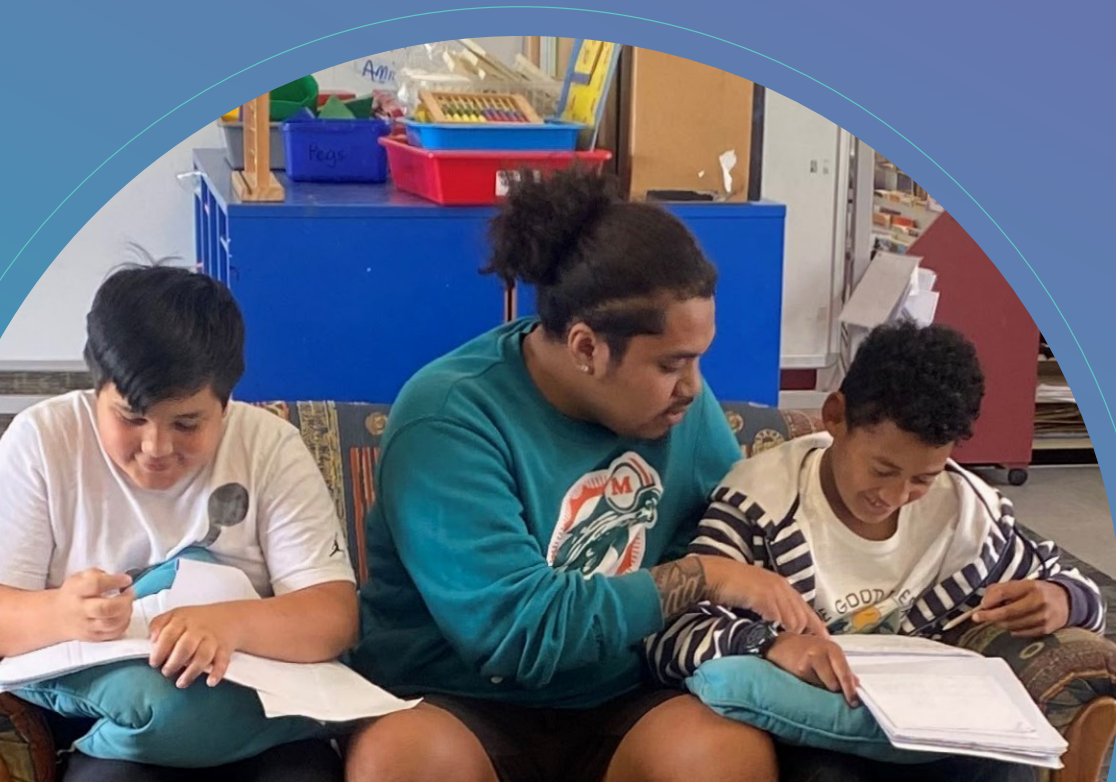




A Practical Guide For School Leaders: What Quality Teacher Aide Practice And Support Looks Like



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 from their schools. With targeted practices, school leaders and learning support leaders can set the scene for great teacher aide practice.

This guide shares practical strategies and insights for principals, Special Education Needs Coordinators, Learning Support Coordinators, and other school leaders, to help you work with teacher aides to make a real difference for learners, together.



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

TA

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 leaders. There are also guides for TAs, classroom teachers, school boards, and parents and whānau. These can all be downloaded from ERO's website, www.ero.govt.nz.

This guide is for school leaders who support TAs

This guide has key ideas, practical strategies, narrative examples, practices to avoid, and reflective questions that will be useful for primary and secondary school leaders who work with TAs, particularly senior leaders, SENCOs, and LSCs.

We focus on four key areas of TA practice, that research shows are effective for learners.

- 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 drawing on their cultural expertise to support learners and staff.
- 4) **Collaboratively supporting students with learning support needs¹** – 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.

¹ 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

Generalised classroom support means that TAs work with learners across the class while teachers work more regularly with those learners that need extra support. For this to work well, TAs need regular opportunities to talk with teachers about lesson plans. They also need support from their school to build a good skillset of quality interaction practices, including culturally responsive practices, while teachers need support to build the knowledge, practice and confidence to work with the diverse range of learning needs in their class.

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 students who have learning support needs, and even overseeing and adapting their learning. This is often called the 'velcro' model, and it was really common for a good reason: to provide lots of support from an adult who knows the learner well. However, we now know that the 'velcro' model isn't the best thing for learners and their education. While they often enjoyed their close relationships with TAs, research shows that there are many negative outcomes too. It's linked to overdependence, isolation, and poor learning progress.

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

PRINCIPAL

Generalised classroom support benefits learners, but schools can find it hard to put this into practice

“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

When TAs work across the wider class, teachers are able to have more focused interactions with learners that need extra support. However, it's hard to shift practices that have been around for decades. 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 class lessons, they need to have a good understanding of learning plans and intentions. Research shows that teachers need to actively work with TAs to ensure they're well-equipped to have responsive interactions with all learners.

b) How can school leaders support generalised classroom practice?

Get buy-in across the school

Research shows that even when good generalised practices are described in school policies or job descriptions, classrooms still tend to drift back into traditional side-by-side practice. Explicit, repeated messages from leadership can be helpful for fostering buy-in to generalised classroom support. Messages should include evidence of benefits for learners, clear expectations for classroom practice, and what teachers and TAs can expect from the school to help them embed good practices.

Provide training and support for TAs

Traditional TA support has also been found to overly focus on task completion, rather than encouraging learning. Common practices that aren't effective include using yes/no questions, repeating exactly what teachers just said, and giving answers and hints. Generalised classroom support works well when TAs have the skills to responsively support the learning of a wide range of students. That might be a big shift for TAs who are used to working closely with a few individuals, whose capabilities they know well.

To equip TAs for generalised classroom practice, leaders can provide training and professional support around good interactions: practices like open questions, wait time, offering the least amount of support first, and facilitating peer-to-peer learning. TAs might also need help to understand and implement culturally responsive practices.

Provide training and support for teachers

It's important that learners with support needs can benefit from qualified teacher interactions – this is true whether or not teachers are released for a portion of their hours in order to do this. However, teachers have reported feeling underprepared, unconfident, reluctant, and fearful about supporting some learners with support needs. Extra training might be needed for teachers to be properly equipped and confident.

“Wait time, open questioning, these sorts of things, a lot of our teachers get that PLD in that, but TAs don't and it's a missed opportunity.”

RTL B

Match cultures where possible

Learners benefit from everyday interactions with TAs who share their culture or speak their home languages.

Allow time in timetables for teachers and TAs to meet

The positive impacts of regular, formalised planning time – even very brief meetings – is strongly emphasised in the evidence base. Making this happen in practice means careful timetabling. Research has found that this time is rarely prioritised, in favour of maximising TAs' time in-class with students. This is reflected in ERO's recent evaluation of education for disabled learners, where almost half (43 percent) of TAs surveyed said they do not regularly meet with the classroom teacher.

“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 school leaders 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 in their classes.

We heard that it can work well for leaders to...

- **carefully plan timetables** so that TAs work with a range of learners and teachers
- **arrange for TA-teacher meetings** within TAs' work hours. Schools maximised assembly or sports times, staggered break times, arranged for TAs to start before class time and finish early, or arranged cover from other TAs
- **support teachers to reflect** on the pros and cons of using a portion of TAs' work hours for collaborative planning, compared to maximising in-class time
- **include TAs** in staff meetings, training, professional learning and development (PLD/PD), Kāhui Ako meetings, and staff-only days
- **make small changes** that affirm TAs as part of the teaching team – like adding them to email chains and social media, ensuring they have access to resources and databases, having a consistent approach to addressing staff (by first name or by title), and not putting TAs' names last in lists or on newsletters
- **provide opportunities for TAs to share their expertise**, for example presenting to teachers, or putting together resources about specific diagnoses
- **talk to parents and whānau** about the value of generalised support over traditional one-on-one TA support, focusing on the benefits for their child. 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.

“I guess [as a sector] we have this expectation that teachers arrive in places well prepared, and we're expecting [TAs] to just turn up.”

PRINCIPAL

“Yes, it's time that TAs aren't with students, but I'd argue that [because of the planning,] the time that they spend with students makes more of an impact.”

PRINCIPAL

“TAs need to be on all staff access. They need to be able to access archives, so they're not considered 'other', or having to chase for basic information.”

TA

“Teachers are kind, generous people, but fear means they can get a bit defensive. Give them the 'why', and how the learning support team can help.”

SENCO

d) Good practice example

Generalised classroom support

At an urban secondary school, the SENCO and school leadership have established useful ways to build and maintain a culture of collaboration and continuous professional development for TAs. The SENCO values the school's culture of professional trust, which enables creative problem-solving.

“Having a boss who's got your back means you can be adventurous.” (SENCO)

Their approach shifted from a traditional side-by-side model of support, to TAs supporting multiple classes. TAs purposefully build relationships and understandings across the range of learners at the school, including a number of learners with support needs.

“In the early days when [TAs] were tagged to one student, that became a hard day, to a hard week, to a hard term, to no enjoyment ... Regarding our most vulnerable, trickier students, that's the weight for the team to carry, not one person. When we timetable, we protect that.” (SENCO)

Presentations and resources around key practices like scaffolding are developed by the SENCO, and stored on a central database for TAs to revisit. The Practising Teacher Criteria are used as a basis for TAs' individual goals and professional discussions. TAs shared that they value their pedagogical learning, particularly because it helps them to:

- see themselves as skilled professionals
- feel equipped to work effectively with a wide range of students
- have shared language and concepts with the teaching staff
- understand how and why key practices are used, and notice their impact on student learning.

Careful timetabling allows space for regular catch-ups with teachers and for the TAs and SENCO to meet and discuss professional practice.

“[Our meetings are] solid mahi as a team on what's working, what's not ... It's not particularly negotiable ... We can't do our job if we're not armed with the tools.” (SENCO)

Reflective questions for school leaders

Are our teachers and TAs attached to the traditional side-by-side model? Do they need support to understand the value of generalised classroom support?

Being well-equipped with a range of good strategies and understandings helps teachers and TAs to feel confident working in a generalised approach. What targeted support and guidance could we provide?

Are TAs provided with important information about lesson plans, or are they expected to catch up on the fly? How might we think differently about timetabling, to enable regular times for teachers and TAs to meet?

2. Delivering structured interventions

Teacher aides can positively impact students' learning by delivering highly structured, evidence-based programmes and interventions. For this to work well, TAs need to be well supported with robust training, careful timetabling, and regular opportunities to liaise 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 for learners. 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 students' 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 students. TAs should be explicit with students 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 school leaders support TAs to deliver structured interventions?

Provide robust training around the ‘how and why’ of the intervention.

“[PLD] was so helpful because I got a real guide on how much to say before giving another instruction.”

TA

For TAs to work with interventions appropriately, they need to be familiar with relevant guidance, scripts, assessments, and other resources. It also helps for TAs to have strong understandings of the purpose of interventions – how and why particular interventions are used for particular learners. TAs benefit from regular, robust training and support in applying interventions, to cement their understandings and skills.

Provide ongoing support for TAs to embed good intervention practices

Observations, professional discussions, and modelling sessions are useful to make sure that key elements of the intervention are well understood by TAs and embedded in their practice. Training should include a focus on connecting intervention sessions with classroom learning: clarifying for learners what they are learning in the session, why they are doing so, what they can expect, and how this will relate to their other learning. This supports learner engagement and helps them make links across settings.

“‘Why am I teaching you to blend? This is why.’ ‘Right, today our focus is the floss rule...’ ‘You’ve done so well learning all of these sounds – today we’re going to learn a new sound.’”

TA

Work with teachers and TAs to plan timetables that set learners up for success

Good quality intervention sessions are brief and regular. They take place at times that have no or minimal disruption to learners’ regular classroom learning, participation, belonging, and continuity of learning. Leaders and teachers need to consider these factors when planning lessons and timetables.

Allocate time for teachers and TAs to discuss intervention learning

Teachers and TAs need regular opportunities to get together and plan, review, and discuss intervention learning and connect this to classroom lessons. These discussions are most useful when they are frequent and formalised. 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 and 33 percent do not meet regularly with the SENCO to plan and review learning programmes for disabled learners. Leaders may need to find creative solutions to allow for these crucial discussions.

“Sharing is a good thing. RTL 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 school leaders 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 leaders to...

- start training sessions with a **focus on how the programme will positively impact learners**
- strongly **emphasise the importance of delivering the programme as intended.** Some leaders talk explicitly about “fidelity,” or talk through the evidence base for the intervention
- **keep up training over time.** This includes clear, repeated messages; revisiting specific techniques, strategies, resources or scripts; and regular opportunities for observation and discussion
- **empower TAs** to adjust, defer, or break up planned sessions when students aren't ready to learn. Professional trust is foundational to this working well
- **facilitate regular teacher-TA communication** about programme and classroom learning
- **carefully arrange timetables.** This might involve mapping out work schedules, student needs, and resourcing requirements on large sheets of paper, with sticky notes on walls, or with timetabling software. Some schools pair or group students to maximise TAs' time, or blend intervention sessions into class times when all learners are working in flexible groups. Some schools find it beneficial to do termly reviews of how well timetabling works.

“For a TA, having a scope and sequence to follow is often really good as well, because they know, ‘This is what you’re working toward, and this is how you do it.’”

TA

“PD PD PD is the most important thing! Good quality PD is what makes the difference. And regularly across the term, not haphazard.”

LSC

“One of [the TAs] said I’m actually really hard pushed getting this amount of students in this block. So I had to go back to the classroom teacher ... we made some changes.”

SENCO

“We have a very large desk and we map it all out. Seven TAs, making sure they’re in the right spot to meet kids’ needs ... Every term [Principal] and I sit for hours and go through timetabling ... we just start with what the kids’ needs are then work around them.”

SENCO

d) Good practice example

Delivering structured interventions

Teachers, TAs, and leaders at this primary school have built a collaborative approach to delivering structured literacy interventions.

Initial training came from an external PLD provider, who spent a year working with teachers and TAs as well as training the school's Resource Teacher of Literacy (RTLit) to deliver training herself. The RTLit now provides ongoing support at the school.

“All the teachers are trained in it; TAs are trained in it as well ... If we have questions about kids, we ask her [RTLit]. She continues to work alongside us and our TAs.” (LSC)

“It's all about keeping the knowledge level and skill. We train our junior teachers, but we want expertise across the school in every team.” (DEPUTY PRINCIPAL)

Formalised training, along with regular discussion and modelling opportunities, are built into school timetables, using quieter times as opportunities to build practice.

“Quite often on Friday afternoons the rest of the school is at sport ... it's the least invasive time to take TAs out [for regular training]. We value upskilling. We have PLD at least two times a term.” (DEPUTY PRINCIPAL)

Good communication supports teachers and TAs to match the content of structured interventions with classroom learning.

Teacher aides from the school agree that the point of their sessions is to enhance, not replace, classroom learning. Regular communication, including brief formalised catch-ups, with teachers is key to making sure that interventions and classroom learning connect to one another and feel relevant for learners.

“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)

Reflective questions for school leaders

Do teachers and TAs have a shared understanding of the 'how and why' of interventions? Would they benefit from a top-up of professional learning or discussion? Would it be useful to model key practices or do targeted observations?

Do we know whether TAs fully understand the intended structure, techniques, strategies, resources, or scripts involved in the interventions they deliver?

Are intervention sessions timetabled so that they are brief, regular, well-paced, and don't create a barrier to key classroom learning or social times?

Do teachers and TAs have opportunities to connect around structured intervention learning and planning? If not, how might we think differently about timetabling, to enable regular times for teachers and TAs to meet?

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 students, 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

Te reo Māori is vital to Aotearoa New Zealand, to our education system, and to our communities. In English-medium schools, TAs that speak te reo Māori have expertise that can support the knowledge and understanding of all staff and students. Many TAs in Aotearoa actively promote te reo Māori in their school, with a range of effective formal and informal strategies like providing programmes, resources, advice, and modelling.

Māori TAs can benefit all learners, by supporting their school's 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 their school. This can include providing advice and guidance around tikanga, leading community events, coordinating kapa haka and Māori arts programmes, and making links with whānau, hapū, iwi, and community, to build localised bicultural practices that benefit all learners.

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

PRINCIPAL

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

A specific set of cultural expertise and understandings is needed to build good relationships with whānau, hapū, iwi, and community. Māori TAs are well-placed to support tamariki me rangatahi Māori by building and drawing on good relationships, lived cultural understandings, and knowledge of learners' whānau and whakapapa. This might involve facilitating connections, providing targeted support, encouraging Māori students' learning, or helping address serious issues.

b) How can school leaders support Māori TAs' practice?

Model support for Māori TAs' initiatives

When leaders show they value Māori TAs' work, other staff are likely to follow suit. Leaders can help Māori TAs make an impact by:

- providing opportunities for TAs to share their expertise
- modelling engagement in TA-led PLD for staff
- encouraging student membership in kapa haka groups or other programmes
- seeking, using, and showing appreciation for TAs' guidance and resources
- sharing explicit messages of support for TAs' work, with learners and staff.

Maintain high expectations for teachers' bicultural practices

Even when there are experts on staff, leaders should make sure that teachers continue to 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 Aotearoa New Zealand's professional teaching standards.

Rearrange workloads to make room for cultural leadership activities

Cultural work should be integrated into a normal workload, and not be seen as additional. Leaders should also remember that this work may not always take place on school grounds or within school hours. Practical support might involve flexible timetabling, or reworking in-class duties.

Facilitate wellbeing support

A whānau and community liaison role can come with a range of personal, social, and emotional challenges (see the box below). Leaders can support Māori TAs to manage their role and maintain their wellbeing, by organising collegial support structures, meeting with TAs to discuss challenges and solutions, or speaking up for TAs to other leaders, staff, or families.

Valuing the taonga of cultural expertise and support

It's crucial that leaders actively value and support those TAs who choose to share the taonga of their culture, language, or connections with their school. Research around school staff with cultural capital shows that as well as having significant workload issues, they experience 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 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.

c) Real life examples: How have other school leaders 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 in their classes.

We heard that it can work well for leaders to...

- **advocate** for Māori TAs' initiatives with teaching staff and the school board, focusing on positive impacts for learners
- **adjust expectations and timetabling** to enable quality cultural leadership and support work
- support Māori TAs to **build or rebuild school practices**, such as kapa haka programmes or pōwhiri
- **arrange for TAs to present to staff** or lead staff te reo Māori lessons – and model enthusiastic engagement at these
- **reconfigure roles, responsibilities, and schedules** to prioritise te reo Māori lessons and other cultural programmes as key, valued learning
- **communicate clear expectations to staff** about engagement with TAs' cultural or language initiatives
- arrange for external PLD and expert speakers, to **support staff buy-in** to culturally responsive practice
- **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
- **check in with TAs** about their wellbeing and work challenges
- **encourage TAs** through clear, positive messages around their value and impact.

“I have had to be a lot more flexible than I usually would ... We've got to slow the whole process down, because there's something special happening here.”

PRINCIPAL

“If you're meeting with whānau, I don't expect that on top of – that's part of your role.”

PRINCIPAL

“We've had to sort of say, 'It's your [the teacher's] job to help out. Can I see in your planning that you're taking what you're learning [from TAs]?'”

DEPUTY PRINCIPAL

“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

This school's leadership and board have made a recent decision to reduce a Māori TA's in-class responsibilities, to make room for a more intense focus on supporting whānau me tamariki 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)

The TA had been working with a number of whānau Māori around their pepeha, when she noted that many of the school's Māori families were unfamiliar with elements of their whakapapa. She recognised that this was having impacts on their children and shared this with leadership. This insight into Māori learners' cultural context was valued by leaders, particularly the principal, who advocated for a reconfiguration of roles and responsibilities for this TA.

“It's a significant investment for the board ... [but] the benefits of this are going to be enormous in the long term.” (PRINCIPAL)

The TA has moved from providing te reo Māori and cultural support for the whole school, to being more focused on whānau, iwi, and community liaison work.

“When I was available to the whole school, and teaching kapa haka and te reo in every class, being available to 280 students and their families – because the Pākehā families very much love this as well ... not having all of them and just being able to concentrate on the Māori families has lessened my workload. And made me be able to be more focused ... I'm now fully focused on Māori students ... ensuring that they are on the right path, that their families are feeling good and involved, and that we can also help make the connections for those families and those students to their whakapapa and related families. Just going with an overall Māori approach of making sure that our disconnected families are connected again.” (TA)

This TA affirmed that her role is 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 school leaders

Do we actively support, engage in, and advocate for Māori TAs' initiatives?

Are we taking the support and leadership of our Māori TAs for granted? How can we better ensure that they have an equitable workload?

How are our Māori TAs doing? Do we have good processes for checking in, offering collegial support, and discussing challenges and solutions?

4. Collaboratively supporting students with learning support needs

Effective learning support takes teamwork – from TAs, teachers, learning support staff, experts, school leaders, students, 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?

As part of a wider team, TAs can support planning and implementation of targeted 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. Plans are enriched when TAs contribute their own expertise and insights about 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.

TAs can actively promote student agency and autonomy

Whenever TAs spend time with learners with support needs, they have the opportunity to promote independence, encourage students 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 interactions, as well as ways to arrange the classroom, resources, and lesson timetables. Strategies may include:

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

b) How can school leaders support TAs, to benefit students with learning support needs?

Involve TAs in a coordinated approach

Good teamwork needs to be supported by good communication with TAs, including meetings. This means that TAs can work more effectively as a team alongside teachers, experts, and whānau, to provide consistent, good-quality support for learners. It adds value when TAs contribute to planning for these students, with their own insights and information about learners.

Concerningly, in ERO's recent evaluation of education for disabled learners in schools, 26 percent of teachers reported that TA support is 'not at all' or 'to a limited extent' effectively coordinated to enable teachers to maximise the presence, participation and learning of disabled learners in their class.

Observe, model, and discuss good practices

Teacher aides need quality training as well as ongoing opportunities to top up their learning and understandings. Training sessions should clarify for TAs both the *how* and the *why* of strategies and techniques – to understand their rationale and believe in their value. Leaders can also provide continued support to embed good TA practices through ongoing opportunities for discussion, observation, and modelling.

Work with teachers and TAs to purposefully arrange classrooms

“It's about encouraging independence. What are they [TAs] doing today for the students that they can be doing less of tomorrow?”

SENCO

Classroom environments should be purposefully arranged to support the learning, belonging, and full participation of all learners. This may involve using special equipment and resources. Where possible, learners with support needs should not be seated next to TAs or away from their classmates. Peer-to-peer learning can be promoted by matching students with friends or socially capable peers.

Carefully arrange timetables to reduce the need for direct TA support

Timetabling should consider learners' 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.

Some strategies should be avoided

Research shows that some well-intentioned practices don't work well for learners:

- always being close by learners (in cases where this is not necessary for safety reasons)
- being a physical barrier to learners' interactions with others
- when working in pairs, partnering learners with TAs instead of their peers
- leaving students 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 school leaders 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 in their classes.

We heard that it can work well for leaders to...

- **arrange timetables to include TAs** in important meetings – within TAs' work hours. Some schools maximise quieter times, stagger break times, or arrange cover from other TAs
- deliberately **make space at meetings** and in planning documentation for TA contributions – recognising that TAs may not feel empowered in these spaces
- **clarify short- and long-term goals**, and what exactly TAs are expected to do to promote these
- **amend individual education plans** based on TA contributions, e.g., around diagnoses, family contexts, new or troubled friendships, known triggers, and ways to link planned learning to learners' interests
- **provide PLD for TAs** around the specific conditions and diagnoses of learners. Schools made this work by: holding online sessions; creating online resources; including TAs in PLD at staff-only days; organising for half the TA team to attend while the other half covered the classrooms
- **source equipment and resources** that help learners to access classroom activities and peer interactions independently of adults
- **do brief visits** to classrooms at busy times, to support positive behaviour
- **rotate TA support** so that learners develop relationships with a number of adults, who use consistent strategies (e.g., agreed language and prompts). Learners' individual needs and preferences around relationship-building is foundational to these decisions
- **work with teachers to build their confidence** around working with learners with specific learning support needs.

“Consistency is the key for these kids, so communication to get on the same page is so important.”

TEACHER

“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 a good space to share what's been happening, ideas that are working.”

TA

“It's about listening to what they [TAs] have to say – they have valuable information.”

PRINCIPAL

d) Good practice example

Collaboratively supporting students with learning support needs

At this primary school, teachers, TAs, and the SENCO from the junior team meet fortnightly to collaboratively plan and discuss individual learners. They are often joined by specialist teachers or an educational psychologist.

“It’s a problem-solving, troubleshooting type of meeting to see how things are going, and what we need to adapt.” (PRINCIPAL)

These meetings were initially put in place as a temporary measure, to provide coordinated support for TAs in response to some challenging student behaviour.

“TAs can be isolated a lot, so we had to make sure we kept coming together so they knew they weren’t on their own. We tried to make it as a team, not just, ‘You’re on your own.’” (SENCO)

Staff quickly noticed the positive impacts of this regular collaboration: classroom practices became more consistent and learner outcomes improved. TAs and teachers affirm that their regular communication also helped to build up their professional trust and a sense of shared purpose.

“It’s given me more of a feeling that it’s definitely a team effort, of people in and out of school ... It’s important for us to know what the end goal is, for that student’s achievement ... and how flexible we can be.” (TA)

“It was giving it the time it deserves. You can’t have those proper conversations in a quick dash before morning tea.” (TEACHER)

Leadership worked with the school board to make these meetings a permanent fixture for the team. This involved reworking some aspects of the school and staffing timetable, to allow for dedicated, formalised meeting times.

“We’ve prioritised it, it was a school decision. This is a really complex group, if we don’t put that time in, we won’t be doing our best by our staff and the kids. So yeah, that’s one of the great challenges.” (PRINCIPAL)

Reflective questions for school leaders

Who is ‘on the team’ for our learners with learning support needs? Is everyone clear about exactly what their role is on that team?

Is our whole school environment purposefully set up to promote students’ learning, wellbeing, friendships, and belonging? Do I need to work with TAs and others to change how we use resources and spaces, or to increase accessibility?

Would teachers or TAs benefit from targeted learning around specific diagnoses to improve their confidence and practices?

Are TAs able to participate in important meetings, including individual education planning? Could we find creative solutions to enable better collaboration?

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. Supporting great TA practice involves 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.

In this study, ERO identified what national and international research says is good TA practice and support, along with how schools have actually made that happen. The TAs, 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 this wasn't always 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, collaborative practice. This can mean that leaders need to support their staff to make a big shift in mindset.

This shift needs to come with practical supports to ensure that there are real changes at the classroom level. Teachers need to be confident working with learners with support needs, and TAs need to be empowered with good strategies and key information – otherwise classroom practices are unlikely to change much.

It's important for people in leadership positions to be clear, explicit, and persistent in their messages and expectations. These messages need to be backed up with real action: setting up good communication systems, prioritising planning and discussion time for TAs, careful timetabling, and robust professional support school-wide.

With deliberate actions, school leaders can make sure their school maximises the value of TA support to make a real, positive difference for learners, together.

“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

“Time is really valued in schools and having that time actually makes the difference for people to be able to have quality conversations that really make a quality difference for kids. That's what we're all in this for, making the difference for kids. People can't do it on the hoof.”

PRINCIPAL

“We could not run this school as successfully as we do without these amazing [TAs]. I call them my angels, because they are.”

DEPUTY PRINCIPAL/SENCO

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.

Link	What's it about?	Who is it for?
Working together: How teacher aides can have the most impact	The main report 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 practical guide for teachers: What quality teacher aide practice looks like	This guide sets out what good TA practice looks like, and practical actions for teachers to help make it happen	Primary and secondary school teachers who work with TAs
A practical guide for school leaders: What quality teacher aide practice looks like	This guide sets out what good TA practice looks like, and practical actions for school leaders to help make it happen	Principals, SENCOs, LSCs, and other school leaders at primary and secondary schools
A practical guide for teacher aides: What quality practice looks like	This guide sets out what good TA practice looks like, and what TAs can do to put these practices into action	TAs at primary and secondary schools
What you need to know about teacher aides: A guide for school boards	This brief guide for school boards 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
What you need to know about teacher aides: A guide for parents and whānau	This brief guide for parents and whānau 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 principals and school leaders \(ero.govt.nz\)](#)
- [A leaders' tool for self review: Teachers and teacher aides working together \(tki.govt.nz\)](#)
- [Supporting effective teacher aide practice \(inclusive.tki.org.nz\)](#)
- [Inclusive education guides \(tki.org.nz\)](#)



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A Practical Guide For School Leaders: What Quality Teacher Aide Practice And Support Looks Like

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