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Building a Bridge to Learning: The Critical Importance of Teacher Aide–Student Relationships in the Primary School Classroom[†]

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Abstract

Teacher–student relationships are critically important for student engagement and learning. Increasingly, children with additional behavioural, physical, communication, and learning needs are supported in the classroom by teacher aides working alongside teachers. Although the teacher aide role is often described as relational, few studies have explicitly examined the nature of the teacher aide–child relationship. This exploratory study in primary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand addresses this gap. Seven teacher aides were interviewed, and thematic analysis was used to construct common themes. The findings show that aides have time to individually know and care for each child and so develop a *special* relationship that is distinct from other relationships at school. In addition, the relationship is seen as *essential* to meet the child's needs and thus enable them to engage in their learning. The teacher aides impact positively on the child's sense of belonging, emotions, and wellbeing, which act as pathways to student engagement. Further research is needed to explore how these special and essential relationships can be optimised, and, in collaboration with teachers, improve the short- and long-term psychological, social, and educational outcomes for children.

Teacher aides/kaiāwhina kaiako (also known as teaching/special education assistants, education support workers, or learning support staff) work alongside teachers. Although teacher aides were initially employed for general classroom duties, global inclusive educational reforms have seen the number of aides increase and the role widen to include support for increasing numbers of children entering mainstream schooling with higher levels of educational needs. In Aotearoa New Zealand, there are around 18,000 teacher aides — 67% work in primary/intermediate schools (Years 1–8), the focus of the current study (Careers New Zealand, n.d.). The role is valued; primary school principals rated hiring more teacher aides as their top priority if they received more funding (NZEI Te Riu Roa, 2017). Despite this belief in the importance of teacher aides, little is known about how aides are important for the children they work with. The current study contributes to this gap, exploring teacher aide–student relationships in primary schools.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, teacher aides work under the guidance of teachers to facilitate students' learning and participation in school life (Careers New Zealand, n.d.). The teacher aide may adapt lesson plans to suit a child's needs, help children stay focused, encourage participation and interaction, and/or

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monitor escalating behaviours and defuse situations (Ministry of Education, 2020). Teacher aides provide specialised support for students with complex learning, health, physical, and/or behavioural needs, as well as working with children with less complex needs. They may also implement behavioural, physiotherapy, or occupational therapy programs prescribed by specialists, and run interventions such as reading programs. The specifics of the role vary depending on the school and the needs of the teachers and children. For example, aides may be working within special needs units, within regular classrooms alongside the teacher, or at times they may take individual or small groups of children out of the classroom for separate learning. An aide may be employed to work specifically with a particular child with complex needs but often aides work with a number of different children.

Research supports the benefits of teacher aides in the classroom. A review by Navarro (2015) found the use of aides led to benefits such as individualised help and attention, increased flexibility in the learning environment leading to greater student engagement, and improved inclusion in classroom activities. A large longitudinal study in the United Kingdom, the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project, found aides had a positive effect on general classroom behaviour and allowed more time for the teacher to teach (Blatchford et al., 2009). Other studies have highlighted that aides provide an important connecting role for children between their peers, teachers, and wider school community (Howard & Ford, 2007) and enable opportunities for students with disabilities to reveal their competence and capability to peers and teachers (Rutherford, 2012).

However, some unexpected negative effects have also been noted. An Australian study highlighted that students with a disability or learning difficulty often received instruction from an untrained aide rather than a trained teacher (Butt, 2018). The UK DISS project also observed this problem of support being 'alternative' rather than 'additional'; students working with a teacher aide had less time with their trained, qualified teacher and so made less academic progress (Blatchford et al., 2011). Other researchers have noted the risks of students developing dependence on the aide and that having an aide can be stigmatising (Giangreco et al., 2001). A key recommendation from studies is increased role clarification and training for both aides and teachers (Butt, 2018; Giangreco et al.; 2013; Mansaray, 2006; Rutherford, 2012).

Few studies have examined the relationships that teacher aides develop with the children they work with. Two theoretical approaches are used to frame the current study: attachment theory, to understand the relationships children develop with significant adults, and student engagement theory, to theorise how those relationships are linked to student engagement and learning in the classroom. Attachment theory proposes that children need secure relationships with significant others for normal social and psychological development (Bowlby, 1988). These early relationships provide the foundation for emotional wellbeing, a sense of cohesion and connectedness, a secure base, and a sense of identity for promoting positive developmental outcomes (Wentzel, 2020). In education, positive teacher–student relationships support children's ongoing emotional, social, and cognitive development (Pianta, 1999) and are fundamental for successful teaching and learning (Hattie, 2009). A report on engagement in Aotearoa New Zealand schools, based on interviews with primary and secondary school pupils, concluded that relationships were critical to help children achieve or to prevent them from failing: 'Many told us that they can't begin learning unless they have a trusted relationship with their teacher' (Office of the Children's Commissioner & NZSTA, 2018, p. 26). Positive classroom relationships are particularly important for children at risk of failing (Fredricks, 2014) and children with complex educational needs such as those assigned to teacher aides (Lopez & Corcoran, 2014).

Despite this evidence of the importance of classroom relationships, few researchers have examined teacher aide–student relationships. One exception is Rutherford (2012, 2016), who looked at the inclusion of students with disabilities within Aotearoa New Zealand classrooms. She found that through relational ways of knowing, teacher aides come to see their students as *who* they are rather than *what* label of disability they have been given. In other studies, the relational aspect of the role is sometimes mentioned but not explored. For example, the DISS project found that the 'interactions between teaching assistants and pupils were often less formal and more intimate than those between teachers and pupils' (Blatchford et al., 2012, p. 125). Similarly, Mansaray (2006) explored teaching assistants and
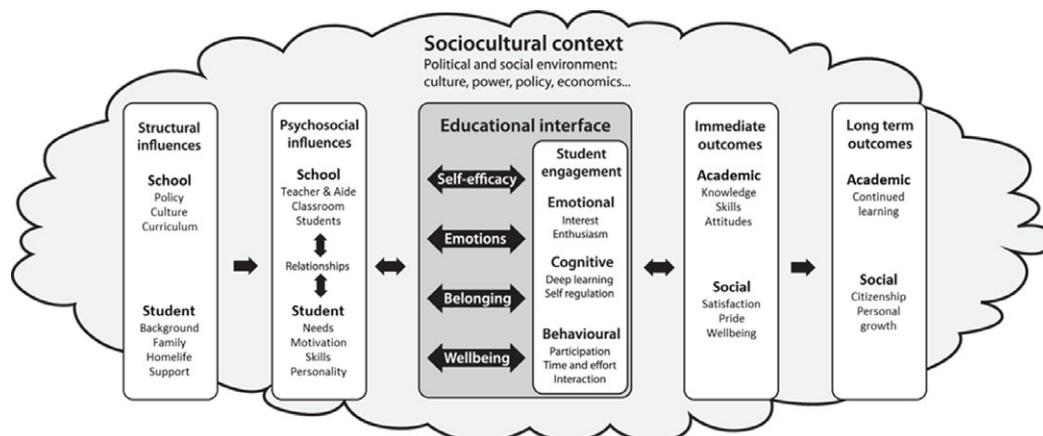
Figure 1. Framework of Student Engagement. Adapted from "Student Engagement in the Educational Interface: Understanding the Mechanisms of Student Success," by E. R. Kahu and K. Nelson, 2018, *Higher Education Research & Development*, *37*(1), p. 64 (https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1344197). Copyright 2018 by E. R. Kahu. Adapted with permission.

in/exclusion within schools and also noted relationships as important: 'for most TAs, what grounds their inclusive orientation is a holistic sense of care towards children, which values close relationships predicated on equal social interactions between them and pupils' (p. 178). More is needed to understand the nature of the teacher aide–child relationship and how that relationship might benefit the child's learning.

Student engagement theory is useful for understanding why positive relationships in the classroom are important. Student engagement, the student's behavioural, emotional, and cognitive connection to their learning (Fredricks et al., 2004), is widely recognised as a key predictor of success in learning environments (Klem & Connell, 2004). The current study uses Kahu and Nelson's (2018) framework of student engagement (see Figure 1) as a theoretical lens. Although developed in the context of higher education, the core principles of the framework — that student engagement is influenced by a complex range of intersecting institutional and student factors, and leads to both academic and social outcomes — apply in any educational setting. In different settings, different antecedents become more or less important; Figure 1 is a slight modification of the original framework to better represent critical influences in primary schools. The centre of the framework, at the intersection of student and institution, is the educational interface — a dynamic space within which the student experiences their engagement and learning. Within the interface, there are four pathways to engagement — ways in which the student responds to their learning environment that can facilitate or inhibit engagement: wellbeing, belonging, emotions, and self-efficacy.

As shown, relationships are a key influence on engagement and on the four pathways to engagement. Teacher–student relationships, and potentially teacher aide–student relationships, are important in part because they foster these responses in children. For example, neurological research shows that students who are anxious or distressed have less capacity to concentrate on learning (Djambazova-Popordanoska, 2016), and warm, caring relationships with teachers can provide a protective factor for children from stressful home backgrounds (Pianta, 1999). As well, positive emotions and a more general mood of happiness enable students to persist at difficult tasks in contrast to having angry or anxious feelings (Pekrun et al., 2018). The belonging pathway is also important, particularly for children with additional needs. The desire for interpersonal attachments is a pervasive and fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). When met, this social need can act as a driving force to positively shape and direct an individual's behaviour, cognitions, and emotions. Within classrooms, stable relationships marked by affective concern and emotional caring are critical (Baumeister &

Leary, 1995). For learners who are at risk of being marginalised and excluded in classroom settings, such as those with additional needs, creating a sense of belonging through teacher–student relationships is especially relevant and supports inclusive practice (Ellery, 2019).

For the children who have them — usually those with challenging learning, health, physical, and/or behavioural needs — teacher aides are an important element of the primary school environment. Yet little is known about the nature and benefits of the relationships these aides develop with the children they work with. The current exploratory study starts to address this gap by asking the following research questions: how do teacher aides in primary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand develop and experience their relationships with students, and how do the aides believe those relationships influence the children's engagement and learning? The focus of the current research is the relationships that aides develop with any of the children they work with, regardless of the working context or the child's particular level of need or disability. It is important to acknowledge that these relationships are two sided and there is also a need to explore these questions from the perspectives of the students themselves.

Method

Incorporating an interpretative epistemology, this research recognises that knowledge of the relationships between teacher aides and their students is subjectively shaped by individuals' interpretations of their experiences. The first author, who conducted the interviews, is a teacher aide and thus an 'insider researcher'. Although there are benefits to this in terms of recruitment and participants feeling comfortable sharing their experiences, such research risks being too influenced by the researcher's own experiences and views, as well as possible role confusion if the researcher responds to the participants or approaches the analysis from the perspective of, in this case, a fellow teacher aide rather than a researcher (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Two strategies were used to counter these risks. First, the primary researcher kept a reflexive journal (Etherington, 2004) to record ongoing thoughts and perceptions that allowed her to later critically review those perceptions to ensure the perspectives and understandings portrayed throughout the study were those of the participants as much as possible. The second strategy was peer review, including listening to interview recordings, by the second author who had no experience as a teacher aide and was therefore able to see the research through a different lens and identify and challenge any assumptions being made. This strategy proved particularly important in the development of the interview questions and the first interviews, where, at times, aspects of the participants' responses were somewhat taken as read rather than being probed to provide a more in-depth understanding. The study was granted ethical approval as a low-risk project by Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

As this was an exploratory study, convenience sampling was used to recruit participants through the first author's networks. Although this approach may lead to a more homogenous sample, the established rapport in such acquaintance interviews can facilitate data collection, enabling participants to be trusting and open in their accounts, resulting in a depth of data needed for quality analysis (Garton & Copland, 2010). The seven Pākehā (New Zealand European) women who volunteered to participate were aged 46 to 60. Their experience working as a teacher aide ranged from 1 to 24 years, with most having between 5 and 8 years experience. The aides were employed at three urban primary schools within communities ranging from low to high socioeconomic status. What constitutes an adequate sample size in qualitative research is a matter of debate. According to Braun and Clarke (2021), researchers need to be able to 'dwell with uncertainty and recognise that meaning is *generated* through interpretation of, not excavated from, data, and therefore judgements about "how many" data items, and when to stop data collection, are inescapably situated and subjective' (p. 201). Guest et al. (2006) argue that asking similar questions of all participants, looking for overarching rather than fine-grained themes, and participant homogeneity — factors all present in the current study — all reduce the need for larger sample sizes. Seven participants were therefore considered sufficient for this exploratory study.

After being advised (in writing and verbally) of the details of the project and their rights, the participants signed consent forms. Each participant had an individual hour-long face-to-face interview designed to enable them to reflect on their experiences in a thoughtful manner to encourage rich data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The semistructured interview schedule was developed from the researcher's own experiences as a teacher aide as well as the literature and research aims and refined following peer review and a pilot interview, as per Kallio et al.'s (2016) recommended process. The open-ended questions kept the discussion focused while allowing participants to discuss issues that were important to them, including those unanticipated by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Topics covered included understandings of the role of teacher aides, the nature of the relationships developed with children, influences on the relationships, and benefits and risks of the relationships. Throughout the interview, participants were invited to provide examples from their practice to illustrate their points. Anonymity was critical, so participants chose pseudonyms and were asked not to mention names or details of schools or children. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the first author, with any remaining identifying details removed. Participants were given the opportunity to check their interview transcript; however, no amendments were requested.

Reflexive thematic analysis is well suited for questions about how people think about a specific phenomenon. The research aimed to be inductive, in that the analysis is grounded in the data, but also deductive, in that the data were viewed through the lenses of attachment and engagement theory. The analysis was conducted by the first author following Braun and Clarke's (2013) recommended stages. First, initial data immersion involved multiple readings of the transcripts while noting ideas of potential interest. Next, the dataset was coded, pulling out features that appeared meaningful in answering the questions of this study. The codes were then organised and structured into a map of provisional themes, looking at relationships between ideas. Finally, the overarching themes and subthemes were defined and named, and the analysis was written up. What Brantlinger et al. (2005) describe as 'peer debriefing' (p. 201) was used throughout to strengthen the credibility of the analysis: The second author read the transcripts and, at each point in the analytic process, we discussed and debated the developing codes and themes to ensure the final analysis was strongly grounded in the data. The presented findings are both descriptive and interpretive, and, although based on the words of the participants, what is presented is our interpretations of those words and experiences.

Findings

Two major interwoven themes, *special* and *essential*, each with subthemes, are used to structure the findings.

The Relationship is Special

Characterised by having the time to individually know and care for each child, a *special* caring and emotional bond was considered central to working with a child. Working either one-on-one or in small groups, the aides felt they were in a better position to form special relationships than teachers: 'That's why I love being the teacher aide and not a teacher. It's because we are allowed to have that special relationship, whereas the teacher can't — she's got 20 plus other kids' (Amy). The theme incorporates three subthemes: *individual*, *caring*, and *time*.

Individual

The aides described the relationships they had with children as deeply personal and unique to that particular aide working with that individual student: 'You have a different relationship with [each of] them' (Jo). The uniqueness of the individual relationships was seen to be grounded in the mix of the teacher aide's and the child's personality: 'Everyone has got their own personality and some kids like the loudness of some people, some like that sort of calm' (Roshin). Ideally, the personality mix

would be the 'right' one, and when the mix was not 'right', it could be stressful and emotionally challenging for the teacher aide, who may have to continue working with the child:

> *It was just a battle and I used to end up feeling really cross and hacked off. But you still have to try and make a relationship with this kid who doesn't want to be there, and who doesn't want to have anything to do with you. It's really, really challenging. (Neeve)*

The teacher aides consistently described certain traits and qualities such as empathy and patience as essential to the role and necessary for building close personal relationships with individual students: 'it takes a certain kind of person to do this job' (Roshin). While practical skills were acknowledged as important for the role, personality aspects were paramount, and not something that could be learnt: 'I think you could learn skills and tips, but I think you have to be that type of person and that it's a job you want because it's a relationship-building role. There's no doubt about that' (Amy).

An important part of the individual relationship was the teacher aide coming to *know* and understand each student; this was unanimously differentiated from merely knowing a child and was seen as much deeper than the teachers' knowledge of the child. Penelope framed this knowing as having 'to get on their level, think like they think', and meant the aides needed to understand the children's lives inside and outside of school, know their likes and dislikes, and understand how they react to certain stimuli. This deeper level of knowing took time and effort: 'I was given information about him, but I really didn't *know* him. And it was only last year I started getting to *know* him, to understand the way he communicates to me, and what he needs' (Jo).

This deeper knowing enabled the aides to work effectively with a child and either pre-empt or smooth situations that might be challenging. As Neeve explained, 'You can tell . . . when a kid you know quite well, you can tell if they're flustered or upset, or things are not quite right'. Understanding what was likely to trigger emotional events for each child allowed aides to respond appropriately to calm students when required and to know how to modify environments or tasks to suit the child and support their engagement in their learning.

Caring

Evident in all the interviews was the depth of care aides felt towards the children they worked with. The participants talked about the strong emotions they experienced for the children: 'Yeah, it actually brings a tear to my eye' (Sharon). An important element of this care was protection: 'I've found that you're quite protective of them as well . . . And you feel strongly about that (pause) . . . I've got goosebumps' (Jo).

This protective care was also evidenced by participants talking about 'my child'; for example, Kate spoke about 'when my girl comes in'. This affectionate and possessive adjective denoted which students they worked with but was also used to distinguish which children the aides had developed close personal relationships with. This extended to seeing the children as family: 'I always treat the kids like my family — like my own kids . . . And I think that's how they hold a special place in my heart' (Jo). Within this family metaphor, for many, the aide was the mother, the caring provider to whom the child goes when they need comfort and attention. As Penelope explains, this met an unfulfilled need for some children who 'don't have that mothering . . . We're with the kids for a long time of the week, you know, long hours and so we become their mums'. Amy, on the other hand, paralleled the aide role with that of a grandmother. Here, the teacher was like the mother who had 'control' and 'who needs to be a little bit strict and keep on task', whereas the aide was the grandmother who develops a trusting and close connection by having the time to work one on one with the child, and who gives 'the treats, and gives the praise, and all the special attention'.

The surrogate parent or grandparent role extended beyond the classroom; part of the relationship role was to be there for the children whenever needed: 'Just being there for them. Not just with learning, with everything. Even on sports days when they haven't got their parents there and that, but you're

supporting them … you're cheering them on' (Penelope). Aides also often provided practical care such as food if the child is hungry or, in one case, taking the child's clothes home to wash as the family had no washing machine: 'It breaks my heart … and I just want her to be the same as her class, so she's not different' (Kate). These extensions of responsibility, beyond the classroom and learning, emphasise the depth of care within the relationship and the positive impact aides can have on the children's wellbeing.

A potential downside of this intensity of emotion and care was that the relationships were sometimes experienced as 'exhausting' (Jo), particularly when working one on one with a child: 'You have to give it all to them so sometimes it can be draining — it's like a counselling session!' (Amy). Worry was also inherent in such a caring relationship, compounded by aides knowing they had no influence over the child's life outside of the school:

> 'Cause you wonder what's happening at home right now. Are they getting fed tonight? Are they being yelled at for some reason? Other things that you just don't know, and you've got no control over whatsoever. You just can't do anything about it. (Kate)

The care and relationship didn't automatically end when the formal role ended; many participants talked about keeping in touch with students they had had particularly caring and close relationships with. For example, an aide who moved from working in the special needs unit at her school to mainstream classes went into the unit for half an hour each day before starting work to 'chat with the children, make sure they are all okay' (Kate). Even when there was no ongoing relationship, the aides still thought about past students: 'I still think of all of them … and wonder how they are' (Sharon).

Time

Time was universally understood by the participants as fundamental to building relationships and was viewed as a critical difference between teacher and teacher aide roles. All the participants recognised that teachers do not have the time to spend individually with a student, particularly when there may be many children in the class requiring extra support. Time provided opportunities to get to *know* a child, as discussed earlier, strengthening the relationship, as Sharon explained:

> Because I always ask the kids, 'How are you going?' and 'What sort of day are you having?' … You've got to have time to do that … because that's how you build the relationship. That's how you get to know the child. (Sharon)

Although the allocation of time for teacher aides to spend with students was often controlled by teachers, for the aides, having time to get to know a child and build rapport ideally occurred before attempting learning tasks. When working together for short periods of time (possibly 10-minute sessions), it was not the length of time that was important but the ongoing and regular nature of those interactions. Relationship duration was particularly important when working with children with social communication needs, such as autism spectrum disorder. Roshin discusses how children don't often get that stability with teachers:

> The kid I've been with now for 3 years, he's had three different teachers now. So, a different teacher every year. It's hard for that kid to connect with [their teacher] because these kids take a lot longer to warm to you, to build up that relationship with you. (Roshin)

This demonstrates the critical importance teacher aides placed on ensuring they have the necessary time to build close relationships with all of their students. Time ties the subthemes within the special theme together — it provides the opportunity to come to know each child and to develop caring and individual relationships.

The Relationship is Essential

The second theme, *essential*, demonstrates the importance of the relationship for the child's wellbeing and their academic and social learning. Two subthemes highlight that the relationship enables teacher aides to recognise and respond to each child's needs, and that the relationship is a precondition for learning in the classroom.

Meeting the Child's Needs

While all children have physical, psychological, and social needs, teacher aides predominantly work with children with 'special' or additional needs. It is through the special, caring relationship, built on knowing the child, that aides become attuned to the child and their needs, some of which may be hidden or veiled by other difficulties. The ability to notice and respond to the child's current needs, especially for behavioural issues, featured throughout the interviews, with aides taking responsibility for comforting and calming or adapting environments or tasks to suit the needs of the child. Sharon explains it well:

> You work to the needs of the child. So you could be working with someone who is in a bad mood, so you try and get them out of it; someone who needs extra help, so you try and help them; someone who has bad behaviour, just try to bring them down. (Sharon)

The impacts of the relationship on the children's emotions are clear. The aides talked about the importance of knowing a child's limits and therefore being able to de-escalate or ward off potential problems: 'You know what's going to trigger them, and you know what's actually going to calm them down' (Kate). This ability to notice and respond sensitively was noted as especially important for vulnerable children and those in complex personal situations whose wellbeing is threatened. For example, Sharon talked about a boy for whom feeling safe was a priority:

> He wasn't treated very well; he was also abused. So it was just making him feel safe. And we did a lot; he used to love singing, we used to sing a lot and watch videos, anything that made him safe and made him happy. (Sharon)

The teacher aides felt they had greater flexibility to meet the child's needs than teachers. For instance, Amy described how she adapted a phonics session when working with a child who had difficulty staying in a class environment: 'I have to go outside with him and practically run around the playground while we're doing sounds because he can't sit still ... A teacher's not going to do that in their one-on-one time'.

Finally, a recurring element considered essential to meeting the needs of the children they work with, and fostering the positive emotions needed for learning, was the child developing trust in the teacher aide and the relationship. Kate talked about how just her presence could be enough to settle a nonverbal boy she works with who gets upset by change. When there is a relieving teacher, he'll look to her: 'Just to know that I'm there, he's safe, he's happy, and we just need to have a good day and do our work ... and not end up in the principal's office [laughing]'.

To Learn

The importance of a close, special relationship was understood by all the teacher aides to be a necessary precondition for learning, particularly for children with emotional or behavioural issues: 'The relationship between the student and the teacher aide is key to any successful learning for that student' (Neeve). Amy explained that a good relationship ensured the children 'want to spend that time with you, they want to learn, they listen ... and if you have no relationship, there's no listening':

I think it just sorts of . . . gets rid of that, 'Oh, I know I find things hard but I actually don't mind going in here for 10 minutes 'cause she's nice, and we have fun and she's fair'. Imagine going into someone who was real cranky. Those kids wouldn't want to do it. (Roshin)

As Roshin's comment illustrates, the relationship needed to be positive and fun for the child to want to spend time with the aide in the first instance and, as the relationship developed, to be willing and able to work with that aide to learn. The relationship was also essential for learning because it enabled the aide to help the children manage their negative emotions and get a child in the right space to learn, as Amy explains:

If you didn't have that relationship . . . you'd just keep talking to them about the tasks that you are doing. There's no learning. I think the relationship is really important 'cause they have to be in the headspace to learn. (Amy)

Similarly, Neeve argued that the relationship helped enable the brain to be receptive to learning, especially for those children who come to school emotionally aroused: 'Their thinking brain is way down here, and their fight-or-flight brain is way up here; [through the relationship and calming them] they are in the right headspace to be able to learn something from you'.

The critical importance of relationships to learning was evident for some children when the teacher aide was away, as Roshin reflected: 'Because if you are not there, that child is lost, they can't do their learning. Not all kids, but a lot of them'. Relatedly, Kate talked about how the limited time that children are funded to be with a teacher aide is a constraint on their learning: 'We've got so many children that need someone all day, but they're only allowed someone for three hours a day, which is just bonkers'.

Jo used a metaphor of the relationship as a bridge to vividly depict the importance of the teacher aide and student relationship for learning. Acting as a conduit between the student, their teachers, and their peers, the teacher aide's relationship with a child is what gave that child access to all forms of academic and social learning:

You're building [the relationship] bit by bit each day you are with that child. 'Cause they need to feel they can trust you, feel secure with you . . . The bridge gets stronger and stronger 'cause the more time you spend with a child, they get to know you, you get to know them . . . I mean, you have to be that bridge for everybody; for the teacher, so the teacher can walk over the bridge and say, 'Hey, how are things going here?' . . . and her peers can walk along it as well, and it's always open. (Jo)

Importantly, several participants highlighted that over-reliance or dependence on the aide is a potential downside to the essential nature of the relationship for learning: 'There can be a reliance on you because you are often there, so then there may be an expectation that you always need to be there and they can't do their work without you' (Neeve). No simple answers were proffered to the challenge of building close relationships to support students in their learning while simultaneously not building over-dependence on an aide. However, some suggested that having a child work with more than one aide could help.

Collectively, these findings highlight the importance of the relationship between a teacher aide and the child they are working with. The relationship is enabled by the caring and patient nature of the aides and the time they get to spend working with individual children. This fosters a deep relationship of care and trust on both sides, which acts as a foundation for the child's wellbeing and thus enables learning in the school environment.

Discussion

This study explored how teacher aides in primary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand talked about their relationships with the children they worked with and how those relationships might influence the children's engagement and learning. Quality teacher–student relationships are vital (Hattie, 2009; Wentzel, 2020) and our findings illustrate that the special relationship children develop with their teacher aide is also essential for the child's engagement and learning. For the aides in this study, knowing and caring for individual children allowed them to foster the child's engagement across all three dimensions of engagement, influencing what the child does, how they feel, as well as how they learn (Fredricks et al., 2004). When the children feel cared for, they are more likely to engage in tasks, comply with classroom norms, and be secure enough to take intellectual risks — all necessary for engagement and learning to occur. As Fredricks (2014) argues, quality relationships are particularly important for children who are at risk of school failure, such as those with complex needs.

The relationship also motivates the child. Motivation changes in specific contexts (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002) and understanding the 'how' and 'why' of an individual student's motivation is important for enhancing it. In the current study, the teacher aides had time to get to know each child — their interests, personalities, and lives inside and outside of school. This deep and intentional knowing enabled them to respond appropriately to the child's needs and so influence their motivation to work at learning tasks. Creating warm relational conditions and socially compelling tasks and learning environments means students are more likely to behave as motivated learners (Taylor et al., 2015).

The discussion now explores three pathways to engagement, which, in the current study, were influenced by the teacher aide–child relationship and which subsequently fostered student engagement: belonging and attachment, emotions, and wellbeing.

Belonging and Attachment

The first pathway to engagement evident in the research is belonging. This is the point of intersection between the two theoretical lenses used in the study: attachment theory and the student engagement framework. The characteristics of the relationships described by the teacher aides align with those that Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue are necessary to meet a child's need to belong: the relationships were formed over time and were temporally stable, the aides demonstrated affective concern and emotional care for the children, and the interactions between the children and aides were frequent and positive. Through this relationship-building process, even insecure children develop trust in the aide they work with. According to attachment theory, such secure relationships are critical for normal development (Bowlby, 1988), especially for children who come to school with either insecure or disorganised attachment schemas (Pianta, 1999). Typically, such children's behaviour and engagement in the classroom are negatively affected (Kennedy, 2008). However, attachment schemas continue to develop, and insecurely attached children can develop secure attachment patterns with supportive and caring teachers (Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2006). Our findings suggest this may be even more so with supportive and caring teacher aides.

The relationships provided the children with a secure base, which was particularly important for those who came from a background deprived of trusting adult relationships. For these children, being able to form a secure attachment to an aide who had the time to know them and meet their individual needs ultimately resulted in the child feeling secure enough to allow their intrinsic curiosity to transform into engagement with classroom activities and learning (Bowlby, 1988). As Ellery (2019) argues, a sense of belonging and the corresponding feeling of being valued are critical for inclusive practices in schools to support learning.

There is, however, as the participants noted, a risk with such a deep and secure attachment that the child becomes excessively dependent on a particular teacher aide and thus feels unable to participate in the classroom or engage in their learning if they are not present. Although this risk has been identified by other researchers such as Giangreco et al. (2001), Blatchford et al. (2012) make the important point

that 'dependency does not necessarily imply learned helplessness or laziness, and may instead reflect genuine need' (p. 89). The findings of the current study highlight the importance of getting the balance right — enabling students to develop the trusting relationships they need to feel safe and to learn but not enabling excessive dependency.

Emotions

The second key pathway to engagement evident in the findings is the children's emotions, which 'can either facilitate or impede children's learning process' (Djambazova-Popordanosak, 2016, p. 497). Children who find emotion regulation difficult have more behavioural issues, have less positive relationships with teachers, find learning more challenging, and have lower academic success (Graziano et al., 2007). One reason for this reduced learning is that emotion dysregulation disrupts the child's executive cognitive functions (Graziano et al., 2007). The findings from the current study highlight the critical role that teacher aides play in assisting the children to regulate their emotions, calming them and reducing their anxiety when they become stressed or overwhelmed. This enables the children to learn more effectively.

The teacher aide–student relationship also fostered positive emotions. Enjoyment and fun were fundamental to the relationship and essential to the child's learning. As Pekrun et al.'s (2018) work shows, in contrast to negative emotions like anxiety, positive emotions motivate students to engage, work, and persist at difficult tasks. Relationships are central to this. Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory posits that fun builds social bonds and secure attachments. The positive emotions open up an individual's creativity and encourage intellectual and behavioural exploration. This 'broadening' in turn helps 'build' an individual's personal skills and resources. The aides in the current study understood this, at times focusing on play as opposed to classroom tasks, especially when getting to know a student. They were aware that making their time with children positive and fun opened the child to learning.

Wellbeing

The final pathway to engagement impacted by the teacher aide–student relationship was wellbeing. The teacher aides in this study cared about, and supported, all dimensions of the children's wellbeing — from providing them with food when they were hungry, to providing them with care and stability when they felt unsafe. A number of the children aides work with come from difficult homes and experience high levels of stress in their daily lives. Reducing that stress is vital, as moderate or high levels of stress strongly inhibit memory and learning in primary-aged children (Vogel & Schwabe, 2016).

As Kahu and Nelson (2018) argue, emotions, a sense of belonging, and wellbeing are not discrete elements of experience. This is clear in the current study — the children's attachment to their teacher aide created a safe, secure environment in the classroom, fostered a sense of belonging, triggered positive emotions and alleviated negative emotions, and reduced the child's stress. This all worked to improve the child's wellbeing and thus make them better able to engage and learn. Siegel's (2001) work on interpersonal neurobiology demonstrates the role of relationships in this process: 'interpersonal relationships (such as attachment) that focus on the importance of the "subjective" experience of each individual are most likely to promote emotional well-being and psychological resilience' (p. 80).

Conclusions

These findings lead to implications for practice. First, given the centrality of the teacher aide–student relationship to the child's engagement and learning, schools need to give the aides time and support to develop that relationship. As well, when a child stops working with an aide or the relationship breaks down, ending the relationship needs to be managed sensitively. Second, communication and collaboration between a teacher and teacher aide is vital to make optimum use of the teacher's pedagogical training and skills alongside the teacher aide's deeper relationship with the child and understanding of

their needs. The teacher aide is in addition to the teacher, not an alternative. Finally, others have noted that teacher aides need more training in pedagogical knowledge and strategies (Butt, 2018). Our findings suggest that aides would also benefit from training in relationship building and understanding how that relationship can benefit a child's engagement and learning.

This is an exploratory study of a little-researched topic and more is needed. The teacher aides in the current study were relatively homogenous, and it would be valuable to explore the experiences of a wider population of teacher aides working in different primary school contexts. It is probable too that teacher aide–student relationships work differently in secondary school settings where the students are older and the teaching context is quite different, with children often moving between classes and teachers. As well, these findings cannot be assumed to apply to teacher aides working within different countries where policies and practices may differ. Finally, and most importantly, this study was limited to the perspectives of the aides. Future research needs to hear the voices of the children, as little is known about how the children experience their relationships with teacher aides. Including the teachers' perspective in future studies would also be beneficial, as would observational studies of interactions within classrooms.

The children who work with teacher aides arrive at the classroom door with many challenges and obstacles. The findings from this study suggest that the aides they work with, through the special and essential relationships they develop, help the children overcome those challenges to better engage with their learning and thus experience success, whatever success means for them. We end with a Māori whakataukī (proverb), which aptly captures this:

Ka whāngaia, ka tipu, ka puāwai

Nurture it and it will grow, then blossom

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