

# Teacher aides' views and experiences on the inclusion of students with Autism: Perspectives across two countries

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*The human rights issue of inclusion in education has been the focus of numerous legislative and policy documents around the world. The right of a student with additional needs to access their local school and participate in mainstream classrooms has been mandated for numerous years across many nations. Increasing numbers of students with additional needs who are included in the regular classroom are diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) but reports indicate the understanding of ASD students remains low. This study investigates the views and experiences of teacher aides (TAs) who support students with ASD in mainstream settings in two countries: the Cook Islands (CI) and New South Wales (NSW), Australia. The research addressed the growing international use of TAs and their roles in inclusive classrooms, and the need to understand contemporary practices from comparative global perspectives. Results indicate many similarities between TA views and experiences on the inclusion of students with ASD in NSW and the CI. The findings are discussed in terms of recommendations to enhance the efficacy and practices of TAs in supporting students with ASD in the inclusive classroom.*

*Keywords: Teacher aides; Cook Islands; New South Wales; Views; Experiences*

## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is part of the human rights agenda globally and supports full involvement of all students within the school community. Cologon (2013) defines inclusive education as a philosophy that embraces personal differences, and recognizes the rights of all people, regardless of race, gender, disability, ethnicity, or socio-economic status, to an education. Cologon's perspective of inclusion encompasses all within the education system who are marginalized, yet is most frequently associated with those students who have a disability (Dyson, 2001). Furthermore, the principle of inclusion has led to the belief that TAs are crucial to successful inclusive programmes where they "bridge the gap" (O'Rourke & West, 2015, p. 532) between classroom teaching and the needs of students with disabilities. TAs, also referred to as paraprofessionals, teaching assistants, paraeducators and student learning support officers, are increasingly employed to support students with disabilities, particularly in developed nations (Sharma & Salend, 2016). The role of TAs has, over time, evolved to include expanded duties that require them to demonstrate a higher level of content-specific knowledge as well as manage the

social interactions that occur between students, and between students and teachers (Yeigh & Evans, 2014).

The research presented here will explore the views and experiences of TAs who work with students with ASD across two countries. One group of TAs worked with students with ASD in NSW, Australia, and the other group of TAs worked with students with ASD in Rarotonga, CI. These two countries were chosen to explore perceptions from contrasting cultures with different developmental trajectories of individualized education (IE), including: IE policies, resource availability and history of IE. The findings from the research will provide not only a current snapshot of the perceptions of TAs who support students with ASD but also offer an understanding of contemporary practices from comparative global perspectives. The purpose of the current paper is to address the relative dearth of research in the area of TA perceptions of their work supporting students with ASD (Danker, Strnadová, & Cumming, 2016).

### **Students with ASD: A definition**

ASD is a developmental disorder that impacts a person's communication and social interactions (Roth, 2013). It is characterized by impaired social interaction, impaired verbal and non-verbal communication, and repetitive behaviour (Stefanatos, 2007). Diagnosis is based on behaviour not cause or mechanism and the diagnostic criteria require that symptoms become apparent in early childhood, typically before the age of three (London, 2007).

### **Role of TAs in supporting students with disabilities and ASD**

In providing for students with additional needs, such as ASD, in the regular classroom, a conventional method is to place a TA in the student's class to support the student (Symes & Humphrey, 2012). Studies of beginning and experienced teachers indicate that their greatest concern regarding IE was inadequate resources and a lack of staff (Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Round, Subban, & Sharma, 2015). While the efficacy of TAs is controversial, (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2012; Rutherford, 2011; Sansotti & Sansotti, 2012), the presence of a TA is seen as the most desirable form of support by teachers at the beginning of their career, although reliance on TAs appears to be diminished as a result of additional experience and professional development (Hemmings & Woodcock, 2011). In a study conducted by Anderson, Klassens, and Georgiou (2007), TA time was identified as one of the main support structures necessary to implement inclusion successfully. This finding was supported by Kearney (2000), who noted that the majority of teachers identified TA time as the most successful form of assistance. The effects of TAs in the classroom was recently investigated in a study using randomized controlled groups comparing the impact on student learning outcomes. Results indicated that the use of TAs had a positive impact on test scores for disadvantaged students. The impact was most noticeable when sharing instruction responsibility in the classroom occurred (Anderson, Beuchert, Nielson, & Thomsen, 2018).

In an international analysis of the role and efficacy of TAs, Sharma and Salend, (2016) reported that, in addition to supporting teacher-directed instruction and performing a variety of non-instructional roles, TAs are shouldering significant instructional, classroom management and socialization roles, making important curricular decisions regarding the education of students with disabilities, and teaching them in separate locations. Further, while TAs have also been found by Butt and Lowe (2012) to support teaching and inclusive education along with students' academic, social and behavioural

performance, at times they experienced unclear professional roles. In addition, limited communication and opportunities for collaboration, training, supervision, and professional learning were reported as major factors hindering the impact of the work of TAs (Butt & Lowe, 2012). The importance of establishing clear roles and responsibilities for TAs is to ensure that the appropriate guidelines have been followed. Adherence to Australian legislation regarding the supervision of students (Gibson, Paatsch, & Toe, 2016) and to policies driven by the Cook Islands Education Master Plan (Cook Islands Ministry of Education, 2008) stipulates clear boundaries of the roles and responsibilities of TAs. However, the tasks and duties of TAs continue to vary widely across schools and communities, as schools have, in many instances, ignored regulations (Page, Boyle, McKay, & Mavropoulou, 2018; Gibson et al., 2016).

Overall, it appears that, in order for TAs to adequately facilitate the learning and social outcomes of students with disabilities, they require clearly stated definitions of their role that is then put into practice, support by the school in terms of supervision, and participation in a collaborative team, and training.

### **NSW historic and legislative context**

Understanding inclusion makes it necessary to engage in the historical cultural value systems through which disability is viewed (Armstrong, Armstrong, & Barton, 2016). Students with disabilities have been integrated into mainstream classes since the mid 1970s, after more than 50 years of educating students with a disability in special schools (Konza, 2008).

Inclusion in the Australian context today is often used on a sliding scale of participation in mainstream classrooms from full participation to partial inclusion and separate special schools (Armstrong et al., 2016). A student's right to be educated at their local school in NSW is upheld by federal legislation such as the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Australian Government, 2016) and the *Disability Standards for Education* (Australian Government, 2005). The Department of Education NSW (2017) has recently moved to support more students with disabilities in the regular classroom with the provision of TAs in all schools.

The prevalence of students (aged between 5 and 14 years) with a disability in Australia is thought to be around 7% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Within that figure, 13% were identified as being on the autistic spectrum, which is the most prevalent disability category. According to federal and state policy, these students are entitled to attend their local school. In practice, however, segregated schooling, either special schools or support classes, continues to be used to manage and exclude children considered too troublesome, difficult, and/or impaired (Lilley, 2015).

Slee (2016) argues that the Australian education system, with its myopic focus on competitive testing, means that not all schools recognize inclusion and include all students. Moreover, Hardy and Woodcock (2015) argue that this competitive individualism has lent itself to a persistent narrative of defect and deficit. Such a discourse has contributed to a conservative inclusive application of state policy in NSW in which inclusion is regarded in a narrow and cursory manner. New South Wales policy changes (Special Education Initiative, 2005) from special to regular classrooms were expected to impact on TA practice, such that classroom teachers were to take responsibility for all students in their classroom. In reality, teachers reported being ill equipped to deal with changing instructions to meet individual needs, leaving TAs to take care of learning and

all other needs of a student (Dixon & Verenikina, 2007). Eight years later, research, such as that conducted by Graham (2015), continues to report on the inappropriate use of TAs in NSW schools where mismatches are observed between state policies and practices of TAs.

### **Cook Islands historic and legislative context**

Within its context as an emerging inclusive education provider, the CI contributes to the understanding of IE globally from a unique perspective. Situated in the South Pacific, the 15 islands of the CI, of which Rarotonga is the largest, reflects an intersection of the cultural context of traditional CI worldview and the Western influences that has served to create community perceptions of IE.

The CI sits within its own set of collectivist cultural values of participation, co-operation, discipline, community involvement, language and Western values (Te Ava, Rubie-Davies, Airini, & Ovens, 2013). Students are taught a curriculum that was initiated in New Zealand (Cook Islands Ministry of Education, 2002), which can, at times, create certain struggles and frustrations. Smith (2008), stated that one such struggle is the challenge that students with disabilities face because a common belief in the CI community that “generally people with disabilities do not have much potential for learning or change” (p. 22).

Notwithstanding the dilemmas involved in making sense of disability, the CI has made some gains and experienced some losses in its brief Individualised education E history. The *Convention for the Rights of person with Disability (CRPD)* came into force in 2009, promoting a barrier-free inclusive and rights-based approach for all in the CI. The *Disability Act, 2008* was introduced to act alongside the *CRPD* to maintain a disability strategy as set out by the convention (Mourie, 2012). The CI has a current educational policy statement (Merumeru, 2011) that had been updated from the original document (Court, 2002) created a shift from “special needs” to “inclusive education” for all students. There are no special schools in the CI, although learning units attached to schools exist. The IE policy addressed the learning needs of students and also allows for the provision of TA support on the basis of need and not diagnosis (Townsend, Page, & Mccawe, 2014). In terms of practice, the availability of TAs helped to improve the predominantly negative attitudes of teachers having students with disabilities in their classrooms (Page, Boyle, McKay, & Mavropoulo, 2018). Despite Ministry policies for inclusive practices, what was commonly experienced was TAs left on their own to support students with disabilities so that teachers “can get on with the rest of the class” (Page et al., 2018, p. 9).

Sustainability of service provision, however, has proved to be a challenge. Teacher aide training has been inconsistent in its delivery, although currently available. Visiting Paediatric services are not always available, and CI doctors have not been trained in specialist diagnosis (Blattner et al., 2017). For these reasons, while there is sound policy addressing IE, delivery of programmes for students with disabilities and, specifically, ASD, must be sustained.

There are approximately 2% of enrolled students identified as having a disability or a significant learning need. Of that 2%, 17% are considered to have ASD characteristics, and constitutes the most prevalent disability category (Townsend et al., 2014). Given the numbers of students with ASD in schools both in the CI and, similarly, in NSW, it is

pertinent to explore what is working in the global field for TAs working with students with ASD so that delivery of services can be maximized.

The existing research in what works for TAs who support students with disabilities is extensive and findings report on the perceptions of TAs themselves (Butt & Lowe, 2012; Lehane, 2013), parents (Hamilton & Wilkinson, 2016), teachers (Carrington et al., 2016; Chung et al., 2015), and, to a lesser extent, students (Saggers, 2015). Much of the research, however, has been conducted within a limited range of countries. Sharma and Salend (2016) have called for further studies in other localities to extend our understanding. Additionally, the research has largely been confined to TA experiences supporting students with intellectual disabilities; therefore, perspectives from a wider range of disabilities would be useful (Danker et al., 2016). The current research is also particularly timely given research by Walker (2015), who reported that, in NSW, despite the growing prevalence of students with ASD in classrooms, teachers lack the knowledge to meet the social, communication, behavioural, and academic needs of these students. As a result, teachers reported relying on TAs for support. It is pertinent, therefore, to explore the perceptions of these TAs and their practices when supporting students with ASD in order to provide a way forward for both TAs as well as teachers. Further, this paper is the first to investigate TA's perceptions of working with students with learning needs in the CI and, because TAs work predominantly with students with ASD, TAs supporting this subgroup of students were the focus of the research. The growing international use of TAs requires an investigation of the experiences of TAs in various settings to fully understand their role from a global viewpoint. Thus, the research questions explored the perceptions of TAs from a region with very new inclusive education practices versus a country with a much longer history of students with disability in regular school settings.

### **Research questions**

The current study contributes to the understanding of TA views and experiences working with students with ASD across different contexts. The study uses a qualitative design in order to meet the values of CI participants and to meet with a methodology that is “closer to Pacific ways” (Vaioleti, 2006, p. 23). The methodology expresses “the valued knowledge and ways of living in the Cook Islands world” (A. Te Ava, personal communication, July 30, 2017). The research explored the following questions:

1. What are the similarities and differences of CI and NSW TAs experiences and views towards the inclusion of students with ASD in mainstream classes?
2. What are the greatest challenges and benefits in working with students with ASD?
3. What are the perceived effective strategies for teaching students with ASD in inclusive settings?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

TAs from public primary schools in the Hastings/Mid North Coast NSW, were invited to participate in this research. Six TAs from public primary schools volunteered. All TAs in Rarotonga, CI, were invited to participate and eight TAs volunteered. All TAs were chosen on the basis that they worked with students with ASD and had at least two years' experience in this role. Ethics was approved by the university Human Research Ethics

Committee (HREC). In addition, the study was approved by the CI National Research Committee. All participants were female with experience ranging from 2 to 18 years.

### **Materials and procedures**

A semi-structured interview schedule was used for the study. The interview schedule consisted of 17 questions exploring three thematic areas: a) personal experiences with teaching students with Autism, b) personal views about the educational placement of students with Autism, and c) personal views about the inclusion of students with Autism in inclusive settings. The schedule had been developed to explore TAs views and experiences of inclusion of students with ASD in a secondary setting (Blizzard, 2015) and the questions were modified to facilitate local language and context. The interviews were conducted in English; English is the language of instruction in schools in both CI and NSW. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour in length and took place in the school grounds where the TA worked. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

### **Data analysis**

The data from the interview questions were coded and analysed according to the resultant themes using NVivo 11 qualitative data analysis software. Inductive reasoning using a thematic analysis approach considered themes based on the literature and data. The interviews were analysed and responses grouped into themes using the thematic analysis approach of Guest, MacQueen, and Namey (2012). An inductive approach was used, given the exploratory nature of this project. Themes were also compared across interviews to determine commonalities and differences between participants and their experiences. To maintain confidentiality, participants are referred to in the results by their transcription code: transcription number and country abbreviation (either CI for the Cook Islands or NSW for New South Wales, Australia). For example, 3-CI refers to the third conversation transcribed with a participant who worked with students with ASD in the CI.

## **RESULTS**

The research questions examined the similarities and differences between CI and NSW TAs views and experiences towards IE in primary schools. Specifically, the first research question explored TAs' experiences and views towards the inclusion of students with ASD in mainstream classes. The second research question identified the greatest challenges and benefits in working with students with ASD, and the final question established the perceived effectiveness of strategies for teaching students with ASD in inclusive settings.

Five main themes emerged from the interviews. The first research question identified two themes; a) that inclusion is beneficial for everyone, and b) effective inclusion requires a supportive learning environment. The second research question identified the third theme in that behavioural challenges are a common issue. The third research question revealed a fourth theme: students with ASD require unique teaching strategies, and, additionally, a fifth theme identified that the TAs' role is to maximize social skills through scaffolded learning for students with ASD.

### **Inclusion is beneficial for everyone**

All six NSW and eight CI participants considered inclusion to be beneficial for not only students with ASD but also for their classmates. Students were seen to benefit from the social modelling provided by students without disabilities. Participant 1-NSW reported that “I’ve obviously thought of the reasons that it’s real life for these kids”.

In regard to the benefits that inclusion provided for all students, these were two-fold. Participant 4-NSW described the development of tolerance in other students, “I’ve seen the students in her class grow, become more tolerant, understanding, willing to help”. Additionally, Participant 4-NSW reported that academic adjustments provided for students with ASD met other students’ learning needs as this provision “can sometimes assist other students who are at the lower level in the classroom and otherwise won’t have access to that kind of help”.

While inclusion was regarded as beneficial for all of the students with ASD, four TAs and one TA from the CI reported that students with severe academic or behavioural needs were more appropriately catered for in segregated settings. Participant 6-NSW stated, for example, that she supported inclusion for all, although, “I mean, if the child’s throwing chairs and being violent I think that’s different”.

Nearly all TAs discussed the necessity of providing an environment that met the students’ needs, which was described as individual or small group time either inside or away from the classroom. Participant 6-NSW reported that “I see the need for support units, I can see the need for mainstreaming and I think they both have benefits”. The option of an alternate space for the student to go to when their sensory needs are overloaded was therefore favoured:

Over here he’s distracted, you know because of the children and he won’t concentrate . . . I mean that’s why I want a room for just him. (Participant 3-CI)

A particular difference was noted in the language and explanations used between the CI and NSW TAs when describing the benefits of inclusion for all students. Three participants stated that inclusion and the acceptance of disability in the CI was because, “we’re in a Christian country and you do not treat people differently” (Participant 1-CI). The explanation based on religious underpinnings was reiterated by Participant 2-CI: “I try to teach the other children [respect for others] in our community and they ask me why I say to them well, in the Bible it says do unto others what you want done unto you”. As well as Christian-based descriptions of the benefits of inclusion for students, from a religious standpoint of acceptance of all people, the importance of participation in cultural activities such as dance and local music performances was also reported (n = 2).

### **Effective inclusion requires a supportive learning environment**

All TAs stated a close working relationship with parents and all school staff was necessary for effective inclusion: “If you’ve got the right support and the right environment, the child copes” (Participant 3-NSW). Good communication was a key element to a good relationship which involved, “constant updates with the teachers . . . [the teacher] converses with [the] parents and that can come back to me so I know where he’s at” (Participant 2-NSW). Open communication allowed teamwork and collaboration to occur. Four NSW TAs reported that collaboration between staff and executive have improved support for themselves for example, one TA stated that “everyone

communicates. Any decisions are made together and I think that is the main thing” (Participant 3-NSW).

NSW TAs report that the school community is the most effective mechanism but CI TAs reported that successful inclusion involved the whole community rather than only strong school participation: ‘Of course they may have their church people, but on the outside, they actually need the support from the community, friends, family’ (1-CI).

Additional challenges faced by all TAs was a lack of resourcing and/or funding that impeded the ability to provide the supportive learning environment they spoke of. Further, there was a noticeable difference between the CI and NSW experiences of funding. Four of the eight CI TAs indicated that teaching programmes would benefit from additional resources while four out of the six participants from NSW mentioned funding as having an impact on the inclusion of students because TAs in NSW saw funding as useful for employment of additional TAs as well as resources. Additionally, TAs in the CI stated that the resources used in classrooms were often made locally and not purchased because resources were scarce. Participant 5-CI described:

I make the schedules, all the visuals for [student]. We are making a book about planes, he loves planes, at the moment, and we are going to the airport next week. I only have one good book in our library for him. Not much.

### **Behavioural challenges are a common issue**

At some point, all TAs had experienced or witnessed difficult behaviour. Of note, four of the six NSW TAs report the negative impact of managing behaviour. Participant 4, NSW, acknowledges that student behaviour management can “take up a lot of time and it effects the health of everyone” and became the “problem” for TAs themselves to manage. An example was given by Participant 5-NSW:

We get asked to pick up the pieces an awful lot when there's been a meltdown . . . so, you know, sometimes that just gets to me a bit.

While TAs in the CI had experienced oppositional behaviour, CI TA interviews were absent of the same key words that were used by NSW TAs, such as “problematic” and “frustrating”. Instead, CI participants reported these events in language that reflected that they were less concerned about it. Participant 3-CI, for example, stated that “we just manage anything as we go along in the day and we might go outside – I just do what he needs. I don’t see it is a big deal”. Moreover, five of the six TAs from NSW used antecedent strategies to avoid “meltdowns”, “tantrums” (n = 2) and “lockdowns” (n = 1); these words were not used by CI TAs.

### **Students with ASD require unique teaching strategies**

That NSW TAs perceived student behaviour as more problematic appeared to have an impact on their subsequent strategies in managing behaviour. Five of the six TAs from NSW used antecedent strategies, such as preparing students for transition that also served to avoid behavioural “meltdowns”. Of note, seven of the eight CI TAs relied on the strategy of “taking a break” as an antecedent strategy, and physical breaks were commonly employed:

He likes to . . . play with the ball and so I take him out for five minutes when he is disengaged . . . he has a short concentration span so getting him out of the classroom

and getting him involved in something like physical I think he responds well for that (Participant 7-CI).

In terms of learning, TAs used a range of common strategies within their repertoire. Strategies included providing: routines, structure, sensory strategies such as weight belts, modified work, a predetermined plan, various seating arrangements, feelings charts, time out to calm, varied expectations if the student is having an off-day, timers, visuals, pre-warnings, rewarding with computer time, giving choices, token systems, break-times, fidget toys, and reducing noise. Using students' special interests were often employed to teach new concepts.

In a further analysis of the differences employed by TAs of teaching strategies, it was found that NSW TAs used more concrete resources such as weight belts, timers, tokens and fidget toys. Teacher aides in the CI relied on strategies that did not require physical resources, such as modifying work, giving choices, break-times, teaching concepts, and routines. The introduction of iPads for students on the inclusive education register in the Cook Islands meant that time on the iPad was an exception of that tendency; six of the eight TAs reported computer time as a reward.

### **The TAs role is to maximize social and learning goals through scaffolded support**

Commonly reported by TAs in both the CI and NSW (n = 9) were examples of their role to enable student independence. Support for learning was commonly achieved by scaffolding the student's learning in class with an overarching goal to increase independence. Participant 1-NSW described that "you feel good in yourself that they're learning to read, to write, to adapt". Further, all TAs perceived that another principal role was the development of social skills. Participant 2-NSW stated: "I just see the other side of it, if we didn't include [social skills] it would certainly be to their detriment in terms of their future".

However, a challenge in providing academic and social support was that, often, TAs were given responsibilities that exceeded their roles. In the CI, three TAs stated that they were charged with developing the teaching plan. In one case, the TA had never seen the student's individualized education program. As a result, TAs were required to accept the "extra burden . . . I get used to doing it, [the teachers] don't, that's not what they signed up for. I've been told before – that's not what I signed up for" (Participant 6-CI). NSW TAs also reported instances of working with teachers who would leave the TA to "deal with it" (Participant 3-NSW). Other participants (n = 3) reported that the TA is given extra responsibility as teachers or the school is "not set up and not capable" (4-NSW) to manage students with Autism.

## **DISCUSSION**

The current research spoke to the growing global use of TAs and their roles in regular classrooms, and the need to understand practices from comparative perspectives. Students with ASD were the focus of the study as ASD is the most prevalent disability in NSW and the CI. Additionally, TAs are often given a disproportionate responsibility for the care of students with ASD. The results point out many similarities between TA views and experiences on inclusion for students with ASD in NSW and the CI.

The research questions examined the perceptions of CI and NSW TAs' views and experiences towards IE in primary schools and generated five themes; inclusion is

beneficial for everyone; effective inclusion requires a supportive learning environment; behavioural challenges are a common issue; students require unique teaching strategies; and, additionally, the TAs role is primarily to maximize social and learning skills through scaffolded classroom work, although at times this role can overstep stated boundaries. This section discusses the importance of identifying the different contexts in which TAs work to successfully support students with ASD given the reality of their role. The study findings highlight the significance that local meaning plays in understanding, relating to, and supporting students with ASD. Of note, the experiences and perceptions of TAs across these contexts provides a way forward to develop or grow alternative roles, and context-specific training to meet the needs of those roles for TAs working with students with ASD.

The first finding in the study showed that TAs all supported IE for the students they worked with although they worked in different settings across the day, including full participation, small group, and one-to-one settings within the classroom, as well as teaching in separate workspaces. These practices are supported by other research findings which note there is not one commonly appropriate site for learning (Simpson, Mundschenk, & Heflin, 2011; Roth, 2013). Additionally, five TAs considered that the needs of students with ASD who exhibited severe behavioural or academic challenges would be better served in special schools. This perception has been widely reported in the research showing teaching staff are less likely to want students with behavioural difficulties in their class because of disruption and time taken away from teaching (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Furthermore, students with autism are also more likely to be excluded or suspended than their peers (Roberts & Simpson, 2016) primarily due to challenging behaviour relating to their disability. Significantly, only one CI TA reported that a special school setting would be beneficial to students with appreciably challenging needs. This may be the result of the absence of such a resource available in that environment. Additionally, the difference in attitudes towards inclusivity and challenging behaviour may be an outcome of strong community ties and church influences that encourages participation for all (Te Ava et al., 2013). It is also likely that, given these cultural values and community perceptions of disability (McDonald, 2001; Smith, 2008), challenging behaviour is positioned differently.

Another theme from the results was that effective inclusion required a supportive learning environment. The findings showed that clear and open communication, facilitated team work, and the involvement of all stakeholders, including the family, was necessary for the successful implementation of planning and reporting. Research has shown that family involvement significantly improves student outcomes and inclusion is most successful when staff and parents work together (Fergusson, 2008). In the CI, community and church involvement were important and markedly different mechanisms that constituted TAs perceptions of a supportive environment. Close communication with communities and community groups is regarded as critical in Pacific contexts because this approach aligns with cultural values and expectations (Sharma, Forlin, Marella, & Jitoko, 2017).

One of the challenges faced by all TAs in providing a supportive learning environment, however, was a lack of resourcing and/or funding. The noticeable difference between the CI and NSW experiences of funding was that the process of resource allocation is centralized in the CI (Townsend et al., 2014). As a result, schools do not have the ability to be flexible with the allocation of resources, as is the case in NSW. In NSW, schools, funding is flexibly managed by the school (Department of Education, NSW, 2017). Further, TAs in the CI critiqued the availability of concrete resources. This, in turn,

appeared to impact on their choice of strategy, where it was apparent that CI TAs made use of what was available in their environment, such as using visuals they had made, or adapting the curriculum and making their own teaching resources to incorporate individual special interests. While NSW TAs used strategies that included the same ASD-specific techniques (Lindsay, Proulx, Scott, & Thomson, 2014) as the CI TAs had, they also used more strategies using specialized resources such as weight belts.

An additional difference was that NSW TAs appropriated strategies to alleviate the possibility of “meltdowns” which is a colloquial description of feeling overwhelmed with frustration and anxiety (Baker, 2014) “tantrums” or “lockdowns”. In contrast, CI TAs did not use these words nor viewed oppositional behaviour as problematic, which may be accounted for in cultural values, as outlined earlier, as well as language differences (for example, there is no word for Autism (“Autism”, 2016) in the Cook Islands language). The results also provided a strong theme that students with ASD required unique teaching strategies. Most TAs used a range of specific ASD approaches that included a range of antecedent strategies to maximize learning by encouraging appropriate classroom behaviours.

Finally, TAs considered their overarching role to be one of supporting the learning goals of students with ASD in both academic and social skills development. This was accomplished by supporting students in a range of strategies that involved one-to-one, small group work, as well as teaching individually in a segregated setting within the school. While TAs stated that a quiet space and one-to-one teaching is imperative, Giangreco (2013) and Butt (2016) claim that this model is the least inclusive model of support because teachers tend to disengage from the student and the student becomes an isolated island in the mainstream. In terms of teaching students with ASD, however, there is a body of evidence that supports individual teaching of specific strategies to be the most effective (Iovannone, Dunlap, Huber, & Kincaid, 2003; Parsons et. al., 2011).

However, a challenge in providing academic and social support was that TAs were responsible for a range of additional tasks that they were not expected to perform, such as teaching and duty of care across the school day. This finding is consistent with other research in which TAs were required to undertake extra work and obligations by the school administration (Howard & Ford, 2007). Teacher aides justified or accepted this role, suggesting that schools and teachers did not yet have the capacity or abilities to better manage the complexities of students with ASD.

## **CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTION**

The literature reports that the basis of an inclusive education (e.g., Forlin, Chambers, Loreman, Deppeler, & Sharma, 2013; Merumeru, 2012), is the fundamental right of all students to access an education at their local school. Teacher aides across the two countries have provided a valuable insight into the similarities and differences of their views and experiences. Much can be learned for the global development of the TA profession from the resultant trending themes and nuances. Overall, TAs generally share similar experiences, cope with the same challenges, and have analogous approaches to inclusion. There were differences noted resulting from cultural and institutional contexts also. These contrasting points indicate a diversity of thinking and positioning in attitudes and practices towards students with ASD. Such differences show that one model of working with students cannot be transposed into different contexts; models of working

with students with ASD must be contextualized in order to maximize the successful learning for these students.

One of the future directions that arises from the results is to recognize the importance of ongoing ASD-specific training that reflects the local context. Teacher aides also need to be supported by school staff and, in particular, teachers, who need to take more responsibility for developing and monitoring learning and pastoral care; this appears to be a global and ongoing dilemma (Coates, Lamb, Bartlett, & Datta, 2017; Tones et al., 2017). Further, TAs stress the importance of adequate resource provision that they consider vital to successfully providing support.

To conclude, the perceptions of TAs within this study indicate that learning for students with ASD is most effective with situation-specific and context-appropriate support. TAs, in the current classroom climate of inclusive education, play a valuable role in the provision of this. The findings identified in this study can be used to address the critical issues to be considered in future directions and tailored ASD professional development that TAs have long requested (Groome & Rose, 2005) that will assist the educational inclusion of students with ASD internationally.

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