Collaborative Practice of a Teacher Aide in Inclusive Education in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract: Inclusive education in New Zealand requires strong collaboration among teachers and staff. This study examines the daily work of a primary school teacher aide, 'Casey', who supports a student with autism. The findings show that Casey helps the student in three main ways: accessing the school lessons, participating in social activities with peers, and managing emotional needs through a safe classroom environment. To do this well, Casey uses special professional knowledge, communication skills, and respects local cultural values. However, the study also finds several problems in daily practice, such as a lack of time for joint planning, unclear roles, and different ideas among team members. In conclusion, this study shows that inclusive education cannot depend on just one person. Schools must provide enough time, clear rules, and shared responsibility to support teacher aides and help every student truly belong.

Keywords: Inclusive Education; Teacher Aide; Collaboration; School Support; Autism; New Zealand.

1. Introduction

Inclusive education in Aotearoa New Zealand is grounded in the belief that every learner deserves genuine participation and belonging, not merely physical presence. This principle is embedded in the New Zealand Curriculum, Te Whāriki (literally meaning ‘a woven mat’, symbolises the interweaving of relationships, knowledge and cultural values in early childhood education), and national guidance that promotes timely, coordinated learning support. Internationally, inclusion is framed as a system-strengthening agenda: rather than "placing" learners into unchanged structures, schools are encouraged to redesign teaching, assessment, and relationships so that diversity becomes an ordinary feature of everyday learning (Ainscow, 2020)[1]. Collaboration-linking the work of teachers, paraprofessionals, specialists, families/whānau, and community services[7]-is central to turning policy into practice (Wong, 2014; Fenwick & Kelly, 2023)[2].

This professional profile is based on a semi-structured interview with a teacher aide, referred to here by the pseudonym ‘Casey’. It critically examines the collaborative role of this New Zealand teacher aide, exploring how he supports a small group of primary-aged learners, including a seven-year-old on the autism spectrum. His role extends beyond task assistance, encompassing the adaptation of materials and instructions for accessibility, the co-creation of predictable routines and calm spaces, and the fostering of peer participation throughout the day. These practices align with Disability Studies in Education (DSE), which reframes learning challenges as mismatches between learner needs and classroom contexts, advocating for the redesign of tasks, spaces, and relationships rather than attempting to "fix" the learner (Li et al., 2022)[5].

The paper explores Casey's role and responsibilities as they unfold in the classroom, the professional knowledge and skills informing his decisions, and the ways collaboration operates in his setting-including both enabling conditions and challenges. It also considers the values and policy frameworks that underpin his practice. Throughout, his accounts are connected to research on system-level inclusion (Ainscow, 2020)[1], effective inter-professional practice (Fenwick & Kelly, 2023)[2], and early-years collaboration principles[5] from New Zealand and international literature (Wong, 2014; Li et al., 2022)[7].

2. Role and Responsibilities

Casey's daily practice illustrates the complexity of teacher aide work in inclusive classrooms, where formal job descriptions-outlined in national frameworks-are only a starting point. His responsibilities involve simultaneously ensuring curriculum access, fostering social

participation, and supporting emotional regulation for a primary-aged learner on the autism spectrum. These areas interweave, requiring real-time responses while sustaining engagement. For instance, curriculum access is achieved by breaking down the teacher's lesson plans into smaller, visually supported steps and embedding scaffolds directly within group activities. This approach reflects Wong's (2014) emphasis on inclusive support as part of the same learning context as peers, avoiding parallel instruction that risks social isolation[7].

Beyond academic engagement, Casey is intentional about creating opportunities for social participation, integrating the learner into group tasks in ways that highlight their competence and value to peers. Simple but deliberate actions-such as inviting them to hand out materials or read aloud-contribute to a classroom culture where diversity is normalised. Ainscow (2020) notes that these everyday moments often have greater transformative potential than top-down reforms, as they reshape how learners perceive one another[1]. Casey also acts as a facilitator in peer interactions, modelling turn-taking, prompting inclusive invitations, and quietly mediating conflicts. This aspect of his role underscores a relational view of inclusion, where belonging is built through sustained, authentic interaction.

Emotional regulation is the third strand interwoven into his practice. Anticipating sensory and emotional triggers, Casey co-constructs predictable routines and safe spaces-such as a "calm corner" with sensory tools-that empower the learner to self-regulate without leaving the community of the classroom. Li et al. (2022) link such environmental adaptations to the Disability Studies in Education perspective, which locates barriers in unresponsive contexts rather than in the learner themselves[5]. Casey's role is to maintain the bridge between the learner and the learning community, ensuring they remain meaningfully included in both academic and social dimensions. This values-based orientation reframes success as connection, not separation, aligning closely with New Zealand's inclusive education ethos.

3. Knowledge, Skills, and Professional Dispositions

Casey's effectiveness as a teacher aide rests on an integrated blend of specialised knowledge, adaptive skills, and inclusive dispositions. His understanding of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) goes beyond recognising characteristics such as sensory sensitivities and executive functioning challenges; it reflects a Disability Studies in Education (DSE) perspective, which positions the learning environment-not the learner-as the primary site for change (Li et al., 2022)[5]. This orientation informs practical adaptations such as modifying time frames, using visual supports, and restructuring group tasks so that participation is achievable without segregation. Such practices demonstrate the shift from a deficit model towards an equity-focused framework in which barriers are dismantled through thoughtful design.

Collaboration is sustained through Casey's strong interpersonal and communication skills, which reflect widely endorsed principles of transparent role negotiation in inclusive practice. Daily check-ins with the classroom teacher and contributions to Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings are opportunities for him to share observations framed in descriptive, non-judgemental language, ensuring they are actionable. His professional repertoire also includes cultural responsiveness grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Wong, 2014)[7]. For example, he actively incorporates the learner's cultural narratives into storytelling activities, strengthening identity validation and peer recognition. This responsiveness positions cultural belonging as integral to inclusion rather than as an optional addition.

Through continuous observation, Casey adjusts interventions to balance agency with participation. Fenwick & Kelly (2023) identify such context-sensitive responsiveness as critical to effective inclusion[2]. Casey's professional disposition-marked by patience, empathy, and reflective practice-ensures these adjustments are grounded in trust and respect. Viewing each day as an opportunity to refine strategies, he models a growth mindset that not only benefits learners but also reinforces a collaborative, learning-oriented school culture (Ainscow, 2020)[1].

4. Collaboration Strategies and Interprofessional Work

Casey's collaborative practice reflects what Garcia-melgar et al. (2022) term "purposeful, structured collaboration," operating fluidly across interactions with teachers, specialists, and

families[4]. With the classroom teacher, daily micro-collaborations at the start and end of each day ensure alignment on learning priorities and allow for rapid adjustments-such as modifying group activities to mitigate sensory triggers. These exchanges build relational trust and echo what international and local research identifies as the value of continuous, informal coordination as the backbone of responsive support in inclusive classrooms.

When engaging with specialist professionals-speech-language therapists, occupational therapists, and learning support coordinators-Casey acts as a translator between clinical recommendations and the realities of classroom implementation. For example, when a sensory break routine was proposed, he trialled different formats, monitored the learner's responses, and shared the results with the team. This iterative, inquiry-driven cycle mirrors Ainscow's (2020) vision of collaborative problem-solving, where solutions are co-constructed and refined through shared evidence. His ability to adapt recommendations to fit classroom rhythms not only sustains interventions but also strengthens professional interdependence[1].

Family and whānau engagement forms the third dimension of his collaborative work. Drawing on Morton et al.'s (2023) principles of culturally responsive partnership[6], Casey participates in meetings alongside the teacher to ensure home–school strategies are aligned, and integrates family perspectives into the learner's Individual Education Plan (IEP). When parents raised concerns about cultural representation in resources, Casey worked with the teacher to include materials reflecting the learner's heritage. This responsiveness demonstrates his capacity to navigate role boundaries-supporting instruction without overstepping, maintaining learner independence while fostering inclusion-and reinforces Florian (2017) concept of "shared professional responsibility," where inclusion is a collective, sustained endeavour[3].

5. Challenges and Tensions in Collaborative Practice

Despite the effectiveness of Casey's collaborative approach, his experience reflects enduring systemic and relational challenges in inclusive education. A central systemic issue is the limited time allocated for joint planning. As Fenwick & Kelly (2023) note[2], meaningful collaboration requires intentional time investment, yet teacher aides often have schedules dominated by direct student work. Casey's planning discussions with the classroom teacher are frequently brief, constraining opportunities for in-depth reflection and co-design of complex adaptations. This challenge is compounded by occasional role ambiguity-identified by Fenwick & Kelly (2023) as a common risk-where workload pressures can lead to teacher aides assuming instructional responsibilities or, conversely, being underutilised[2]. While Casey is capable of managing delegated tasks, he remains aware that over-reliance on his presence may inadvertently limit peer inclusion opportunities for the learner.

Navigating the diversity of perspectives within a multi-professional team presents another layer of complexity. Specialists may approach disability from differing paradigms, with some favouring withdrawal-based interventions while the school adheres to a rights-based inclusion model (Florian, 2017)[3]. Casey has occasionally mediated these tensions, working to reconcile therapy goals with the ethos of full participation. His role demands diplomacy-maintaining constructive relationships while protecting the learner's right to be present in the classroom-echoing Ainscow's (2020)[1] view that collaboration often involves balancing competing professional priorities.

On the relational front, hierarchical structures can limit the influence of paraprofessionals. While Casey's observations, grounded in daily interaction with the learner, are often valued, there are instances where his input is overshadowed by external specialist recommendations (Wong, 2014)[7]. This dynamic, combined with emotional labour, can create personal strain. Although Casey mitigates this through peer support networks and reflective practice, he recognises that institutional acknowledgement of emotional workload remains limited. As Garcia-melgar et al. (2022)[4] argue, genuine "shared responsibility" requires that both practical and emotional contributions be equitably recognised across the collaborative team.

6. Reflection and Implications for Practice

Building on the challenges and collaborative dynamics outlined above, reflecting on Casey's work has deepened my understanding that inclusive education is not merely a policy

directive but an adaptive process shaped by micro-level decisions in daily practice. His strengths-based orientation, consistent communication, and commitment to shared responsibility (Garcia-melgar et al., 2022)[4] have shifted my perception of inclusion from an abstract principle to a lived practice requiring constant attentiveness and reflexivity.

A key insight has been the role of distributed expertise in sustaining inclusion. As Florian (2017)[3] note, effective classrooms rely on shared knowledge and decision-making. Casey's approach shows that leadership in collaboration can shift according to the expertise most relevant in the moment-whether from a teacher, specialist, or support staff. This has challenged my earlier belief that teaching quality depends on a single lead figure, encouraging me to adopt a more open stance toward co-constructing practice. It prompted me to reconsider my own perfectionism, where I equated responsibility with overseeing every detail. Casey's example-and the literature on trust and shared responsibility (Morton et al., 2023)-demonstrates that genuine inclusion benefits from allowing others to contribute meaningfully, broadening perspectives and fostering mutual ownership of outcomes[6].

Casey's challenges-time constraints, role ambiguity, and conflicting professional perspectives-reinforce that collaboration is rarely seamless and must be intentionally structured (Ainscow, 2020)[1]. For my future work, I aim to integrate strategies such as transparent role negotiation, structured planning, and shared documentation from the outset. Equally important is recognising the emotional dimension: sustaining collaborators' wellbeing is as vital as meeting learners' needs.

7. Conclusion

Casey's practice offers a compelling, real-world demonstration of how collaboration functions as the heartbeat of inclusive education. His work illustrates the integration of professional expertise, relational trust, and adaptive communication-elements that the literature consistently identifies as critical to building inclusive environments (Florian, 2017)[3]. By grounding his approach in mutual respect and shared responsibility, he shows that effective collaboration is not an optional extra, but a central pedagogical commitment that underpins every aspect of teaching and learning.

Through analysing his strategies and challenges, I have developed a deeper appreciation for the complexities of collaborative work in inclusive settings. Inclusion is realised through daily negotiation of roles, shared goals, and professional trust. Such findings align with Fenwick & Kelly (2023), who argue sustainable collaboration depends on relationships as much as technical competence[2].

For my own professional journey, Casey's example reinforces the value of balancing high expectations with openness to diverse contributions, and the necessity of anticipating barriers-such as role ambiguity or conflicting perspectives-through clear communication and structured protocols. Most importantly, inclusive education is sustained by the collective energy of a committed team. By the collective energy of a committed team. In this way, collaboration is both the means and the measure of inclusion: it ensures that every learner not only has access to education, but experiences genuine belonging.

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