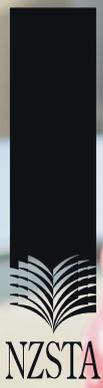




COMBINING SIMPLE SOLUTIONS

Kapanui School

A case study of teacher aides at Kapanui School, a full primary school based in Waikanae, north of Wellington



Summary

What's this document for?

This is a case study of teacher aides at Kapanui School, a full primary school based in Waikanae, north of Wellington. This case study is part of the Support Staff Working Group final report.

What are the key themes of this case study?

- The value of a reflective approach to change.
- Engaging staff in decision making and problem solving.

Why did the school change its approach to support staff?

The change was prompted by the need to respond to a specific situation. Reflecting on the possible solution to that problem prompted a rethink of their whole approach to using and supporting teacher aides.

What did they do?

The initial change was to shift from assigning one teacher aide to one student, to sharing the responsibility amongst two to three aides. Since then they have developed a range of systems and approaches to support this.

What was the result?

It has benefited the teacher aides by making their jobs more interesting, developing skills, giving them a greater sense of team and giving greater job security. It has also benefited the students, enhancing their learning and independence.

What the support staff said

- “We understand each others’ problems and we feel like a team.”
- “Initially it may be harder, but the benefits are there the more you work at it ... it is more interesting.”
- “It feels as though we have more security of employment.”

Discussion questions

1. How well does our school make the time to stop and reflect on what is working and what could be improved?
2. Do we actively seek to involve all relevant staff in understanding problems and finding solutions, or do we leave it to just a few?
3. Could any of the solutions that work for Kapanui work for us?

Combining simple solutions

Solving a specific difficulty led Kapanui School to do a fundamental rethink about the way they use and support their teacher aides. They used their learning from a specific situation to inform their wider practice. The SENCO at Kapanui comments, "The key thing that brought about the change was that we had to identify that there was a problem. We reflected. If we had not done that, we would have carried on doing the same things." Much of their success comes from involving the relevant staff in finding practical, simple solutions.

Designing a new approach

Several years ago, in response to a high needs child entering the school, Kapanui reassessed the way it deployed the teacher aides. Instead of assigning one teacher aide to one child the decision was made to share the responsibility amongst two or three teacher aides. The school day was broken up into sessions and a different teacher aide works with a child for each session.

This approach has been positive for students. They have benefited as there have been fewer issues of dependency between the teacher aides and the child, and less disruption if one teacher aide is away. Children who sometimes have difficulty coping with change have learnt to accept change as part of their schooling. Sometimes a child may become frustrated and resistant about working on one topic area, for example reading. The school has found that swapping which teacher aide takes reading for a while can diminish the frustration and lead to a better learning opportunity.

It has also benefited the teacher aides. "We understand each others' problems and we feel like a team." They have appreciated the opportunity to rotate and not be with one high needs child all day. There is less stress involved in the job. With some high needs children the need to be constantly 'on alert' can be extremely demanding and a period of lapsed concentration may result in an emergency. It has also enabled the teacher aides to increase their skills and knowledge as they work with a broader range of children with different issues.

The changed approach has worked for teachers as well. Transitioning of teacher aides runs very smoothly and teachers do not feel that the changeover disrupts their class. They also feel that because there are several teacher aides

working with a child, there is less likely to be a culture of 'that adult is here solely for that child'. One of the teacher aides comments, "The children see us differently—not just working with special needs kids. It's also changed the teachers' perceptions of us. They are now more likely to take the special needs child while we work with the group."

One of the teachers reflects, "If you had asked me last year I would have said [changing the teacher aides] wasn't good, but now I think it is best. If you change the teacher aide regularly, it changes and eases things in the class. You can play to people's strengths and what suits the child best in terms of matching teacher aides with children and learning."

Making it work

One of the teacher aides reflects, "Initially it may be harder, but the benefits are there the more you work at it... it is more interesting. Don't get a lot of prep time—no gaps, but it seems to flow. It relies on everyone being conscientious."

One of the tools the teacher aides use for smoothing the transition between teacher aides are workbooks for each student. The teacher aide will make quick notes during their session with the child so that any issues can be communicated to the next teacher aide without lengthy discussion. It means that teacher aides are aware of any triggers for behaviours or medical problems that have occurred before their session with the child.

Parents are also brought into the loop. They can take the workbook home and add relevant information on what is happening out of school hours. They have proved to be useful for monitoring patterns and changes of behaviour.

One of the difficulties of this approach has been the timetabling of the teacher aides.

The SENCO acknowledges that this takes more time, but is clear that the benefits are worth it. It also relies on some flexibility to manage changeovers. The teacher aide may not be able to leave until the next one arrives.

When a child leaves the school or funding for a child is stopped, the situation now affects the whole team, not just one person. Each time this has happened the principal/

SENCO has sat and discussed the change of circumstances with the team of teacher aides and as a group agreed how the reduced hours will be managed. This is a solution that will not work for all schools, but has worked here as particular care has been taken to ensure that the relevant staff are fully informed and have genuine choices.

Sometimes one or two teacher aides have wanted to reduce their hours. If not, or if insufficient hours are reduced, they have agreed to share the reduction in hours across the team. Instead of one person losing their job, they may all reduce their hours by a couple of hours each week. The response of the teacher aides is, "It feels as though we have more security of employment. If there are changes to hours then we talk it through and share it out. Makes you feel more of a team."

Communication

The changed approach relies on good communication. Like all schools, things change daily at Kapanui. There are school outings, impromptu time out of the classroom and working in the grounds, or children may be away sick. All this can impact dramatically on the working day of the teacher aide. Many teacher aides are part-time and may miss out on verbal communication of some of these changes. Even having a teacher aide meeting can be difficult to schedule as not everyone is necessarily at school and available for a meeting on any one day.

Kapanui has put in place a number of strategies to address these difficulties. All of the strategies are simple. It is the combination and consistency that make it work.

The daily notices

Each day a sheet of notices is put up for the teacher aides in the designated place in the staff room. The sheet is written by the SENCO and will have information for the day and, where possible, the rest of the week. It covers if someone is sick or will be away for part of the day, playgroups, photos and school visitors. The daily notices stay up for the whole week so that if a teacher aide is away for a day they can read the daily notices and catch up on what is happening or has happened.

Teacher aide meeting

Once a month the SENCO meets with the teacher aides. It is not possible for all the teacher aides to attend because of their hours of work but minutes are taken and written up so even those who are unable to attend are able to be part of the communication loop.

Teachers' meeting

The teacher aides do not attend this meeting but they do get a copy of the minutes from the teachers' meeting so they are kept up to date on what is happening in the school.

Using their time well — the Yellow Card system

Teacher aides were feeling frustrated that sometimes they would turn up to a class and the teacher and children would not be there. The teacher aide could then spend a lot of time trying to find the class or the SENCO to find out what they should be doing. Now when this occurs, the teacher aide will go to the Yellow Cards instead.

The system has evolved through trial and error. The system as it currently operates was developed by one of the teacher aides.

The Yellow Cards are in individual pockets on a notice board in the staff room. Each Yellow Card has the name and classroom of a child on it, and in one case a group of children's names. These children have been identified by the teachers as those who would benefit from receiving the assistance of a teacher aide, even though they don't normally get it. These might be with reading for younger children or it could be extra assistance to prepare a child for maths at high school next year.



When a teacher aide finds they have unexpected time available, they will get a Yellow Card, or several Yellow Cards, and go to the child's classroom. In the classroom there is a box with all the information and resources they need to work with that child. The information will have a very specific learning intention on it, for example:

- I am learning how to read fluently.
- My reading should sound smooth.
- If it isn't smooth, can you stop me and remind me what it should sound like. Maybe you could read a paragraph to me first.
- It is OK for me to read the same passage a few times until it sounds fluent.
- It is better that I read a small section fluently than read the whole story without fluency.
- Please listen to me read. I should be able to read three to four books in 10–15 minutes.

The teacher aide will go into the classroom, get the material and then ask the child to come with them. They do not disrupt the class or need to talk to the teacher. Once the teacher aide has finished working with the child, the Yellow Card is returned to the 'done' pocket.

The teachers like the Yellow Card system as it helps children benefit from some additional help. One comments, "I like the Yellow Card system; kids really benefit as a result. In another school I worked at, I sometimes had to manufacture jobs for the teacher aide when the child was away... it means our teacher aides feel valued... they're not given all the scuzzy jobs like cleaning art brushes."

The teacher aides like it because they feel they are contributing to the school and have more 'control' over their time. "It helps to reduce wasted time... we are not wandering around wondering what to do."

Continuing to find simple solutions

Kapanui continues to evolve the way it works with children and supports their teacher aides. It is an ongoing journey of reflecting on what is working and what is not, of involving staff in identifying possible solutions, of trial and error. Each year has brought refinements and successes.

Documentation you might find useful:

- An example of the Yellow Cards in the staff room or a copy of daily notice

Discussion questions

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Kapanui School is a full primary, decile 8 school based in the small town of Waikanae, north of Wellington. The roll is approximately 500 pupils. Eighty-three per cent are Pākehā and nine per cent are Māori.

www.kapanui.school.nz