



# A Practical Guide For Teachers: What Quality Teacher Aide Practice And Support Looks Like



Teacher aides have a wide range of valued roles and responsibilities. They enhance learner outcomes by drawing on positive relationships, good training, collaborative practices and cultural expertise. But teacher aides can't do their best work without good support around them – this is where teachers come in.

This guide shares practical strategies and insights for classroom teachers, to help you work alongside teacher aides to make a real difference for learners, together.

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We appreciate the work of all those who supported this research, particularly the teacher aides, teachers, school leaders, sector experts, learners, and whānau who shared with us. Their experiences and insights are at the heart of what we have learnt. In interview after interview, we heard evidence that TAs are working alongside schools, experts, and whānau to do innovative, thoughtful, life-changing work for learners in Aotearoa New Zealand.

## What's this guide all about?

### ERO looked at teacher aide practice and support

Teacher aides (TAs) have been vital members of Aotearoa New Zealand schools for more than 50 years. We've learnt a lot about what good education looks like over that time, and we also know more about how TAs can have the most impact.

ERO was commissioned by the Ministry of Education and NZEI Te Riu Roa to find out about good TA practice and support. We started by looking at the evidence around what works, based on a wide range of research from Aotearoa New Zealand and overseas. Then we talked to TAs, teachers, principals, Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), Learning Support Coordinators (LSCs), Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLBs), learners, and whānau, from 11 diverse primary and secondary schools.

Not everyone will identify with the term 'teacher aide'. The TA role is called different things at different schools, for example, kaiāwhina, teaching assistant, learning assistant, or inclusive learning assistant.

### We wrote a main report and a range of practical guides

Our main report, *Working together: How teacher aides can have the most impact*, goes into detail about the research evidence that we refer to in this guide. We also wanted to support real change through practical resources, including this guide for teachers. There are also guides for TAs, school leaders, school boards, and parents and whānau. These can all be downloaded from ERO's website, [www.ero.govt.nz](http://www.ero.govt.nz).

### This guide is for classroom teachers who work with TAs

This guide has practical strategies and ideas, narrative examples, practices to avoid, and reflective questions that will be useful for primary and secondary school teachers.

The four sections focus on the key areas of TA practice that are highlighted in the research.

- 1) **Generalised classroom support** – TAs working with the wider class, so that teachers can have quality interactions with all learners.
- 2) **Delivering structured interventions** – TAs holding brief, focused sessions with individuals and small groups, using evidence-based interventions.
- 3) **Te ao Māori cultural leadership and support** – Māori TAs supporting staff and students with their cultural expertise.
- 4) **Collaboratively supporting students with learning support needs<sup>1</sup>** – TAs using a highly collaborative, autonomy-focused approach, to contribute to the learning and wellbeing of individual learners.

Keep in mind that not *all* TAs work in these four key areas, and some TAs may work across a combination of areas. The TA role is diverse, and responsibilities will look different depending on classroom, school, and community contexts. It will be important to reflect as a team, about practices that are right for your school.

<sup>1</sup> When we talk about individuals with learning support needs, we mean learners that require support for disabilities or specific health, behaviour, or learning needs.

# 1. Generalised classroom support

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Generalised classroom support means that TAs work with learners across the class while teachers work more regularly with those students that need extra support. To do this, TAs need to have good information about lesson plans and intentions and be confident to have good-quality interactions. Teachers also need to be confident to support the diverse range of learning needs in their class.

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## a) What do we know about what works?

### Traditional one-on-one learning support doesn't work for most learners

Understandings about good TA practice have changed over time. It used to be common practice for TAs to spend most or all of their time working closely with learners who have support needs, and even overseeing and adapting their learning. Though this model was put in place with good intentions, we now know that this kind of support is strongly linked to poor learning and wellbeing outcomes.

In specific cases where constant side-by-side support for a learner is necessary, their teaching and learning should be still teacher-led, rather than overseen by TAs.

### It benefits learners when TAs work across the class, but schools sometimes find it hard to put this into practice

When TAs support learning across the class, teachers are able to work more regularly with learners that need extra support, which benefits these learners. However, time and resource pressures, low teacher confidence, and parent expectations can make it difficult for schools to embed this model in practice.

### Teachers and TAs need to share information and work together

For TAs to support the wider class, they need to have a good understanding of learning plans and intentions. Research shows that this requires teachers to actively work with TAs to ensure they're well-equipped. Teachers also benefit from the expertise and insights of TAs, especially in cases where teachers are still building their confidence to work with students with learning support needs.

#### Tip: Teachers' confidence affects learning

ERO's recent evaluation of education for disabled learners in schools showed that many teachers are still leaving planning and adaptations up to TAs. Some teachers also reported feeling underprepared, unconfident, reluctant or fearful about supporting these students' learning. If this sounds like your class, a next step could be to work with learning support staff, other experts, and whānau to build your capability to support the diverse learning needs of your learners.

## b) How can teachers support generalised classroom practice?

### Spend more time with learners that need extra support

It's important that teachers take the lead in moving their classroom on from traditional side-by-side support. A good rule of thumb is for teachers to spend *at least* as much time working with students that have learning support needs as they do working with other learners. This is true whether or not teachers are released for a portion of their hours specifically to do this. Some teachers might need to grow their understandings and confidence around learners' diagnoses and support needs.

“TAs are encouraged, where possible, to keep lower achieving children to teachers. The TAs roam around. As skilled as our TAs are, we're the ones with the teaching degree. Parents need to see we work with their children as well.”

SENCO/TEACHER

### Support TAs to engage in quality interactions with all learners

Working across the class can be a big change for TAs who are used to spending most of their time working closely with a few students. Teachers can support TAs by modelling, training, and encouraging TAs around good interaction strategies that will help them to support a wider range of learners. TAs might also need help to understand and implement culturally responsive practices.

“Maybe 10 years ago our perspective was that [TAs] were there to help the child finish the work, stay on task.”

PRINCIPAL

#### Tip: Quality TA interactions matter

When TAs focus on task completion rather than learning, use yes/no questions, repeat exactly what teachers just said, or give answers and hints, interactions are not effective and there are negative impacts on students' learning.

If this sounds like your class, a next step could be to support TAs to build more useful interaction practices, through modelling and professional discussion. Good TA interactions include practices like open questioning, wait time, offering the least amount of support first, and facilitating peer-to-peer learning.

### Take time to talk with TAs about classroom plans

TAs need a good understanding of what is being taught each day. Without that key information, TAs' interactions can end up being focused on task completion, and that's not good for learners. Teachers can support TAs to have responsive and useful interactions by taking the time to ensure TAs understand lesson plans and objectives, intended learning outcomes, and what their feedback should look/sound like.

“In the long run, the benefit of putting some time aside to plan, evaluate, work collaboratively, will mean the programme will work so much better. Benefits are enormous if you make time to do it.”

PRINCIPAL

## c) Real life examples: How have other teachers made generalised classroom support work?

ERO spoke to schools that use a generalised classroom support approach. We wanted to know about the practical strategies that they've found useful.

### We heard that it can work well for teachers to...

- **group learners** in flexible groups using rotating activities or 'work stations' during key lessons, and teachers and TAs rove around the groups
- **encourage peer-to-peer learning**, through careful matching of students
- **get to know learners with support needs** and their parents and whānau
- **let learners know what to expect:** that this classroom has a team teaching approach, and TAs will work with everyone
- **be aware of subtle messaging** about TAs' 'place' in the class, for example seating, access to resources, and the teacher's tone of voice
- **use quieter times** during TAs' work hours (and not during breaks) as opportunities to meet – like assembly, sports, or reading times
- **prepare** instructions or 'ready to go' resource baskets for TAs who arrive after class has begun. This works well when resources are familiar to TAs, from earlier discussions
- **encourage TAs to take time** to look through planning documentation at the start of class time
- **model and discuss useful teaching interaction techniques** like open questioning and wait time, building on the skills that TAs already have
- **talk to parents and whānau** about the value of generalised support over traditional side-by-side TA support, focusing on how the approach benefits their child and better meets their needs. For some families it works well to start by going over how the Aotearoa New Zealand school system might be different to families' home countries.

“That child is actually my responsibility, and I need to build that relationship with that child.”

TEACHER

“The children understand that the learning assistant's voice carries the same weight as the teacher's ... Don't create a them-and-us mentality in the students.”

TEACHER

“[The teacher's] learnt that, just tell me beforehand, five minutes before so I can get my head around it. In the mornings we have short five, ten minutes to catch up. For example, we're doing maths today, geometry, here's the sheet. Then I know the expectations.”

TA

“We find that what works is modelling and reflecting, discussing good practice, answering questions. It's about being side by side rather than expert and learner. You find you develop better relationships and you get more out of that. It's built through regular contact, modelling, and being a learner with them. All the stuff that works in the classroom too.”

RTL B

## d) Good practice example

### Generalised classroom support

In an urban primary school with a high Pacific roll, regular time is set aside for TAs and teachers to connect. This, combined with a school culture of positive and non-hierarchical relationships, means collaborative classroom practices flow easily between teachers and TAs.

“We work like a team, inside the classroom and out.” (TA)

Every morning, teachers meet briefly with TAs to discuss students’ learning and plan for the day ahead. This equips TAs for their interactions that day. During class time, TAs rotate working with different groups of learners, spending concentrated time with each of the learners, and using quality interaction skills.

“[TA uses questioning strategies like] ‘Tell me more’ ‘What else?’ ‘Does anybody have anything to add on?’ ‘What do YOU think?’” (TEACHER)

At other times, TAs support the majority of the class in large-group activities, while teachers work intensively with small groups.

Because a large proportion of the school roll is Pacific, TAs from a range of Pacific communities are thoughtfully matched with classes. Their cultural and community insights play a big role in daily planning, supporting teachers to tailor their plans and interactions.

“Non-verbal cues are picked up a lot quicker when you’re members of the same culture.” (TEACHER)

Teachers model good practices, and TAs reflect on these at weekly get-togethers with their SENCO.

“Our teachers are mentoring the learning assistants. When we meet on Tuesdays, they share the different strategies they see from working with their teacher. They always have a lot to share, about how the teacher connects with the class.” (TEACHER/SENCO)

### Reflective questions for teachers

Do I support TAs to work across the class? What are my barriers?

How much of my teaching time is spent with those learners who require extra support? How can I make sure that I spend more time, not less, with these learners than others?

Would TAs who I work with benefit from respectful conversations, modelling, or training around quality teaching interactions?

Do I know about TAs’ areas of expertise? What could I learn from them?

Do I share important information about class plans with TAs – or do I expect them to catch up on the fly?

## 2. Delivering structured interventions

Teacher aides can positively impact students' learning by delivering highly structured, evidence-based programmes and interventions. For this to work, TAs need to be well supported with robust training, careful timetabling, and regular liaison with classroom teachers.

### a) What do we know about what works?

#### TAs can benefit learners through interventions – but only if they're delivered in a structured way

Good quality interventions are designed to be used in specific ways. The evidence shows that when TAs deliver interventions as instructed, based on robust training, there are positive impacts on learning. Research also shows that when TAs *don't* use the intended structure – for example, not using the resources, or condensing several short sessions into one long one – this has a *negative* impact on student learning.

#### Timing is important

Good quality intervention sessions are brief, regular, and well-paced. Careful timetabling is needed, to ensure sessions take place at times that have no or minimal disruption to learners' classroom learning, participation, and belonging.

“It has to be run with fidelity. That's the key word we use ... Making sure TAs are running programmes with fidelity, so progress for students is made. If a programme is intended to be run four days a week but is only run two days a week, this affects the progress of the student. If a TA is doing a structured literacy lesson, but missing out key parts, this impacts the student at the end of the intervention.”

RTL B

#### Intervention learning should link back to the classroom

“I basically back up what the teachers are teaching in class. So, where they're at with the teacher is what I'm teaching, so it's not new to them.”

TA

Interventions work best when they have meaning and relevance for learners. TAs should be explicit with learners about what they will be learning from the intervention, why they are doing so, what they can expect from sessions, and how this will relate to their regular classroom learning. This means that TAs need to have a good understanding of those things themselves.



## b) How can teachers support TAs to deliver structured interventions?

### Support TAs to fully understand the ‘how and why’ of the intervention

TAs need robust training around how to deliver interventions – this is usually provided by learning support leaders or other experts. Teachers can also help TAs fine-tune their practices through professional discussions, observations, and modelling. It’s also useful for TAs when teachers clarify why this intervention was chosen for particular learners – talking about the evidence base, or the assessments that led to this decision.

### Plan timetables that set learners up for success

Intervention sessions are often timetabled by school leaders, rather than teachers, and decisions are based on resourcing, TA hours, and other factors. However, teachers *can* impact how their classroom lessons are going to work around those sessions. When planning, teachers should consider:

- when some learners will be busy with interventions – important lessons or key social times shouldn’t take place when those learners will miss out
- the planned content of those sessions, and how classroom lessons could be linked to that learning
- TAs’ insights around learners’ preferences, social dynamics, care routines, and energy levels.

### Talk with TAs about how interventions are going, and how they can support learners by linking learning across settings

Teachers and TAs need regular opportunities to get together and plan, review, and discuss intervention learning, and how that learning can connect to classroom lessons. However, ERO’s recent evaluation of provision for disabled learners showed that 43 percent of TAs surveyed do not regularly meet with the classroom teacher.

To help learners get the most out of their sessions, teachers should communicate regularly with TAs about intervention learning. Teachers can also help learners make links across settings by talking with them about:

- how their intervention learning is useful for their classroom learning
- how their classroom lessons are useful for their intervention sessions.

“Quite often we talk about what programmes kids are doing with TAs. We give students a lot of voice about what they like.”

TEACHER

“Sharing is a good thing. RTLB learning goals, they’ll be on [the shared drive]. Timetables, programmes, all on there. There’s a lot of discussion between teachers and TAs about what those programmes are. We all work together really, constantly having discussions each day about what kids have done in their programmes that day. We bring problems to each other and try and find solutions.”

SENCO

## c) Real life examples: How have other teachers supported TAs to deliver structured interventions?

ERO spoke to schools that use structured interventions, delivered by TAs. We wanted to know about the practical strategies that they've found useful.

### We heard that it can work well for teachers to...

- **engage in training** from experts, alongside TAs
- take personal initiative to **understand the content** of interventions
- hold intervention sessions in the classroom, at times when all learners are working on small-group activities. This means teachers can **stop by to observe, pick up on key ideas, ask questions, or offer next steps**
- **pair or group students** in intervention sessions to maximise TAs' time
- **be responsive** when TAs share that a session "hasn't quite clicked", using this information to boost that learning in the classroom
- **use TAs' insights** about intervention learning, classroom dynamics, student energy levels, etc., to inform intervention timetabling and class planning
- **use shared contexts for learning** across settings, for example relating sessions to inquiry topics, or linking to learners' interests in both settings
- **trust TAs to make responsive decisions** about pacing – for example, to defer a session if a student isn't ready to learn, or to take an extra few minutes to finish off a session
- use notebooks or online planning documents to **communicate regularly** with TAs about intervention learning, when in-person conversations aren't possible.

“[At secondary school,] with the age of our students, they can feel quite whakamā about being taken away and working one-on-one, so we try where possible if there are any interventions...that they are within their learning space.”

LSC

“We make sure we don't just do a random different topic. We look at the context of the modules and try and fit that in where possible.”

LSC

“Some kids will have arrived that day and they're really not in the headspace to do much. So you kind of have to adapt to that. You need to pick that up and say they're not listening today, we're not going anywhere with this.”

TA

## d) Good practice example

### Delivering structured interventions

Teachers, TAs, and leaders at this primary school have built a collaborative approach to structured literacy interventions. This started with shared training in the programme, for TAs and teachers together. The school maintains a sense of joint effort with regular meetings that focus on interventions.

Teachers and TAs work together to responsively match the content of intervention sessions with the students' classroom learning.

“The classroom teacher takes the programme first. Then the TA follows up, for example, paragraphs – TAs would follow up on that specific content ... [they are] not giving kids new information; the TA is going over what's already been taught.” (LSC)

Teacher aides from the school agreed that their sessions are all about enhancing, not replacing, classroom learning. They shared ways that teachers take an active role in ensuring that learners can benefit from relevant, timely intervention sessions:

“We use a notebook for them – and if the teacher's seen them first then she jots down what the tricky part was for the day, what the focus was in that lesson, and then when I'm with the child I take that notebook as well and I back that up – and vice versa. If I see them first I'm writing the notes in this notebook that goes back to the class with that student, and the teacher sees ... and she backs it up and does sentence writing, or 'work writing' using that particular area where the focus was.” (TA)

“Say I go to a classroom at ten o'clock, [the teacher] makes sure she's already seen those children before I come at ten o'clock, and then I'm taking them after that ... They're always getting double time.” (TA)

### Reflective questions for teachers

Do TAs and I have a shared understanding of the 'how and why' of interventions?

Am I in the loop about the interventions that my learners engage with? What steps could I take to be better informed and more involved, so that I've got the information I need to support that learning in-class?

Do students miss out on key learning or social times when they are in intervention sessions? How might I adjust my lesson plans?

Do I talk to learners about how classroom learning relates to their intervention sessions? Do I know if TAs do? How could we better communicate about this?

## 3. Te ao Māori cultural leadership and support

Māori TAs can positively impact learning by modelling and promoting te reo Māori, supporting the cultural understandings and practices of staff and learners, leading initiatives and school events, or taking a liaison role in the school community.

### a) What do we know about what works?

#### TAs can play a key role in promoting and supporting te reo Māori

In English medium schools, TAs who speak te reo Māori have expertise that can be used to support the knowledge and understanding of all staff and learners. Many TAs in Aotearoa New Zealand actively promote te reo Māori in their school, with a range of effective formal and informal strategies, such as providing programmes, resources, advice, and modelling.

#### Māori TAs can benefit all learners by supporting authentic bicultural curriculum and culturally responsive practices

There are positive impacts on all students' learning when Māori TAs have a leadership role in te ao Māori, kaupapa Māori me ngā tikanga Māori at the school. This can include providing advice and guidance around tikanga, leading community events, coordinating kapa haka and Māori arts programmes, and making links with hapū and iwi to build localised bicultural practices that benefit all learners.

#### Māori TAs can benefit Māori learners through liaison with whānau, hapū, iwi, and community

Māori TAs are well-placed to support Māori learners by building and drawing on good relationships, lived cultural understandings, and knowledge of learners' whānau and whakapapa. This might involve making connections with whānau, hapū, iwi, and community, providing targeted support, encouraging students' learning, or helping address serious issues.

“I think our staff *thought* they had good relationships with whānau and iwi.”

PRINCIPAL

#### Tip: Teachers need to keep up their own learning and practice

Having experts on staff is great, but it doesn't mean that this aspect of teaching and learning is left up to them. As always, teachers should take personal responsibility for building their own culturally responsive practices; understanding and acknowledging the histories, heritages, languages, and cultures of tamariki me whānau Māori; and for their own use of te reo me ngā tikanga Māori. This is clearly set out in professional teaching standards.

## b) How can teachers support Māori TAs' practice?

### Actively support Māori TAs' initiatives

Active, collegial support from teachers helps TAs to make an impact. Teachers can support Māori TAs by:

- modelling engagement in TA-led PLD for staff
- encouraging student membership in kapa haka groups or other programmes
- using resources developed by TAs
- seeking, using, and showing appreciation for TAs' advice and guidance
- offering encouragement and professional guidance to support TAs' language-acquisition teaching skills
- sharing explicit messages of support for TAs' work, with learners and staff.

### Be mindful of workload

A cultural expertise role should fit comfortably within a TA's workload – not be an add-on. When making requests of Māori TAs, teachers should find ways to mitigate any time and workload implications, remembering that their work may not always take place on school grounds or within school hours.

### Offer wellbeing support

A whānau and community liaison role can come with a range of personal, social, and emotional challenges. Teachers can support TAs by checking in, offering collegial support, discussing challenges and solutions, or speaking up for TAs to other staff, leaders, or learners.

#### Valuing the taonga of cultural expertise and support

Research shows that school staff with cultural capital often feel obligated to take on extra work, which isn't always acknowledged by their schools. As well as workload issues, staff report complex social and emotional pressures around:

- educating colleagues, including bosses
- drawing on personal relationships to benefit the school
- feeling that they are seen to be responsible for the education and behaviour of all Māori students
- advocating against racism
- attending events in their own time
- 'representing' the school in their community
- discomfort with enacting a tuakana role with some whānau, hapū, or iwi members
- tension when community members have problems with the school
- feeling personally committed to serving Māori.

It's crucial that teachers actively value and support those TAs who do choose to share the taonga of their culture, language, or connections with their school.

## c) Real life examples: How have other teachers supported Māori TAs?

ERO spoke to schools that support Māori TAs in cultural leadership and support roles. We wanted to know about the practical strategies that they've found useful.

### We heard that it can work well for teachers to...

- **ask TAs for te reo Māori words** that will be useful for specific lessons and subject areas. Teachers that were trained overseas start small, by focusing on using and normalising key kupu like 'ākonga'
- **model enthusiastic engagement** during TA-led PLD sessions
- use TAs' te reo Māori resources to **front-load learning** for students, ahead of te reo lessons, or to **revisit learning** afterwards. One TA noted that it was "obvious" which teachers did this, from the increased capability of their learners
- weave new learning from TAs' te reo lessons or PLD sessions into teachers' **class planning**
- **work together** with TAs to support Māori learners and whānau
- **reflect on the power differences** between TAs and teachers or leaders. TAs may feel that they can't say no to extra tasks or unreasonable requests. For example, teachers at one school decided to stop asking a TA to make "difficult phone calls" to Māori whānau, after realising that this was an unnecessary social burden
- **encourage TAs** through clear, positive messages around their value and impact
- **feed back to leaders** about the positive impacts they are noticing
- **check in with TAs** about their wellbeing and work challenges.

"They've really embraced the te reo Māori. Because teacher stays in the classroom ... it's a way of them getting to learn without getting separate PD. And it's relevant for the age group they're teaching."

TA

"A child who had lost his mother, in a lot of pain, and he was autistic ... [the teacher] came to me and said, [TA], I'm having trouble with [Māori learner] – this is how he likes things done ... She made sure that when I approached him, I was approaching him with all of the knowledge that I needed."

TA

"This role makes you pretty close to the families, and Māori families, they can get very close to you and some of them might end up just coming to you. Because of their school experiences. And so it can get heavy."

TA

## d) Good practice example

### Te ao Māori cultural leadership and support

At this school, a Māori TA has a cultural expert role, focused on tamariki me whānau Māori.

“The other staff can see that it’s incredibly important – it’s skill and expertise that they don’t have ... We can’t do this, and we’ve got someone pretty special in our mix that has that capacity.” (PRINCIPAL)

This TA’s cultural role in the school started with leading te reo Māori and kapa haka programmes alongside another Māori staff member. Teachers quickly saw the positive impacts of kapa haka in learners’ leadership skills, confidence, and engagement.

“Kapa haka has been the biggest bridge, the best bridge ... It’s a collective thing, so even our shy children excel.” (TA)

These days, teachers throughout the school value her expert guidance around tamariki Māori learning, behaviour, and emotional regulation from a kaupapa Māori perspective.

This TA’s in-class duties have been reduced to allow dedicated time for building relationships with whānau, and supporting those who have become disconnected from their whakapapa. Often, the TA’s key focus is rebuilding trust in the education system and in teachers, particularly around the use of te reo Māori in all Aotearoa New Zealand schools.

“It may not have been important in the past, but it’s important now, and making sure [whānau Māori] understand that it’s changed, from when they went to school, and making sure that they understand that their children have access to everything that they missed out on.” (TA)

This TA affirms that these important conversations, and the closeness of these relationships, are rewarding and worthwhile in terms of positive impacts for tamariki Māori – but emotionally taxing, personally. She shared that she is often approached about school matters on weekends, or at the supermarket; her role at the school has impacted her role in the community.

### Reflective questions for teachers

Do I actively engage in and support Māori TAs’ initiatives?

Do I encourage and scaffold learners’ engagement in Māori TAs’ initiatives?

Do I take personal responsibility for building my own culturally responsive practices; understanding and acknowledging the histories, heritages, languages and cultures of tamariki me whānau Māori; and for my own use of te reo me ngā tikanga Māori?

Am I taking the support and leadership of our Māori TAs for granted? How could I help ensure that their expertise is acknowledged by staff, leaders, and myself?

How are my school’s Māori TAs doing? Could it be helpful for me to check in, offer collegial support, discuss challenges and solutions, or speak up to other staff, leaders, or learners?

## 4. Collaboratively supporting students with learning support needs

Effective learning support takes teamwork – from teachers, TAs, learning support staff, experts, learners, and whānau. In collaboration with others, TAs can play a key role in positively impacting students' learning, wellbeing, peer connections, and independence.

### a) What do we know about what works?

#### TAs can make valuable contributions to the planning and implementation of targeted support strategies

As outlined earlier in this guide, evidence shows that it's not good for learners when a TA is the main person responsible for planning or adapting their learning. However, TAs can play a key role in a collaborative approach that does work well for learners.

TAs need the right guidance and information from the right people, to fully understand how and when to use strategies, techniques, and resources. This might mean learning alongside teachers, as well as therapists, specialists, SENCOs, LSCs, and whānau. Plans are enriched when TAs contribute their own expertise and insights about learners.

#### TAs can actively promote learners' agency and autonomy

Whenever TAs spend time with students with learning support needs, they have the opportunity to promote independence, encourage learners to make their own choices, and reduce the need for adult support over time. Useful strategies might include encouraging independent movement, prompting self-regulation, or focusing on learners' choices, preferences, and rights to dignity during care routines.

#### TAs can foster positive behaviour, social skills, and friendships

Students with learning support needs sometimes need extra help to connect with their peers. TAs can work with teachers and other experts to decide on targeted strategies to use in their interactions, as well as ways to arrange the classroom, resources, and lesson timetables. Useful TA strategies may include:

- limiting the length and frequency of interactions, so there is time and space for learners to connect with peers (see the 'Generalised classroom support' section of this guide)
- facilitating group learning
- prompting and coaching around social skills
- recognising and avoiding learners' triggers and using de-escalation strategies
- thoughtful timing around medication and other care routines, to avoid interrupting social times.



## b) How can teachers support TAs, to benefit students with learning support needs?

### Work as a team, with clear roles and responsibilities

Involving TAs in planning meetings and documentation means that they can work as a team alongside teachers, experts, and whānau, towards joint goals. A good collaborative approach involves being explicit about roles and responsibilities. It's particularly important to be clear about what the expectations are for a TAs' role in supporting student learning, promoting positive behaviour, and around de-escalation strategies.

### Observe, model, and discuss good practices

To offer the right support, TAs need quality initial training (from specialists, therapists, resource teachers, whānau, or other experts), as well as ongoing opportunities to top up their learning and understandings. Teachers play an important role in embedding good TA practices through ongoing discussion, observation, and modelling.

### Arrange the classroom to reduce the need for TA support

Classroom environments should be purposefully arranged to support the learning, belonging, and full participation of all students. This may involve using special equipment and resources, in discussion with school leaders and experts. If possible, students with learning support needs shouldn't be seated next to TAs or away from their classmates. Peer learning can be promoted by matching students with friends or socially capable peers.

### Arrange the timetable to reduce the need for TA support

Class timetables should consider known patterns of fatigue or escalation, as well as ensuring that key lessons don't happen at times when learners have intervention sessions, therapist appointments, medication checks, or other routines.

#### Tip: Some strategies should be avoided

Research shows that some well-intentioned practices isolate learners and limit their agency and autonomy. Practices to avoid include:

- always being close by learners (in cases where this isn't necessary for health or behaviour reasons)
- being a physical barrier to peer interactions
- when working in pairs, partnering learners with TAs instead of peers
- leaving learners waiting (e.g., for care routines or access to resources)
- inconsistent or confusing guidance, that does not align with agreed planned strategies
- focusing on task completion or hurrying learners' work
- waiting for things to go wrong before acting, rather than using strategies to prevent escalated behaviour.

## c) Real life examples: How have other teachers made collaborative approaches to learning support work?

ERO spoke to schools that use a collaborative approach to benefit students with learning support needs. We wanted to know about the practical strategies that they've found useful.

### We heard that it can work well for teachers to...

- **include TAs** in planning meetings, training, and PLD
- deliberately **make space at meetings** and in planning documentation for TA contributions – recognising that TAs may not feel empowered in these spaces
- **amend individual education plans** based on TA contributions. We heard examples of valuable information supplied by TAs around learners' diagnoses, family contexts, new or troubled friendships, known triggers, and ways to link planned learning to students' interests
- **clarify short- and long-term goals**, and what exactly teachers and TAs will do to promote these
- **be flexible**, where possible, when TAs have opportunities to engage in training or important meetings when they would usually be supporting a class
- **source equipment** and resources that help learners to access classroom activities and peer interactions independently of adults
- work together with TAs to **arrange classroom seating** to reduce the need for TA support – for example, placing learners with behaviour challenges far apart, and matching more talkative learners with those who are building their skills and confidence
- **set up spaces** or resources that act as natural behaviour supports in the classroom, for example having sensory materials, weighted blankets, favourite toys, or quiet spaces
- **ask leaders to do brief visits** to classrooms at busy times, to support positive behaviour.

“They need to understand [the details of diagnoses] to be able to work with that child.”

PARENT

“Your opinion's valued. It's what I respect the most, because that hasn't always been my experience.”

TA

“I've quite liked that meeting, being included. It's given me more of a feeling that it's definitely a team effort, of people in and out of school. It's a good space to share what's been happening, ideas that are working.”

TA

## d) Good practice example

### Collaboratively supporting students with learning support needs

This school has embedded a team approach to their support for students with learning support needs.

At the start of each term, careful timetabling of classes and rosters draws on the insights of TAs.

“It’s about listening to what they have to say – they have valuable information.” (PRINCIPAL)

Teachers and TAs meet up at least once a week to discuss learners. Planning is online and used for daily communication, and all teaching resources are shared.

Staff share a focus on supporting learners’ autonomy, agency, and peer connections. They emphasise the importance of “not hovering” around students that need extra supervision – inside the classroom and out:

“There are a few high health needs children who need playground support. TAs stay just on the outskirts. If there is an issue, the kids are solving the problems. Kids being kids, if they’re having an argument with a friend, the TA doesn’t come in. Otherwise, kids don’t want to go there again because an adult comes in. Another child with a nut allergy, she doesn’t sit with TAs – she’s still sitting with her peers.” (TEACHER)

The SENCO, teachers, and TAs discuss specific ways they can reduce support over time. They’ve found that it works best to start with a team brainstorm, and then figure out a team approach. They shared the following example:

“For his first two years at school, [learner] had to be monitored at eating time. It was something he no longer needed, but wanted – because [adults] would talk to him or watch something on the iPad. There was a decision between the TA and I to transition away from that, for him to become a full member of the class. It did take a term. We took it in turns to wean ourself off. We would lessen the time that the TA would stay. Without him realising, the TA removed herself completely but I was there. For the last two terms, lunchtime and morning tea he has no supervision. And he doesn’t ask for it, because we did it so gradually.” (TEACHER)

### Reflective questions for teachers

Who is ‘on the team’ for my learners with support needs? Is everyone clear on what their role is?

Do I set my classroom up to purposefully promote students’ learning, wellbeing, friendships, and belonging? Do I need to work with TAs and others to adjust seating arrangements, change how we use resources and spaces, or increase accessibility?

Does my class timetable respond to the needs and routines of learners with support needs – or do they miss out on key learning or social times?

Do TAs have opportunities to contribute their perspectives to individual education planning? How can I ensure that their expertise and insights are heard?

# Conclusion

Teacher aide support makes a big difference to students' learning and wellbeing. TAs boost learner outcomes by drawing on positive relationships, good training, collaborative practices, and cultural expertise.

But they can't do it alone. Responding to the diversity of learners in Aotearoa New Zealand classrooms takes real teamwork.

ERO identified what the national and international research says is good TA practice and support, along with how real schools have actually made it happen. The teacher aides, teachers, SENCOs, LSCs, senior leaders, and RTLBs that we spoke to were energised by the practices they'd put in place, and saw how their efforts were paying off in the classroom and in their learners' outcomes. But they also acknowledged that making these shifts wasn't easy, especially at first.

For many schools, the first step is letting go of traditional ideas about the TA role, and moving on to more current understandings of good quality collaborative practice. This can mean a big change in mindset for many teachers, and for TAs themselves.

Most often, we heard that it's good communication that makes things work. This means good information-sharing, valuing and respecting one another's perspectives, defining roles and responsibilities, and getting really clear about the shared strategies that are going to make the most difference for learners.

Teachers work more closely with TAs, and more often, than other school staff do. This means that every day, teachers are in the position to set the scene for great TA practice – and for great outcomes for learners.

“People in education, that's all they do all day long is find solutions to really tricky problems. And different ways will work differently at different schools.”

TA



# Useful resources

## This guide is part of a suite of resources around good TA practice and support

ERO worked with the Ministry of Education and NZEI Te Riu Roa to produce a range of useful resources. These can all be downloaded for free from [www.ero.govt.nz](http://www.ero.govt.nz).

Link	What's it about?	Who is it for?
<a href="#">Working together: How teacher aides can have the most impact</a>	The <b>main report</b> goes into detail about what good TA practice looks like, and how schools have made this work in practice	TAs, teachers, leaders, and whānau  Learning support staff, specialists, therapists, and the wider education sector
<a href="#">A practical guide for teachers: What quality teacher aide practice looks like</a>	This guide sets out what good TA practice looks like, and practical actions for <b>teachers</b> to help make it happen	Primary and secondary school teachers who work with TAs
<a href="#">A practical guide for school leaders: What quality teacher aide practice looks like</a>	This guide sets out what good TA practice looks like, and practical actions for <b>school leaders</b> to help make it happen	Principals, SENCOs, LSCs, and other school leaders at primary and secondary schools
<a href="#">A practical guide for teacher aides: What quality practice looks like</a>	This guide sets out what good TA practice looks like, and what <b>TAs</b> can do to put these practices into action	TAs at primary and secondary schools
<a href="#">What you need to know about teacher aides: A guide for school boards</a>	This brief guide for <b>school boards</b> explains what TAs can offer their school, and the supports that need to be in place for them	Board members at primary and secondary schools
<a href="#">What you need to know about teacher aides: A guide for parents and whānau</a>	This brief guide for <b>parents and whānau</b> explains what they can expect from their school	Parents and whānau of children who have TA support at primary and secondary schools

### Other useful resources:

- [Education for disabled learners in schools: Examples of good practice for teachers \(ero.govt.nz\)](#)
- [Supporting effective teacher aide practice \(inclusive.tki.org.nz\)](#)
- [Inclusive education guides \(tki.org.nz\)](#)
- [Learning support services – Ministry of Education website \(education.govt.nz\)](#)



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