour Initiative (SBI), Speech-Language Initiative (SLI), School High Health Needs Fund (SHHNF), and provisions for students with moderate sensory and moderate physical impairments. Students with moderate needs have access to school-based resources, including the Special Education Grant (SEG), Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLb) and Resource Teachers: Literacy (RT: Lit). The amount of the SEG is calculated according to each school's total roll and decile ranking, the latter being the rating given to a school related to the economic and social factors of the local area. Schools in more affluent areas receive less government funding than those in less affluent areas, based on the assumption that families in the former can more easily afford to support their children's education than families with lower incomes. In 2002 an Enhanced Programme Fund (EPF) was established to provide additional funding to schools in which there are a disproportionate number of students with moderate needs. Referred to as "magnet" schools (Mitchell, 2001)



because of their welcoming response to students with special needs, these schools were disadvantaged in having to spread their SEG more thinly than schools of equivalent size and decile ranking which were resistant to enrolling such students, despite their legal obligation to do so. As part of the introduction of SE2000 policy, the Ministry of Education funded professional development opportunities for schools, from 1998 to 2000.

Students identified as having special educational needs typically have an Individual Education Plan (IEP), the purpose of which is, as the name implies, to individualise learning opportunities so that students can access the curriculum and participate in school life in meaningful ways. Specific curriculum goals are linked to the national curriculum, and teaching strategies, supports, resources, and assessments are individualised according to each student's requirements. *The IEP Guidelines* were published by the Ministry of Education in 1998 to provide schools with a framework for planning, implementing, and evaluating the IEP process.

A three year evaluation of SE2000, commissioned and funded by the Ministry of Education, was carried out by Massey University, resulting in the publication of several reports. Schools' overall satisfaction with the various components of SE2000 appeared to increase, with the exception of the Severe Behaviour Initiative (Massey University, 2002). In 2000, the Minister of Education commissioned a review of SE2000 for the purpose of recommending ways of improving education for children with special needs. Entitled *Picking Up the Pieces*, the Wylie Report (Wylie, 2000) highlighted the fragmented and inconsistent nature of special education services and funding. A series of significant organisational and funding changes were recommended, including the establishment of Group Special Education (GSE) within the Ministry of Education, in place of Specialist Education Services (SES). Of particular relevance to this study are Wylie's recommendations for the "mandatory inclusion of provision for students with special needs within core preservice teacher development courses" (p. 97) and for the provision of professional development for teacher aides and practicing teachers.

The first Ministry of Education initiative regarding teacher aides was introduced to schools in 2002. *Kia Tūtangata Ai: Supporting Learning: An Introductory Resource for Teacher Aides/Kaiāwhina Supporting Teachers of Students with Special Education Needs* is a professional development resource intended for use at a whole school level, as opposed to targeting teacher aides only (Ministry of Education, 2002b). An evaluation of its

effectiveness, carried out in 2004, is examined in the review of teacher aide literature in Chapter Three.

Also in 2002, the Ministry of Education reviewed the national curriculum, as documented in the *Curriculum Stocktake Report* (2002a). In response to the absence of disabled students in this report, a separate report, *Curriculum Policy and Special Education Support* was prepared by McMenamin, Millar, Morton, Mutch, Nuttall, & Tyler-Merrick (2004) to investigate the effectiveness of national curriculum policy in addressing the learning outcomes of students with special educational needs. The review of national and international literature highlighted a lack of research regarding curriculum in special education, and a lack of consistency in terms of how schools utilised *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework* in planning for students with special needs. As in Wylie's (2000) report, McMenamin et al. noted the need for improvements in teacher and teacher aide education and professional development.

Another focus of Ministry of Education initiatives in the last few years has been on building capability in teachers and schools, in response to the increasingly diverse nature of students in New Zealand schools. In the *Quality Teaching for Diverse Students in Schooling: Best Evidence Synthesis*, Alton-Lee (2003) outlined ten key characteristics of quality teaching in classes consisting of a diverse range of students. The Ministry's commitment to developing evidence based practice is also apparent in *Enhancing Effective Practice in Special Education* (EePiSE) (Ministry of Education, n.d.), the special education part of this policy focus which involved the implementation of a Ministry project from 2004 to 2006.

In 2004, the Ministry of Education, Special Education (also referred to as Group Special Education) conducted a *Let's Talk Special Education* local servicing profile process, in which opportunities were provided throughout the country for parents, educators, and some students to share their experiences of special education services (Ministry of Education, 2004). *Let's Talk Special Education* was initiated in response to a number of national concerns about the shortcomings of SE2000 policy, and was regarded as a means of contributing to the Government's mission to raise achievement and reduce disparity, and to the goals of the NZDS (Ministry of Education, 2004). Consistent with previous evaluations, one of the major priorities for change identified by parents was that of staffing, in that they wanted "more training and better understanding of students with special education needs by people working with their children" (Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 6).

*Let's Talk Special Education* provided valuable information to inform the development of GSE's Action Plan for 2006-2011, entitled *Better Outcomes for Children*. This plan is supplementary to the Ministry of Education's overall commitment to raising achievement and reducing disparity through effective teaching, engaged families and whānau, and the use of evidence-based practices. *Better Outcomes for Children* prioritises children's "presence, participation and learning leading to achievement" (Ministry of Education, 2006a, p. 3). *Educate: Ministry of Education Statement of Intent 2006-2011* (Ministry of Education, 2006b), while claiming that special education in New Zealand performs well relative to international standards, acknowledges that there is "significant underachievement" (p. 20) among special education students. Reference is made to research indicating that "not only is it possible to teach learners with special education needs together with their age peers, but also that doing so can lead to improved learning for all" (p. 20).

The final Ministry of Education initiative to be mentioned is the introduction of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007d), which is the outcome of extensive review of the original *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (Ministry of Education, 1993). It is intended to provide a national framework from which local schools can develop their own curriculum in response to the particular needs of their communities. New to this curriculum is the inclusion of New Zealand Sign Language, in recognition of its status as an official language.

Given the findings of the various initiatives and evaluations mentioned above, and the Ministry's emphasis on effective teaching and evidence-based practice, a review of teacher education is essential if improvements in the education of all students are to be realised. At the time of writing, the Ministry of Education (2007a) is undertaking a review of initial teacher education policy.

# Appendix B

## Participant Interest Form: Students

University of Otago Research Study

Students with disabilities and teacher aides: An analysis of experience

### **PARTICIPANT INTEREST FORM: STUDENTS**

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20 May 2004

Yes, I am interested in finding out more about this study.

Please fill out this sheet to tell us a bit about yourself. Everything you put on the sheet will be private—no one apart from the researcher will read it.

If you want some help filling this out, you could ask your parent/caregiver, or get in touch with the researcher, Gill. Her phone number is 479-3804. Thank you.

#### **Information about you**

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
*First name* *Surname*

What is your home address?

\_\_\_\_\_

What is your home phone number?

\_\_\_\_\_

How old are you?

\_\_\_\_\_

Are you male or female? Please tick ☒ the right answer: ☐ Male ☐ Female

Which of these ethnic groups do you belong to? (please tick ☒)

- ☐ NZ European
- ☐ NZ Māori (please write down your iwi affiliation) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Pacific Island (please write down which Pacific Island culture you belong to) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Asian (please write down which country/culture you belong to) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Other (please write down which country/culture you belong to) \_\_\_\_\_

How do you find it easiest to talk with people? Please tick ☒ the ways that are best for you:

- |  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Talking                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Sign language    | <input type="checkbox"/> Letter or word board |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Symbol or picture board | <input type="checkbox"/> Hand gestures    | <input type="checkbox"/> Facial expressions   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Eye gaze                | <input type="checkbox"/> Head movements   | <input type="checkbox"/> Objects              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Touch Talker            | <input type="checkbox"/> Using a computer | <input type="checkbox"/> Writing by hand      |

Some other way (please write what it is)

---

What school do you go to?

---

What is your school address?

---

What year are you in at school?

---

How many teacher aides do you work with at school?

---

Thank you very much for answering these questions. Please post this sheet in the stamped envelope addressed to:

Gill Rutherford  
Dunedin College of Education  
Private Bag 1912  
Dunedin

*Gill will get in touch with you after she has got information from other students who would like to take part in the study.*

# Appendix C

## Participant Interest Form: Teacher Aides

University of Otago Research Study

Students with disabilities and teacher aides: An analysis of experience

### PARTICIPANT INTEREST FORM: TEACHER AIDES

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17 May 2004

*Please complete the following information sheet about you and your work. This information is confidential, and will be used to select teacher aide participants for the proposed study. Thank you.*

#### Contact details

Name \_\_\_\_\_

*First name*

*Surname*

School name \_\_\_\_\_

School address \_\_\_\_\_

Your home address \_\_\_\_\_

Home phone number \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

#### Personal details

Age (*please circle age bracket*)

<20

20-30

30-40

40-50

50+

Gender (*please circle*)

Female

Male

Ethnic group/s with which you identify (*please tick*)

☐ NZ European

☐ NZ Māori (*please specify iwi affiliation*) \_\_\_\_\_

☐ Pacific Island (*please specify*) \_\_\_\_\_

☐ Asian (*please specify*) \_\_\_\_\_

☐ Other (*please specify*) \_\_\_\_\_

#### Experience

How long have you worked as a teacher aide in your present school?

\_\_\_\_\_

Have you previously been employed as a teacher aide? If so, please give details of your previous employment (where, when, nature of work—e.g., regular class support; special class).

School	Year(s)	Nature of work

What training/qualifications do you have? Please give details of training/qualification, education provider, year/s completed.

Training/qualification	Education provider	Year(s) completed

How many hours per week do you work as a teacher aide? *(please circle)*

Less than 10      10-15      15-20      Over 20

How many students with disabilities do you work with each week? Please give details:

Student gender (do not name)	Age	Number of hours per week	Setting (e.g., regular class, unit, break times)	Kind of supports provided (please indicate if student is ORRS funded)

**Thank you very much** for answering these questions. Please post this sheet in the stamped envelope addressed to:

Gill Rutherford      Dunedin College of Education   Private Bag 1912   Dunedin

*Gill will get in touch with you after she has got information from other teacher aides who would like to take part in the study.*

## Appendix D

### Student Information

**What do you think  
about school and  
teacher aides?**

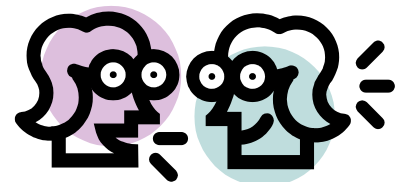


Hi! My name is Gill Rutherford.

I am doing a study at university to find out

1. What do students think about school and working with teacher aides?
2. What do teacher aides think about school and working with students?

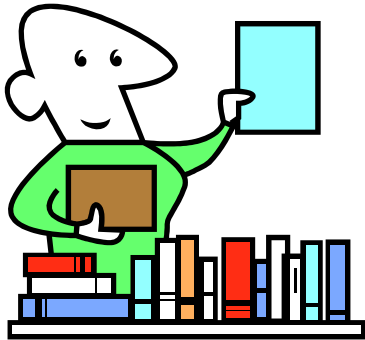
I would like to interview 15 students with disabilities and 15 teacher aides, from primary, intermediate, and high schools in Otago and Southland.





I would like to meet with each student 2-3 times.

I would like to meet with each teacher aide once.



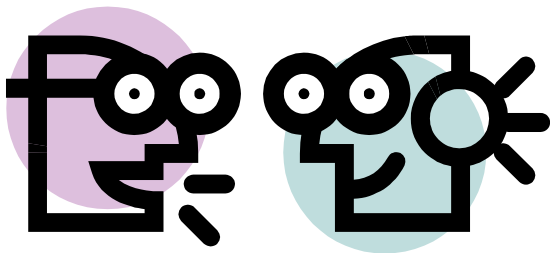
I will write a report to tell people what I learn.

I will also talk about the study with teachers and other people.

This may help schools understand what students and teacher aides think are important.

I will talk with everyone in private.

I won't use their real names whenever I write or talk about the study with other people.



I would like to meet you to find out what YOU think.

Here is some information to help you decide if you want to take part in the study.

You can choose if you want to or not—either way, it's OK.



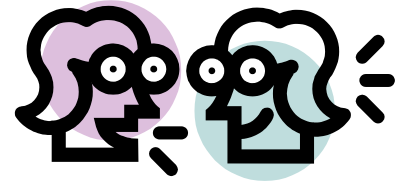
## What would I have to do?

### MEETINGS WITH ME

You would meet with me to talk about your school and working with teacher aides.

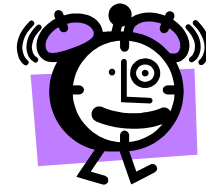
We'd probably meet 2-3 times, so we can get to know each other.

We would try to meet in July and/or August.



You can decide

- ★ where you would like to meet
- ★ when—what day and time
- ★ how long we meet for—probably up to an hour each meeting
- ★ if you'd like someone to come to meetings with you—you choose who



## What would we do when we meet?

First we'd talk a wee bit about ourselves, so we can get to know each other.

Then we'd talk about:



- ★ your school—what you do there, and what you like about it
- ★ working with teacher aides—what they do and how they help you at school
- ★ anything else you want to tell me about school and teacher aides.

### **What if I need help with saying what I want to say?**



I will ask you and your family to help me make sure you have the support you need.

You can draw pictures, write, use photos, or do whatever is easiest to say what you think.

### **What if I'm not sure what to say?**



You don't have to say anything if you don't want to—you choose what to tell me.

If you want to take a break during our meetings, that's fine too.

### **Will you tell anyone what we talk about?**



What you tell me is private, between you and me.

If there's anything serious that I need to talk with someone else about (like your parents), I will ask you about it first.

When I write the report of what I've learned, I won't use your (or anyone else's) real name.

This is because your privacy is important.

People who read the report won't be able to tell who said what.

### **How will you remember what we talk about?**



If it's OK with you, we will tape record our meetings.

What you tell me is important, and I want to remember it correctly.

If there are things that you want to say but don't want taped, just tell me and we'll turn off the tape.

### What will you do with the tapes?



A typist will type up what's on the tape.

The typist is not allowed to talk to anyone about what's on the tape.

You and I will check the typing to make sure that it's what you said.

If it's not, we'll change it so it's right.

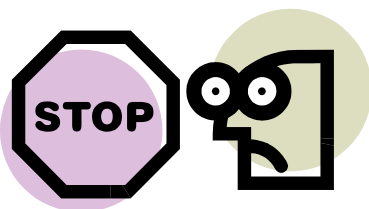
After we've done this, the tapes will be destroyed so no one else can hear them.



The typed copies of what you said will be locked up at the university for 5 years. That way, no one, apart from me and my supervisors (people helping me do my study), can read them. Then they get destroyed.

I will write my report and give you a copy of it.

### What if I don't want to do the study any longer?



That's OK—you're allowed to change your mind.

No one will be angry if you do this.

If you are unhappy about being in the study, you can tell me, or your parents/caregivers, or someone you trust.

We will try to help with any problems.

## What do I have to do to get started in the study?

If you want to take part, you and your parents/caregivers will be asked to sign a **Consent Form**.



This is a form to say that you know what the study is about, and you want to take part in it.

Then we can make a time to meet and get started!



## Who do I ask if I have questions about the study?

Please get in touch with me or my supervisor:

Gill Rutherford

Dunedin College of Education

Private Bag

Dunedin

479-3804

0800 TO TEACH

[gill.rutherford@dce.ac.nz](mailto:gill.rutherford@dce.ac.nz)



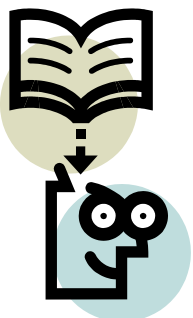
Dr Anne Bray (Supervisor)

Donald Beasley Institute

P O Box 6189

Dunedin

479-2162



Thank you for reading this and helping with my study.

*This project has been reviewed and approved by the  
University of Otago Human Ethics Committee*

## Appendix D

### Student Information: Consent

University of Otago PhD Study:

*Students with disabilities and teacher aides: An analysis of experience*

#### CONSENT FORM FOR STUDENTS

---

I have read the Information Booklet about the study and I understand what it is about.

My questions about the study have been answered.

I know that:-

1. I don't have to take part in the study if I don't want to.
2. I can change my mind if, later on, I don't want to be in the study.
3. I don't have to answer questions if I don't want to.
4. If I want to know more about the study, I and/or my parents/caregivers can ask the researcher.
5. What I tell the researcher is private.
6. My name won't be put in the study report—no one will know that I took part in the study.
7. What the researcher writes down will be locked up safely at the university for five years, then shredded.  
The tape recordings of our interviews will be wiped after they are typed up, so that no one else can hear them.
8. Nothing bad will happen to me if I change my mind about anything to do with the project.

I would like to take part in the study.

.....

(Name and signature)

.....

(Date)

*Thank you. Please return this to Gill Rutherford.*

---

*This project has been reviewed and approved by University of Otago Human Ethics Committee*

## Appendix D

### Student Information: Parent Consent

**University of Otago PhD Study:**

***Students with disabilities and teacher aides: An analysis of experience***

#### **CONSENT FORM FOR PARENTS/CAREGIVERS**

---

I have read the Information booklet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:-

1. My child's participation in the project is entirely voluntary;
2. My child is free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage;
3. The data [*notes and audio-tapes*] will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed;
4. This project involves an open-questioning technique where the precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance. Instead questioning will depend on the way in which the interview develops. In the event that the line of questioning develops in such a way that my child feels hesitant or uncomfortable s/he may decline to answer any particular question(s) and/or may withdraw from the project without any disadvantage of any kind.
5. The results of the project may be published but every attempt will be made to preserve my child's anonymity.

I give consent for my child to take part in this project.

.....

(Name and signature of parent/caregiver)

.....

(Date)

*Thank you. Please return this to Gill Rutherford.*

---

*This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee*

# Appendix E

## Teacher Aide Information

University of Otago PhD Study:

*Students with disabilities and teacher aides: An analysis of experience*

INFORMATION FOR TEACHER AIDES

1 June 2004

Thank you for showing an interest in this project. Please read this information sheet carefully before deciding whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, thank you. If you decide not to take part there will be no disadvantage to you of any kind. Either way, your time and efforts are appreciated.

.....

### What is the aim of the project?

This project is being undertaken as part of the requirements for a PhD in Education at the University of Otago. The purpose of the study is to gain an understanding of the perspectives and educational experiences of students with disabilities and teacher aides.

The study will involve separate interviews with students with disabilities and with teacher aides respectively, at out of school times and locations to suit participants and to minimise any disruption to school life.

My interest in doing this study comes from working as a high school teacher with students with disabilities and teacher aides. I respect the effort and commitment shown by teacher aides in their work with students, and want to learn more about teacher aides' perspectives. We know a lot informally from our own experiences, but so far, very little formal published research has been done on this topic in New Zealand, especially from the perspectives of teacher aides and students served by them.

Hopefully, what we learn through this study will be of benefit to teacher aides, students,

and schools in general, and will help inform educational policies and practices regarding students with disabilities and teacher aides.

### What kind of participants are sought?

Interviews will be held with 15 students with disabilities and 15 teacher aides, respectively, involved in primary, intermediate, and secondary schools in Otago and Southland (please note: we are not seeking "matched pairs" of students and teacher aides—the participation of a teacher aide in the study is not dependent on the student/s s/he supports also consenting to take part in the study, and vice versa).

In a later stage of the investigation, research findings may be shared with other "stakeholders" in the education system. Principals, teachers, and parents may be invited to take part in separate discussion groups to discuss the findings and to contribute their perspectives regarding the education of students with disabilities and the role that teacher aides play in this.



**What will teacher aides be asked to do?**

If you agree to take part in this project, you will be asked to sign a consent form indicating that you understand what's involved in the study, and are willing to participate. The following details are provided to enable you to make an informed decision.

**Interviews**

I would like to talk with you about your perspectives and experiences of "teacher aiding" and support of students who have disabilities. Interview questions will focus on teacher aide roles and responsibilities, relationships with students, influence on students' learning and friendships, and any other issues you consider important in your work as a teacher aide.

The interview will be arranged at a time and place convenient to you, and will take approximately one to two hours to complete. The interview will be tape recorded if you feel comfortable about this (otherwise I'll take notes of what you say). The tapes will then be typed out and you will be asked to read through the interview transcripts to check that they are correct, and to make any changes you think necessary.

**Discussion group meetings**

As a follow up to the interviews, you will be invited to come along to a meeting with other teacher aides, to talk as a group about the interview findings and about any matters that you feel are important that have not been covered in the interviews.

The meeting will take approximately two hours. You are not obliged to take part in this second phase of the study, if you prefer not to. You can make your decision about this at whatever time suits you. Where required, assistance will be provided with transport to and from meetings.

Meetings will be facilitated by the researcher, who will be assisted by a recorder to ensure that an accurate record of discussion is made. As with the interviews, these meetings will be tape recorded if everyone is agreeable to this.

**Can I change my mind and withdraw from the project?**

You may withdraw from participation in the project at any time and without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

**What information will be collected and what use will be made of it?**

The information I collect will consist of interview and discussion group transcripts.

As I am interested in your perspectives of what's important, I will use an open questioning approach in which the interview will develop in response to your thoughts about certain topics. Consequently, although the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee is aware of the general areas to be explored in the interview, the Committee has not been able to review the precise questions to be used. In the event that the line of questioning does develop in such a way that you feel hesitant or uncomfortable you are reminded of your right to decline to answer any particular question(s) and also that you may withdraw

from the project at any stage without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

The information will be analysed and used to write my PhD thesis. It may also be used in conference and professional development presentations, as well as journal articles, so that others involved in the education and research sectors can learn from your experiences.

You and others involved in the study (individuals and schools) will not be identified in any way, and all the information collected will be confidential to me, my two PhD supervisors, and the people who transcribe the interviews (type up the interview and discussion group tapes). I will send you a summary of the study findings, and you are welcome to request a copy of the full, completed study if you wish.

The data collected will be securely stored in such a way that only those mentioned above will be able to gain access to it. At the end of the project any personal information will be destroyed immediately except that, as required by the University's research policy, any raw data on which the results of the project depend (e.g., interview transcripts) will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed.

### **What if I have any questions?**

If you have any questions about the project, now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:-

Gill Rutherford  
Dunedin College of Education  
Private Bag, Dunedin  
479-3804  
0800 TO TEACH  
[gill.rutherford@dce.ac.nz](mailto:gill.rutherford@dce.ac.nz)

Dr Anne Bray (Supervisor)  
Donald Beasley Institute  
P O Box 6189, Dunedin  
479-2162

**Thanx for reading this and  
helping with my study😊**

*This project has been reviewed and  
approved by the  
University of Otago Human Ethics  
Committee*

## **Appendix E**

### **Teacher Aide Consent**

**University of Otago PhD Study:**

***Students with disabilities and teacher aides: An analysis of experience***

#### **CONSENT FORM FOR TEACHER AIDES**

---

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:-

1. My participation in the project is entirely voluntary;
2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage;
3. The data [*notes and audio-tapes*] will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed;
4. This project involves an open-questioning technique where the precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance. Instead questioning will depend on the way in which the interview develops. In the event that the line of questioning develops in such a way that I feel hesitant or uncomfortable I may decline to answer any particular question(s) and/or may withdraw from the project without any disadvantage of any kind.
5. The results of the project may be published but every attempt will be made to preserve my anonymity.

I agree to take part in this project.

.....

(Name and signature of participant)

.....

(Date)

*Thank you. Please return this to Gill Rutherford, using the envelope provided.*

---

*This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee*

## Appendix F

### Summary of Student Participants

Name	Age	Ethnicity	School level	School type	School location	Primary means of communication	Number of TAs	TA Hours/week
Ross	8	NZ European	Primary Year 3	State co-ed	City	Talking	1	5
Bart	8	NZ European	Primary Year 4	Integrated (religious)	City	Talking	1	5 approx
Tim	9	NZ European	Primary Year 5	State co-ed	Suburban	Talking	1	14
Sam	9	NZ European	Primary Year 5	Integrated (religious)	City	Talking, sign language, symbol/picture board, gestures, facial expressions	1	Full support while at school (not always full days)
Bella	9	NZ European	Primary Year 5	State co-ed	City	Talking	1 * No teacher aide in 2005	Varied

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>School level</b>	<b>School type</b>	<b>School location</b>	<b>Primary means of communication</b>	<b>Number of TAs</b>	<b>TA Hours/week</b>
Mack	11	NZ European	Intermediate Year 7	State co-ed	City	Talking	1	15
Paul	15	NZ European	Secondary Year 11	State co-ed	Rural town	Talking	3-4	Varied (at least 12 hours/week)
Sophie	17	NZ European	Secondary Year 12	State single sex	City	Talking	4	Varied (at least 12 hours/week)
Jess	17	NZ European/Māori	Secondary Year 13	State single sex	City	Talking; eye gaze	At least 6	Varied (most classes)
Rachel	17	NZ European/Māori	Secondary Year 13	State single sex	City	Talking	“Depends who has been timetabled—it changes.”	Varied (at least 12 hours/week)

## Appendix G

### Summary of Teacher Aide Participants

Teacher aide	Age	Ethnicity	School location	School type	Length of time in current school	Hours per week	Current student supports	Previous experience as teacher aide	Training specific to teacher aide work
Esther	30-40	NZ European	City	Primary State co-ed	10 months	10-15	5 year old male 15 hours regular class ORRS	None	Tertiary certificate qualification (equivalent 1 year full time study)
Rosie	40-50	NZ European/ Māori	City	Primary State co-ed	Half a term	Over 20	5 year old male 27.5 hours regular class ORRS	3 years in 2 different primary schools; regular class support	No formal training
Caroline	50+	NZ European	City	Primary State co-ed	4 years	Over 20	8 year old female 21 hours regular class ORRS	8 years in primary and intermediate schools; regular and special class support	No formal training
Leah	40-50	NZ European	City	Primary State co-ed	1 year 1 term	15	9 year old male 15 hours class; lunchtime; primary care ORRS	3 years secretary/TA in primary school	Enrolled in tertiary certificate qualification

Teacher aide	Age	Ethnicity	School location	School type	Length of time in current school	Hours per week	Current student supports	Previous experience as teacher aide	Training specific to teacher aide work
Brodie	40-50	NZ European	City	Primary State co-ed	4 years	Over 20	11 year old female 14.5 hours class & out of class; ABA training ORRS. 12 hours general school support	None	Tertiary certificate qualification (equivalent 1 year full time study)
Mary	40-50	NZ European	Rural town	Primary State co-ed (2 different schools)	5 years 6 years	Over 20	11 year old male 20 hours regular and special class; breaks Accident Compensation Commission funded. 12 year old male 8 hours regular class; breaks ORRS	6 years in 3 different primary schools; regular class and special class support	3 tertiary certificate qualifications
Lucy	40-50	NZ European	City	Primary Integrated	4 years 1 term	Over 20	9 year old female and 10 year old female 25 hours regular class ORRS	None	No formal training

Teacher aide	Age	Ethnicity	School location	School type	Length of time in current school	Hours per week	Current student supports	Previous experience as teacher aide	Training specific to teacher aide work
Mae	40-50	NZ European	Rural town	Primary Integrated	4 years	Over 20	5 year old female 19 hours regular class breaks; swimming; 1-1 speech; 1-1 physio & OT program ORRS. 6 year old female 1.5 hours regular class and 1:1. 6 year old male 1 hour regular class and 1:1.	9 years in current primary school; regular class support; ESOL work; therapy support; 9 years in kindergarten	No formal training (previously school dental nurse)
Nell	30-40	NZ European/ Māori	Rural town	Primary State co-ed	3 years	Over 20	10 year old male 11 hours regular class ORRS. 6 year old female 12.5 hours regular class ORRS	None	Tertiary certificate qualification (equivalent 1 year full time study)



Teacher aide	Age	Ethnicity	School location	School type	Length of time in current school	Hours per week	Current student supports	Previous experience as teacher aide	Training specific to teacher aide work
Jack	30-40	NZ European	Rural town	Primary State co-ed	4 years	Varies	Range of student supports in different primary schools (contracted by Ministry of Education and/or Health to work in schools)	4 years in early childhood, primary, and secondary schools; regular class support with students who have autism	Completing final year of teacher training; Accredited behavioral therapist
Kate	40-50	NZ European	City	Intermediate State co-ed	7 years	20	12 year old female 8.75 hours (job share) regular class & interval ORRS. 11 year old male 5 hours regular class; “behavioural.” 12 year old male 5 hours regular class; “behavioural.”	14 years in early childhood, primary, and intermediate schools; regular class and special class support	Tertiary certificate qualification Occasional professional development short courses
Grace	40-50	NZ European	City	Intermediate State co-ed	3 months	15-20	11 year old male 15 hours regular class; Orientation & Mobility (in and out of school)	2 years in primary school; regular class support	Tertiary certificate qualification (equivalent 1 year full time study)

Teacher aide	Age	Ethnicity	School location	School type	Length of time in current school	Hours per week	Current student supports	Previous experience as teacher aide	Training specific to teacher aide work
Meg	50+	NZ European	City	Secondary State single sex	10 months	Over 20	12 year old female 21 hours regular class; unit; break ORRS. Assists with other students based in unit	4 years in primary and intermediate schools; regular class with special school itinerant support	Occasional professional development short courses (previously psychiatric nurse)
Jo	30-40	NZ European	Rural town	Secondary State co-ed	6 years	Over 20	13 year old male 22 hours break times; unit; regular classes ORRS. 17 year old male 5 hours regular classes	None	Occasional professional development short courses
Ellen	40-50	NZ European	Rural town	Secondary State co-ed	9 years	Over 20	16 year old male 5 hours regular class ORRS. 16 year old female 7 hours regular class and 1:1 ORRS. regular class support	None	No formal training (Previously involved with <i>Literacy Aotearoa</i> )

Teacher aide	Age	Ethnicity	School location	School type	Length of time in current school	Hours per week	Current student supports	Previous experience as teacher aide	Training specific to teacher aide work
Ann	30-40	NZ Māori	Rural town	Secondary State co-ed	3 years	Over 20	13 year old female 18-20 hours regular class ORRS and SEG. 13 year old male 4 hours regular class. 13 year old male 4 hours regular class.	None	Occasional professional development short courses
Liz	30-40	NZ European	City	Secondary State co-ed	5 years	Over 20	16 year old male 25 hours unit ORRS	4 years in primary, intermediate and secondary schools; regular and special class support	Tertiary certificate qualification
Pip	40-50	NZ European	Town	Secondary State co-ed	4 months	10-15	16 year old male 10 hours in 2 regular classes; 3 hours' correspondence	None	No formal training

# Appendix H

## Guidelines for Meeting Parents

### GUIDELINES FOR INITIAL MEETINGS WITH PARENTS

---

#### *Purpose of meeting:*

- introduce myself and go over what's involved in the study
- discuss any questions you may have
- learn about the best ways of communicating and making meetings successful
- sign consent form
- plan meeting with student

#### **Introductions and overview of study**

NB: Importance of CONFIDENTIALITY (re: roles of student, parent, researcher)

In the event of disclosure of anything of concern, need to inform parent

Parents' questions?

Can you tell me a bit about \_\_\_\_\_?

Is there anything I need to know about \_\_\_\_\_ so that I can make our meetings safe/fun/interesting/successful?

Communication—what works best?

Strengths/interests?

Dislikes?

Difficult/sensitive topics?

Health/medication/specific aids/supervision?

Reasons for having a teacher aide?

#### **Consent form if happy to proceed**

#### **Meeting with student**

**Date**

**Time**

**Place**

**Supports**

Any questions/concerns, please get in touch. Really appreciate your time and willingness to share your experience with me—thank you!

## Appendix I

### Summary of Meetings with Students

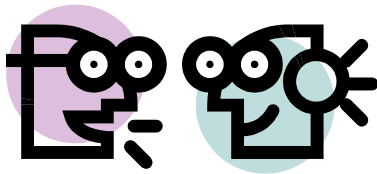
Name	Age	Primary means of communication	Number of meetings	Length of meetings	Record of meetings
Ross	8	Talking	4 Plus follow up meeting to check accuracy of my summary of our talks.	1 hour 1 hour 55 mins 1 hour 15 mins	All meetings recorded. 3 transcribed by me; 1 by transcriber.
Bart	8	Talking	4 (including initial meeting with mum)	1 hour 20 mins 1 hour 10 mins 1 hour 10 mins 40 minutes (Bart not well)	3 meetings recorded. 2 transcribed by me; 1 by transcriber (did not tape meeting with mum).
Tim	9	Talking	3 Plus follow up meeting to check accuracy of my summary of our talks. Plus 2 hour interview with mum	1 hour 20 mins 1 hour 30 mins 1 hour 15 mins	All meetings recorded; transcribed by me. Mum's interview transcribed by transcriber.
Sam	9	Talking, sign language, symbol/picture board, gestures, facial expressions	5	1 hour 40 minutes 1 hour 1 hour 1 hour	All meetings recorded; transcribed by me.
Bella	9	Talking	4	1 hour 1 hour 1 hour 1 hour 30 mins	Did not want to be taped; notes made of each meeting.  * No teacher aide in 2005.

Name	Age	Primary means of communication	Number of meetings	Length of meetings	Record of meetings
Mack	11	Talking	6 (including meeting with mum) Plus follow up meeting to check accuracy of my summary of our talks.	1 hour 15 mins 1 hour 30 mins 1 hour 1 hour 30 mins 1 hour 45 minutes	5 meetings recorded. 3 transcribed by me; 2 by transcriber (did not tape meeting with mum).
Paul	16	Talking	3 Plus follow up meeting to check accuracy of my summary of our talks.	50 minutes 1 hour 20 mins 2 hours	2 meetings recorded. 1 transcribed by me; 1 by transcriber (did not tape introductory meeting with mum and Paul).
Sophie	17	Talking	5 Plus 2 hour follow up meeting to check accuracy of my summary of our talks.	1 hour 5 mins 1 hour 1 hour 10 mins 1 hour 1 hour	All meetings recorded. 2 transcribed by me; 3 by transcriber.
Jess	17	Talking; eye gaze	4 Plus follow up meeting to check accuracy of my summary of our talks.	1 hour 1 hour 10 mins 1 hour 1 hour 15 mins	3 meetings recorded; transcribed by me (did not tape introductory meeting with mum and Jess).
Rachel	17	Talking	3	1 hour 1 hour 20 mins 1 hour 20 mins	All meetings recorded. 1 transcribed by me; 2 by transcriber.

## Appendix J

### Student Evaluation of Meetings

What I think about meeting  
with Gill



How I feel about talking with Gill

Didn't like



OK



Great!



3 words to describe our meeting are

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

What would make meetings better?

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---

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Thank you! 😊😊

Appendix K  
Stuff about Me  
(actual forms were in colour)

# ☺ Stuff about ME ☺

My name is \_\_\_\_\_

I am \_\_\_\_\_ years old.



I live at \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

People (and pets) in my family



\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Where I go to school

\_\_\_\_\_

What I love BEST about school is



\_\_\_\_\_



\_\_\_\_\_



What I don't really like about school is



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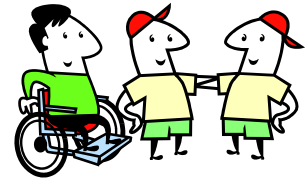
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My friends are

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What I like best about my friends is



---



---

After school and in the weekends I like to

---

---

---



My favorite things (what I LOVE) are ☺

---

---

---



My pet hate (what I DON'T LIKE) is



---



I'm REALLY GOOD at

---

---

What I want to do when I grow up is...



---

3 words to describe me are

1. 

---
2. 

---
3. 

---

Other things I want to tell you?



---

---

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---

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Thank you ☺

# Appendix L

## Stuff about School

(actual forms were in colour)

# ☺ Stuff about School ☺

Here are some questions about your day at school.








How do you get to school? Please tick the right answer ✓

- ☐ I walk to school.
- ☐ I get a ride to school.

What do you **learn** at school?

What I do	✓	What I think about this ☹ ☺ ☺	Who helps me	What I think about this ☹ ☺ ☺
 Reading				
 Writing stories				
 Handwriting				
 Maths				
 Topic				
 Art				
 Music				
 Computer				
 Fitness				

What other things do you do at school?

What I do	✓	Who I'm with	What I think about this ☹ ☺ 😊
 Playtime			
 Lunchtime			
 Hometime			
 Assembly			
 Sports			
 Friends			
 Camp			

Please tell me and/or draw the answer:

When I get to school I

Before playtime I

After playtime I

At lunchtime I

After lunch I

Before hometime I



At school I'm REALLY GOOD at



What I love BEST about school is



What I don't really like about school is



What I would like to change about school is

Other things I want to tell you?

Thank you ☺

## Appendix M

### Talking about Teacher Aides

*(actual forms were in colour)*

# Teacher Aides

**Here are some questions about teacher aides. Please tell me and/or draw the answer:**



## What is a teacher aide? What are they meant to do?

## How many teacher aides do you have?

## How long have they worked with you?

How many times a day (or week) do they work with you?

[illegible]

Why do you have a teacher aide?

What's the difference between  
a teacher and a teacher aide?



Who do you think helps you more?



## What my teacher aide does to help me

Schoolwork

Making friends



Communication

Helping me in other ways

I think my teacher aide is

---

Not helpful

OK

very helpful

Please ✓ the things your teacher aide does that are helpful.

Please ✗ the things your teacher aide does that are not helpful.

Are there other things a teacher aide **SHOULD DO** to help students or the teacher?

Are there other things a teacher aide should **NOT** do with students or the teacher?



What would you change about the ways your teacher aide helps you?

## My Teacher Aides

What I like about my teacher aides



What I don't like



Reasons?

Reasons?

What would the best teacher aide in the world be like?



Can you write a job description for a teacher aide?

What would you like to tell teacher aides to help them do their job better?



If you were the Principal, what would like to change about school to make it better?













Is there anything else you want to tell me about teacher aides and school?

Thank you ☺

# Appendix N

## Teacher Aide Board Game

(scaled down)

START	2	3 ?	4	5  	6 ?	7 
						8 X
21 	22 ?	23 	24 ?	25		
20 X				26 ?		
19 ?				FINISH 		
18 	17	16 ?	15  	14	13 ?	12 

? question




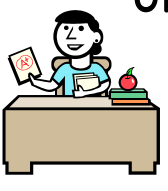

X miss a turn




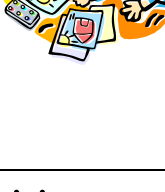


 go back a space

 get a treat

# Appendix N

## Cards for Teacher Aide Board Game

 <p>How many teacher aides do you have?</p>	<p>What does your teacher aide do to help you in your schoolwork?</p> 
<p>What does your teacher do to help you in your schoolwork?</p> 	<p>Who helps you more—your teacher or teacher aide?</p>  
<p>What do you like about your teacher? Please tell me in 3 words.</p> 	<p>What do you like about your teacher aide? Please tell me in 3 words.</p> 
<p>☹</p> <p>Is there anything you do NOT like about your teacher?</p> 	<p>☹</p> <p>Is there anything you do NOT like about your teacher aide?</p> 

 <p>What would the best teacher aide in the world be like?</p>	 <p>Is there anything you would like to tell teacher aides to help do their job better?</p>
 <p>Do you like having a teacher aide?</p>	 <p>Does your teacher aide help other children?</p>
 <p>Your turn to ask a question. 😊</p>	 <p>Your turn to say anything you want about teacher aides. 😊</p>

## Appendix O

### Summary of Meetings with each Student

(sample)

#### ☺ What I think about school and teacher aides ☺

In September and October 2004, Jack Black talked to Gill Rutherford about school and teacher aides. This is helping Gill to do a big project at university. Jack and Gill met at Jack's house five times.

Gill asked Jack lots of questions. Jack was really helpful. Some of the things he talked about are written below.

Some of the words have got "speech marks" around them. This means that Jack said these actual words (Gill wrote them down when she listened to the tape recording of the meetings).

At our first meeting, we talked about JACK.

Name: Jack Black

Age: 11

Address: 1 Noname Avenue, Nowhere

Jack's family:

Mum and Dad

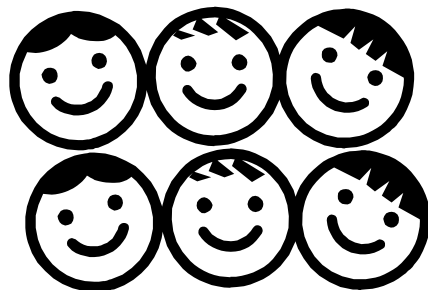
Ruby

Mary

Debbie

Goldie Fish and Kitty Cat

School: Happy School





After school and in the weekends I like to

☺ Play with my toys

My favorite things (what I really like) are

☺ going shopping

☺ toys—especially trucks and cars

☺ staying in bed when I don't have to get up for school



What I DON'T like is

☹ nothing!

I'm REALLY GOOD at



☺ Playing games

☺ Singing



When I grow up I want to be

★ A farmer

★ A chef

3 words to describe me are

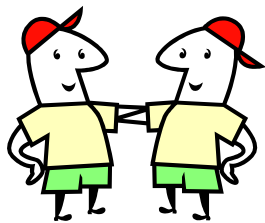
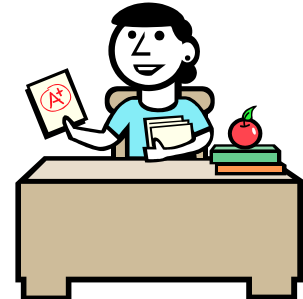
1. P for Pumpkin Eater (we had a good giggle about that!)
2. Good
3. Funny

## The second thing we talked about was **SCHOOL**

Jack filled in charts about what he does at school, and what he thinks about that. We also used pictures and photos to help us talk about school.

What I like about school is

☺ When I asked Jack what he loves about school, he said "Oh, this is a good question...all the nice teachers—I've got lots of nice teachers you know."



☺ He also said "well, just probably just playing with my friends ... just going to the library."

☺ Jack said that Happy School "is a really good school, you see."

☺ Jack said that Technology is "great ... because you get to make stuff."  
Technology is one of his favorite subjects.

☺ He also said "Science—that's my favorite thing!" And he "likes sports."



☺ Jack went on camp with his class. A family friend went with him to camp.

Jack said "We had to walk right around the bush. ... And we had to walk at night time. I was a bit scared of possums."

What I don't like about school is

☹ "Nothing, I just like everything!"

At school I'm really good at

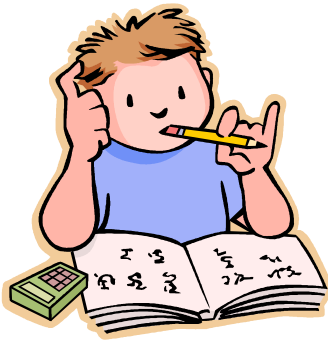
☺ Kapa haka

"You get to do some Māori songs ... and you get to do some actions."

☺ "Just playing with my friends."

☺ Jack got his first certificate for "helping others."

He felt "really happy. I deserved it, anyway."



What I find hard at school

Jack said that tests are a bit hard—"to see and to understand."

My friends

☺ Jack said he is friends with Mary (secret squirrel name). He drew a Very Happy face ☺ to show that friends are pretty important to him.

Jack said what he likes best about his friends is that "they look after me a lot when I fall over—they're *so* nice to me."



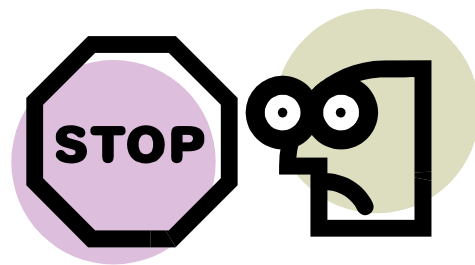
If Jack was the **Principal** of the school, he would:

"Well, just put a new playground in. ... Because it's actually annoying because we don't have lots of stuff to do. Because we can't see, well I can't see the hopscotch."

I asked Jack what would make it easier to see the hopscotch. He said "well, if it's painted white."

Jack told me that some of the teachers are grumpy, but he still likes them. He thinks teachers get grumpy "when people don't get their work done."

Jack said that sometimes "boys were absolutely mean to me ... talking about me." He said that he feels "a bit upset" when that happens, and that if he was the principal, he would "growl at them."



## The third thing we talked about was **TEACHER AIDES**

We played a game to help us talk about teacher aides. We had to answer questions about teacher aides.

### Jack's teacher aide

Jack has a teacher aide to help him in class every morning, except Wednesday mornings. On Wednesday afternoon she helps Jack in Technology.



Jack said he has a teacher aide "because of my vision, I can't see. ... And I can't see words really small, so she has to come and help."

I asked Jack that if the teacher made the words bigger for him to see, would he still need a teacher aide? He said yes, "because she would know all the words that I don't know." He said that the teacher's "got to do work with the rest of the class."

When we talked about this another day, we said:

Gill        Why do you have a teacher aide, Jack?

Jack        Well, because of my eyes, I can't see really far, for a distance.

Gill        Right.

Jack        Like if there's something big on the board, I can't actually see it, it's too small.

Gill        What about if Mr A wrote bigger and you sat at the front of the class?

Jack        That would be great.

Gill        Could you do that?

Jack        Well, yes I could.



Gill        Yeah.

Jack        But, some people need to be up close to the board.

Gill        Yeah, but don't you too?

Jack        Yeah, but Mr A doesn't let me.

Gill        Why not?

Jack        Oh, 'cause he knows [teacher aide's] gonna help me. So I can't.

Gill        So where do you sit in the class?

Jack        I just sit in the back.

Jack said that one day his teacher aide wasn't there, and no one told him. He said "I was a little bit angry and a little bit happy." He was a little bit angry "because she didn't arrive" and a little bit happy "that Mr A helped me."

#### **What the teacher aide does:**

The teacher aide helps Jack with all his subjects, except PE.



Jack said

"She just writes things down."

"She plays nice games with me."

"She helps me at guitar."

Jack said his teacher aide "comes round when I'm stuck—and she says 'Jack you know that!'"

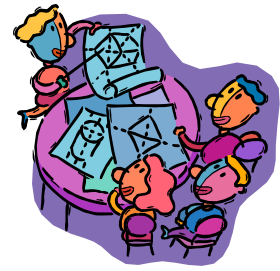
Jack's teacher aide helps explain things, and helps him with tests. She writes in big writing, so he can see more easily.

In Sewing, "she just does the needle, going through with the needle ... because she thinks I might just go poke!"

Sometimes the teacher aide helps other children.

"Sometimes she, if Mr A's working with one group, people come up and ask Mrs B the questions."

Jack said it's OK if she helps other kids.



### **What the teacher aide doesn't do:**

Jack's teacher aide doesn't help him at playtime or lunchtime.

At Assembly, Jack said "I just look after myself."



Stops me playing with my friends—"no, she would not want to do that."

I asked Jack if his teacher aide helps him on Sports Days. He said "No, she won't be helping me. Nope. ... She'll just come and cheer me on."

### **What the best teacher aide in the world would be like:**

Jack drew a picture of the best teacher aide. He said that it was Mrs B, "because she helps me a lot."

He said "Well, you see, she's been really, really kind to me and she's been a great teacher aide because she, when she wants me to do something, I'll do it, actually do it for her..."

Jack chose these words to describe his teacher aide:

★ Kind

"yeah, of course she is ... because she helps me with lots of work. That's why she's kind." (Jack said that kind means "being friendly")

★ Makes work fun

★ Helpful

★ Fair

★ Funny

★ Happy

"yes, cos she's always..."

★ Talks with me about stuff

★ Likes me

"Yes, course she does!"

★ "She does know how to help me"

★ Gives me time to do things myself

★ Tells me I do good work

"course she does"

★ Sometimes does my work for me (if it's very hard)

★ Likes what I do

★ Helps me when I'm upset

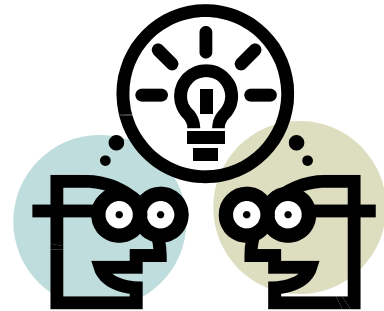
"Yes, of course she does."

★ Organised

"She always gets organised. ... She organised things for me to do for homework."

★ Lets me choose

"Like if I want to choose a book, she says 'choose a book, Jack.'"



Jack said that "Mrs B is my favorite helper."





## Teachers and teacher aides

Jack said that a teacher aide is meant to "help. Just help." A teacher is meant to "teach—the children" and the "teacher aide just teaches me."

Jack thinks a teacher aide is meant to "do jobs for other teachers", as well as help students. He thinks that teacher aides help some kids if they need it, because teachers get "busy doing something else."

Jack said that the teacher is the boss in the class. He said that teacher aides aren't allowed to tell kids off.

Jack said he likes working with the teacher and the teacher aide—when they both do fun activities.

He said "If Mr A doesn't want me to do something, what's actually a bit hard for me, well I do something with Mrs B." "if the class is busy with Mr A, then I've been missed out, then I go up to Mrs B."

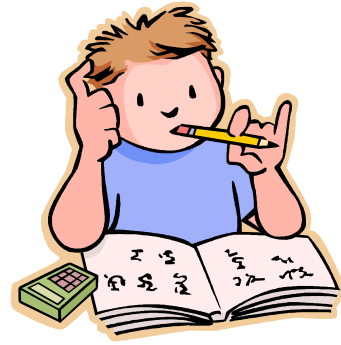


Jack said he thinks he learns more from the teacher, but he also learns things from the teacher aide.

Sometimes he does different work with his teacher aide, in a different room. He said that that was OK, but sometimes he wants to do what the rest of the class is doing.

Jack thinks that organising homework is the teacher aide's job, because "sometimes Mr A's busy with the class."

Jack said that school would be "hard" if he didn't have a teacher aide.



I really liked meeting Jack and his mum. They were really kind to let me come to their house to talk with them. We had a lot of laughs--Jack has a GREAT sense of humor😊. He helped me a lot with my project.

THANK YOU JACK (and mum!!).

# **Appendix P**

## **Teacher Aide Interview Guide**

*Date*

### **Background information**

- How did you come to be a teacher aide? Can you tell me about the employment and orientation process you went through to begin work at your school?
- Please tell me about your work as a teacher aide—what might a typical day look like?
- How many students with disabilities do you work with? What kinds of support requirements do these students have? What kind of educational settings do you work in (e.g., supporting students in regular classes, in separate unit)?
- What kind of training/experience do you have? What training/professional development do you believe would be helpful to you in your work? What kinds of supports and barriers to training exist for you?

### **Role of teacher aide**

- What do you consider the role of the teacher aide to be? What are your key roles and responsibilities?
- Who decides what you do? How are the roles and responsibilities of teacher aides made known throughout the school and with parents/caregivers? Where do teacher aides “fit” in the school system?
- Sometimes teacher aides may be asked to do things that they believe to be “outside their job description”. Can you describe any such experiences you have had, and how you have dealt with these?
- Can you tell me about supervision arrangements (e.g., who supervises you? To whom are you accountable?)
- Do you have any comments you would like to make about the role of teacher aides in schools?

### **Relationships with students who have disabilities**

- You work with \_\_\_\_ number of students. For the purpose of this study, we will focus on the student with whom you spend the greatest amount of time each week. It would be helpful if you could give a general overview of your work with her/him (e.g., how you think of and know her/him, how long you’ve known her/him, how much time you spend with her/him each week, what kinds of supports you provide, what you enjoy and/or find challenging in your work with her/him).
- How would you describe the kind of relationship you have with this student?
- What helps you develop positive relationships with students in general and with this student in particular?

- What gets in the way of your developing positive relationships with students in general and with this student in particular?

#### **Influence on learning/academic achievement**

- How is the academic achievement of the students you support measured?
- What influence do you think you have on this particular student's learning/academic achievement (e.g., describe the kinds of achievements experienced by her/him, and how you contribute to these)?
- What kinds of difficulties do you encounter in supporting students' learning/academic achievement?
- What kinds of support do you have in supporting students' learning (e.g., close consultation with teachers)?
- What do you think would be helpful to you to enable you to better support students' learning?

#### **Influence on relationships/friendships with peers**

- Can you describe this student's pattern of friendships with school peers?
- What influence do you think you have on her/his relationships with peers?
- What kinds of difficulties do you encounter in supporting students' relationships with peers?
- What kinds of support do you have in supporting students' relationships with peers?
- What do you think would be helpful to you to enable you to better support students' relationships with peers?

#### **Changes/General**

- What do you love about/gives you the most satisfaction in your job?
- What presents the greatest difficulties in your work?
- What changes would you like to see take place in schools/the education system regarding the education of students with disabilities and the role that teacher aides play in this?
- Do you have any other general comments you would like to make that may be relevant to this study?

***Thank you very much indeed for sharing your time and experiences.***

## Appendix Q

### Summary of Teacher Aide Interviews *(in order of interview date)*

Teacher aide	Date of interview	Location	Length	Transcript	Edit?	Coding
Ann	21 October 2004	Home	10.00 am–12.10 pm 2 hours 10 minutes	17,023 words 48 pages	Edit to clarify and remove personal comments	32 nodes
Pip	25 November 2004	Home	10.00 am–12 noon 2 hours	14,528 words 40 pages	None	35/36 nodes
Ellen	30 October 2004	DCE office	11.00 am–1.00 pm 2 hours	13,341 words 39 pages	None	33/39 nodes
Liz	13 November 2004	DCE office	9.30 am–12 noon 2 hours 30 minutes	27,382 words 57 pages	None	41/43 nodes
Meg	2 December 2004	DCE office	1.00-3.00pm 2 hours	15,242 words 46 pages	Edit for clarity and grammar	38/47 nodes
Jo	6 December 2004	Home	9.30 am–12 noon 2 hours 30 minutes	16,403 words 32 pages	None	39/48 nodes
Grace	8 November 2004	Gill's home	7.00-9.30pm 2 hours 30 minutes	10,192 words 25 pages	Provided one page update	35/48 nodes
Kate	17 November 2004	DCE office	3.30 – 6.15 pm 2 hours 45 minutes	28,231 words 67 pages	Edit to remove personal comments	45/49 nodes
Lucy	21 October 2004	DCE office	4.15 – 6.25 pm 2 hours 10 minutes	17,491 words 37 pages	Minor edit for clarification	33/49 nodes

Leah	3 November 2004	School	3.10 – 5.10 pm 2 hours	13,887 words 38 pages	Minor edit for clarification	36/49 nodes
Brodie	4 November 2004	Home	7.00 – 9.00 pm 2 hours	13,760 words 33 pages	Minor edit for clarification	36/50 nodes
Esther	12 November 2004	DCE office	11.30am – 1.50 pm 2 hours 20 minutes	15,906 words 41 pages	Very minor edit	32/50 nodes
Rosie	15 November 2004	DCE office	3.30 – 5.45 pm 2 hours 15 minutes	21,953 words 54 pages	Edit for clarity	41/50 nodes
Caroline	24 November 2004	Home	3.00 – 5.00 pm 2 hours	16,341 words 36 pages	None	36/50 nodes
Jack	25 November 2004	Home	5.30 – 7.50 pm 2 hours 20 minutes	21,263 words 49 pages	None	34/51 nodes
Nell	25 November 2004	School	2.00 – 3.15 pm 1 hour 15 minutes	7,768 words 26 pages	None	26/51 nodes
Mae	26 November 2004	Home	9.00 – 10.50 am 1 hour 50 minutes	14,313 words 32 pages	None	36/51 nodes
Mary	7 December 2004	DCE office	4.30 – 6.30 pm 2 hours	12,911 words 34 pages	Edit for clarification and added notes for elaboration	34/51 nodes

734 pages total transcripts

## Appendix R

### Data Codes

*(listed in alphabetical order)*

**Created:** 30/06/2005 - 9:28:22 a.m.

**Number of Nodes:** 51

<b>1</b>	\$\$\$	<b>38</b>	school structure, policies, practice
<b>2</b>	appreciation	<b>39</b>	student support
<b>3</b>	barriers to learning	<b>40</b>	students' response to TA
<b>4</b>	changes like to see	<b>41</b>	TA advocacy
<b>5</b>	communication	<b>42</b>	TA's place in school
<b>6</b>	discipline	<b>43</b>	TA's thinking about students
<b>7</b>	ECE	<b>44</b>	teacher training
<b>8</b>	extracurricular activities	<b>45</b>	terms TAs use to describe students
<b>9</b>	families	<b>46</b>	the ABA thing
<b>10</b>	flexibility	<b>47</b>	the other 28 children
<b>11</b>	frustrations-challenges	<b>48</b>	training-experience
<b>12</b>	getting a job	<b>49</b>	transitions
<b>13</b>	getting to know students	<b>50</b>	working with professionals
<b>14</b>	Group Special Education	<b>51</b>	working with teachers
<b>15</b>	high school or primary TA		
<b>16</b>	humor		
<b>17</b>	IEP		
<b>18</b>	intermediate school		
<b>19</b>	job insecurity		
<b>20</b>	job satisfaction		
<b>21</b>	keeping people happy		
<b>22</b>	looking to the future		
<b>23</b>	mainstreaming-special		
<b>24</b>	medication		
<b>25</b>	miscellaneous		
<b>26</b>	pathway to teacher training		
<b>27</b>	perceptions of TAs		
<b>28</b>	principal		
<b>29</b>	professional boundaries		
<b>30</b>	relationships with students		
<b>31</b>	responsiveness to students' behavior		
<b>32</b>	responsiveness to students' learning		
<b>33</b>	responsiveness to students' primary care		
<b>34</b>	responsiveness to students' socialisation		
<b>35</b>	rights		
<b>36</b>	roles and responsibilities		
<b>37</b>	safety		

## Appendix S

### Ethical Considerations throughout the Research Process

*(adapted from Kvale, 1996)*

Research stage	Thematising
Ethical considerations	One of the main purposes of social science research is “to contribute knowledge to ameliorating the human condition and enhance human dignity” (Kvale, 1996, p. 109).
Application to this study	The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the educational experiences of disabled students and teacher aides (both marginalised groups within the education system). I hope that the research will result in new and constructive knowledge that will benefit students and teacher aides by legitimising their voices and contributing to an understanding of their experiences, which in turn will inform educational policy and practice.
Research stage	Designing
Ethical considerations	This stage of research is typically addressed in the preparation of ethics applications. It involves detailing procedures used to obtain informed consent, ensure confidentiality, and other ethical protections outlined above.
Application to this study	<p>Gaining ethical approval has already been outlined. As the research process evolved, I adapted my original “children” information sheets and consent forms so that they were more appropriate and meaningful for younger and older students (Beresford, 1997).</p> <p>Both parents/caregivers and students were asked to give consent to participate in the study (Minkes et al., 1994). In the event that a parent consented and their daughter/son did not wish to take part, the student’s wishes were respected (Alderson, 1995). Informed consent involves participants having the capacity to understand and give consent (Beresford, 1997). While much traditional research has tended to contest the notion of disabled children’s capacity, more recent studies provide evidence of their agency and competence (e.g., Barnes et al., 2000). In this study, I am guided by the criterion of the “least dangerous assumption” (Donnellan, 1984) and a presumption of competence (Biklen, 1998), that children are capable of understanding and giving their consent, providing situations are clearly and meaningfully explained to them. In addition to the written/pictorial information, I asked students to tell me what they thought the study was about/what they would do, as a means of checking their understanding. I concur with Eisner’s (1998) “general rule” that “researchers should seek the consent of those whom they expect to provide information or to be observed” (p. 173).</p>



Research stage	Interview situation
Ethical considerations	Written ethical procedures were put into practice in the meetings with participants.
Application to this study	<p>At the start of each interview I reviewed the ethical requirements, to ensure that participants had a clear understanding of their rights throughout the research process. I asked each person if they had any questions or concerns, and reiterated the confidential and anonymous nature of their participation. When discussing difficult situations brought up by participants, I tried to be sensitive to their emotional state, respecting the extent to which they felt comfortable discussing particular topics.</p> <p>Morris (1998) noted that “informed consent is not something that needs to be established just at the beginning of contact with the participant but should be an inherent part of the whole relationship” (p. 6). In my meetings with students, I made a point of reminding each person of their rights at the start of and during each meeting, using varied means of communication to do so (Kelly et al., 2000). These included plain language, pictorial material (e.g., stop sign positioned in an obvious place during our meetings) as well as verbal explanations (Beresford, 1997). This occasionally met with interesting responses. For example, in our second meeting, one teenager who was keen to start talking told me assertively “I know!! You’ve already told me all that stuff!” A younger student decided that he had had enough after 15 minutes, and quite clearly said “good bye” to me. I duly respected his wishes to finish our session for the day. Such responses were similar to those experienced by researchers in Morris’ (1998) project, who found that the need to inform participants about ethical rights sometimes got in the way of the informal interaction that characterised a successful visit. I tried to deal with this in a fun yet sincere manner.</p> <p>To clarify understanding of “confidentiality” and “anonymity” with children (Gollop, 2000), I asked them to tell me what they thought these words meant, then generated concrete examples with them.</p> <p>To help make the concepts of anonymity and confidentiality more concrete and real, I invited students to make up their own “secret squirrel pretend name”. As noted by (Gollop, 2000), students seemed to enjoy this.</p> <p>Students were invited to choose to have someone with them for our meetings, in the interest of security and safety (Gollop, 2000). I was guided by students and their parents/caregivers in this; where an adult accompanied the student, I nevertheless focused my attention on the student to encourage her/him to interact directly with me.</p> <p>Alderson (1995) raised an interesting question regarding the safety of children who take part in research by asking whether researchers should have police clearance. This was alluded to by one mother in her initial phone contact with me. I respected her need to know that her child would be safe, and tried to reassure her that my teaching position necessitated my adherence to safe, ethical conduct, and that children were invited to have a support person with them during our</p>

	<p>meetings.</p> <p>In the event that students revealed significant concerns (e.g., abuse), I would have asked them to nominate an appropriate adult (such as parent/caregiver, teacher, principal) to discuss the matter with. I would have been guided by the appropriate adult in determining the need for further action.</p> <p>Almost all of the students mentioned bullying as something they did not like about school. I found this tricky to respond effectively to, particularly when the student's parent/caregiver was present. I was acutely aware of how difficult it could be to hear your child talk about being bullied, and tried to clarify/make sure that each student knew what they could do about bullying.</p> <p>In the event of adult participants expressing difficulties, I would have listened respectfully, ensured that the participant was aware of possible supports and/or procedures to follow in dealing with the difficulties, and had a clear understanding of the researcher's role, which precluded becoming personally involved in the resolution of such difficulties. Documentation of such issues in the study findings would have been carefully considered and subject to the participant's consent.</p>
Research stage	Transcription
Ethical considerations	This stage of the research process involves checking that the transcribed interview is accurate and that confidentiality and anonymity are respected.
Application to this study	<p>As outlined, each teacher aide was sent a copy of her/his interview transcript to check that it accurately reflected her/his perspectives. Names of people and schools were changed, as were any potentially identifying personal or professional details.</p> <p>Summaries of the meetings with students were compiled, in which key points of our time together were documented, using plain language and pictures where appropriate. Where possible and/or convenient to families, I visited each student to verbally review the summary with them, to try to make the checking process as meaningful as possible. I reiterated with students that although I may use their words/quotes in my write up ("big story"), I would not use their real name, so that no one would be able to tell who said what (Gollop, 2000). Several students requested that certain details be changed. These were made and an amended copy provided to the student to keep.</p> <p>Transcribers and PhD supervisors were the only people (other than participants and me) who had access to the interview data. Their adherence to confidentiality is an integral part of their work.</p> <p>Research materials relating to participants were stored securely at my home and on my password protected laptop. I will follow university procedures for the eventual destruction of participant research material.</p>

Research stage	Analysis
Ethical considerations	The extent to which interviews can be analysed, and by whom (e.g. how much say do participants have), needs to be carefully considered in this stage of the research.
Application to this study	Interpretation of the interviews with teacher aides was shared with them via a Summary of Teacher Aide Findings (Appendix T). Participants were invited to provide feedback if they wished to do so.
Research stage	Verification
Ethical considerations	Researchers have an ethical responsibility to report knowledge that is as accurate/verified as possible.
Application to this study	The above procedures ensured that the knowledge gained through interaction with student and teacher aide participants was accurately recorded, verified, and documented in the writing of the thesis.
Research stage	Reporting
Ethical considerations	The issues of confidentiality and anonymity must be stringently addressed in any published work.
Application to this study	As noted, any details that could potentially identify people or organisations were altered or removed, to protect individuals' right to confidentiality and anonymity. In addition, my PhD supervisors played a monitoring role throughout the study, to ensure that it was conducted in an ethical manner.

# **Appendix T**

## **Summary of Teacher Aide Findings**

*(sent to participants prior to refining the scope of the thesis)*

### **PhD STUDY**

#### ***STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AND TEACHER AIDES: AN ANALYSIS OF EXPERIENCE***

#### **SUMMARY OF TEACHER AIDE FINDINGS**

##### **The Purpose of this Document**

This document has been written for the teacher aides who so generously shared their time, knowledge, and insight to help me understand their experiences of working as a teacher aide. It is a summary of initial findings drawn from my analysis of the interviews held with each teacher aide. The first section outlines the interview analysis process, followed by the findings for each of the key research questions.

Please note that this Summary of Findings is confidential. It is provided for the teacher aides involved in the study (a) for their information and interest, and (b) as a basis for feedback by those who wish to do so.

Gill Rutherford

PhD Candidate, University of Otago

January 2007

## INTERVIEW ANALYSIS PROCESS

*How did I get from what you told me to what I've written as the study "findings"?*

### **Transcribing Interviews**

Interviews were held at the end of 2004 with eighteen teacher aides (seventeen women and one man) employed by primary, intermediate, and/or high schools in Otago and Southland. Each interview lasted approximately two hours. The taped interviews were then transcribed. The printed interview transcripts ranged in length from 25 pages for the shortest interview to 67 pages for the longest, with a total of 734 pages of printed transcripts. Each transcribed interview was posted to each teacher aide to check and make any changes if desired.

### **Analysis of Interviews**

#### ***Initial Analysis***

To protect teacher aides' confidentiality, each was given a pseudonym, and any identifying details about schools and students were removed/changed in each transcript. The checked transcripts were then ready for analysis. This was done with the help of a computer software program called *NVivo*, which enabled me to sort/categorise "data" (the interview transcripts) into codes. For example, anything that teacher aides said about teacher aide pay was put in a code called "\$\$\$"; things to do with roles and responsibilities were put into a code called "roles and responsibilities."

To begin with, I read through each transcript and coded what each person said about different topics. After reviewing the first transcript I had 21 codes; after reviewing the final, 18<sup>th</sup> transcript, I had 51 codes. As I read through and coded each person's transcript, I also made notes/memos about points of interest that would help me understand teacher aides' experiences. This initial process of analysis concluded with my printing out each of the 51 codes. The smallest code consisted of teacher aides' references to "Group Special Education" (4 pages long) and the largest related to "working with teachers" (90 pages, consisting of a range of quotes from every participant about their experiences of working with teachers). I haven't added up the total number of pages printed from the 51 codes, but there are hundreds!

#### ***Further Analysis***

The next part of the process involved relating the 51 codes to the four main research questions, namely:

1. What is the role of the teacher aide?
2. What kind of relationships develop between students with disabilities and teacher aides?
3. What influence do teacher aides have on the school lives of students' with disabilities (e.g., in areas such as learning/academic achievement, social experiences, personal development)?
4. What changes are desirable in schools/the education system regarding the education of students with disabilities and the role that teacher aides play in this?

Beginning with Question 1, I read through the codes that related to the role of the teacher aide. As I reviewed each relevant code, I made notes and diagrams to help me interpret the wealth of teacher aides' discussion about the various aspects of the teacher aide's role. This then gave me a framework for writing about the role of the teacher aide, which I structured using headings for each part of teacher aides' work. This resulted in my writing the draft chapter of *Understanding the role of teacher aides in students' school lives*, using the following headings:

- Teacher Aides' Definitions of Their Role
- Understanding the Scope and Influence of Teacher Aides' Work
- Academic Support
- Individual Educational Plans
- Social Interaction
- Discipline and Behaviour
- Personal Care and Health
- Safety
- Extracurricular Activities
- Transitions

Each of these headings has subheadings to further structure discussion.

The same process was followed for analysing the codes relating to Questions 2 and 4. When I reviewed codes for Question 3, the influence that teacher aides have on students' school lives, I found that I had already covered much of this question in my discussion of Question 1. It was difficult to separate teacher aides' discussion of their role and the influence they had on students, so I amended the draft chapter on the role of the teacher aide to include their influence on students. So far, analysis of teacher aide findings has resulted in the writing of 172 pages. It is unrealistic to expect each person to read all of this (!) hence this summary of the key findings for each question.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

### **QUESTIONS 1 and 3**

#### **UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF TEACHER AIDES IN STUDENTS' SCHOOL LIVES**

##### **Teacher Aides' Definitions of Their Role**

Teacher aides varied in their definition of the teacher aide's role. Although all were employed to support students funded through the Ongoing Reviewable Resourcing Scheme (ORRS) some thought of their role as that of a "teacher" aide, while others saw themselves as a "student" aide.

##### **Understanding the Scope and Influence of Teacher Aides' Work**

All teacher aides agreed that the teacher aide's role was wide ranging, and that there was often tension between what they were supposed to do and what they actually did. Much depended on the contexts in which teacher aides worked, as well as the students and teachers with whom they worked.

##### ***Academic Support***

In supporting students academically, teacher aides' experiences could be considered in one of three ways:

- 1) Some teacher aides worked in partnership with teachers to support students in accessing the curriculum. In this situation, teachers and teacher aides had a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities, with the teacher aide working under the guidance of the teacher to support students' learning using a range of strategies. While employed to support a specific student, teacher aides were also available to help out other students if required.
- 2) Some teacher aides worked in situations in which their roles and responsibilities were not clearly defined or understood. They were expected to use their initiative in supporting their assigned students, with little help or supervision from teachers who were involved in teaching the "other 28 students" in the class. As well, teacher aides in these situations acted as a safety net in helping those students who struggled academically but who did not qualify as eligible for additional support.
- 3) Some teacher aides were required to take on the role of untrained teacher for "their" students, with minimal or no support from teachers. In these situations, despite their best efforts, teacher aides with limited knowledge of curriculum or teaching strategies struggled to occupy students in meaningful ways each day, at times feeling as if they were simply babysitting.

### ***Individual Educational Plans***

Participation in the IEP process raised a number of concerns for teacher aides. Not all were paid to attend IEP meetings, and did so out of their commitment to the students concerned. Some found themselves in the position of having to take responsibility for the IEP process, with minimal support from teachers, while others felt that their working knowledge of the student and school context was not valued by specialists and parents. The usefulness of the IEP in individualising students' education appeared to depend a great deal upon the adults involved, and the extent to which they worked collaboratively within their professional roles to develop, implement, and evaluate meaningful programmes of learning for specific students.

### ***Social Interaction***

Teacher aides played significant roles in supporting students' social involvement in school life. In some situations, teacher aides seemed to act as surrogate friends, taking the place of students' peers during break and lunchtimes. Although most teacher aides discouraged such dependence on adult company, students appeared to be drawn to teacher aides in the absence of friends of their own age, and, in some instances, because they felt safer and more comfortable in the presence of adults who could act as a shield from teasing and bullying.

The role of social connector was considered important by many teacher aides, who showed initiative and resourcefulness in subtly making the most of opportunities to support students' social interaction with peers, as well as accurately judging when to get out of the way. Acting as a social interpreter to help students make sense of jokes and the dynamics of informal student interactions was also considered an important part of a teacher aide's role. Some teacher aides actively taught students relevant communication and social skills to enable them to relate to their peers. They also used incidental learning opportunities to teach peers about understanding and accepting students' differences in a positive way, in an attempt to bridge the social distance between students and peers.

### ***Discipline and Behaviour***

Teacher aides' role in responding to students' behaviour was similar to that outlined under Academic Support:

- 1) A few teacher aides worked within clearly defined boundaries in partnership with teachers to share responsibility for students' behaviour. In these situations, teacher aides were accorded the same respect as teachers, and were supported by school staff in dealing with any students' inappropriate behaviour. In providing an extra pair of eyes to monitor classroom behaviour, teacher aides were well positioned to support the smooth functioning of the classes in which they worked.
- 2) Some teacher aides had to work within far more ambiguous boundaries regarding discipline and behaviour. A lack of clarification of teacher and teacher aide roles and responsibilities placed teacher aides in awkward positions in which they witnessed inappropriate behaviour but were powerless to



respond to it and/or not supported by teachers when they did respond. Teacher aides' lack of authority and vulnerability was recognised by students, some of whom openly referred to them as "just a teacher aide."

3) In some situations, teacher aides were required to take full responsibility for controlling "their" students' behaviour, essentially acting in the role of a minder or behaviour monitor with minimal or no back up from teachers. In slightly different circumstances, some teacher aides were temporarily assigned to students who did not have a disability, but whose behaviour presented challenges to teachers. In both circumstances, the primary role of the teacher aide was to keep certain students under control, to minimise disruption to the rest of the class. There seemed to be little effort by schools to address the actual causes of students' behaviour (which may have included frustration or boredom with academic demands), and there was a lack of training and support for teacher aides charged with the responsibility of dealing with the students that trained teachers found difficult.

Teacher aides' discussion indicated that the majority demonstrated understanding, initiative and skill in responding to students' behaviour. They sought to understand the possible causes and meanings of behaviour rather than simply trying to control students. All made an effort to develop trusting relationships with their assigned students, which formed the foundation of their work together. Where necessary, teacher aides taught students alternative ways of communicating that were more effective than using behavioural means of interacting with others, and supported students in learning about the consequences of certain behaviours. In some situations, teacher aides were required to remove students from classrooms if their behaviour was judged to be disruptive to the rest of the class, thus taking on a minder role to occupy the student until s/he could return to class. In a few extreme situations involving behaviour that could be harmful to the student and/or others, teacher aides were involved in the use of physical restraint of students, often with little support from teachers.

### ***Personal Care and Health***

Supporting students who received ORRS funding involved teacher aides in a range of personal care and health matters. This included helping with eating, toileting, personal hygiene, lifting, moving, dressing, medication, physiotherapy exercises, and care of accidents and seizures. Some supported children with high health needs, occasionally providing in home support for families. Concerns were voiced by some teacher aides about health, safety and privacy issues for both students and teacher aides when assisting with students' toileting. A lack of adequate and accessible toilet facilities placed these children and adults in literally awkward positions, and necessitated teacher aides engaging in advocacy to bring about any improvement. A few teacher aides spoke of supporting extremely fragile children, their experiences providing insight into the enormity of the responsibility expected of and carried by some teacher aides.

## ***Safety***

Keeping students safe was a priority for some teacher aides. This involved keeping students physically safe, as well as protecting them from peers' teasing and bullying, and, in isolated instances, ensuring that a student's behaviour was not harmful to peers. Keeping students physically safe involved monitoring their physical and medical well-being and ensuring that "runners" stayed within school grounds. While in some situations teacher aides appeared to act in the role of a "minder" in the absence of any real risk, most were aware of the need to give students space, by looking out for them from a distance. As with other aspects of the teacher aide's role, the extent to which they were supported by teachers varied a great deal.

## ***Extracurricular Activities***

Teacher aides were involved in supporting students' participation in a range of whole school and outside school contexts, often on an unpaid, voluntary basis. Helping with students' arrival and departure from school by taxis, supervising students in break times, form time and assemblies, and supporting students' participation in sports and cultural activities were some of the additional duties carried out by teacher aides within whole school contexts. Out of school, teacher aides took part in camps, transported students in their own vehicles, supported students in their homes, and, in one instance, voluntarily organised an out of school recreation group for disabled high school students. While some of the above duties fell within the scope of teacher aides' job descriptions (if they had one), other tasks were performed out of teacher aides' goodwill. The extent to which this was recognised and compensated for varied from school to school. In some situations, the unpaid work of teacher aides in supporting extracurricular activities appeared to be taken for granted, and obscured the extent to which certain school activities relied upon voluntary labour.

## ***Transitions***

Supporting students in their move from one class and/or school to another was an important role identified by almost all teacher aides in the study. Teacher aides' relationship with and knowledge of students meant that they were often the best person to support students in shifting to new environments and to help teachers (and peers) to understand the new students. In a sense, teacher aides acted as guides and interpreters, particularly for students who needed support in their communication with others. In a few instances, transition of students and teacher aides was carried out very effectively, in that sufficient time and planning were provided for all involved to become familiar with one another. More often however, transition arrangements were less satisfactory, with insufficient thought being put into communication and planning for the move of students and teacher aides from one school to the next. In some situations, it appeared that students and teacher aides were regarded as a kind of convenient package deal who would move together; in other situations, the teacher aide simply lost her job when the student she supported moved schools. Not only did this affect teacher aides financially and emotionally, it had a potentially larger human cost for the students and schools involved, in terms of the loss of valuable support, knowledge and experience.

## **QUESTION 2**

### ***UNDERSTANDING RELATIONSHIPS***

The relationships teacher aides developed with students played a significant role in determining the nature of their work. While a range of different kinds of relationships were described by teacher aides, central to all was a genuine sense of caring about students, which underpinned their commitment to supporting students well. Six inter-related topics emerged from my analysis of teacher aides' discussion of their relationships with students.

#### ***Getting to Know Students***

Teacher aides' initial contact with students varied from having a planned introduction prior to supporting them in class, to simply arriving in class and seeking them out. A common approach used by teacher aides involved taking time to get to know or "suss out" students, and to gradually develop rapport and mutually agreeable working relationships. Most teacher aides were very thoughtful and considerate of students, aware that their presence could be particularly awkward for older students who did not want their difference to become even more visible due to the hovering of an adult. They showed empathy in trying to understand students' feelings and learning difficulties, to enable them to respond to students in ways that would be helpful rather than stigmatising. For example, some teacher aides deliberately worked to get onside with all students in a class, prior to gaining the acceptance of the particular students to whom they were assigned. Teacher aides working in high schools commented on the difficulties in getting to know students due to structural constraints of changing classes, teachers, and teacher aides several times each day, thus limiting the time in which teacher aides and students could develop trusting relationships.

#### ***Terms Used to Describe Students***

Most of the teacher aides used a range of disability and behavioural labels to describe the students with whom they worked. Such language reflects common understandings of disability in terms of "special needs" thinking that is prevalent in educational policies and practices (e.g., "Special Education 2000," "special education" units, and so on). As teacher aides came to know students, their understanding of who the student was tended to be more significant than what kind of disability/label they had.

#### ***Thinking about Students***

The majority of teacher aides thought about students primarily in terms of their personality, interests, strengths, likes and dislikes, rather than focusing on their particular disability as the core feature of their identities. While teacher aides did not deny the reality of students' impairments, they responded to the latter in constructive and supportive ways. Several teacher aides resisted the deficit thinking of others about the students with whom they worked. Instead, they held intuitive beliefs about these students' educability and potential, if given the right support and educational opportunities and environments. They

recognised the fundamental importance of supporting students' development of communication strategies and of doing things differently to enable students to demonstrate their abilities, rather than writing them off as incapable of learning.

In contrast to the majority, one teacher aide tended to understand the student she supported in terms of his disability, which was used as an explanation and/or justification of his lack of participation in school life. The master status of disability seemed to obscure the teacher aide's knowing of the student in terms of who he was as a human being, and narrowed his educational opportunities to those considered appropriate for students with this particular kind of disability.

How teacher aides thought about students' differences influenced the ways in which they supported the latter. Teacher aides who interpreted disability as a natural and inevitable part of being human tended to work with students in ways that opened up opportunities for them to demonstrate their potential and to teach others about the value of human difference. They understood that disabled students, like all students, were "all different." Conversely, teacher aides who thought of students primarily in terms of their disability tended to believe and accept that students' abilities were inherently limited by the presence of disability. For these teacher aides, the common characteristics of particular disabilities such as Down syndrome or autism were more important in determining appropriate supports than the personalities and abilities of individual students.

### ***Relationships with Students***

Teacher aides in this study developed close relationships with students due to the nature and intensity of ORRS' funded students' support requirements. Most were very aware of students becoming dependent upon them, and carefully maintained professional boundaries in providing appropriate kinds of support.

The importance of developing understanding relationships with students was mentioned by several teacher aides, who believed they were far more effective in working alongside students than imposing their authority on the latter. For some students, the teacher aide acted as a sounding board or confidante, someone they could trust and with whom they felt safe. Teacher aides varied in the extent to which they felt they played the roles of friend or mother, particularly with younger students. Some teacher aides maintained their relationships with certain students beyond the time they had worked together, while some believed that the intensity of one-to-one support could only be sustained for a certain period of time, implying that relationships with some students had a definite "expiry" or "use by date."

Teacher aides used a range of strategies to maintain effective working relationships with students. These included: supporting the development of alternative communication strategies with students who did not speak; taking time to listen and show interest in students' lives; respecting students' wishes; sharing a sense of humour; and understanding students in terms of their complexity as human beings, rather than simply in terms of their particular disability. Naturally, each relationship was unique, and depended upon the people involved and the contexts in which they worked.

### ***Students' Responses to Teacher Aides***

Students' responses to teacher aides could be categorised in one of three ways:

- 1) Some students resisted teacher aide support, and tried to distance themselves from this extra adult in the classroom. While this was more common among high school students, it was also observed with children as young as five years old, who were quite clear in asserting their desire to be like the other children in the class. Teacher aides recognised the difficult position in which some teenagers found themselves, in needing academic support yet resisting it because of the social cost of stigmatisation that accompanied teacher aide assistance. In such situations, some teacher aides kept their distance yet developed subtle signals that students could use when they needed specific help.
- 2) Some students readily accepted teacher aide support, viewing the latter as just another source of help for all students within the class. These students seemed to develop a kind of interdependent relationship with teacher aides, in contrast to students who were dependent on teacher aide help.
- 3) In some situations, students became possessive of and dependent upon "their" teacher aides, and were reluctant to share the latter with other students. Some teacher aides told of working with students whose previous teacher aides had encouraged students' dependence on them by actually doing students' work for them rather than simply supporting them to do their own school work. Such situations highlighted the need for proper clarification of teacher aides' roles and responsibilities.

### ***Student Peers' Responses to Teacher Aides***

The response of student peers to the presence of teacher aides in class also varied, some viewing the latter as an ally and a valuable source of support, and some showing disrespect towards teacher aides. "Nah, you're just a teacher aide" was a typical devaluing response of some students towards teacher aides, whom they regarded as powerless in the school context, particularly at high school level. Similarly hostile attitudes were often shown towards the students supported by teacher aides, with similarly intimidating effects.

As students moved through primary to secondary schools, their positive and respectful perceptions of teacher aides appeared to diminish, depending upon a range of factors such as school culture, understanding of teacher aides' roles and responsibilities, and the nature of relationships among the students and adults involved in different classes. The optimal and least stigmatising situation seemed to be one in which the role of the teacher aide was to support not only assigned students, but also the teacher and students in general, thereby acting as a valuable additional human resource in busy classrooms.

## ***WORKING WITH TEACHERS AND SPECIALISTS***

The topic of working with teachers and specialists was raised by most teacher aides in the course of their interviews, and constitutes a significant part of the study findings.

### ***Working with Teachers***

Three topics emerged from the analysis of discussion regarding working with teachers, the first of which was the importance of relationships. This was integral to the second and third topics, in which teacher aides outlined very clearly the characteristics of teachers they considered effective and problematic, respectively.

#### ***The Importance of Relationships***

Several teacher aides commented on the paramount importance of a good working relationship with teachers, noting that this was essential in working in partnership in the best interests of students. The role of communication skills and of personalities in supporting or hindering the development and maintenance of relationships with teachers was highlighted, particularly by teacher aides who had experienced situations in which communication with teachers was conspicuous by its absence or its awkwardness.

A less obvious yet significant influence in the development of working relationships was that of different ways of knowing that informed and shaped teachers' and teacher aides' thinking about education and students. The formal academic and professional knowledge acquired by teachers in pre-service and in-service education programmes contrasted with a lack of formal training available to a number of teacher aides. Teacher aides, however, tended to have valuable informal experiential knowledge of the students with whom they worked. Several teacher aides in the study outlined examples of effective collaborative relationships in which their knowledge of students was respected and complemented teachers' knowledge of what and how to teach, which resulted in positive educational outcomes for the students with whom they worked.

Relationships between teachers and teacher aides were also influenced by the extent to which they held shared understandings of students' capacities and educational rights. Difficulties arose in many situations where teachers' understanding of disabled students appeared to be limited to and by stereotypical deficit thinking about "special needs" and a privileging of "regular" students' right to education over that of disabled students. In contrast, most of the teacher aides in this study, while recognising the impact of students' impairments, focused on knowing students in terms of their capacities and clearly understood students' right to learn. Such contrary understandings of disabled students impacted adversely on the relationships teachers had with teacher aides, particularly where teachers distanced themselves from "special needs" students by assigning them to teacher aides to "look after."

While it is impossible to accurately define a “good” working relationship, analysis of teacher aides’ discussion highlighted the powerful nature of relationships in determining how teacher aides worked in supporting disabled students. Those who experienced effective and equitable relationships with teachers tended to work as “teacher” aides, while those whose relationships with teachers were problematic or barely existent tended to act as “student minders.”

### ***Every Teacher is Different: Characteristics of Effective Teachers***

Teacher aides are uniquely placed in terms of their opportunities to observe the ways in which teachers work in classrooms on a daily basis. The teacher aides in this study made a number of insightful and constructive observations about teachers they considered effective in terms of teaching all students, and in terms of their abilities to work in partnership with teacher aides and other support personnel. The personal qualities of such teachers included compassion, caring, commitment, respectfulness, and sense of humour, all of which were evident in their interactions with both students and adults. In addition, teacher aides identified a range of sound professional knowledge and skills characteristic of effective teachers. These included having a clear and shared understanding of teacher and teacher aide roles and responsibilities, an ability to work in partnership with the latter, a willingness to listen to and act on teacher aides’ observations and concerns, consistency in setting clear expectations and following through with these, and sound organisational and management skills. They recognised and responded to the diversity of students in their classes, and made an effort to plan and teach in meaningful ways for all students. As well, teacher aides noticed that effective teachers tended to utilise teacher aides as a resource for all students, and expected the latter to treat teacher aides with respect. Teacher aides working with such teachers felt included and valued in their classes, as were the students they supported.

### ***Every Teacher is Different: Characteristics of Other Teachers***

All of the teacher aides in the study had worked with effective teachers at some time in their employment, and most had also experienced working with teachers with whom they had to carefully negotiate their roles and place within classrooms. These teachers showed through their attitudes and behaviour that they did not consider “special needs” students to be their responsibility, and resisted having anything to do with them. Similarly, they demonstrated a lack of respect for the teacher aides employed to support disabled students by ignoring and/or being dismissive of their work, and, in some cases, reprimanding teacher aides in front of students. Such behaviour adversely affected not only the teacher aides and students involved, it signaled to other students that behaving in these ways towards certain people was acceptable, and fostered a “just a teacher aide” mentality among students.

A lack of clarification of roles and responsibilities by teachers was commonly experienced by teacher aides, who then had to cannily and diplomatically figure out what specific teachers wanted them to do. Some teachers, particularly in high school contexts, appeared to feel threatened by the presence of a teacher aide, one teacher actually refusing, in front of his class, to admit the teacher aide into his room. Others accepted teacher aides and students into their classes, but made it very clear by the use of space

(e.g., seating at the back of the classroom) and/or lack of planning for the “special needs” student(s), that they were the teacher aide’s responsibility and that their presence in class was conditional on the student(s)’ “good” behaviour. In these situations, the teacher aide’s role became one of surrogate (and untrained) teacher for “special needs” children, to enable the teacher to do his/her job of teaching the rest of the children in the class. Several teacher aides commented on the unfairness of such situations, in denying the students they supported their right to be taught the national curriculum by a qualified teacher, and in placing teacher aides in situations for which they were not trained nor adequately paid. Out of commitment to the students with whom they worked, it was not uncommon for teacher aides to spend time at home preparing the next day’s activities for “their” student.

Certain teachers’ beliefs and practices regarding discipline were also identified by teacher aides as problematic, in terms of how teachers managed their classes as a whole and how they dealt with individual students’ behaviours. In some cases, teachers’ lack of understanding of the reasons for certain students’ behaviours may have lead to an escalation of the “challenging” behaviour, at which point teacher aides were expected to deal with the “problem,” often without the support of teachers, and without adequate training and authority. Having to take on the role of a “minder” or behaviour monitor was not something that teacher aides in this study liked doing.

The teachers identified as problematic for disabled students and teacher aides could also be problematic for other students, according to a number of teacher aides’ accounts. The teaching and learning process was disrupted for all students in classes run by teachers whose management and discipline skills were ineffectual. Teacher aides also expressed concern about the increasing number of students who were struggling in schools, yet were ineligible for extra support. Their difficulties in learning were compounded by teachers who tended to “teach to the middle” rather than responding to the diverse range of students in their classes. It might be suggested that, just as effective teachers for disabled students tended to be effective teachers for all students, teachers who had difficulties in responding to disabled students also experienced difficulties in other aspects of their teaching, which affected “regular” students in their classes.

### ***Understanding the complexity of teachers’ work***

Despite teacher aides’ difficulties in working with certain teachers, most were extremely understanding of the complexity of teachers’ work, and acknowledged the reality of teachers having to be many things to many people. They recognised the significant constraints of time and the systemic barriers that precluded the development of optimal working relationships that underpin effective teaching and learning for all students.

Perhaps the most significant finding to emerge from analysis of teacher aides’ comments about working with teachers was that so much depended on the teacher in terms of defining the teacher aide’s role, which in turn affected the kind of education the student received and from whom. How teachers constructed students’ identity, in terms of their capacity or incapacity to learn, in turn influenced the extent



to which the teacher aide role was one of assistant to the teacher or surrogate teacher for labeled students. Also of significance was the nature of the relationships that developed among teachers, teacher aides, and students. Teachers whom teacher aides identified as effective and inclusive tended to develop positive, equitable relationships with teacher aides and students that formed the basis of their inclusive teaching practice. Conversely, teachers considered to be less responsive to “special needs” students placed less importance on developing constructive working relationships with teacher aides. Whether deliberately or inadvertently, these teachers used teacher aides as a means of distancing themselves from the students whose disability marked them as different from the other 28 students in their classes. The teacher aides in this study noted that such teacher behaviour placed teacher aides and students in inequitable positions in terms of their employment and education, respectively.

### ***Working with Specialists***

Teacher aides worked with a wide range of specialists who operated on an itinerant basis to provide additional support to disabled students. These included physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech language therapists, psychologists, Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour, Resource Teachers of Literacy, Resource Teacher: Visual Impairment, Group Special Education personnel, special school itinerant teachers, and health professionals. They also had indirect contact with Correspondence School staff if students had a dual enrollment with their local and Correspondence schools. Several teacher aides also had varying levels of involvement with Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) “therapists.”

Analysis of transcripts revealed parallels between teacher aides’ experiences of working with teachers and with specialist staff. Much depended upon who the specialist was, how they thought about students, what kinds of relationships they developed with students, teacher aides, and teachers, and how professionally responsive and competent they appeared to be. As with teachers, there was a clear distinction between specialists considered “helpful” and “less helpful” respectively.

### ***Helpful Specialists***

Helpful specialist staff were those with whom teacher aides and teachers worked collaboratively in the best interests of students to develop practical strategies that could be easily implemented in educational settings. Specialists’ provision of relevant resource materials, including background information about specific impairments and supports, was appreciated by teacher aides, as was guidance and practical “on the job” training. The encouragement and support offered by specialist staff was particularly valued by several teacher aides who received little support for their work within their schools.

### ***Less Helpful Specialists***

While a handful of teacher aides had experienced constructive help from specialists, the majority’s experiences were less than satisfactory. As with teachers, confusion and frustration arose in situations in which the roles and responsibilities of specialists, teachers, and teacher aides were either ill defined or not

defined at all. Frustration was expressed by teacher aides who had worked in situations in which external specialists' "expert"/professional knowledge was privileged over teacher aides' experiential and in-depth knowledge of students and the contexts in which they lived, learned, and played. This sometimes led to important decisions being made about students' education and supports on the basis of incomplete information. Visiting professionals' lack of knowledge of and relationship with students, and their lack of consideration of teacher aides' input was a source of annoyance for some teacher aides, who were expected to implement specific therapy strategies that they knew would not work for a particular student in their school context. In some instances, teacher aides refused to follow through with therapists' recommendations on the grounds that to do so was beyond the scope of their training, and therefore constituted unsafe practice. As well, competing demands made by various specialists involved with the same child placed teacher aides in awkward situations. This was particularly evident where teacher aides, who had little power or authority, were required to act as a go-between external specialists, teachers, and families, manage the complexity of these interpersonal dynamics, and then work unsupported with students on a daily basis to implement professionals' recommendations.

Accessing appropriate supports in a timely manner was mentioned frequently in teacher aides' discussion of specialist support, particularly by those in rural areas. As in the discussion of teachers, teacher aides were generous in their understanding of specialists' time and workload constraints, yet were genuinely concerned about the impact that inadequate (or no) specialist input had on the development of the students they served.

Consideration of teacher aides' experiences in working with specialists suggested that, as in other aspects of their work, much depended upon the people involved. They indicated that the cultivation of mutually respectful working relationships among adults would make a difference to their effectiveness in supporting the students who represent the heart of their work.

#### **QUESTION 4**

##### ***SUGGESTED CHANGES IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM***

In response to the final research question regarding changes considered desirable in schools and the education system, teacher aides outlined a number of suggestions at both policy and practice levels. While not surprisingly pay and employment conditions were identified as priorities for change, teacher aides' commitment to ensuring that students get a fair deal in schools was reflected in their discussion of the inequities experienced by students and the need to address these. They outlined numerous examples of ways in which they put students' educational rights and interests ahead of their own employment concerns.

### ***The Big Picture: Change in Policy***

At a policy level, teacher aides identified three main areas in which they believed changes were necessary: improving student support; teacher aide employment conditions; and education of adults.

### ***Supporting Students' Education***

Teacher aides discussed the need for improvements in student support, for both ORRS' funded students and "borderline" students, whose ineligibility for additional assistance placed them at risk of failure in their education. Concerns were expressed by many teacher aides about the inadequacy of the arduous application process for funding, the lack of sufficient funding, the uncertainty of funding from year to year, and the ways in which it was arbitrarily cut by people with little knowledge of students or their circumstances, with adverse consequences for both students' education and teacher aides' employment.

The source of funding for teacher aide support was an equity issue for some teacher aides. While most were employed by schools under Ministry of Education ORRS or Special Education Grant (SEG) provisions, other sources included Accident Compensation Commission (ACC), health care providers, charitable trusts and parents. Such practices had implications for schools in terms of having students for whom they were responsible supported by teacher aides who were not school employees. It also raised concerns about the extent to which parents were expected and/or able to supplement state schools' shortfalls in providing adequate support for students. Accountability of schools' use of students' funding was also questioned, some teacher aides commenting that the students they supported received little or none of the specialist teacher time to which they were entitled. Teacher aides therefore advocated that the current funding model be reviewed in an attempt to reduce these inequities and inconsistencies.

In their support of the students to whom they had been assigned, teacher aides were also aware of and, where possible, responsive to students who struggled to achieve without extra assistance. Their discussion of borderline students revealed the extent to which schools struggled to effectively teach certain students, and the extent to which teacher aides acted unofficially as a safety net for such students. Some teacher aides proposed that assigning trained teacher aides to classes to support teaching and learning under the guidance of teachers would be one way of improving supports for those for whom school was more often associated with failure than success.

### ***Teacher Aides' Employment Conditions***

Legitimate concerns about employment conditions were expressed by all of the teacher aides in this study. Particular mention was made of pay, job insecurity, and the nature and extent of teacher aide roles and responsibilities. The need to address each of these issues was highlighted in the interest of employment equity and in reducing the sense of powerlessness often experienced by teacher aides in carrying out their work.

That teacher aiding was not a job you did for the money was noted by several teacher aides, who prioritised students' well-being ahead of their income. Nevertheless, several inequities regarding pay were outlined. Rates of pay varied depending upon schools and sources of funding, with further inconsistencies regarding the recognition of length of service, qualifications, and responsibilities. Underpayment and having to "grovel" for annual increments to which teacher aides were entitled were also common. For example, in one school teacher aides were underpaid for up to two years, receiving reimbursement eventually as a result of union intervention. Lack of payment for extra time spent supporting students (e.g., at lunchtimes, on school trips, waiting for late taxis) was not uncommon, some schools relying significantly on teacher aides' goodwill. Work related costs, such as transporting children in teacher aides' vehicles and having to pay for items that teachers were given free (e.g., school photos) were also sources of frustration for teacher aides. Lack of holiday pay was another area of contention, particularly when associated with job insecurity.

None of the eighteen teacher aides in the study had a sense of job security. Not knowing at the end of each year whether they would be employed the following year, having hours cut with little notice, and losing their job if the ORRS' funded student they were employed to support moved schools characterised the conditions under which teacher aides worked. While the union offered some protection to members, those not involved were particularly vulnerable. In addition to the financial cost of job insecurity, the human cost of uncertainty, of having little control over your employment status, weighed heavily on some teacher aides. Further inequities were described, including, in at least one teacher aide's experience, the lack of teacher aide payment in the event of a student's absence from school. Others mentioned situations in which, if teacher aides were absent, students were asked to stay home, as the school had no alternative means of supporting them. Such circumstances highlighted the tension between teacher aides' employment rights and students' educational rights.

The implications of having such a highly casualised workforce were recognised by teacher aides, some of whom believed that their poor employment conditions made it difficult to attract suitable and educationally sound employees. They suggested that changing from the current student dependent funding model of employing teacher aides to one which provided greater security and equity of employment would be advantageous for both teacher aides and schools (e.g., by employing teacher aides to support teachers and classes or by employing teacher aides to work in a cluster of schools).

Clarification of teacher aide roles and responsibilities was the third key concern identified by teacher aides. Lack of job descriptions and clear professional boundaries within which they should operate were problematic for teacher aides, placing them at times in awkward and unsafe positions in their support of students. Acting in the roles of surrogate teacher, therapist, and parent were not uncommon. Developing national guidelines regarding the appropriate and professional use of teacher aides may help inform school practice in this area.

## ***Education of Adults***

The need for education of teacher aides, teachers, teacher education providers and policy-makers was identified as a priority by teacher aides. In their discussion of teacher aide education, teacher aides outlined a strong rationale for having some form of training, and gave their reasons for undertaking formal study. Learning to do the right thing by students was regarded as one of the core reasons for training, which made the difference between knowing how to support students in educationally effective ways and simply babysitting or “minding” students. A range of personal and professional benefits of training were described by teacher aides, with self-confidence, professionalism, understanding of students and families, and specific content knowledge being regarded as particularly useful. Having opportunities to network with other teacher aides engaged in study was also considered to be very beneficial. Several teacher aides shared their opinions about characteristics of effective initial and ongoing training in terms of both content and delivery. Systemic barriers to training were also outlined, specifically costs, lack of recognition of qualifications, lack of information about professional development entitlements and opportunities, and lack of support to undertake study. Making the necessary changes to enable teacher aides to access training that would enable them to support students more effectively was regarded as a priority by almost all of the teacher aides in this study.

Teacher aides commented on the varied extent to which teachers understood their responsibility to teach all students, their ability to do so, and their understanding of the teacher aide’s role. The need for teacher education providers to address these concerns was raised by a number of teacher aides, who found these especially problematic at high school level.

In addition, teacher aides expressed frustration with the apparently limited understanding that policy-makers and Ministry of Education officials had of the realities of students’ school lives. They proposed that those in positions of power need to develop a more informed understanding of inclusive education, and of the impact of their policies and decision-making on students’ educational opportunities.

## ***School Contexts: Changes in Practice***

In addition to calling for changes at a national policy level, teacher aides recognised that changes needed to be made at a local school level, where policy is put into practice. They identified two main areas in which changes could be made in the ways that schools operate, in order to address inequities experienced by teacher aides and the students with whom they work. The first area of concern related to the nature of school cultures in general, while the second area focused on the need to include teacher aides in school policy and practice.

### ***The Nature of School Cultures***

Teacher aides work within the complexity of school cultures—the overall philosophy and values ascribed to by schools, as well as the personal and professional values, attitudes, and practices of the principals

and teaching staff. Teacher aides in this study described their experiences in a range of schools that varied greatly in the extent to which disabled children were welcome and included in all aspects of school life. It appeared that principals played a significant role in setting the tone of their schools, which in turn influenced teachers' (and students') attitudes and practices regarding the inclusion or exclusion of certain children and the teacher aides employed to support them.

Most of the teacher aides in the study had experienced working in at least one "exclusive" school culture, in which students were identified primarily in terms of their disability labels, which determined their deviance from the "norm" and their "special needs" status. This then justified their separation from regular school life through placement in "special education" in its various forms, such as units, special classes, and/or allocation of teacher aides. The involvement of some disabled students in regular classes was limited and conditional upon their "fitting in" with the set programme with the support of a teacher aide, whose presence was considered necessary to ensure that the disabled student(s) did not disrupt the learning of the "other 28" students in the class. Such situations could be extremely difficult for teacher aides, particularly when they were expected to take full responsibility for "their" student(s) in terms of a daily programme, with little or no guidance from qualified teachers. Aware that these students were not getting a fair deal educationally, a number of teacher aides in such situations showed great initiative and resourcefulness in "working the system" to reduce students' isolation and lack of relevant education. Teacher aides' accounts of the negative effects of exclusive school cultures on disabled students' education highlighted the importance of educating educators about positive, constructive ways of interpreting human difference, and about their responsibilities to teach all children.

### ***Including Teacher Aides in School Policy and Practice***

The omission of teacher aides within national education policy is paralleled by their omission from some schools' policy framework. None of the teacher aides in this study referred to the existence of a "teacher aide policy" in which the latter's roles and responsibilities were documented. Only seven out of eighteen had a job description in which their duties were specified. The lack of a clear and shared understanding of what teacher aides are supposed to do meant that teacher aides, teachers, principals, students, and parents developed their own interpretations of teacher aides' work, which may or may not have been legally, educationally, and/or professionally appropriate. The ambiguities resulting from inarticulated or vague roles, responsibilities, and employment conditions were understandably a source of frustration and tension for teacher aides, and impacted negatively on students' education (e.g., teacher aides being placed in the position of untrained teacher for certain students).

Documentation of the role of the teacher aide within school policy frameworks would not only make teacher aides visible "on paper," it could facilitate understanding of their actual presence, place, and daily practice within schools. While some schools were clearly very supportive of teacher aides, many of the teacher aides in the study commented about the lack of recognition, understanding, appreciation, and valuing of teacher aides and their work by teaching staff. In much the same way as the students they

supported, a number of teacher aides spoke of not being included in school and staff routines and activities, of not belonging, of feelings of lower status, and of feeling undervalued.

One teacher aide commented “I think [teacher aides] do heaps around the place. If you took them all out of the school, imagine what would happen.” Similar to the contribution of volunteers within our communities, the work of teacher aides could be described as similarly invisible, impossible to accurately measure, and vital to the functioning of most school communities. It is worth considering what would happen in schools in the absence of teacher aides. Such a situation may highlight the shortcomings of the education system that the presence and goodwill of teacher aides obscure. As one teacher aide pointed out, who teacher aides are and what they do are not merely “special education” issues, but concerns for the compulsory education sector as a whole. The changes proposed by these teacher aides were not solely focused on improving their employment conditions, rather, they revealed teacher aides’ concerns with the larger educational context in which teacher aides are positioned, albeit tenuously. In identifying the need for education of educators and the development of national and local school policy to inform practice, teacher aides in this study demonstrated an understanding of how systemic change could benefit not only teacher aides, but, as importantly, students and teachers, in reducing inequity and promoting excellence in our schools.