

Education Support Workers' perspectives on their work  
with children with disabilities in  
New Zealand kindergarten settings

Pamela Jean Backhouse, HighDipTchg; DipEI

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International literature has focused on paraprofessionals working with students with disabilities in schools and similarly there is some investigative research on teacher aides working with children with disabilities in New Zealand schools. However there is little enquiry into Education Support Workers (ESWs) perspectives of working with children with disabilities in New Zealand Early Childhood Education settings. This study is intended to contribute to addressing this important gap in the literature.

ESWs are allocated as primary supports for children with disabilities who need extra learning support and require intervention. This qualitative and quantitative research study is positioned within a sociocultural framework of the *Te Whāriki* (1996) Early Childhood curriculum which promotes inclusive practices for all children. One-hundred and three ESW respondents from the kindergarten sector completed and returned a questionnaire. Data collection included the role and proximity of an ESW, the child's interactions with others, and the ESW's relationship with the child with disabilities.

The results revealed ESWs have a wide range of roles and responsibilities in their work with children with disabilities. They work in collaboration with teachers in determining their work with a child and integrate a child into the environment. The development of social skills and involving everyone in the child's learning was a top priority. Also included was the building of relationships between the child, peers, teachers, and parents. In this study ESWs used a combination of positions such as working *alongside*, *hovering*, *opposite*, and *behind* and at the same time the child primarily interacted with the *ESW, teachers, and peers*.

Even though there were some ESWs who worked exclusively with a child, the child still interacted in combination with the ESW, teachers, and peers. This result showed inclusion of others irrespective of the ESW's close proximity. The ESW's relationship with a child was

reported as warm, caring, and positive and also described as very close, perhaps due to the nature of support for some children.

This study explored ESWs' perspectives on their work with children with disabilities and used self report. Theoretical and policy implications are discussed in the context of the ECE curriculum. Although some insight has been generated by ESWs' participation in this study, there is still an urgent need for future research to ensure Ministry of Education policy and practice line up for children with disabilities and their families, in order for them to receive an equitable fair education as valued members of our community.

*Jesus said, "Let the children come to me and do not stop them, because the Kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19: 14, Good News Bible). Now thanks be unto God who always causeth us to triumph in Christ..." (2 Corinthians 2: 14, 21<sup>st</sup> Century King James Version) and thank you to so many key people instrumental to the completion of this study.*

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## Table of Contents

v

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Figures	viii
List of Appendices	ix

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

**1**

Rationale for this Study	1
Definitions	1
Overview of the Thesis	3

### **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

**5**

Inclusive Education Policy	5
Theoretical Framework	8
Benefits and Challenges of Inclusion	9
Paraprofessional Roles	12
Relationships between Paraprofessionals and Students/Children	19
Paraprofessional Proximity	22
Conclusion	25

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

**27**

Research Design	27
Questionnaire Development	27
Pilot Testing of the Questionnaire	28
Questionnaire Distribution	29

Validity and Reliability	31
Ethics	32
Data Coding and Analysis	33
<b>Chapter 4: Results</b>	<b>35</b>
Introduction	35
Demographic Data	35
Professional Development	41
Role of the ESW	44
Child's Interactions with Others	47
Proximity of the ESW	48
The Teachers' Role in Determining the ESW's work with a Child	52
ESW's Relationship with a Child with Disabilities	55
General Comments	59
Children's inclusion and social skills	59
ESWs working in a team	60
ESW's role in combination with a teacher	61
Professional development	62
Training and qualifications	63
Government funding	64
ESWs' pay	65
Transition to school	66
Conclusion	68

<b>Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications</b>	<b>69</b>
Demographic Data	69
Role of the ESW	70
The child's integration into kindergarten	70
Social skill development	72
Teachers' Role in Determining the ESW's work with a Child	74
Training	75
Professional Development	77
ESW's Relationship with a Child	79
Other Relationships	80
Child's Interactions with Others	81
Proximity of the ESW	81
Government Funding	85
Theoretical Implications	85
Policy Implications	88
Limitations of this Study	94
Future Research	95
Conclusion	96
<b>References</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>105</b>

## List of Figures

viii

<b>Figure 1:</b>	Years of experience as ESW	36
<b>Figure 2:</b>	Main disability	37
<b>Figure 3:</b>	ESW training	39
<b>Figure 4:</b>	Training and Years of experience	40
<b>Figure 5:</b>	Who child primarily interacts	48
<b>Figure 6:</b>	Proximity in group	49
<b>Figure 7:</b>	Proximity in group and Training/Experienced – no training	50
<b>Figure 8:</b>	Proximity in group and Who child primarily interacts	51
<b>Figure 9:</b>	Who child primarily interacts and Years of experience	52



## **List of Appendices**

ix

- A** Teacher aide interview guide (Rutherford 2008)
- B** Survey questionnaire
- C** Telephone introduction slips
- D** Information letter for ESWs
- E** Follow-up letter
- F** Information letter for the Ministry of Education Regional Managers
- G** Information letter for the Ministry of Education District Managers

# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction**

### **Rationale for this Study**

Given the numbers of young children entering early childhood education with special learning needs or disabilities, it is important to understand how Education Support Workers' (ESWs) work with children, their experiences, and the nature of these relationships. My proposed study aimed to investigate ESW perspectives on their work with children with disabilities who are mainstreamed into early childhood education (ECE) services. This is important because the daily interactions of children with their social and physical environment builds relationships and promotes participation. Through my role as an early childhood educator and early intervention teacher I have observed particular practices between children with disabilities and adults. Whilst many interactions are helpful, some may have inadvertently caused adult dependency and limited social contact for children with disabilities, creating a possible barrier between the child and their environment. Furthermore, the nature of support received in class between an ESW and the child with disabilities may influence the formation of functional relationships with teachers and peers, potentially impacting on the child's educational experiences. The widespread use of ESWs as primary supports assigned to work one-to-one with children with disabilities in early childhood education environments and the absence of literature pertaining to their work became the impetus for this study.

### **Definitions**

In New Zealand paraprofessionals are known as Education Support Workers in the early childhood sector and as teacher aides in the school sector. The New Zealand Ministry of

Education Group Special Education (GSE) is the main service provider for Early Intervention services and employs ESWs to support children with disabilities in early childhood environments (Ministry of Education, 2008). Other GSE-accredited service providers are also funded by the government and support a range of Early Intervention services (Ministry of Education, 2005).

Visiting GSE staff, for instance Early Intervention (EI) teachers, sometimes work directly with children. However most of their interventions are indirect, supporting teachers, early childhood services, schools, and families. This collaborative approach aims to develop “outcomes for children that contribute to achievement [through] presence, participation [and] learning” (Ministry of Education, GSE, action plan 2006 – 2011, p. 7). A team approach to learning relies on the daily opportunities that a child with disabilities has within their social learning environment, that is, the involvement of teachers and peers, when an ESW is assigned to work with a child.

There is no formal qualification required for ESWs to work with children with disabilities in New Zealand early childhood settings. Some ESWs may have a qualification in teaching or another profession while others rely on professional development and on the job training. Purdue, Ballard, and MacArthur (2001) inform, “while some education support workers are trained teachers, many have very little, if any, training or qualifications” (p. 39). In contrast, in recent years teacher assistants in the USA have been required to hold a two year or higher degree and have a minimum of two years post secondary education, or pass a state or local assessment (Council for Exceptional Children, 2010) in order to work with children with disabilities.

ESWs gain experience by working alongside educators in early childhood environments to implement an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or an Individual Plan (IP). These are early intervention programmes or plans devised by families and professionals for children with

special education needs (Ministry of Education, 2005). An ESW provides one-to-one support for children with 'high' or 'very high' special education needs and facilitates their learning and development. ESWs also undertake observations of their child, recording their progress which is linked to the IP strategies. This information assists with future planning that is made available to the family, EI teachers, and other educators (Ministry of Education, 2008). Similarly, in the United States teacher assistants provide individual support to students by following the teacher's lesson plans and using observations to record and assess this progress. They may also support students with English as a second language and those needing remedial education (CEC, 2010).

## **Overview of the Thesis**

The literature review in Chapter two covers policy and practice regarding full inclusion for children with disabilities into the state education system in New Zealand and includes sociocultural theories that underpin learning for all children, based on the relationships a child has in their learning environment. Studies overseas and in New Zealand identify challenges to full inclusion for children with disabilities that affect participation in early childhood and school sectors. The relationship between the paraprofessional and student or child is a key focus of this study with most research found in the school sector.

Paraprofessional roles are summarised along with paraprofessional proximity, and the effects of close positioning of ESWs to the child. Furthermore, the input of teachers and peer involvement is considered. Chapter three focuses on the methodology framework where respondents were surveyed using a questionnaire that included both qualitative and quantitative data. The Results chapter is presented in Chapter four, it covers the demographic data (consisting of gender), the length of time the participant had been an ESW, how many children with disabilities the ESW currently worked with, and the main disability of the child currently worked with. The ESW is asked to describe the kindergarten

session the child attends and includes the session hours of the kindergarten, the number of children attending and the number of teachers in attendance. The kind of training and opportunities for professional development along with the type of professional development is also presented. Further results cover the role of the ESW, the child's interactions with others, the proximity of the ESW when working with their child, and when working in a group setting, the teacher's role in determining the ESW's work with a child, and the ESW's relationship with a child with disabilities, and finally a section on general comments. Chapter five covers an overall discussion and implications, offers suggestions for future research, and provides implications for policy and practice and concludes this thesis.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

In New Zealand, Ballard (1996) has described inclusion as “the right to access the curriculum as a full-time member of an ordinary classroom alongside other students of similar chronological age” (p. 2). Inclusion in education for children with special educational needs has been mandated by law internationally and in New Zealand. When a child with a disability is included in a mainstream early childhood classroom they are usually assigned a paraprofessional who works with them for allocated hours on a weekly basis. It is likely that the relative success of a child’s educational experience will be influenced by the practices of these paraprofessionals. However, despite being standard practice for well over a decade in New Zealand, very little is known about the qualifications, training experiences, attitudes, and practices of these ESWs in the New Zealand context.

This chapter will review international and New Zealand literature from the school and early childhood sectors, focusing on paraprofessional support allocated to children with disabilities. The review will focus on examining practices that affect inclusion, relationships between paraprofessionals and students/children, paraprofessional roles, and their proximity in their work with children with disabilities. The majority of research regarding this topic has been undertaken in schools. However, very little has been found pertaining to the early childhood context. Thus, this context has become the impetus for this study.

#### **Inclusive Education Policy**

According to Davies and Prangnell’s (1999) paper on the Ministry of Education’s Special Education 2000 policy (SE2000), children with disabilities in New Zealand have traditionally had their education provided in segregated settings since the late nineteenth century. As

Ballard (2004) points out, these facilities may include special classrooms, schools, or other amenities where an education for children with disabilities may be separate and delivered by specialist staff. However, locating children in specialist facilities disconnects them from a conventional primary or secondary education and same age peers (Ballard, 2004).

These separated approaches to education may create dilemmas for some families in determining what is best for their child. In particular, segregated settings may be better equipped and more accepting as opposed to mainstream local schools that require additional resourcing and specifically trained staff.

In most Organisations for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2006) countries, early childhood education and care programmes are considered important for children with diverse learning needs. The OECD (2006) identifies that “successful inclusion requires enhanced funding, low child-staff ratios, specialist staff and well planned pedagogies” (p. 17). The right to an education is acknowledged for all people with and without disabilities (Ballard, 2004). This is further recognised within the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2008) which, New Zealand signed in September, 2008. The UNCRPD has a focus of removing barriers that prevent disabled people from being accepted as, fully valued, participating members of society.

Several researchers have identified that New Zealand’s traditional practices are no longer appropriate. As far back as 1968, Dunn exclaimed there needed to be a shift away from identifying students based on a label and that this had negative effects. Davies and Prangnell (1999) found that learning and behaviour difficulties were more a social construct resulting from the interactions a student has in the learning environment, rather than residing within a person. This idea was a step toward more inclusive paradigms. Kearney and Kane (2006) examined inclusive education and policy in New Zealand and recognised continuing traditional education would need to be challenged. In New Zealand the Education Act 1989

provides for all children, irrespective of any disability, to obtain an education at a nearby primary or secondary school. It is important for children needing extra support to receive the best possible education. Claiborne and Smith (2006, p. 74) identify, since “the passing of the Human Rights Act (1993), disability has been acknowledged as an area of discrimination” which needs to be prevented through the appropriate practices of all concerned in the delivery of services.

A number of policies address the importance of an inclusive education and future for all children in New Zealand, irrespective of any differences. Schools implement their obligations to children with disabilities through the nationwide SE2000 policy (Ministry of Education, 2000). The policy’s goal is to “achieve a world class inclusive education system that provides learning opportunities of equal quality to all children and school students” (p. 1) by giving them reasonable access for learning and participation in society. The New Zealand Disability Strategy (NZDS), introduced in 2001, includes a specific focus on how disabled children may lead full and active lives, be involved in making decisions, and have more autonomy in their lives. Further, the NZDS (2001) suggests that when people with impairments can say that society values their lives and consistently encourages their complete participation, inclusion will be achieved. The Ministry of Education’s Group Special Education *Statement of Intent* (2006 -2011) identifies that a long term outcome for every child is to “enjoy a quality education that enables them to achieve and participate in the community and workforce” (p. 4).

More recently, the ECE Taskforce report (2010) recommended to the Government that they take action to lift the standard of early childhood education in New Zealand. They recommended that children with disabilities attract higher levels of funding, so that all children are able to have their needs met through the right agencies. The ECE Taskforce also recommended that professional development be made available for all early childhood staff to support them to work successfully with children with special learning needs, as it was



possible these families were being disadvantaged through insufficient staff education. Further, the ECE Taskforce recommended an improved funding system that provides separate payments for priority groups, which included children with special educational needs, and that the government should reprioritise their existing spending into this much needed area.

Thus, there is currently a focus on policy and practice working together to honour full inclusion for children with disabilities into the state education system in New Zealand. The next section of this review will focus on sociocultural theories that underpin learning for young children in New Zealand.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Since the late twentieth century, sociocultural theories have had significant influence on teaching and learning within early childhood and in inclusive education. The literature reviewed in this chapter identifies that learning is based on responsive and reciprocal relationships, embedded in the social and cultural contexts of a child's learning environment and, thus, sits comfortably with the sociocultural and ecological framework found in the early childhood curriculum: *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996).

Vygotsky (1978) initiated the discussion on how sociocultural factors impact on learning. Vygotsky understood that social interactions between the child and the people in their environment improved psychological, language, and social development and were significant in the construction of meaning. Vygotsky suggested that “the state of a child’s mental development can be determined only by clarifying its two levels: the actual development level and the zone of proximal development” (p. 87). That is, what a child can do now with help and what they are able to do later on their own.

Social constructivist theories of cognition further identify guided participation as a key teaching technique. Rogoff (1990) agrees with Vygotsky's theory and positions guided participation as, diminishing adult involvement to allow the learner to take responsibility for their own learning as active participants in their social world. Vygotsky (1978) also suggested children move between levels of competence, gaining knowledge through social interactions with teachers and more skilled peers. In light of these theories, it is essential for teachers to have knowledge of teaching strategies that support all children's learning.

## **Benefits and Challenges of Inclusion**

At present, receiving an education alongside peers in mainstream settings is recognised as more favourable than segregated learning. This is evident in Kennedy, Shikla, and Fryxell's (1997) study that involved students with severe disabilities. They placed one group in a general education classroom and another group in a segregated special education classroom. They found greater social benefits accumulated for those students in the general education environment, rather than in a segregated learning environment, including "greater levels of sustained contact with peers without disabilities, and ... richer friendship networks" (p. 2).

Important features of effective inclusion were identified in a Centre of Innovation (COI) (Ministry of Education, 2002) project that investigated inclusive practices at an Auckland kindergarten (Glass, Baker, Ellis, Bernstone & Hagan 2008). In particular, they researched their understanding of inclusive practices and 'possibility thinking' (Burnard et al., 2006), to generate ideas to find ways to enhance learning for all children. Data was gathered from parent surveys, child and parent interviews, teacher focus groups, and anecdotal notations to see what inclusion looked like. Teachers identified that it was essential to develop respectful and equitable learning environments that emphasised full acceptance alongside

peers. In addition, when staff use a collaborative teaching approach, a child is not singled out (Glass et al., 2008; Purdue et al., 2001). For instance, visual tools for learning could be cued into the daily routines to avoid a child being set apart as “special” (Glass et al., 2008).

Several pieces of literature, both internationally and in New Zealand, noted aspects of inclusion that were a challenge. Parents of children with disabilities indicated they had appreciated preschool staff that accepted them and had not treated them any differently from the onset (Purdue et al., 2001). Parents also appreciated their children being accepted by peers in the regular school classroom; some children with disabilities were considered to be friends and the most popular children in the class by their peers (Evans, Salisbury, Palombaro, Berryman & Hollowood, 1992). Paraeducators identified several factors that influenced successful inclusion, such as cognitive and social capacity, the extent of behaviour difficulties, the classroom teacher’s motivation, and the access to school resources. Parents also preferred the social benefits of placing their child in the mainstream classroom (Marks, Schrader & Levine, 1999), alongside age related peers (Purdue et al., 2001) in order to receive an education in the same learning environment (Jorgensen, Schuh and Nisbet, 2006). Furthermore, some teachers identified the importance of using typical teaching practices to include and teach children with disabilities as for all children, “remembering that this is a person, not a disability” (Purdue, et al., 2001, p. 46).

Additional examples from the literature showed there were hindrances to inclusion. If students were perceived as socially different or viewed as abnormal or disabled in the classroom, this may exclude children from social interactions and curriculum involvement (Kearney and Kane, 2006; Macartney, 2008); and “exclusion” may reduce the involvement of pupils in the mainstream (Booth, 1998). Other research has found that educators may relinquish their responsibility to teach and require a child to attend with a parent or ESW (Macartney, 2008; Purdue, et al., 2001). Without a teaching approach that upholds responsive, reciprocal relationships between children, families, teachers, and peers, the

child's learning and involvement may be jeopardized (Macartney, 2008). Kearney and Kane (2006) examined policy and inclusive education in New Zealand. They noted that teachers were likely to find it difficult to include a child with disabilities because they lacked confidence and relied on visiting professionals. Teachers needed to work together rather than on their own in the classroom to manage diversity (Kearney & Kane, 2006).

Discrimination has been identified as an important issue when considering inclusion (Kearney, 2009; Purdue, et al., 2001). Competitive schools looking for high achievement rates legitimised exclusion for students with disabilities (Purdue, et al., 2001). Slee (2001) found that parents of children without disabilities pressured competitive schools to ensure that inclusion of these students would not hinder their own child's learning. Disabled students were refused enrolment, unable to attend school fulltime, and deprived of access to take part in the usual class programme (Kearney, 2009).

A further challenge to inclusion is that staff need training (Bricker & Woods Cripe, 1992; Bruns & Mogharreban, 2007). For successful integration into settings, studies have found that specialised intervention strategies were needed to better equip staff (Bricker & Woods Cripe, 1992) and teachers needed training on areas they were less familiar with, such as the implementation of an IEP and communication strategies (Bruns & Mogharreban, 2007). Practitioners needed to be knowledgeable to support children with Autism in social, communication, and imaginative areas of the curriculum (Wall, 2010; Macintyre, 2010), whilst specific strategies embedded into a child's learning environment were found to counteract possible isolation and promote inclusion (Macintyre, 2010).

In summary, studies overseas and in New Zealand have identified concerns surrounding the inclusion or exclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood and school environments. Studies found there were key attitudes, practices, and knowledge that supported or limited inclusion. Attention is now turned to studies that address the conflicting

roles of ESWs and teachers and the differing perspectives about where the responsibility lies for including children with disabilities into mainstream environments.

## **Paraprofessional Roles**

MacArthur, Purdue, and Ballard (2003) refer to Te Whāriki and its inclusive focus when discussing the situation of children with disabilities in New Zealand early childhood centres. They noted that teachers viewed the ESW as responsible for including a child with disabilities into a centre. Similarly, this perspective was evident in Macartney's (2008) study where teachers saw the child with disabilities as the responsibility of the family, the EI staff, and an ESW. Furthermore, Macartney noted that if the teachers did not take responsibility to teach and support an inclusive learning environment, the child's learning and participation were considerably reduced and were centred on the ESW and allocated child rather than the entire learning community.

The view that the ESW and child with disabilities need to belong as full members of the learning community motivated research undertaken by Glass et al. (2008). That research showed that teachers believed that a child's attendance at kindergarten was unconditional, irrespective of the ESW's attendance. Furthermore, the role of the ESW was viewed by participants as that of a teacher and considered part of the teaching team working to support all children, irrespective of the special learning needs of an assigned child (Glass, et al., 2008). Similarly in Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, and MacFarland's (1997) study, a classroom teacher offered ideas as to how paraprofessionals could best be utilised in the classroom. For instance, the paraprofessional could be involved in particular activities rather than to work solely with a child. This was to avoid the stigma of a special education label and to protect a child's identity. Ideally, the paraprofessional would work with all children rather than be overloaded with the same child.

Glass et al. (2008) argued there were “four key components to an inclusive setting: the teachers, the children and their families, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum Te Whāriki (1996) and the environment” (p. 39). Glass et al. identified the extended teaching team consisted of teachers, parents, ESWs, and students. The extended teaching team could attend professional development with staff and were offered the use of technology and kindergarten resources, and were accepted as members of a learning community. Glass et al. (2008) argued that the education of a child with special learning needs was reliant on the communication that a teaching team had with the ESW and teachers had to adapt and implement a programme into the EC setting that enabled all to be involved. As, Bricker and Woods Cripe (1992) point out, the implementation of an IP required specialised Activity Based Intervention (ABI) approaches, where adaptations and strategies were embedded into the child’s environment. Bricker’s (1989) study noted that the formulation of intervention fostered inclusion as it helped to build on a child’s practical skills, with the added benefit of daily involvement in their social learning environment.

It is likely that a child with a disability will spend a considerable amount of time with an educator who was not a qualified teacher. Marks et al.’s (1999) study involved the views and experiences of 20 paraeducators who worked with students with disabilities. They found that more than half of the paraeducators were responsible for adapting the curriculum and working one-on-one with their students, even though they felt it to be the teachers’ role. However, paraeducators were more likely to have had specific training and have more knowledge about positive behaviour strategies than the classroom teacher, who preferred to pass on the responsibility to paraeducators rather than need release time to attend courses. This study also identified there were implications for practice that called for a more unified teaching approach. Intervention strategies developed as part of IEP planning aimed to gradually reduce the paraeducator’s support, by shifting their focus away from an individual student to the whole classroom, which increased their distance from the student. This then provided opportunities for teachers and peers to become more involved by filling the space

usually taken up by the paraeducator as the child's sole support. Furthermore, this helped to clarify the shared role and responsibilities of paraeducators and classroom teachers.

Giangreco, Broer, and Edelman's (2002) study investigated the increased use of paraprofessionals in general education classrooms. Data was collected from 215 personnel from four schools with students aged between two and 12 years. Principals reported that the number of paraeducators had steadily increased over several years, describing this as "very alarming" and "an explosion" (p. 56). Since their role shift from clerical (i.e., making copies, organising and making materials, and cleaning up) to instruction (i.e., providing group programmes, tuition, and helping with homework) paraeducators were considered important. The role of most paraeducators was to work one-to-one with students.

In other research, Young and Simpson's (1997) study investigated the impact of paraprofessionals' proximity involving three students with autism. They strongly believed that inclusion was not always the best option for autistic students, especially as untrained paraprofessionals were often the primary contact and that their presence "may supplant a teacher's involvement" (p. 36). Similarly, Giangreco's et al. (1997) study focused on the position of instructional assistants in relation to students with varying disabilities and found teachers forfeited their role to teach, believing their own training as professionals was insufficient to work with "high needs" children. In addition, data consistently revealed that instructional assistants rather than the professional staff implemented nearly "all of the day to day curricular and instructional decisions" (p. 10). Giangreco et al. (1997) noted that clarification as to what the classroom teacher's role might be was required. They found that teacher interactions with students with disabilities were observed as minimal and proportionally less than peers, with involvement mainly "limited to greetings, farewells, and sometimes praise" (p. 10). The majority of teachers considered the education of students with disabilities in their class were not their role or responsibility. Although teacher assistants

had an important role in assisting the teaching team, Giangreco et al. (1997) believed it inappropriate for them to work in a “teacher” capacity.

Further research reveals that teachers are leaving the education of students with disabilities to paraprofessionals. Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, and Doyle (2001) review several pieces of professional literature published between 1991 and 2000 relating to paraprofessional support for students with disabilities. They found key evidence that paraprofessionals were being given students with the most demanding behavioural and learning features and were engaged in varied roles which they were insufficiently trained to perform.

Boomer’s (1994) article examined the changing role of special education paraprofessionals that have for decades assisted teachers with the administration and physical care of students with autism. In recent years responsibilities have increased to include the collection and organisation of data, the facilitation of transitions, and teaching functional skills in mainstream environments. Boomer (1994) suggests when a paraprofessional is designated to work with a student on a one-to-one basis it may be a barrier for the teacher to teach, because in effect a full-time “babysitter” has been assigned. An indication that the paraprofessional has been given too much responsibility is when “experienced skilled classroom teachers and special educators defer important curricular, instructional, and management decisions about a student with disabilities to the paraprofessional” (Giangreco, Broer, and Edelman, 1999, p. 283).

Giangreco and Broer (2005) used questionnaires to examine the utilisation of paraprofessional support and involved 737 school personnel and parents from twelve public schools. They found that roles usually kept for professionals such as curricular adaptations, instruction, and communication with parents were being assigned to paraprofessionals. The continued dependence on paraprofessionals as primary support for students with the most challenging behaviours by the least qualified personnel has raised a number of concerns



regarding appropriate education for students with disabilities. However, if some teachers are relinquishing their role to teach children with disabilities, and untrained ESWs are predominantly delivering their education, this brings into question the knowledge base and experience of ESWs. Therefore this current study examines ESW training and professional development and whether children with disabilities are receiving an equitable education alongside their peers.

Hemmingsson, Borell, and Gustavsson's (2003) explorative study collected field observations and interviews from seven pupils with physical disabilities, their teachers, and assistants who were in different grades, schools, and regions in Sweden. A major finding was that the assistant could both facilitate and hinder involvement and that when pupils could choose they preferred to do activities with minimal help. For instance, pupils placed priority on peer group involvement and approval rather than performing school course work. The pupils saw that conflict could occur if an assistant facilitated learning instead of recognising a pupil's desire for social participation and learning opportunities within a group. Further findings revealed that a pupil's involvement with teachers and peers may be reduced by the presence of an assistant, whether seated close to the pupil, one or two desks away, or outside the group of students. Hemmingsson et al. (2003) noted that further research is required to ascertain whether an assistant affects social interaction and positive learning outcomes for a pupil.

Giangreco and Broer (2005) suggest the work of the general education teacher and the paraprofessional in inclusive classrooms requires clarification. Further research was needed, as there was no evidence that the paraprofessional model to support students with disabilities was effective. Conflicting views of ESW roles in New Zealand were identified in Purdue's et al. (2001) study. Issues related to whether ESWs would work solely with a child with disabilities or would interact with all children. For instance, in a childcare setting it was usual for the support worker to be assigned to one child, while in a playcentre the ESW was

expected to interact with all children. This indicates the need for clarification of practices across early childhood education services. In addition, concerns about the lack of information for teachers as to how best to work with children with disabilities were apparent.

This review will now focus on collaborative assessment and programme development to support inclusion, as was utilised in Williamson, Cullen and Lepper's (2006) study involving two children in New Zealand with combined high needs. Professional development on the use of "learning stories" (Carr, 2001) as assessment tools by teachers, parents, health and support workers, and EI teachers, encouraged collaborative interpretations and inclusive programming for children with disabilities at IP meetings. In contrast, the use of separate assessment and planning systems; that is, skill-based for EI and interest-based for early childhood education, was likely to communicate that additional teaching and learning needs were met by external agencies and not by teachers (Williamson et al., 2006).

Taking responsibility to collaboratively teach children with disabilities has also been explored. Cullen and Bevan Brown's (1999) survey of EI services delivered to children in early childhood through Specialist Education Services (SES), asked educators about the implementation of the IP. While educators were happy with ESWs, they could be perceived as "taking over" rather than working together with the teacher to support the child. Bourke et al. (2002) evaluated the SE2000 policy over a three year period between 1999 and 2001. Data was collected using national surveys to assess the effects on schools and early childhood centres and included evaluation of a professional development package: *Including Everyone: Te Reo Tataki*. This was distributed to all early childhood centres by the Ministry of Education during 2000. While the resource to some extent had increased educators' understanding of EI policies and inclusive practices, accredited providers considered there were still centres that believed the responsibility to include children with disabilities was reliant on the ESW or Early Intervention provider. This view was also supported in statements made by Specialist Education Service EI service leaders. These findings

highlight a discrepancy in practice and brings into question whether children with disabilities are receiving a fair education in some centres, when the roles of paraprofessionals and teachers need clarification.

Williamson et al.'s (2006) study, used 'learning stories' (Carr, 2001) as assessment and planning tools to encourage collaborative team programming for children with disabilities. They suggest ESWs need to see themselves as valued team members and receive guidance from teachers and EI teachers, "supporting the child to access the curriculum alongside their peers, rather than teaching specific skills" (p. 27). Similarly, Dunn's (2000) study of the EI team of the SES in Waikato found they used learning stories focused on dispositions as opposed to the acquisition of skills, to measure and plan programmes for young children with disabilities. Dunn found that although ESWs often encouraged the child they were working with to join a group, they would then focus the child on a specific task rather than support social interaction with their peers. Professional development was organised for ESWs to use learning stories in practice. One ESW realised by stepping back and watching she noticed more, rather than being involved with the child with disabilities where one-to-one interactions developed. Also, the presence of an ESW alongside reduced the need for the child to socialise with others.

In summary, international and New Zealand literature notes that paraprofessionals are designated to work with students/children in the mainstream learning environment, and suggests that these roles though intended to be supportive to the teacher and child with disabilities, may create a barrier for teachers and peers to form relationships to participate and promote inclusion. Key evidence from various published literature revealed that most teachers did not consider their role included educating children with disabilities. Instead, the paraeducator was considered the expert and assumed responsibility to manage the academic and behaviour needs of these children. There were also concerns that untrained paraprofessionals were often the primary contact and that their presence may replace

teacher involvement. Some studies had viewed the ESW as part of the teaching team whose role was to support all children in an endeavour to focus away from one child and provide opportunities for teachers and peers to become involved. Clarification was needed to identify whether the ESW worked with one child or for all children and what the roles of teachers and paraprofessionals might be. Without a teaching direction to support children with disabilities, their families, teachers, and peers, the potential to learn and participate may be jeopardised. There has been very little literature found pertaining to this important aspect where the ESW, their role, and relationship with the child has been the focus. Therefore this study seeks to understand and contribute to this significant gap in the literature.

### **Relationships between Paraprofessionals and Students/Children**

A key focus of this study is to look at the relationship between an ESW and a child with disabilities. Attention is now turned to reviewing studies that have examined aspects of these relationships. Although most of the research investigating the nature of this relationship has been situated in the school sector, these studies provide useful insights for this project.

Rutherford's (2008) research centred on teacher aides' and disabled students' school experiences of working together. Rutherford noted a lack of research into this aspect of education in New Zealand and the widespread reliance on teacher aides as primary support. Participants were recruited after responding to advertisements about this research, resulting in 18 teacher aides and 10 students from primary, intermediate and secondary schools from the South Island taking part. Rutherford interviewed 18 teacher aides who worked with eight-17 year old students with differing disabilities and found that, although teacher aides were assigned to work with specific students, they supported the teacher by also working with other students. One teacher aide stated her role should be to support the teacher: "...I know we're not trained, but in a lot of situations...that child is taught by me, not the teacher"

(Rutherford, 2008, p. 139). Rutherford found that, unless the classroom teacher supported the teacher aide, they had little knowledge of the adapted curriculum or teaching strategies required to support the student, and felt they were “simply babysitting” (Rutherford, 2008, p. 140). The study revealed that some students believed teacher aides to be more approachable than the teacher, and classed teacher aides as the helper. Further, the students mainly enjoyed the positive relationships with them and identified kindness as an important feature and generally called them “a friend.”

A commonly held view was that teacher aides were looking after students rather than supporting the teacher to teach. When the student participants were asked about the positioning of teachers and teacher aides, one student described a teacher as “standing in front of the classroom” and a teacher aide as “sitting beside you” (Rutherford, 2008, p. 125). Half of the students were unanimous that their help came from the teacher aides more than the teacher, and that one-to-one support unintentionally distanced students from teachers, particularly if this support meant they left the classroom. However, the teacher aide participants were aware of the possibility of student dependency, making sure they distanced themselves to allow students to engage socially with their peers (Rutherford, 2008). It may be that students are spending a considerable amount of time with the teacher aide, affecting the development of relationships with teachers and peers.

Skar and Tamm’s (2001) study in northern Sweden interviewed 13 school children and adolescents with restricted mobility, to explore the role of the paraprofessional and the relationship between the paraprofessional and child. Half of the children interviewed alleged the role of the paraprofessional as “mother [or] father,” that became a hindrance for peer interactions. For instance, several peers had asked a participant “if I have my mother with me” (p. 924). Children perceived that peers did not want to play with them when the paraprofessional was present, as they believed the paraprofessional made the choices of how and what they played with. In addition, when paraprofessionals stood in close proximity

and observing rather than leaving them to play, this was perceived as an intrusion on the game by children, adolescents, and their friends. Children and adolescents were asked to describe their ideal assistant. Despite there being few that had viewed their assistant as a friend, there were several children and adolescents that considered an ideal assistant would be a friend that would provide confidence and safety.

Rutherford (2008) found teacher aides sometimes felt they acted as surrogate friends for students with disabilities due to the absence of friends their own age. They also acted as a security guard protecting them against possible teasing and bullying from other students particularly during breaks and lunchtimes. This “minder” role helped the students feel safe and secure with the presence of an adult. Similarly, Giangreco, Doyle and Broer’s (2005) study of sixteen former students who had received paraprofessional support in general education classrooms found that their respondents described “paraprofessionals as mother, friend, protector and primary teacher” (p. 425). Though students had experienced favourable friendships with paraprofessionals, the latter study identified that this relationship had interfered with interactions with the teacher and peers. Students reported only making friends with students with disabilities and interacting with the paraprofessional rather than the classroom teacher. Therefore, assigning support staff to work one-to-one with students may hinder the participation of teachers to contribute to children’s learning and for natural peer involvement to occur.

In contrast, there is some evidence that effective inclusive practices in New Zealand are evident in literature. In the Glass et al. (2008) study, the ESW was viewed as part of the teaching team collaboratively teaching all children, which supported equitable learning for children with additional needs and allowed for teachers and peers to interact with the child with disabilities. Likewise, Purdue, et al. (2001) found that ECE personnel and parents considered that collaborative relationships between professionals and parents were important for inclusion. Several parents identified their preference for their child to be

educated at a preschool, alongside their age-related peers, and viewed as ordinary members of the centre community. One parent commented, “the child is included in all the activities and his teacher aide is one of the teachers there...not seen to be working just for the child” (p. 46).

In summary, studies indicated there were significant relationships that the ESW and teacher aide were likely to share as primary supports allocated to work with children with disabilities in early childhood and the school sector in New Zealand. Several studies, mostly in the school sector, have identified that children with disabilities were being taught by the teacher aide and not the teacher. The common view was that the teacher aide was looking after the student rather than supporting the teacher to teach. In addition, assigning one-to-one support and the amount of time a teacher aide was likely to spend with a student with disabilities could inadvertently cause dependency and be a barrier for teacher and peer involvement. Most studies have interviewed teachers, parents, and students or children with disabilities, however little research has been found relating to ESWs as primary participants and their perspectives on their work with children with disabilities in the early childhood sector. This study seeks to make some contribution to this important gap in the literature.

Consideration is now given to research that addresses the proximity of paraprofessionals in their work with children with disabilities in the mainstream.

### **Paraprofessional Proximity**

Giangreco et al.’s (1997) study in eleven public schools investigated the effects of the close positioning of instructional assistants and students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Close proximity was defined as ongoing physical contact with a student or their wheelchair. This was found on a regular basis through close proximity with the child’s

shoulder, back, arms, and hands; instructional assistants would sit next to, or with the child on their lap while peers sat on the floor. Giangreco et al. suggested that this may hinder a child's interactions with others. For instance, a mother was interviewed and had noticed the paraeducator did not need to be beside her son, if the teacher included him in the class activities. Similarly, unnecessary mothering or hovering was noticed as well as that when adults were in close proximity the participation of peers was reduced. However, when adults distanced themselves, peer interaction could occur more easily. Likewise, a special educator reported that the close proximity of a paraeducator inhibited a child's chance to relate with peers "because there is always somebody hovering... showing her what to do or doing things for her" (p. 13). Conversely, although participants indicated close proximity with students was at times essential to facilitate their use of writing tools, gestures, and to help follow instructions, there was little indication that assistants were reducing prompts and adult dependency, to encourage students to engage with other people. In fact, a student with disabilities was seen to have support almost throughout the entire school grounds. Similarly, Giangreco et al.'s (2002) study found increased use of paraprofessionals in the classroom who were often "observed situated in very close proximity to students with disabilities" (p. 58). The suggestion that support could be excessive was found in Rutherford's (2008) study that investigated 10 students' perspectives of their school experiences. They found that some students were sensitive to the stigma of needing help for academic support, note writing, and safety procedures; nine out of ten students claiming "there were times they did not need any help" (p. 123).

Teachers' *notice, recognise, and respond* (Ministry of Education, 2004) to children's learning during undocumented teachable moments in every day practice. However, if an ESW is consistently in close proximity with a child with disabilities, opportunities for teacher and peer involvement with the child may be lessened. The position of teachers is essential for them to teach and deliver the curriculum for meaning-making to occur, i.e. to actively plan to engage in ways that foster children's participation and learning (MacNaughton & Williams, 2009).



Further, the location of adults can communicate what adults value and staff can model the acceptance of children with disabilities by regularly interacting with them. Willis (2009) emphasises the importance of the paraprofessional and teacher working together to avoid learned helplessness, that is, when the child with disabilities works out if someone is always there and they appear needy enough, someone will step in and do things for them which they could have done for themselves. Similarly, MacNaughton and Williams (2009) point out that adults' hovering over children may influence their autonomy as independent learners and teachers need to balance the child's need for support with the child's need for independence and both "trust children with disabilities to be in charge of their own learning" (p. 149) and be available when needed.

Young and Simpson's (1997) study examined the effect of space between paraprofessionals and three students with autism in general education classrooms. They found "all three students remained in their seats 82% or more of the time when the paraprofessional was in the room, regardless of the distance" (p. 3) and that these students stayed focused when working exclusively with peers. They suggested peer groups could be used as an alternative to paraprofessional direct involvement, however paraprofessionals would need training to implement, assess, and evaluate these peer mediated groups. They noted that placing a peer with students with autism is not tutoring and does not guarantee inclusion or an education. Further, Giangreco and Broer (2005) identified in their study that paraprofessionals spent approximately 86% of their time in close proximity (inside 3 ft) of the child with disabilities. The reader is asked to imagine the experience from a students' perspective; how "having an adult (metaphorically) attached at the hip might affect your social relationships" (p. 22) at school.

A few studies have addressed that the close proximity between an ESW and a child with disabilities reduced teacher and peer involvement. However, when adults distanced themselves, interactions with others could occur. Although it was necessary at times to

facilitate a child's use of writing tools, use of gestures, and to follow instructions, there was little indication that prompts were reduced to encourage a child's autonomy and that constant support was noticed throughout the school.

It is evident from the literature that there was only a small sample of literature found overseas and in New Zealand and it is mainly around the school sector. Very little related to ESWs designated to work with children with disabilities on a one-to-one basis and on their widespread use in the early childhood sector. This study is interested in the perspectives of ESWs assigned to children with disabilities in New Zealand early childhood settings and is centred on contributing to this important gap in the literature.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has reviewed literature focused on an all-encompassing education for children with disabilities and the contribution of paraprofessionals to enabling these children to participate in mainstream education programmes. Key issues identified have included the different centre responses to inclusion; while some children with disabilities were welcomed unconditionally, there were children that could only attend under certain conditions, and in some instances enrolment and full time attendance had been refused. Another issue was that staff needed knowledge about intervention strategies to facilitate learning and inclusion. Although the intention of a paraprofessional was to support the teacher and child with disabilities, this may have inadvertently created a barrier for teachers and peers to form relationships and participate with the child. Several pieces of literature revealed that teachers did not believe their role was to educate children with disabilities and left this to the paraeducator, who was likely to be untrained yet was often the primary contact for a child. However, without teaching direction to support children with disabilities, learning and participation was likely to be hindered. Furthermore, the role of the ESW needed

clarification; whether their role was to work with one child or all children and what the role of a teacher might be. In addition, the proximity between an ESW and child with disabilities was shown to have the potential to reduce teacher and peer involvement. When adults distanced themselves interactions could occur. Constant support between the paraprofessional and child was noticed with little indication that prompts had reduced to create independence. The close following of the child by an adult throughout the entire school was noticed and brings into question the affect this may have on the child's identity and social belonging, providing them with little opportunity to interact with peers.

These studies show that in New Zealand in most instances, young children with disabilities are having their educational needs met by untrained ESWs. Further, they indicate that there is no formal training or ESW qualification required to work in the field, and, as ESWs are assigned as the primary supports for children with disabilities, this brings into question whether these children are receiving the best possible education in the current education system.

There is surprisingly little research about the relationship between the ESW and child in ECE settings. This study is intended to contribute to addressing this gap in the literature by focusing on ESWs' perspectives of their work with children with disabilities in New Zealand kindergarten settings.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

This study uses a survey methodology to gain ESWs' perspectives on their work with children with disabilities in New Zealand kindergartens. The chosen method of surveying the respondents was through a questionnaire which included both qualitative and quantitative questions. The qualitative component of the questionnaire enabled exploratory data about ESWs' thoughts, feelings, or experiences of their work, whereas the quantitative questions enabled data to be gathered on a number of standardised items. A combination of both types of questions is typical in mixed questionnaires (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

By using a combination of qualitative and quantitative questions participants were able to respond in their own words and follow a set of predetermined responses based on open and closed-ended items in a questionnaire. The benefits of this approach allowed for data to be analysed using descriptive statistics and enabled respondents' perspectives to be elicited and described. The convergence of varied data is likely to provide stronger evidence when reporting the results (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

#### **Questionnaire Development**

Using Rutherford's (2008) "Teacher Aide Interview Guide" (Appendix A) which was designed for the school sector, a questionnaire (Appendix B) was developed for the purpose of this present study to gain an understanding of the perspectives of ESWs and their work with children with disabilities in the kindergarten sector. The questions and content were modified and include a mix of qualitative and quantitative items.

There were 15 items in the survey questionnaire of which five relate to the basic demographic and three relate to training and professional development needs of the participants. These questions were associated with: gender, length of service as an ESW, the number of children they are currently working with, the main disability of a child they are currently working with, the kindergarten session hours, the number of children attending the kindergarten, the number of teachers attending the kindergarten, and a description of the local community (for example, rural, urban, cultural make-up). They were also asked about the kind of training they had received in relation to children with disabilities and any professional development (PD) opportunities they had attended. The remaining seven questions were based upon Rutherford's Interview Guide. In particular, participants were asked to describe their role as an ESW, who the child primarily interacts with, the relationship the ESW has with the child, and the role that teachers play in determining ESW work. Finally, there was one general comment question regarding the education of children with disabilities and the role that ESWs have in their education. In addition, two questions relating to proximity were included to determine where the ESW positioned themselves in relation to the child, to draw on the work of Giangreco et al. (1997) and Giangreco and Broer (2005).

### **Pilot Testing of the Questionnaire**

An initial version of the questionnaire was given to a former ESW who provided feedback. Some minor changes were made and the questionnaire was then completed again by the same ESW and another former ESW. No further changes were made to the questionnaire.

## Questionnaire Distribution

The participants in this study were ESWs working with children with disabilities in New Zealand kindergartens. The Ministry of Education website provided an early childhood directory of services from which 632 kindergartens were identified throughout New Zealand. The kindergarten sector had a large population to draw from and was chosen for providing predominantly sessional programs for the three to five year age range and for their high child/teacher ratios. Kindergartens were chosen based on the assumption that these centres were considered more likely to actively seek ESW support for children with disabilities.

The procedure used to locate possible participants was initially to randomly select every fourth kindergarten from the directory and to contact them by telephone to determine whether an ESW worked there. The rationale for using random selection was to have an unbiased sample of ESWs which was representative of the wider population of ESWs so that ESWs had an equal chance of being selected as potential participants in this study (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). This is important in quantitative research as it enables the researcher to generalise to a population.

Two assistants living in Wellington and Auckland helped with the telephone process for their areas and followed a pre-colour-coded directory and a telephone introduction slip (Appendix C) as a guide. The process of random selection and telephone calls continued until 302 possible ESW participants were located. Due to the fact that most ESWs did not have email or computer access, it was important to choose a survey approach that was going to be equally accessible for all participants; thus a paper copy of the questionnaire was sent to each participant. Questionnaires were addressed to the ESW rather than to a named person.

In November and December 2010, 302 questionnaires together with information letters (Appendix D) and reply paid envelopes were posted to the identified ESWs to invite them to participate in this survey. An approximately two week period was given for the completion and return of survey questionnaires, with 302 follow-up letters (Appendix E) posted prior to the end of term four. This was to encourage further participants to return their questionnaires, in order to increase the response rate. There were 59 participants who completed and returned their questionnaires by the 26th January, 2011.

Johnson and Christensen (2008) indicate that the larger the sample size the more valid the outcome, with a response rate of 30% generally considered acceptable for surveys. As the response rate only represented 19.5% of the population of ESWs contacted, it was decided to telephone the remaining kindergartens on the directory. Subsequently a further 112 possible ESW participants were located and questionnaires were sent out to them in early March 2011. Subsequently, 112 follow up letters were sent two weeks later to prompt completion of the questionnaires. This time, 44 questionnaires were completed and returned by 20th May, 2011. During the telephone process in March, there were 14 kindergartens not operating as a result of the earthquake in Christchurch and these potential participants were unable to be included in this survey. A further two questionnaires were received incomplete and could not be used in this study. Of 632 kindergartens listed in the early childhood directory, a total of 414 kindergartens had ESWs. This produced a total sample size of (N= 103; 24.9%) ESW respondents who completed and returned the questionnaires. Questionnaires were numbered and dated as they were received. ESWs and the kindergartens they worked in were kept anonymous.

## Validity and Reliability

The construct items used in the questionnaire for this study drew upon the interview schedule used by Rutherford (2008) for teacher aides in the school sector. The Teacher Aide Interview Guide was developed by Rutherford (2008) using her four research questions as topics. My use of an existing instrument strengthens the validity of the data and provides an opportunity to compare the results of this present study with existing research. In addition, the following strategies were implemented to strengthen research validity:

- Discussion was necessary via peer reviews with my supervisors, to ensure interpretations and conclusions were accurate and allowed for any problems to be resolved.
- The questionnaire was trialled with trusted personnel, who had both worked as ESWs, to review content validity.

Johnson and Christensen (2008) noted that good research practice needs to include strategies to validate “trustworthiness,” that is, interpretation of processes and outcomes should possess a legitimate quality. This means that my interpretation of data needs to be kept honest. I have given careful consideration to my own bias and have endeavoured to maintain an objective viewpoint, open to the data, rather than be influenced by any preconceived ideas. Johnson and Christensen (2008) describe a researcher’s self reflection on their potential bias as “Reflexivity,” which is considered important to me, as I have personally worked in the field.

I came to this study with a set of beliefs from my experiences in the field as an ESW, early childhood educator, and EI teacher and recognise it is necessary to address the issue of a biased viewpoint. I believe the success of the role of an ESW is largely influenced by the experience they bring to the field and the collaborative partnership with the child and family, the teaching team, and visiting professionals, and the ESWs ability and



focus on the common goal to provide the best, safest learning experience for the child with disabilities and their family.

It is equally important in this study that any preconceived ideas that I may hold do not influence the interpretation of findings, which are intended to be objective and non judgemental, and that the collection of data is consistent with current practice. Bassey (1999) describes this approach as "...an empirical enquiry, this means that it is not in the realms of reflective or creative research, and data collection is the starting point" (p. 59).

## **Ethics**

Ethical procedures were carefully followed, particularly as this enquiry centred on the services and people responsible for the education of a young child with disabilities. Ethics approval was gained from the VUW Human Ethics committee (SEPP/2010/81: RM 18002 dated 22/9/2010) and respondents' participation in the study was kept anonymous.

Participants were under no obligation to take part in the questionnaire which was entirely voluntary. On the completion and return of the questionnaire, participants' indicated their informed consent.

Results have been reported using aggregated data and therefore no individuals or centres can be identified. Both soft (electronic) data and hard copies (surveys) will be stored securely for five years after which they will be destroyed; with the information only available to myself and my supervisors. An information letter attached to the questionnaire ensured participants that they would remain anonymous within this thesis and any subsequent publications. On completion, the thesis will be available in the Victoria University of Wellington Library.

Regional and District Managers of the Ministry of Education were sent (via email) a copy of the questionnaire and information letters (Appendix F & G). Information letters were developed as part of the Victoria University ethics application to inform the Ministry of Education, the predominant employers of ESWs of this study, of the intended fieldwork. The Ministry of Education's Ethics and Advisory Team (EAT) recommended that their District Managers remind ESWs, as public servants, to consider the Code of Conduct requirements and how they communicate publicly about their work, as this may reflect negatively on policies and practices. The writer undertook to ensure that on reporting this research, ESWs' views would not be treated as official Ministry of Education perspectives. It is important to identify that it is not the researcher's intention to criticise a team or system because all are working together to reduce barriers and increase opportunities for children with disabilities to be educated in the mainstream early childhood and school sector.

## **Data Coding and Analysis**

There were different approaches to the data coding and analysis used for each data type. For the five qualitative questions, data was transcribed into a word document for analysis whilst data from the remaining ten quantitative questions were entered into SPSS. The qualitative data analysis was initially deductive, as most of the questions had pre-determined categories drawn from the literature. However inductive analysis also took place, as new categories emerged as was the case in Johnson & Christensen (2008). The data findings were sorted into specific answers as well as similar clusters and they were then summarised according to each research question specified in the questionnaire (Cox & Cox, 2008). The quantitative data has been analysed using SPSS and reported using descriptive statistics.

This chapter informs that a survey method was used to gather qualitative and quantitative data using a questionnaire. These were completed by ESW participants nationwide between November 2010 and May, 2011, of which the following chapter will report the results of the data analysis.

It is intended that through the collection and interpretation of data, there will be insight into the different perspectives of ESWs' work with children with disabilities and some understanding of their unique relationship designed to support and encourage inclusion in early childhood learning environments nationwide.

## **Chapter 4**

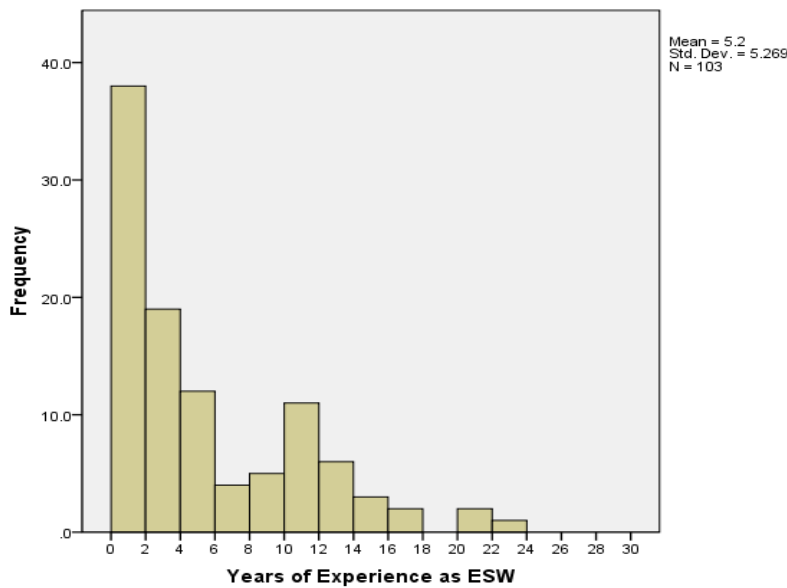
### **Results**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter presents both quantitative and qualitative data gathered in the survey of ESWs. Of the 414 questionnaires posted to possible ESW participants, 103 (N = 103) ESWs responded by completing and returning the questionnaire. This represents a response rate of 24.9% of the ESW population invited to participate. The first section of this chapter reports basic demographic data, the kind of training undertaken with comparison data, and the PD opportunities of the participants. Key results include the role of the ESW, the child's interactions with others, the proximity of the ESW and comparison data, the teachers' role in determining the ESWs' work with a child, the ESW's relationship with a child with disabilities and a general comments section.

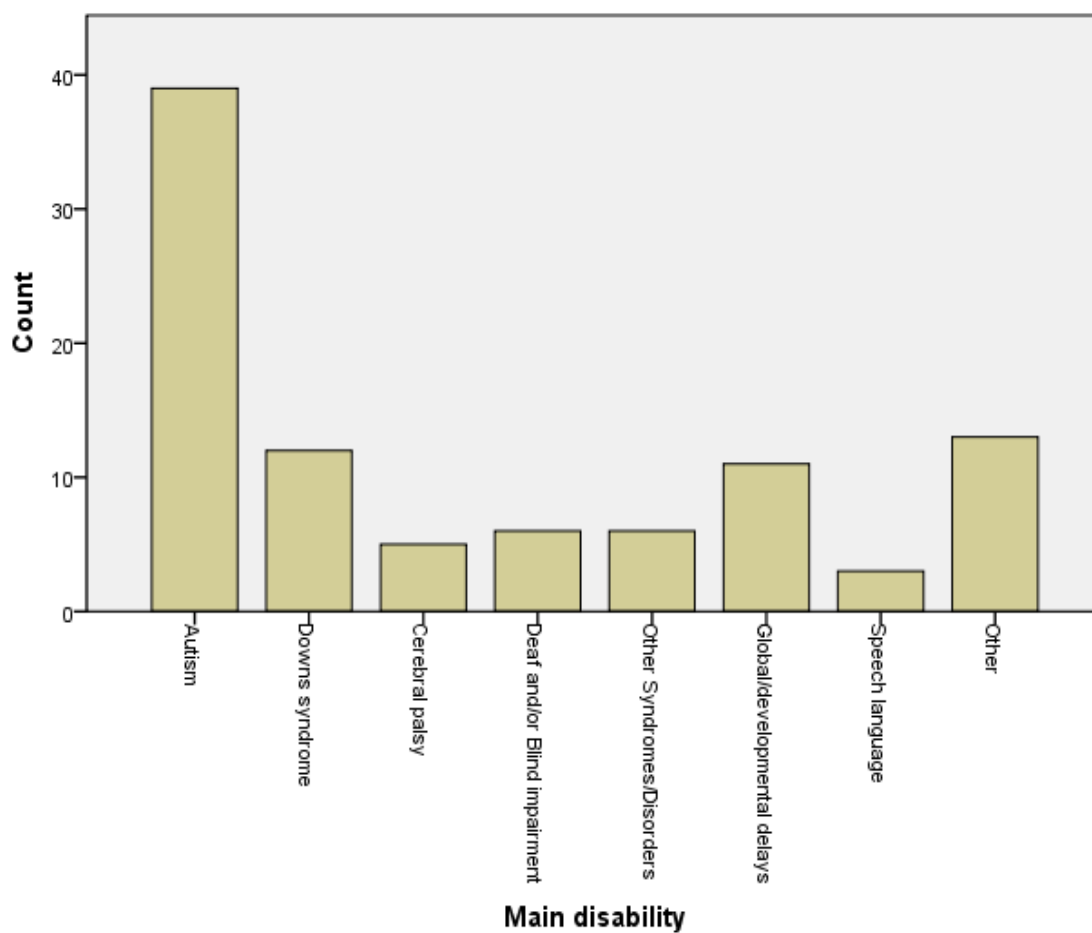
#### **Demographic Data**

Almost all respondents (n = 102; 99%) in this study were female. Respondents were asked how long they had been an ESW. As can be seen from Figure 1, 36.9% had worked for less than two years, 38.8% for between two and ten years, and 24.3% for 10 years or more. The average length of experience as an ESW was 5.2 years with a standard deviation of 5.3. ESWs' length of service ranged between one month and 24 years.



**Figure 1: Years of experience as ESW**

For the purpose of understanding the ESW's workload, respondents were asked to indicate how many children with disabilities they were currently working with. One hundred and two responded to this question. The majority of respondents worked with up to two children ( $n = 69$ ; 67.6%) and the remaining 32.4% of respondents worked with between three and five children. One respondent appeared to misinterpret the question; this response was not included in these results. To obtain specific information about the relationship between an ESW and one of the children they were working with, respondents were asked to focus on one child and one kindergarten when completing the questionnaire. Respondents were given a list of several disabilities as well as the opportunity to identify "other" disabilities and were asked to indicate the main disability of the child they were currently working with. There were 98 respondents who answered this question. Figure 2 shows the main disabilities respondents identified were Autism ( $n = 39$ ; 39.8%), Down's syndrome ( $n = 14$ ; 14.3%) and global or developmental delays ( $n = 11$ ; 11.2%). Five respondents listed more than one disability and as the main disability could not be determined, these data were not included with the results listed here.



**Figure 2: Main disability**

To understand a little about the kindergarten session that the child attended, respondents were asked about the session hours attended by the child, how many children attended the session, and the number of teachers that were in attendance. This was asked in order to understand the context that the ESW worked within. Eighty-three responded to this question. Twenty-six respondents indicated that the child's attendance was between four and five hours per day (31.3%) and a further 27.7% of respondents indicated between six and seven hours per day, while 22.9% of respondents indicated that attendance was between three and four hours per day. Seventeen respondents appear to have misinterpreted the question.

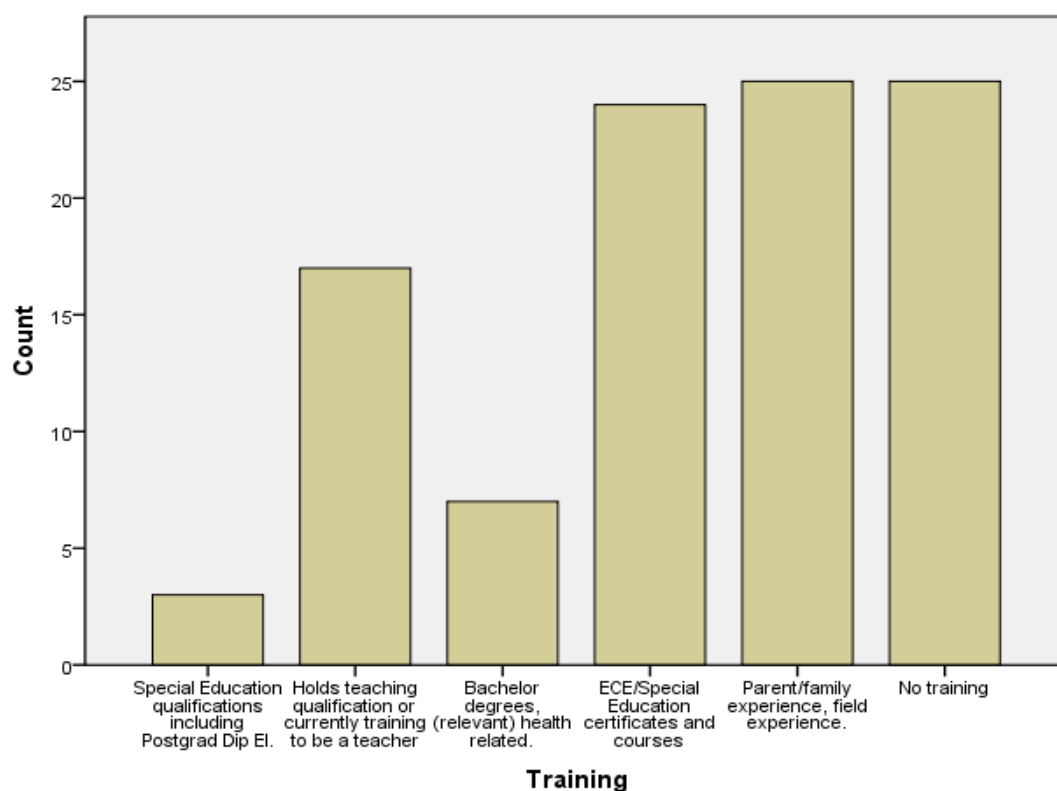
When asked how many children attended the session, 91 responded to this question. There were 34 respondents who indicated 40 children attended the session (37.3%) and an

additional 33% of respondents indicated 30 children attended. Another 11% of respondents indicated 45 children were in attendance. The remaining respondents reported small numbers of children attended sessions that ranged between 20 and 43 children. This would suggest that most children with disabilities were attending kindergarten settings in the same mainstream environment as their peers.

From the respondents who answered this question, four teachers (n = 39; 42.9%) or three teachers (40.7%) taught in each session. A smaller number of respondents (10.9%) indicated five teachers were teaching in each session. The data indicated that most of the children with disabilities were attending kindergarten sessions where the number of children attending ranged between 30 to 40 children and where three to four teachers were teaching.

In order to gain an understanding of where ESWs were working, respondents were asked to describe the local community of their kindergarten (i.e., rural, urban, cultural make up). There were 95 responses. Respondents were free to describe their centre as this question was open-ended. The majority of respondents indicated an urban/suburban kindergarten location (n = 71; 74.7%), while 17.9% were of rural location and 7.4% were a mix of both locations. More than one third of respondents did not consider the cultural make up of their kindergarten community (n = 36; 35%). The remaining 67 respondents referred to multicultural (n = 55; 82%) and bicultural (18%) kindergarten communities. This indicates participants in this study were from predominantly urban/suburban, multicultural kindergarten communities. Some respondents described the socio-economic status of the kindergarten community, however a large majority of respondents did not consider this aspect (n = 79; 76.7%). Of the respondents who did comment on the socio-economic status (n = 24; 23.3%), nine described the kindergarten community as “low”, six as “medium” and two as “high.” Of the remaining seven respondents who indicated mixed socio-economic status, two described their kindergarten as “diverse,” made up of a “cross section of socio-economic communities.”

To determine the professional expertise of respondents, they were asked what kind of training (if any) they had in relation to children with disabilities. There were 101 responses to this question. In reference to Figure 3, 25 respondents had personal experience either as a parent or as part of their wider family while others had field experience (n = 25; 24.8%). An equal number of respondents had no training (24.8%). This indicates almost half of the respondents participating in this study (49.6%) were without formal training. The remaining 50.4% were trained, of which 24 (23.8%) indicated they held ECE/Special Education certificates and attended courses. In addition, 17 (16.8%) respondents held teaching qualifications or were currently training to be a teacher. There were seven (6.9%) respondents with health-related Bachelor degrees, and three (3%) respondents with Special Education qualifications including a Postgraduate Diploma in EI.



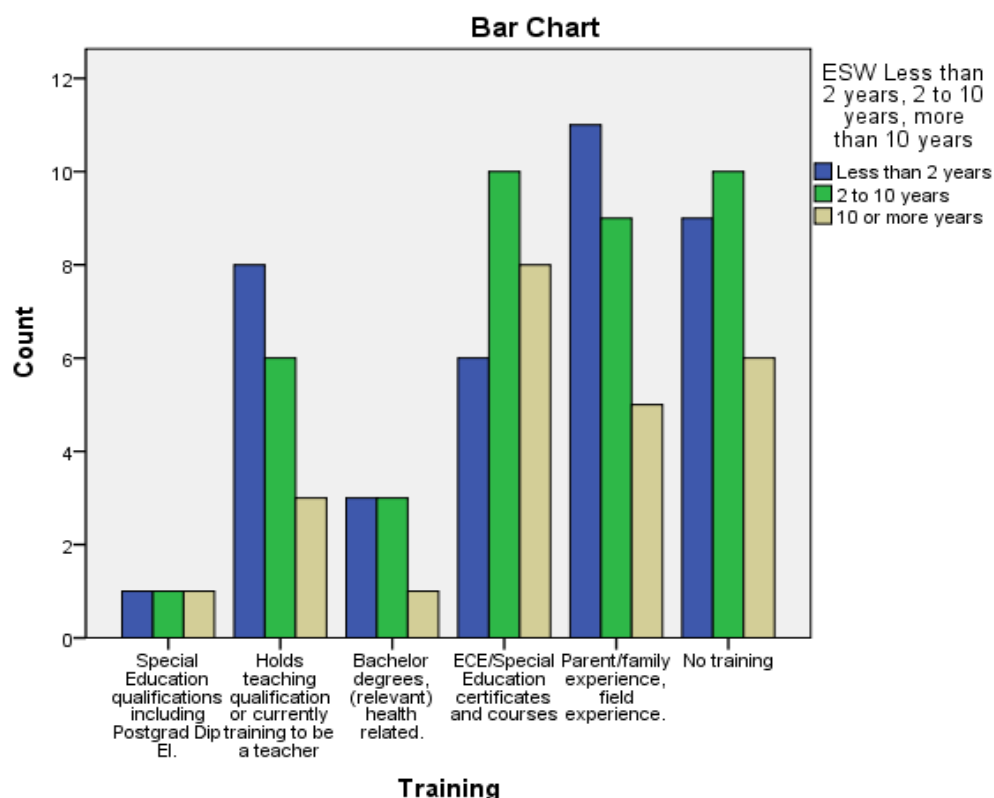
**Figure 3: ESW training**

Generally, international literature indicates that paraprofessional supports for students with disabilities are insufficiently trained (Giangreco et al., 2001) and likewise in New Zealand



there is no formal qualification required for an ESW to work with children with disabilities. Therefore I decided to compare the years of experience with training to ascertain whether the length of service had a correlation with the qualifications of an ESW.

As can be seen in Figure 4, ESWs with more than two years experience had slightly more training in the area of ECE/Special Education certificates and courses than those with less than two years experience. In addition, ESWs with less than two years experience were described as either holding a teaching qualification or currently training to be a teacher. This may indicate a trend to become better qualified. Overall, those with less than 10 years experience were more qualified than those with 10 years or more years' service which was also evident in the Bachelor degrees category. A relatively small number were equally represented as having a Special Education qualification.



**Figure 4: Training and Years of experience**

The demographic data revealed a diverse sample (aside from gender) in terms of the ESW's experience and qualifications, the disability of the child worked with, and the kindergarten community in which ESWs worked. The data identified a predominantly female sample with one male participant. A high proportion of respondents had less than two years experience. Nearly half of the respondents were without formal training and the remaining respondents classified as trained held teaching qualifications, were in training, or had bachelor or special education qualifications. Most respondents worked with up to two children with disabilities who attended sessions with between 30 and 40 children and three to four teachers in attendance. Of the seven main disabilities or impairments identified in the data, the most predominant disability identified was Autism. The data also identified that the respondents were from predominantly urban/suburban, multicultural kindergarten communities.

## **Professional Development**

Respondents were asked whether they had attended professional development opportunities relating to their role as an ESW. Of 100 responses, the majority of respondents (n = 83; 83%) indicated they had undertaken PD relating to their role as an ESW. It is important for an ESW to have the opportunity to attend PD to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to work with children with disabilities. As Bricker and Woods Cripe (1992) suggest, specialised intervention strategies were necessary to better equip staff to work with children with disabilities.

Respondents were asked to describe any PD they had attended relating to their role as an ESW. When describing PD they had participated in, respondents identified they had attended workshops, seminars, and conferences, as well as courses, meetings, and talks offered through their employers. A range of PD activities were available in different locations. For instance, PD was held in Ministry of Education GSE offices and run by Early Intervention

teachers, team leaders, and therapists. Presentations by guest speakers from outside agencies were also reported. The results reveal a wide variance in ESWs' access to and completion of PD. Some respondents indicated they attended PD several times a year every year regularly (e.g. over the past 10 or 12 years). Other respondents indicated they had minimal PD and did not attend on a regular basis. Respondents who did attend PD regularly attended between one and a half and two and a half hour sessions once or twice each term. This indicated PD was generally for short sessions and varied in terms of frequency.

Respondents identified a wide range of professional development topics they had attended (n = 81; 80.2%). More than one third had attended PD relating to Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (n = 34; 42%). One key theme that emerged from the data was the provision of PD relating to communication. For example, respondents identified attending sign language/makaton (n = 21; 26%), speech language development (n = 19; 23.5%), and communication (n = 11; 13.6%) PD sessions. Also related to communication was behaviour management (n = 19; 23.5%) and social/emotional learning (n = 5; 6.2%) which assists a child's self regulation to know how to interact with their peers and to help with social acceptance in the learning environment. To a lesser degree, data was identified pertaining to a specific disability, such as Down's syndrome (n = 8; 9.9%), hearing impairment (n = 7; 8.6%), and visual impairment (n = 6; 7.4%). Finally respondents indicated they had attended PD that included music and movement (n = 8; 9.9%), children's play (n = 6; 7.4%) and Pasifica, Maori culture, and different ethnicities (n = 5; 6.2%).

Informal learning opportunities were also identified by respondents as PD. These included EI teachers and visiting therapists providing on the job training in the kindergarten environment. They worked alongside ESWs and offered strategies to implement IP goals and liaised with the teaching team. Six respondents specifically identified support networks in their workplace which included kindergarten teachers and GSE professionals. For instance, one respondent reported "I get ongoing support from the Psych, or SLT [Speech Language

Therapist] or kindy teacher” [ESW 55] whilst another respondent received “literature from [the] supervisor [and] on the spot training here at work” [ESW 78], indicating there were a number of ways for ESWs to gain support. Several respondents reported speech language therapists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, psychologists, and EI teachers offered ongoing advice and worked alongside them in kindergarten environments or took PD training sessions at GSE offices. For instance, one respondent described PD as attending “Special Education Network Meetings and [having] one on one with physio and speech language therapist etc. relevant to the particular child” [ESW 100] whilst another commented on “PD offered through GSE...meetings [are] where they tell us things they think useful” [ESW 8].

Twenty respondents had not attended PD opportunities related to their role as an ESW. Respondents offered some explanations for their lack of engagement in PD, for example, “I would love to attend but nothing has been offered” [ESW 6] and “not yet...my own family have had a family member with a lot of disabilities” [ESW 22]. Two respondents reported that they faced difficulty in attending PD or had limited availability for attending training days. For example, one ESW commented that she was “not always able to attend...because one child I support cannot attend the kindergarten without support” [ESW 57] whilst another commented “these are on a Friday and I work with the child on a Friday, so do not often attend” [ESW 74]. In contrast, two respondents reported they had attended PD and had also decided to pursue their own as well. One respondent attended two workshops in five years, “one which I was offered and one that I asked about myself, [attending] various workshops in my own time” [ESW 4]. The second respondent reported she “privately attend[ed] seminars, read appropriate books etc. funded by myself. Research on line” [ESW 5].

Two respondents had reported a reduction in PD opportunities and implied they needed more PD support. For instance, one respondent alleged she attends, “usually 6 training sessions of 2 hrs a year, in the last year may be three and this year so far, no indication on

any coming up” [ESW 61]. The other respondent reported attending PD training on a Friday, but “only twice this year with all the changes” [ESW 50].

A small number of respondents commented they had attended PD, however this had not necessarily corresponded to the disabilities of the children they were working with. For example, respondents reported “teachers, speech therapist and physio people have been very helpful, but haven’t had any particularly aimed at cerebral palsy” [ESW 13] and “worked all my adult life with children, but poorly prepared for children with Autism” [ESW 32].

In summary, a large group of respondents had attended PD relating to Autism. This correlates with the main disability of the child that respondents in this study were currently working with (see Figure 2, p. 36). The involvement of a wide array of professional personnel who worked alongside or took training days illustrates the breadth of PD available to some ESWs. In contrast, some respondents reported they had difficulty in attending PD or had not had PD available in their role as an ESW. Others indicated that PD was not always accessible, sufficient, or relevant to their child’s disability.

## **Role of the ESW**

Respondents were asked to describe their role as an ESW. Data analysis resulted in the identification of two major themes and three smaller themes. The first major theme focused on the role of the ESW in supporting the child to explore and participate in activities within the kindergarten and in working alongside teachers to set and assist the child to work towards the IP goals. Within this theme, part of the ESW’s role was to attend and contribute to IP meetings and keep records of a child’s learning progress. They worked in partnership with the teaching staff and also informed EI teachers.

ESWs also indicated their role was to assist children in their day-to-day learning through play by encouraging the development of new skills, introducing learning tools, and by promoting independence. For example, one respondent viewed their role was to support their child's "presence, participation and learning..." [ESW 30].

Some respondents reported that to encourage learning it was necessary to assist a child to take small steps to gain confidence, connect, and be interested in their surroundings. To access the curriculum, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996) and to help involve the child was described by some ESWs as paramount, whilst other respondents described working exclusively with a child. Six respondents described working solely one-to-one with the child. For example, one respondent commented "my role is one-to-one with the child" [ESW 103] and another respondent provided "one-on-one extra help to get the child really involved" [ESW 39]. This indicated some respondents worked exclusively with their child while others were focused on involvement in the wider environment.

A second major theme emerging from the data was the respondents' view that they supported the child to develop social skills. Respondents recognised an important factor in supporting a child's inclusion was to involve everyone in order to help facilitate the building of relationships and to move the child towards independence. Respondents described doing this through supporting communication, role play, and positively reinforcing interactions between the child, peers, teachers, and parents. Being alert to social opportunities to assist a child's integration into the kindergarten was also identified as important.

Several respondents identified that features consistent with social integration for the child were part of their role as ESW. These included supporting the child and family to belong in the education system and assisting parents to be listened to and accepted. One respondent described their role as an "encourager, advocate, helper [and] educator" [ESW 38] to assist

the child to develop skills similar to their peers and to work with EI, kindergarten teachers and their peers as part of a team.

In addition, respondents recognised their role to support social skills included assisting the child to develop language skills and to gain confidence to interact and form relationships with other children in the environment. They also felt that relationships were built on trust and friendship and their role was to encourage reciprocal play between peers and inclusion in all activities. Respondents also indicated their role was to help a child understand routines and to extend learning, to encourage a child to do things for themselves, and to communicate their needs. For instance, one respondent considered her role was to support “all aspects of integration also encouraging better understanding within my child’s peer group at kindy” [ESW 32].

Respondents felt it was important for a child to develop alongside his or her peers, to play, and be included. For example, one respondent commented it was “vital all children feel accepted” [ESW 54]. In addition, ESWs felt it was part of their role to help settle a child, observe and engage their interest in the surrounding environment to enable a child to reach their maximum potential, and prepare a child for transition to school.

There were three smaller themes resulting from the analysis of data where ESWs saw their role as to ensure the child’s safety, build their self help skills and care, and to assist their transition to school.

Several respondents acknowledged the need for safety in a child’s learning environment. Respondents described being a point of contact and assisting a child to play safely with their peers. Keeping children safe from physical harm, when for example, they “cannot walk, talk or sit unaided” [ESW 6] and to encourage the safe use of materials was also noted. Finally,

monitoring tiredness of a child and ensuring appropriate rest times was identified as part of an ESW's role.

Self help skills and care included a range of support roles in various routines such as sitting with a child while they were eating or feeding. In addition, ESWs helped by assisting with toileting, nappy changes, and overall care. For example, one respondent noted her role was to “meet [a] child's personal hygiene, care and safety needs” [ESW 12].

Finally, respondents identified their role in helping a child to transition between environments; that is, from kindergarten to school. For example, one respondent described her role as “working towards a good outcome for my children with love, patience and getting them ready to go to school or other places” [ESW 34].

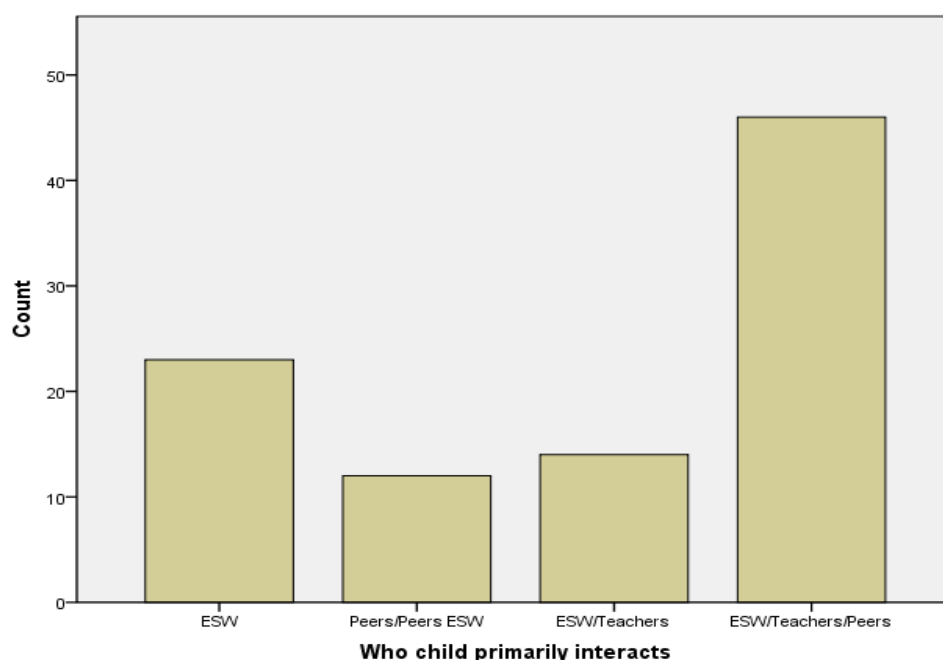
In summary, respondents reported their role as an ESW was varied and centred on integrating a child into the kindergarten learning environment. ESWs supported the kindergarten teachers to achieve IP goals; working in partnership with them and EI teachers. Whilst some respondents worked exclusively with a child to encourage learning, there were other respondents who encouraged social integration and learning in the wider environment.

### **Child's Interactions with Others**

Respondents were asked to tick one of seven statements which best described who the child primarily interacted with to see if a child accessed their learning environment. A Centre of Innovation, Ministry of Education (2002) identified an inclusive learning environment was made up of the teachers, the child and family, the *Te Whāriki* (1996) early childhood curriculum, and the learning setting (Glass et al., 2008). There were 95 responses to this question. With reference to Figure 5, almost half the respondents indicated that the child



they worked with in their ESW role interacted with a combination of the ESW, peers, and teachers (n = 46; 48.4%) and a further 24.2% of respondents indicated the child primarily interacted solely with them. A relatively small number of respondents indicated the child primarily interacted solely with them and teachers (n = 14; 14.7%). The remaining respondents indicated the child primarily interacted with them and peers (n= 12; 12.6%).

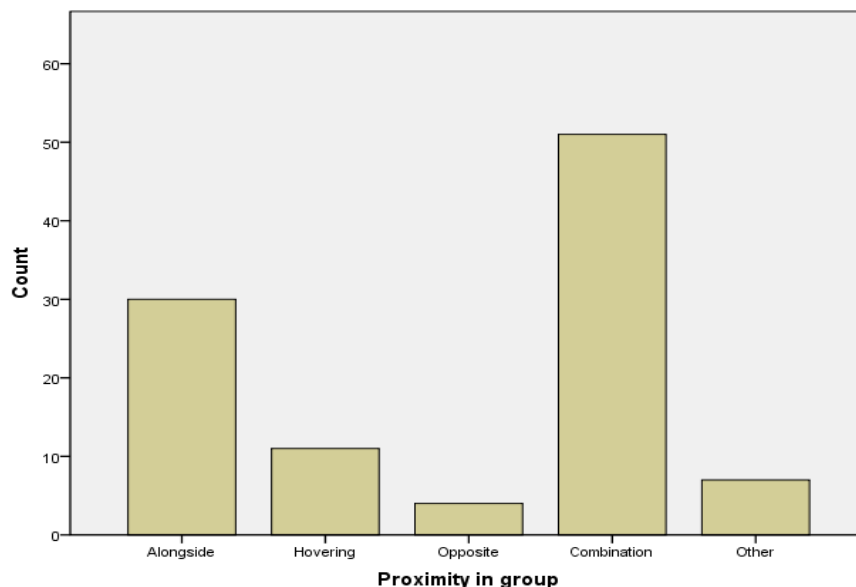


**Figure 5: Who child primarily interacts**

### Proximity of the ESW

To understand the nature of ESWs' and their work with a particular child, respondents were asked to tick one response from three possibilities (do you pay exclusive attention to the child, include the child's peers during your interactions, adopt a combination of the two). Most respondents adopted a combination of both, *paying exclusive attention and including peers* when working with children with disabilities (n = 100; 91%). Of the remaining nine respondents, seven included the child's peers and two respondents gave exclusive attention to the child.

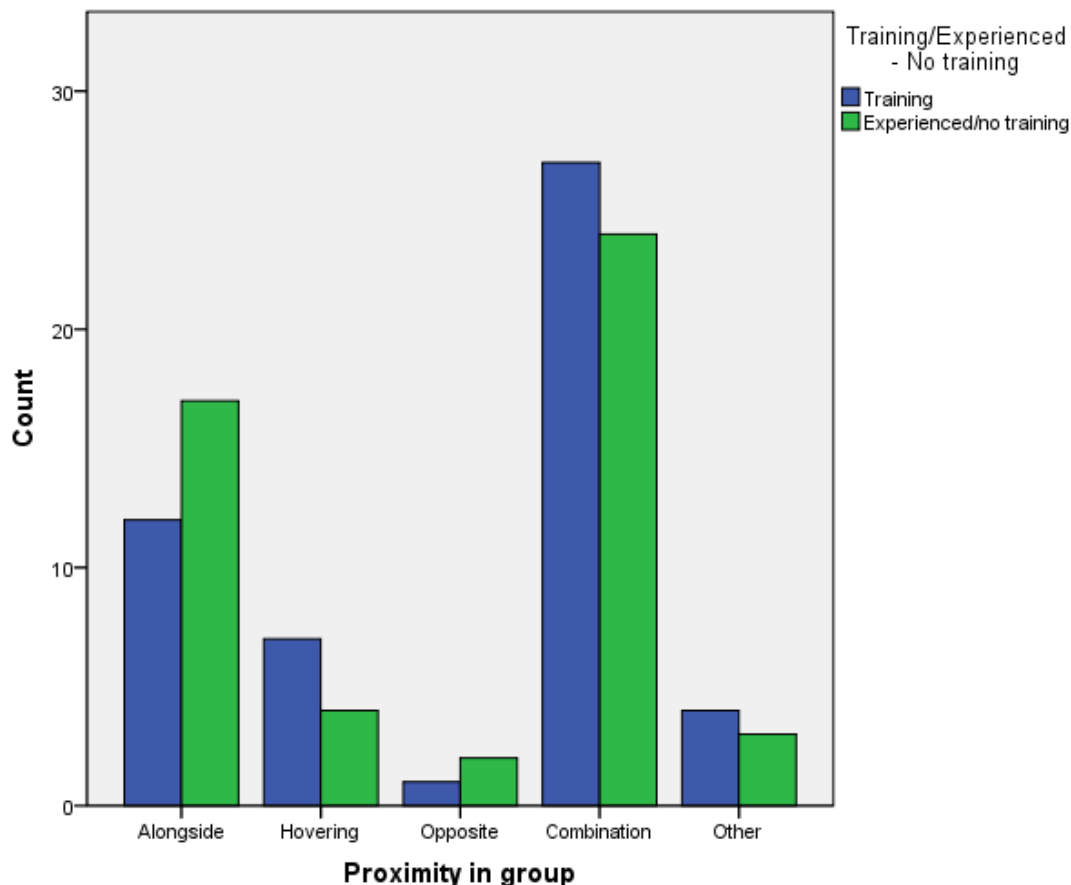
The proximity of an adult to a child can have an impact on learning. Giangreco et al. (1997) found that close adult proximity, including hovering near to a child, resulted in reduced peer involvement. However, when adults distanced themselves, peer interactions could occur more easily. So I decided to ask respondents where they would usually position themselves in relation to the child with disabilities in a group setting (e.g. alongside, hovering, opposite). As can be seen from Figure 6, a majority of respondents indicated using a combination of positions. These included: *alongside*, *hovering*, *opposite*, and *behind* (n = 51; 49.5%). A further 29.1% of respondents indicated working exclusively alongside the child, while 10.7% of respondents indicated hovering. A relatively small number of respondents indicated working opposite to a child with disabilities when working in a group setting (n = 4; 3.9%). The remaining 6.8% of respondents recorded as “other” had different perspectives such as, “it varies depending on the interaction occurring as to what’s happening” [ESW 4] and “it depends on the child’s abilities” [ESW 65].



**Figure 6: Proximity in group**

A comparison was made between proximity in a group (i.e., where an ESW would position themselves in relation to the child with disabilities) and ESWs’ training or experience. This was to identify current practice and whether training had any effect on the proximity of ESWs. With reference to Figure 7, most respondents indicated that they used a combination

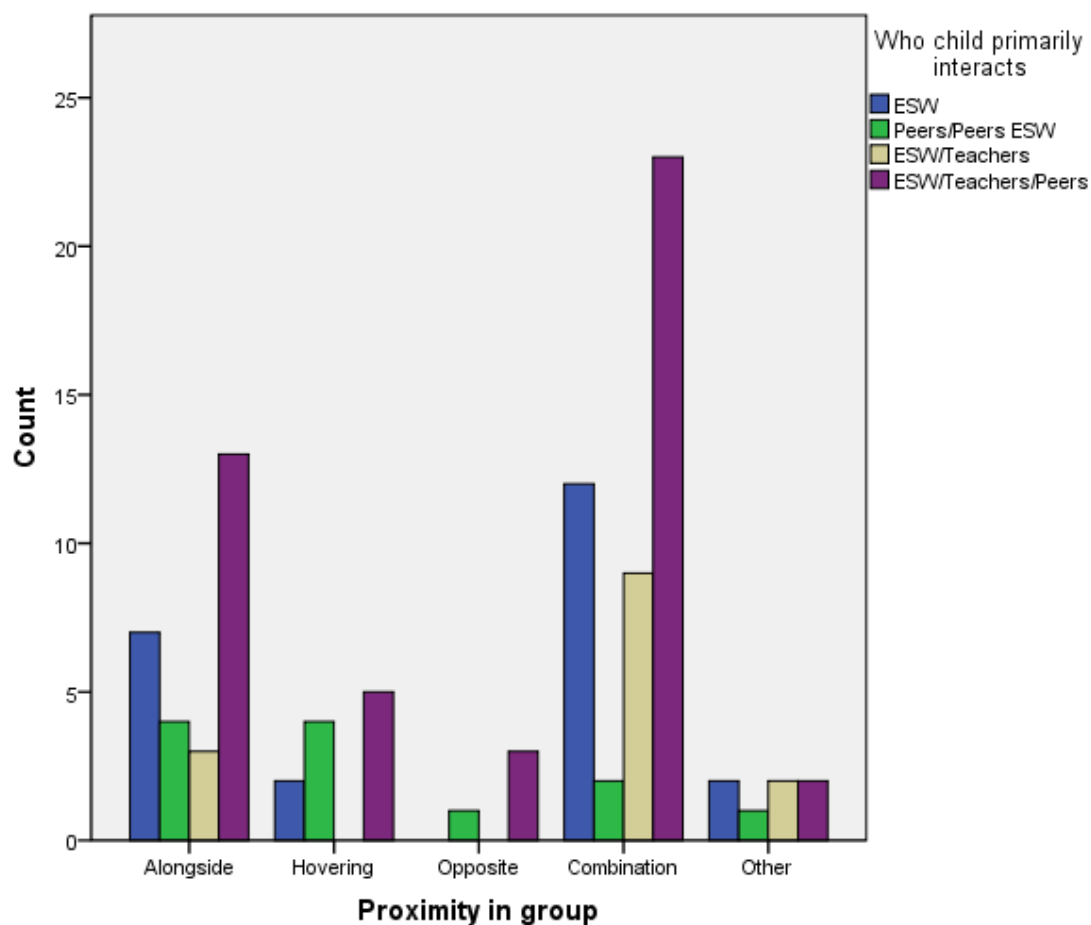
of positions when working with a child and this did not appear to be influenced by training. However those with no training were slightly more likely to position themselves alongside the child.



**Figure 7: Proximity in group and Training/Experienced – no training**

A comparison was also made between proximity in a group and who the child primarily interacted with to identify whether the position of an ESW influenced the involvement of teachers and peers. Marks et al.'s (1999) study found using intervention strategies as part of the IEP to broaden the paraeducator's focus from one child to the whole classroom increased their distance from the student and provided space for teachers and peers to become involved. As can be seen in Figure 8, 51 respondents indicated using a *combination* of positions in relation to working with a child and at the same time reported the child primarily interacted with an ESW, teachers, and peers.

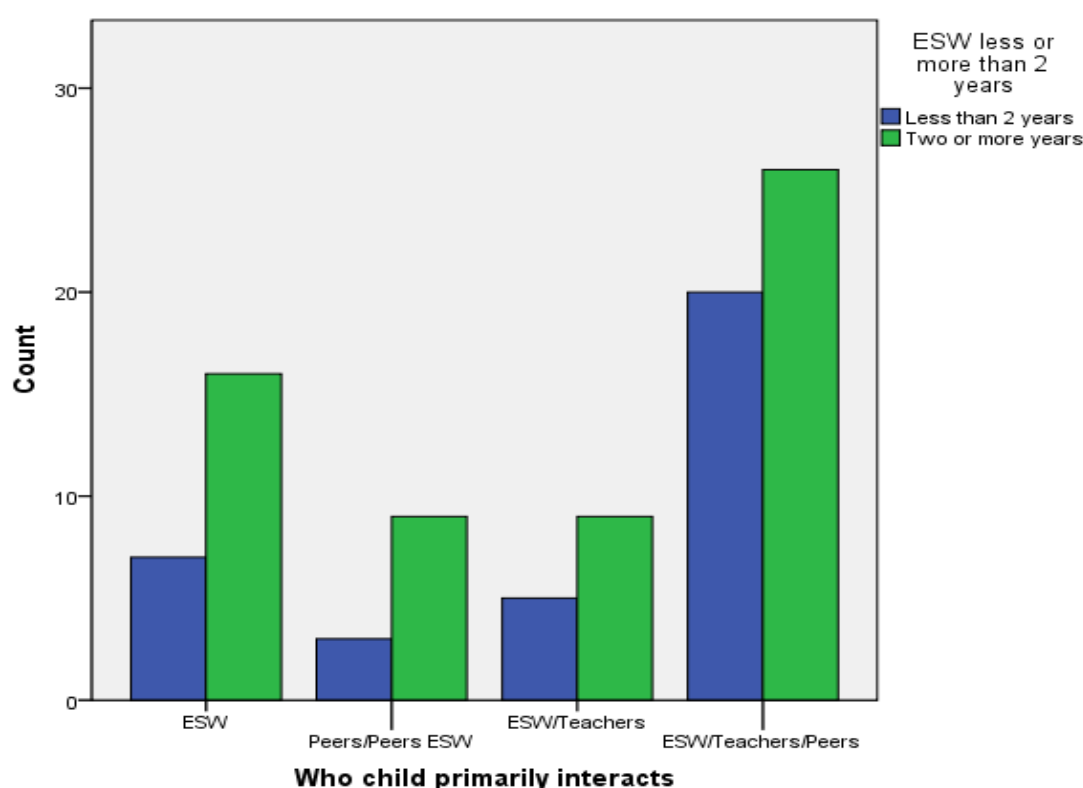
In the *alongside* category, several ESWs positioned themselves solely alongside a child with disabilities in a group, however, the child primarily interacted in combination with the ESW, teachers, and peers. This suggests some ESWs included others irrespective of their close proximity to the child, also evident in the *hovering* and *opposite* categories. In the *hovering* category, there was an absence of teachers solely working with the child, although teachers did work in combination with the ESW and peers.



**Figure 8: Proximity in group and Who child primarily interacts**

Finally, a comparison was made between the years of experience as an ESW and who a child primarily interacted with. This was to see if ESWs that had been in the job longer were more likely to involve teachers and peers, promoting an inclusive learning environment.

In Figure 9, the largest group of respondents indicated a child primarily interacted with an ESW, teachers, and peers. This was likely to occur slightly more often for ESWs with more than two years experience. This interaction highlights a collaborative approach to learning for a child with disabilities that supports responsive and reciprocal relationships found in the sociocultural framework of the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). Similarly, the second largest group of respondents indicated that they worked exclusively with the child, again indicating this was likely to occur slightly more often for ESWs with more than two years experience.



**Figure 9: Who child primarily interacts and Years of experience**

### **The Teachers' Role in Determining the ESW's work with a Child**

Respondents were asked about the role kindergarten teachers played in determining their work with the child. The analysis of data has identified a number of themes that are described along a continuum, from at one end, teachers working in a supportive role by

providing advice and guidance, through to teachers working in partnership and sometimes working with the child, through to teachers observing, monitoring, and offering feedback on a child's progress, to the other end of the continuum, where teachers had no or very little involvement and made minimal suggestions about the child.

Three quarters of respondents (n= 77, 75%) made comments that indicated teachers had a positive role in determining the ESWs' work. Of these, 54.4% indicated that the role of the teacher was predominantly supportive and this directed the ESWs' work with the child. Teachers attended IP meetings, set goals, suggested activities and resources, and provided the ESW with advice and guidance. Respondents also commented they valued the teachers' experiences, thoughts, and opinions about a child.

Twenty nine respondents described their inclusion as part of the teaching team and worked in partnership with teachers. They offered a unified consistent approach where they liaised and made decisions about centre routines together. One respondent reported the teachers had "a big role, we keep the child doing the same activities as the other children" [ESW 22]. Teachers modelled and worked alongside in a helpful manner and supervised group activities. For example, there were two respondents who acknowledged that teachers worked in a collaborative way, such as "a supportive role, but let me also decide what to do with the child" [ESW 16] and "while I am present leave me to carry through behaviour enforcement goals with their support" [ESW 19].

Another group of respondents reported that teachers took a lesser role, contributing by observing learning activities and monitoring a child's progress. Furthermore, teachers updated and passed on to them important information about the child, e.g. whether they were settled or unsettled. Teachers provided feedback on the child's involvement in activities

and their work on specific outcomes when the ESW was not there, liaising with the parent or caregiver.

Six teachers spent time and interacted with the child, particularly when they were not busy or when the ESW was not there, facilitating their involvement in activities. For instance, two respondents said teachers were “very supportive, they also are involved with the child’s learning as well” [ESW 56] and “teachers also work with [him] he often goes up to them” [ESW 79]. One respondent reported, “[teachers] are always available to work with the child when I’m not there and give me a brief break if required” [ESW 54].

In contrast, 20 respondents reported that teachers had, “none” or “very little involvement” and made few suggestions in determining their work with a child. For example, one respondent commented, “... I work fairly independently to them. They are usually busy with some of our other challenging children” [ESW 8]. Another respondent reported “the teachers have little role in determining my work, but I work with them... they give excellent feedback. I will help in other areas of the kindergarten to support staff. I have an IDP which I work out goals from. A supervisor usually [visits] twice a term” [ESW 12].

Finally, two respondents reported the role of the teacher in determining their work with the child, as “... encouraging the child to transition smoothly between activities” [ESW 83] and “they set out the equipment for the day and advise if mat time will be appropriate to join in” [ESW 93].

It was clear that whilst a number of respondents worked independently from the teaching team when they were working with a child, ESWs could seek advice if they needed it. For example, one respondent commented, “I’m left to my own devices but am able to ask, get advice, help” [ESW 45] and another respondent reported teachers “provide resources if I ask for them. I initiate all activities and work towards the goals set for the child in the IDP” [ESW

17]. Some respondents identified that help came from outside agencies and that teachers made little contribution in determining their work with a child. For instance, one respondent commented “I am guided more by my EI teacher, but at times the teachers will contribute ideas” [ESW 72].

Overall, the majority of respondents indicated teachers played a major role in determining their work with the child with disabilities. This was especially apparent when teachers were supportive of the ESWs’ work programmes and when they had direct input into the child’s learning and worked with the child. A small number of respondents reported they had little input from teachers and relied on outside agencies to determine their work programmes. ESWs were essentially left to work with the child independently, although advice from the teachers could be sought.

### **ESW’s Relationship with a Child**

Respondents were asked to describe the relationship they had with a child they worked with as an ESW. Most of the respondents mentioned that they had a warm, caring, and positive relationship with a child which included features of working well together and enjoying the shared relationship, indicating a happy association. For example, one respondent described the relationship as “warm, friendly, firm, fun, interesting, understanding, accept[ing] [and] reciprocal” [ESW 60] illustrating the view of many respondents. There were various aspects of the relationship where the child would apparently look for support from the ESW, perhaps as the familiar person. For instance, “I have full responsibility of his needs” [ESW 9] and “the child I work with does look to me first for help” [ESW 1]. Some respondents reported that they acted as a role model to help the child attain skills and build confidence. Two ESWs reported, “he... will copy my actions” [ESW 21] and “I...model and encourage...the child to help them participate” [ESW 38].



Thirty-one respondents reported their relationship with a child involved elements of trust and saw themselves as a “friend”, “teacher,” or “support worker”. Trust was gained through their understanding of the child’s needs and participating in co-operative activities with them. For example, three ESWs reported different aspects of a trusting relationship, describing the relationship as “warm, trusting, co-operative fun” [ESW 2], and “he trusts me for comfort when hurt or afraid” [ESW 54], and “she trusts me to support her showing her one on one how to do certain tasks” [ESW 70].

A more intimate relationship between the ESW and child was further described by 17 respondents as “very close”, a “special bond,” and “very affectionate.” Some ESWs identified the reason for closeness was to support the child to feel safe, be reassured if troubled, to learn, and to have fun. Other respondents identified that closeness could also be too exclusive, to the detriment of the child’s learning and relationships with others. For example, ESWs reported it was “easy...to end up in a bubble with the child” [ESW 18] and that a very affectionate child attempted “to cuddle instead of doing a task” [ESW 98]. In contrast, another respondent reported “I work very closely with this child at all times because her needs are so high and complex” [ESW 57]. This indicates there may be some children that require a close and supportive relationship to meet their high needs.

In addition, eight respondents identified an even closer relationship with a child and described themselves as a “play partner,” “mum/parent,” or “babysitter” indicating the ESW may be taking on various roles and responsibilities while in the kindergarten environment that are outside of their role as a support worker. For instance, “I am his teacher and playmate” [ESW 77] and “I am the ‘other mum’ according to the boy’s mother. I work alongside him with lots of hugs, giggles and fairly unmovable boundaries” [ESW 8].

The analysis of data further identified that, when respondents were asked to describe the relationship they had with the child they worked with, categories relating to spatial

awareness, dependence and independence, safety, comfort and behaviour were apparent. Some ESWs understood the need to provide space for a child to explore their environment. For example one ESW noted, “role modelling and encouraging, to standing back when child capable” [ESW 31] whilst another commented “I am standing back a lot more to allow him more space” [ESW 83].

Some respondents were aware of the need to promote independence and encourage a child to try different activities without always having support to extend learning and reduce dependence. For example, one ESW “encourages the child to be independent and to try new things” [ESW 90]. In contrast another respondent commented “the child is very dependent on me, needs constant physical contact with me and I feel very responsible for this child as she is so high needs...” [ESW 6]. This indicated that although some ESWs were aware of the need to promote independence, this was not always possible due to the high needs of the child and the type of support they require.

A small number of respondents recognised their role was one of providing safety and comfort to a child and was further described as meeting their personal routines of eating, toileting, and providing reassurance. For example one ESW noted, “the child comes to me for comfort when hurt [and] tired” [ESW 41] and a second ESW noted their role was “helping him to eat, change his nappy and keep him safe” [ESW 17] indicating respondents were involved in a variety of roles that supported a child’s wellbeing.

Respondents considered behaviour management as part of their relationship and role as an ESW and reported using the following strategies in their work with a child. Two ESWs reported their role as “ignoring negative and praising positive behaviour,” [ESW 50] and offering “positive reinforcement when behaving appropriately; distract, move on, stop behaviour that is inappropriate or dangerous, negative” [ESW 80]. As the majority of ESWs made no comment on behavioural problems this may indicate this was not an issue.

Alternatively, in practice, this responsibility may rest with the teacher in collaboration with the ESW.

Although respondents were asked to describe the relationship they had with the child in this question, some respondents offered additional responses concerning their relationships with others such as peers, teachers, and parents.

Eighteen respondents perceived their job was to encourage a child to have positive relationships and interactions with others and in particular recognised that a child's relationship with peers was important to promote friendship and inclusion. For example, ESWs noted "his relationship with peers is highly important... [and I] give him a helping hand to communicate well with them" [ESW 59] and "My job is to help my child interact/approach and play with/alongside his peers [and] help with conversation, introductions and explanations" [ESW 80].

A small number of respondents acknowledged the child had good relationships with teachers, who sometimes worked with and included the child in play. For example, one ESW noted, "...the other teachers do also work with him and the children – sometimes approach him and include him in play (maybe once or twice a session)" [ESW 18].

A few respondents acknowledged they felt a sense of pleasure when they informed parents of their child's progress. For example, one respondent noted "a bond develops with parents. I delight in the achievements my child makes and share that delight with parents" [ESW 102].

In summary, the majority of respondents reported the relationship they had with a child was warm and caring, a happy association, and based on trust. In addition the position held a

number of titles for respondents described as “friend”, “teacher”, “support worker”, “play partner,” and “mum” indicating some respondents had an intimate relationship with the child. These more intimate relationships appeared linked to the level of care required by the child.

## **General Comments**

The last question in the survey gave respondents the opportunity to offer any general comments regarding the education of children with disabilities in the early childhood sector and the role that ESWs have in their education. The analysis of data has identified five key themes. These relate to a child’s inclusion and social skills, the importance of working as a team, the ESW’s role in combination with the teacher, PD, and training and qualifications. The remaining data can be categorised into issues of Government funding and insufficient allocated hours, being poorly paid, and transition to school.

### **Children’s inclusion and social skills**

Eight respondents viewed the inclusion of children with disabilities into the learning environment was paramount noting that they were relied on to support and encourage children’s confidence and social interactions. For example, one respondent considered their role was to help a child to “interact with their peers and have respect for their teachers and good manners (acceptable behaviour)” [ESW 12]. Another respondent noted that, with the appropriate support, children “can be offered the opportunity to reach their full potential intellectually, socially, emotionally and physically” [ESW 57]. Further, an ESW commented that “a child with disabilities can be fully included and enjoy a rich pre-school experience” [ESW 54].

Seven respondents commented on how they helped children to socialise and belong in the learning environment. For instance, one respondent provided communication and behaviour management strategies, such as, “just treat them with care and talk in single words and back up what you say to them, e.g., if they eat play dough and ask them to stop, then you take them away from the play dough for not following instructions” [ESW 24]. A few respondents commented that they offered “a lot of encouragement, praise and photos of their achievement” [ESW 67] and that “children with disabilities can do amazing things when they are supported well” [ESW 39].

Five respondents viewed one-on-one support as important to help their child interact, meet goals, make progress, and prepare for their future learning. In particular, one respondent noted that, depending on the needs of the child, practices vary “from full one-to-one support to mainly observation and subtle facilitation of social interaction with peers. Flexibility required depending on centre culture and teachers’ attitudes” [ESW 53].

Four respondents noted that the role of ESWs needed to be flexible and adapt to the changing horizon of children’s needs. The IEP needed to be regularly updated to keep up with these changes and strategies and goals were also required. For example, one ESW commented “It is an important role! Each child you work with [is] so different, that you need to have strategies to deal with [them]. I work with Downs’ Syndrome, autism, behavioural and each one so different” [ESW 46].

### **ESWs working in a team**

Seven respondents noted working as a team was important and saw themselves as the link or go between with peers, parents, and teachers. One respondent commented about the importance of the team approach to provide “the chance for a child with disabilities to learn and be part of early childhood education by supporting both the teaching team, the child’s

individual needs (and ideally the whole family by creating trust)” [ESW 101]. The involvement of all concerned with the child’s learning was seen to be important and was described as a “big village” [ESW 100]. This supports a collaborative approach to learning which includes the need for parents to trust the ESW with their child. For example, one respondent commented “The parent has to trust us to care for their child in the mainstream setting, often for the first time...and vital that it is done without judgement and with respect [because] many of those children would be unable to participate without our support” [ESW 17].

### **ESW’s role in combination with the teacher**

Eleven respondents considered the role they had in conjunction with the role of the teacher, in relation to the education of children with disabilities in the kindergarten sector. Most respondents realised their role was to support a child with disabilities and maintain the programme for teachers, whereas the teacher’s focus was on the whole group. Three respondents wanted more teacher input, for instance, one respondent wanted the teacher to “be made aware that the child isn’t only the ESW’s responsibility once they arrive and would like some support and inclusiveness from some of the centres” [ESW 61]. Another respondent who was new to the role resented the teachers getting the credit when “it is myself who has extended the concentration on these activities [and]...am yet to see input from the teachers” [ESW 3]. Further, it was felt by one respondent that “... in many cases [they were] not respected by teachers” [ESW 15]. This highlights the possibility that some ESWs are not receiving sufficient support from the teaching staff and may be undervalued and left to educate a child by themselves.

The reason for the absence of teacher involvement in their work with children with disabilities was described by three respondents. They commented that the large number of children in the kindergarten and the load placed on teachers made it difficult for teachers to provide children with disabilities with quality time. For example, one respondent commented “more

often than not children with disabilities/disorders have needs that cannot be met by the teachers...this may be due to a large roll, teacher inexperience or time" [ESW 69].

Conversely three respondents noted that teachers did have time to respond to children with disabilities. For example, one respondent noted "teachers are able to respond to all children without the special children being left out" [ESW 13] and another respondent stated that "although they of course have time for these children, it is hard for them to provide one-to-one" [ESW 70]. This indicates there was a variance with the level of involvement that the teachers had with children with disabilities.

Seven respondents commented they enjoyed their job as an ESW working with children with disabilities, most finding the role happy and worthwhile. For example, one respondent commented "It's the most rewarding job to see a child smile for the smallest thing we take for granted" [ESW76]. Two respondents were appreciative of the provision of services for the children with disabilities and the centres they had worked in: "thank goodness for Special Education and early intervention, an amazing service for children and families" [ESW 88] and "the centres and kindys I have worked in have been really understanding and very helpful, they really appreciate having me there also" [ESW 103].

### **Professional development**

Ten respondents classified PD as important for their work with children with disabilities, with the majority wanting "more", "better", "real", or "continued" PD. This data indicates respondents were willing to upgrade their work performance and were wanting PD, however, two respondents commented "but we aren't offered a great deal of opportunity" [ESW 4] whilst another commented "GSE offer no professional development" (ESW 6]. Respondents identified that certain criteria should be in place prior to and in preparation for starting the job. For instance, one respondent stated, "I feel it imperative ESWs are educated on their clients' abilities and disabilities before working with them" [ESW 78]. Another respondent

provided a personal perspective of being under prepared regarding her work as an ESW, stating “I have strong views on the lack of ‘real’ up- skilling of our work and of my original appointment which was in the deep end and I felt set up to fail which from a personal/professional point of view was quite crippling” [ESW 32]. This indicates there may be little opportunity for ESWs to attend PD prior to starting the job and that they are therefore ill-equipped to meet the child’s specific needs. In contrast, one respondent reported “on the job skill and knowledge has benefitted me immensely...” [ESW 68]. Although on the job training is helpful, this does not prepare the ESW before working with the child.

### **Training and qualifications**

Eight respondents considered training and qualifications were vital for their work with children with disabilities. Most of these respondents wanted to have the opportunity to gain qualifications in their role. For instance, one respondent suggested the need for a qualification the same as “teacher aides are able to study... (and have a recognised salary)” [ESW 4]. Another respondent would prefer training “instead of lots of one off courses” [ESW 31]. There were respondents who questioned the quality of support provided to children with disabilities. For example, one respondent stated, “they do not deserve to be supported by people with very little training or knowledge. Their needs seem to be met on an ‘ad hoc’ basis depending on availability of willing/available people” [ESW 36]. The need to have qualified personnel working as ESWs is further identified by another respondent who expressed the view that it should be ensured that “... trained, skilled persons are working with them at all times” [ESW 58].

Two respondents reported that GSE offer no ESW qualifications or study papers. One respondent commented “sadly I cannot further [my] level of employment, without leaving to do Early Childhood teacher qualifications, which means it would take me five years to come back to the job I find very rewarding so I stay” [ESW 20]. There was a willingness from these



respondents to become qualified but it appeared there was very little opportunity to become trained as an ESW.

### **Government funding**

Twenty five respondents referred to issues of Government funding and insufficient allocated hours and time given to support children with disabilities in kindergarten learning environments. These respondents reported the need for more funding and expressed their concern that children with disabilities required more hours of support. For example, one ESW stated that, “higher functioning children that just need a few hours to set them up for life are losing funding and moderate to severe cases don’t get enough hours of support...” [ESW 5]. Another respondent noted that “children with the most needs only now qualify” [ESW 51]. Overall, it appears respondents felt that Government funding affected the levels of support and number of allocated hours given to children with disabilities. One ESW stated, “without early intervention, a lot of children and teachers are being disadvantaged not only the child but the whole centre can be affected when the extra assistance is not given to support the special needs of the child at the centre” [ESW 102]. Insufficient funding and hours of ESW support is likely to place more pressure on the kindergarten staff.

Some respondents were frustrated that their hours of employment and the time they had with a child was not enough to meet the child’s needs and make progress in their learning. For example, one respondent noted “there is a maximum of 10 hours a week per child. The child I work with most is at [the] centre 28 hours a week, as the centre are strong on inclusion...he would do better with more support” [ESW 41]. Another respondent commented “the hours are never sufficient to satisfactorily complete a program set up. For a 17 hour week, my child gets 7.5 hours per week. To make progress can sometimes be hit and miss, and a lot depends on the individual child” [ESW 82]. That children were not receiving enough hours of support was reported by another two respondents, “it concerns

me that the children are getting less hours with one to one...they grow and mature with the encouragement” [ESW 52] and “we can access a ‘special learning library’ thankfully. We do this outside our working hours, as time with our children is so limited” [ESW 29].

Some respondents perceived their work was undervalued by the system. For instance, one respondent noted that “GSE regards ESWs as ‘child minder’ and as such treat us with little respect” [ESW 6] and another respondent commented, “the MOE use the ESW little in special education and set a wage scale but the role is what services want it to be” [ESW 11]. Furthermore, a respondent stated, “we should be recognised by the government more for all the work we put in, not as the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff” [ESW 50]. Finally, one respondent explained that reduced funding means attending any sessions to up-skill reduced the time spent with a child. For example, “any extra input by the ESW must come out of the child’s allocated hours, e.g. attending an Occupational therapy session to learn firsthand skills pertaining to a particular child” [ESW 82].

### **ESWs’ pay**

Even though respondents enjoyed their job, there were six respondents that commented about being poorly paid. For example, one respondent commented “pay is pretty poor considering my qualifications – am on maximum of \$15 per hour” [ESW 98]. Another respondent noted “the pay and conditions are steadily getting worse...[and] this impacts on children as there is a high staff turnover and more experienced ESWs are leaving” [ESW 15]. It appears that the pay structure for ESWs does not match the responsibilities placed on them and ESWs appear to be underpaid, which might lead to experienced ESWs leaving the field.

Three respondents identified the role of the ESW was not sufficiently defined. For example, one respondent noted, “it is very important for ESWs to know what is expected of them. Often there are so many ‘grey’ areas and it is easy to feel swamped in your work especially if there is lack of EIT support and no support from teachers at the kindy” [ESW 83]. The need for job clarification was further acknowledged by another respondent: “the role of the ESW has not [been] defined or recognised by the education system...” [ESW 11]. The ESW’s role appears to vary between kindergartens and is dependent on the support from the teaching staff. This suggests the role of an ESW needs to be clearly defined including clarification of the role the teacher plays in relation to the ESW and child with disabilities.

### **Transition to school**

Thirteen respondents considered the transition of a child to school by preparing them for school and the wider community was a vital part of their role. For example, one respondent commented, “early childhood education lays the foundation for school and to have a great support in place helps for a successful transition to school” [ESW 41]. A few respondents also viewed the benefits of school preparation and one respondent noted “ESWs give a child who may have gaps in their development, a boost before they become school age” [ESW 38].

Respondents identified the benefit of sharing information between the kindergarten and school to ensure there was a successful transition for the child. For example, one respondent commented that “the understanding and experience we have is valuable information to be passed onto their support worker at school” [ESW 21] and another respondent noted “the recent introduction of more communication between early childhood and school has helped transitions” [ESW 25].

A few respondents made suggestions about the advantage of extra support for a child during the transition to school. For instance, one respondent suggested that “ESW paid sessions to attend first few days at school should be provided by MOE as this hand over after lap invaluable [sic] particularly modelling to new teacher aide how best to support [an] individual child” [ESW 31]. Another respondent recommended that all centres have assistance, noting that ESW support was only provided for the “worst” cases and suggested that “many more children would have a better start to school learning with a targeted ESW...” [ESW 25].

Three respondents commented that there were inconsistencies between environments which influenced transitions. For example, one respondent stated “it seems a shame that the system works with a break between ECE and school. At the same time as the child makes the huge transition to school, she/he has to get used to a new support worker and is under a new team of people at GSE. I suspect this makes a hard change harder” [ESW 18]. Although change is inevitable for a child transitioning from kindergarten to school, it may be that the ESW could transition along with the child to help create a smoother process.

In summary, the data shows respondents are dedicated to their work with children with disabilities in kindergarten communities and consider it to be an enjoyable and rewarding job. However the perceived cuts in Government funding means that children with disabilities may be disadvantaged. Due to insufficient funding, ESWs considered the hours allocated to work with a child were inadequate, given the child’s high needs for inclusion, social integration, and preparation for transition to school. With more funding and more allocated hours ESWs felt they would be far more effective in meeting a child’s needs and ultimately the whole teaching team would be better supported. Some ESWs felt they were undervalued by the education sector and were underpaid. The majority of respondents have had PD, although the job position does not provide for ongoing formal training and there are no ESW qualifications available.

ESWs reported their roles were diverse and have not properly been defined. While a number of ESWs had a good working relationship with the teachers, there were some who felt unsupported by the teaching team. ESWs understood that teachers had overall responsibility for all the children in the classroom. Respondents considered their work was important and that they did make a difference to their child's learning and development.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion this chapter shows that demographic data, concerning the ESWs' experience and qualifications, was diverse and that most respondents had attended PD mainly in the area of Autism. Some respondents had found it difficult to attend PD or had not had PD available. The role of the ESW was varied and centred on integrating the child into the kindergarten environment. Children tended to interact mainly in combination with ESWs, peers, and teachers. To a lesser extent some ESWs worked solely with the child. ESWs mostly used a combination of positions when working with their child, such as *alongside* *hovering opposite* and *behind*. The kindergarten teachers played a major role in determining the work of an ESW. The majority of respondents had a close relationship with their child. Generally, the ESWs enjoyed their job and considered it an important role even though reduced Government funding had affected the hours they were able to work with their child. The next chapter presents a discussion of these findings.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion and Implications**

In this chapter key discussion include the ESW's role, the teachers' role in determining the ESW's work with a child, training of ESWs, PD, the ESW's relationship with a child, and their other relationships, the child's interactions with others, the proximity of an ESW to their child, and Government funding. Key results are discussed with an overview of the main findings, linked to literature, with possible implications for theory, policy, and practice. This is followed by an outline of the limitations of this study and suggestions for future research. This chapter then finishes with an overall conclusion.

### **Demographic Data**

Of the 414 questionnaires sent out, 103 respondents returned completed questionnaires. This represented a response rate of 24.9%. The demographic data suggests that respondents were working in fairly typical kindergarten settings. Respondents commonly reported the child they worked with attended kindergarten sessions between four to five hours per day where 40 children attended the session and four teachers taught in each session. Respondents worked across a broad cross-section of urban/suburban locations and multicultural kindergarten communities, typical of New Zealand society (Dunn 2000). The majority of respondents had been working in the field for less than five years (Figure 1, p. 36) and currently worked with up to two children. An interesting finding was that almost 40% of respondents were working with children with Autism as the child's main disability.

As a group of employees generally, these respondents were atypical in terms of gender as all but one were female. However, the wider ECE workforce is predominantly female and therefore the sample is typical of the gender makeup in this sector. For example, as at July,

2010, licensed early childhood services employed 343 male and 19,558 female teachers (Ministry of Education, 2010) indicating the teaching profession was predominantly female.

## **Role of the ESW**

The role of the ESW is varied and centred on supporting a child's integration into the kindergarten and working with a child to develop their social skills and build relationships between the child, peers, teachers, and parents.

### **The child's integration into kindergarten**

The first major theme described by respondents was that their role was to support a child's integration into the kindergarten and to work in partnership with teachers. ESWs worked alongside teachers to assist a child to achieve IP goals, attended and contributed to IP meetings, kept records, and informed EI teachers of a child's progress. In the main, ESWs reported a collaborative working role with kindergarten teachers and the visiting EI teacher, which is supported by some literature. Glass et al. (2008) considered the role of the ESW as that of a teacher and part of the teaching team, working to support all children. Likewise, Rutherford (2008) noted that teacher aides worked with all children supporting the teacher even though they had an assigned child allocated to them. Conversely, Cullen and Bevan Brown's (1999) survey revealed ESWs could be "taking over" rather than working together with the teacher to support the child. That roles normally kept for professionals had shifted to the paraprofessional was reported in Giangreco et al.'s (1997) study. Nearly "all of the day to day curricular and instructional decisions" (p. 10) were implemented by the paraprofessional rather than professional staff and teachers' interactions with students with disabilities were observed as minimal, with their involvement mainly "limited to greetings, farewells and sometimes praise" (p. 10).

More recent research confirmed that responsibility continued to rest with the paraprofessional. Giangreco and Broer's (2005) research found curricular adaptations, instruction, and communication with parents was being assigned to paraprofessionals. Contrary to findings in this study, New Zealand empirical research showed that teachers saw the ESW as responsible for inclusion of the child with disabilities rather than working in partnership. MacArthur, Purdue, and Ballard (2003) noted that teachers viewed the ESWs' role was to include the child. Similarly, in Macartney's (2008) study the teachers viewed the family, EI staff, and ESW as responsible for inclusion of the child. However, Macartney noted that learning and participation were considerably reduced for a child if teachers were not responsible, as the ESW centred on the child rather than the entire learning community.

In Rutherford's (2008) study one teacher aide stated her role was to support the teacher; "I know we are not trained, but in a lot of situations...that child is taught by me, not the teacher" (p. 139). Similarly In this present study, twenty respondents reported that teachers had very little involvement in determining ESWs' work with a child. For example, one respondent noted "...I work fairly independently to them. They are usually busy with some of our other challenging children" [ESW 8]. Another respondent reported, "I'm left to my own devices but am able to ask, get advice, help" [ESW 45]. This highlights the possibility that some ESWs are not receiving sufficient support from the teaching staff and left to educate the child by themselves.

Research supports the possibility that ESWs may be taking the place of a teacher in terms of adult participation with a child in early childhood settings. Young and Simpson (1997) report paraprofessional presence "may supplant a teacher's involvement" (p. 34) and that educators may relinquish their responsibility to teach and require a child to attend with a parent or ESW (Macartney, 2008; Purdue et al., 2001). Further, Macartney (2008) noted that without a teaching approach that upholds responsive, reciprocal relationships between all parties, learning and involvement may be jeopardised.



Some respondents in this study reported their role included assisting a child to be involved and interested in their surroundings while others described working exclusively with a child. Research surrounding ESWs' work practice was undertaken by Boomer (1994) who noted that when paraprofessionals were assigned to a student on a one-to-one basis as a full time "babysitter" this may have been a barrier for the teacher to teach. There was too much responsibility given to the paraprofessional and experienced classroom teachers were giving them the task of teaching the child with disabilities (Boomer, 1994). Purdue et al.'s (2001) study highlighted conflicting views of whether ESWs were meant to work one-to-one with the child with disabilities or with all children and this differed between early childhood environments. Similarly, Marks et al. (1999) reported more than half of paraeducators adapted the curriculum and worked one to-one with students, rather than the primary teacher, even though paraeducators felt it to be the teacher's role. In contrast, the same study showed they developed intervention strategies to encourage wider involvement of others in the child's learning. Paraeducator support was faded out by shifting the focus from one student to the whole classroom, to encourage the teacher and peers to become involved. It would appear there was a need for clarification of the roles of ESWs and teachers to help alleviate uncertainty as to where the responsibility lies for including children with disabilities into educational settings.

### **Social skill development**

The second major theme reported by respondents, regarding their role, was to support a child to develop social skills. This includes aspects of involving everyone in the child's learning, building relationships between the child, peers, teachers, and parents, and to be alert to social opportunities for a child and promote their independence. This collaborative approach to learning is supported by Giangreco et al. (1997) who argue for paraprofessionals to work with all children rather than solely with a child with disabilities to avoid the stigma of special education and to protect a child's identity. The delicate balance of

when to best support a child's learning is described by Hemmingsson, Borrell, and Gustavsson (2003). In their study they interviewed pupils and found assistants could help or hinder a child's social opportunities, especially when the child wanted minimal help. There was a conflict between facilitating learning and the recognition that children preferred social participation within a group and that involvement with teachers and peers may be reduced by the presence of an assistant. Similarly, Dunn's (2000) research found that ESWs encouraged a child to join a group but then focused on a specific task rather than supporting the child's social interactions with their peers.

In the current study, respondents identified that their relationships with the child they worked with were built on trust and friendship and that they supported reciprocal play with peers, encouraged the child to communicate their needs, and encouraged a better understanding with their peer group. They also identified the importance of working as a team with the EI, kindergarten teachers, and peers. In addition, ESWs also identified that it was important for the child and family to belong in the education system and for parents to be listened to and accepted. This is similar to research reported by Purdue et al. (2001), where parents appreciated preschool staff who had accepted them and not treated them any differently from other families. Glass et al. (2008) noted the ESW, child, and family needed to belong as full members of the learning community.

The benefit of inclusion in the general education system was identified in research by Kennedy, Shikla, and Fryxell (1997) who compared general education with segregated education and found increased social benefits in the mainstream, reporting "greater levels of sustained contact with peers without disabilities and richer friendship networks" (p. 2). In addition, Glass et al. (2008) supported a collaborative teaching approach to achieve full acceptance of children with disabilities alongside peers. Evans et al. (1992) found parents appreciated their children being accepted by peers in the regular classroom. Some children

were considered to be friends and some were the most popular in the class, regardless of a disability.

Transition to school was also considered by some respondents as part of their role, as they identified that preparing a child for school and the community was important. The sharing of information between kindergarten and school was perceived as important, as was providing children with extra support for a smooth transition into the school environment.

### **Teachers' Role in Determining the ESW's work with a Child**

In this study three-quarters of respondents (n= 77, 74.8%) commented on the positive role teachers had in determining their work as ESWs. Of these, 54.4% of respondents indicated that teachers were supportive and played a major role in providing direction. Almost one third (n= 29) of respondents felt they were included as part of the teaching team, worked in partnership with teachers, and made decisions together with teachers about centre routines. That more than half of ESWs reported positive support from, and the involvement of, teachers in determining their work with a child is a positive finding of this research. This is similar to research reported by Purdue et al. (2001) where teachers used typical teaching practices to teach all children, including children with disabilities "remembering this is a person not a disability" (p. 46). Glass et al. (2008) also found that it was important for staff to use a collaborative teaching approach so that children with disabilities are not singled out. MacNaughton & Williams (2009) reported that teachers can actively engage and position themselves to teach the curriculum in ways that foster children's participation and learning. Overall, these findings contrast with Rutherford's (2008) research where half of the students were unanimous their help came from the teacher aides more than the teacher and that one-to-one support unintentionally distanced students from teachers, especially if the teacher aide and student left the classroom.

It is, however, important to note that in the current research just over one-third of ESWs reported that teachers had limited involvement. In particular, teachers contributed by observing, monitoring a child's progress, and giving feedback. Twenty respondents reported teachers had no or very little involvement in determining their work with a child. Research in the schooling sector has identified several reasons for teachers not being involved. For example, Kearney and Kane (2006) have reported the reason for limited teacher involvement was that teachers found it difficult to include a child with disabilities because teachers lacked confidence and relied on visiting professionals. Similarly, Bruns and Mogharreban (2007) reported teachers needed training on subjects they were less sure about, such as implementation of the IEP and communication strategies.

One possible explanation for the positive teacher involvement evident in this study may relate to the organisational and structural constraints in schools compared with EC centres. Teachers in schools work together in departments or syndicates but teach on their own whereas teachers in early childhood settings operate as a team in the same physical space where there is interaction, teaching, and planning for the same group of children. Thus a collaborative team approach may be more evident in the early childhood environment where three to four teachers and an ESW are able to work in partnership, as opposed to the school environment where there is one classroom teacher and a teacher aide.

## **Training**

In this study almost half of respondents reported they were without formal training for their role as an ESW. These results mirror findings in both the international and New Zealand literature. For example, in the USA Giangreco et al. (2001) noted that paraprofessional supports were insufficiently trained. Similarly, New Zealand researchers Purdue, Ballard, and MacArthur (2001) inform "while some ESWs are trained teachers, many have very little,

if any, training or qualifications” (p. 39). There is no provision in New Zealand for an ESW to undertake formal training to gain a qualification. Some ESWs may have a qualification in teaching or another profession, while others rely on professional development and on-the-job training to gain experience. Only a very small minority of respondents considered training and qualifications as important. They wanted to gain qualifications and be given opportunities similar to teacher aides working in school settings, preferring on-going training to one-off PD courses. Teacher aides working in New Zealand schools are able to obtain a teacher aide certificate through the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, which offers distance learning nationwide. This creates a disparity between training opportunities for teacher aides in schools and ESWs in early childhood settings, even though ESWs and teacher aides both support children in the education sector.

Interestingly, the findings in this study show those with less experience were likely to be more qualified (i.e., they were a teacher or currently training to be a teacher) than those with 10 years or more years’ experience. This may indicate a trend that ESWs are currently becoming better qualified.

Respondents reported that they believed children did not deserve to be supported by people with very little training or knowledge and they needed qualified personnel. Giangreco et al.’s (2002) research reported there was a lack of educated and experienced paraprofessionals. For example, it was difficult to find paraprofessionals with ‘2-4 years’ secondary education, which was preferred. In this study, it was found some ESWs were willing to gain qualifications but GSE offered little incentive to be trained as an ESW. A small number of ESWs were trained teachers or in training, which they appear to have initiated themselves, however almost one-half of respondents were without any formal training.

## Professional Development

The majority of respondents indicated they had attended PD relating to their role as an ESW. That ESWs are taking up the opportunity to attend regular PD and had a wide array of PD available is a positive finding from this research, even though not all were able to or had limited opportunity to attend. Professional development opportunities have been identified as important in other empirical studies focused on paraprofessionals. In Glass et al.'s (2008) study PD was provided to staff and this involved the extended teaching team. For example, the parents, ESWs, and students were able to use the technology and kindergarten resources and all were accepted as members of the learning community.

The results in Figure 2 (p. 36) indicated almost 40 ESWs worked with children with Autism and more than one-third of respondents attended PD relating to Autism. That a large number of ESWs working with children with Autism indicated they had received PD in this area, meaning they were likely to have some understanding of the nature of this disability and how to work with a child with Autism is an encouraging result. Literature suggests that staff need to be knowledgeable in order to support children with Autism in social, communicative, and imaginative areas of the curriculum (Wall, 2010; MacIntyre, 2010).

One key theme that emerged from the data was that respondents had attended PD relating to communication which included training in sign language (26%) speech language (23.5%) communication (13.6%) behaviour management (23.5%) and social/emotional learning (6.2%). Behaviour management and social/emotional learning were grouped as part of the communication criteria, as an ESW may need to assist a child to self regulate, to know how to interact and communicate with their peers, and to help with social acceptance in the learning environment. The fact that the Ministry of Education, as ESWs' employers, had provided PD that recognised communication was an important area of the curriculum for

these children, their learning and development, and ultimate inclusion, was a favourable result.

Although the majority of respondents had attended PD there were still 20% who had not attended PD or had described their engagement in PD as insufficient. Literature emphasises the importance of PD for people working in specialised areas such as ESWs. This has been found to be important as it ultimately supports children with disabilities, as these children require knowledgeable staff to adapt the curriculum and support their learning. Bricker and Woods Cripe (1992) also indicate the need for training in specialised intervention strategies would better equip staff.

The importance for personnel to be more knowledgeable in the field is reported in literature. MacIntyre (2010) suggested the use of specific strategies, embedded into the child's learning environment, counteracted possible isolation and promoted inclusion for children. For example, an ESW and teacher could adapt the curriculum together, working from the IEP and using strategies discussed in on-the-job PD. PD could include how to keep the child in the centre of their own learning and how to encourage choice making and turn-taking games with peers. PD could also address strategies to fade out the child's need for help by an ESW and to promote ongoing independence for the child. A PD package *Including Everyone: Te Reo Tataki* distributed by Ministry of Education in 2000 was intended to increase educators' understanding of EI policies and inclusive practices. Accredited providers of EI services reported there were still discrepancies as to whose responsibility it was to include children with disabilities into the learning environment. There were still centres that relied on the ESW or EI provider rather than the teacher (Bourke et al., 2002). Almost a decade later, the ECE Taskforce (2010) recommended that PD be available for all early childhood staff to work successfully with children with special learning needs. They considered that these families were being disadvantaged through insufficient staff education.

## **ESW's Relationship with a Child**

When ESWs were asked to describe their relationship with a child with disabilities, responses ranged from being in a warm, caring and trusting relationship, to them having a parent role, described by some respondents as like a “mum” and “very close”. Some research has reported that relationships between a paraprofessional and children with disabilities were wide-ranging. In Rutherford's (2008) school based study, students mainly enjoyed positive relationships with teacher aides and identified kindness as an important attribute, generally calling their teacher aide “a friend.” However, the results showed that teacher aides sometimes acted as surrogate friends due to the absence of friends their own age (Rutherford, 2008). The limitation of friends was also found in Giangreco, Doyle, and Broer's (2005) study where students with disabilities reported they only made friends with others who also had a disability and interacted with the paraprofessional rather than the teacher.

A more personal relationship can also form, as is seen in Giangreco et al.'s (2005) study, where former students used words such as “mother” and “protector” to describe their paraprofessional. Giangreco et al. found that this type of relationship interfered with interactions with teachers and peers. Similarly, research reported by Rutherford (2008) found teacher aides were a guard from teasing and bullying and took on a minder role mainly at breaks and lunchtime for students who felt safer with an adult. Similarly, Skar and Tamm (2001) reported several children and adolescents considered an ideal assistant would provide confidence and safety.

In addition, Skar and Tamm (2001) also found half of the children interviewed perceived the paraprofessional as a “mother” or “father” who hindered peer interactions. One child reported, several peers have asked “if I have my mother with me...it's embarrassing” (2001,



p. 924). It is interesting that similar language is found in research undertaken both in New Zealand and internationally. The results from this study indicated the relationship between ESWs and a child with disabilities were varied and likely to go beyond the usual adult/child working relationship found in early childhood settings. A possible explanation for this closeness could relate to the nature of the care and support required to meet a child's personal and educational needs. The ESWs need to know how to provide just enough support to meet these needs while still ensuring they promote a child's independence in the learning environment.

Skar and Tamm's (2001) study indicates that when the paraprofessional was present, the child with disabilities perceived that peers did not play with them, as the paraprofessional chose what they would play with and how, thus intruding on the game. The closeness of the relationship between child and teacher aide needed to be balanced to enable autonomy for a child with disabilities, to ensure access to the learning environment was not hindered. In Skar and Tamm's study some respondents provided space for a child to explore and promoted independence. In Rutherford's (2008) research, teacher aides were aware of student dependency, making sure they distanced themselves to allow for student engagement with peers.

## **Other Relationships**

When respondents were asked about their relationship with a child, they also gave their perspectives on relationships with teachers, peers, and parents in the kindergarten environment. Eighteen respondents encouraged a child to have positive relationships with peers to promote friendship and inclusion. A small number acknowledged the child had a good relationship with teachers who sometimes worked with and included the child in play and some respondents took pleasure in informing parents of the child's progress. Research

supports the importance of collaborative relationships between all parties in the learning environment. For example, Glass et al. (2008) reported the ESW was part of the teaching team and this meant their role included teaching all the children, which this allowed for the teachers and peers to interact with the child with disabilities. Similarly, Purdue et al. (2001) found that early childhood personnel and parents considered collaborative relationships were important for inclusion. Parents preferred their child be educated alongside age-related peers and appreciated preschool staff that accepted them. Even though respondents in this study were assigned to work with a child there were some who recognised it was important to include teachers, peers, and parents as part of the child's learning environment.

### **Child's Interactions with Others**

Almost half of the respondents indicated the child they worked with interacted in combination with the ESW, peers, and teachers (n= 46, 48.4%). A further 24.2% of respondents indicated the child solely worked with them. That twice the percentage of children were interacting with the ESW, peers, and teachers as opposed to solely with the ESW is a favourable finding and is consistent with literature that identifies the importance of children with disabilities interacting with others across the learning environment.

### **Proximity of the ESW**

The majority of respondents (n=100; 91%) used a combination of paying exclusive attention to a child and including peers during interactions when working with a child with disabilities. This is a positive outcome as such practices support a collaborative approach to learning by including others when working with a child in the learning environment.

Almost half of the respondents (49.5%) used a combination of positions when working with their child in a group setting. These included *alongside*, *hovering*, *opposite*, and *behind*. This was a favourable result as using a combination of positions was likely to provide space for the inclusion of teachers and peers in the child's learning environment. A further 29.1% of respondents worked exclusively alongside and 10.7% of respondents indicated using a hovering position. These were less favourable results as, according to Giangreco et al. (1997), close proximity, including hovering near a child, resulted in reduced peer involvement. When adults distanced themselves from the child, peer interactions could occur more easily. Participants in Giangreco's study indicated close proximity was essential at times to facilitate the child's use of resources, to gesture, and to assist the child in following directions. However, Giangreco found there was little indication that paraprofessionals were working towards reducing their assistance to allow teachers and peers to engage with the child and thus avoid paraprofessional dependency. Similarly, Rutherford (2008) reported teacher aide support could be excessive at times and found the majority of students did not need help.

In the current study, a comparison was made between the ESWs' proximity to the child with disabilities in a group and who the child primarily interacted with, in order to see if the proximity of an ESW influenced the involvement of teachers and peers. Proximity was categorised as *alongside*, *hovering*, *opposite* and *behind* whilst who the child primarily interacted with was categorised as *ESW*, *teachers* and *peers*. A large number of ESWs used a combination of positions when working with a child and at the same time the child interacted with the ESW, teachers, and peers. Even when ESWs were *alongside* exclusively with a child, the child interacted in combination with the *ESW*, *teachers*, and *peers*. This result showed inclusion of others irrespective of the ESWs' close proximity to the child. This favourable outcome indicates that the majority of ESWs are providing children with disabilities the space to learn while at the same time, the opportunity to interact with others. In addition, in the *combination* category, even when a child primarily interacted with an ESW

and, to a lesser degree, teachers and peers, the ESWs use of more than one position when working with a child allowed the child opportunity to experience personal space and some independence in their learning.

Similarly, Young and Simpson (1997) examined space between paraprofessionals and three students with Autism in general classrooms. All three students remained in their seats 82% or more of the time regardless of paraprofessional distance and stayed focused when working with peers. In contrast, Giangreco and Broer (2005) identified paraprofessionals spent 86% of the time in close proximity (inside 3ft) of the child. In the article they asked the reader to imagine how “having an adult metaphorically attached at the hip might affect social relationships” (p. 20). The concern for space between the paraprofessional and child was further identified in Mark’s et al.’s (1999) study who recommended IEP strategies be used to shift paraeducators’ focus from one child to the whole classroom to create space for teachers’ and peers’ involvement. The above international research has raised an awareness of the impact paraprofessionals’ close proximity can have and of the importance of involving others when working with children with disabilities. This research may have contributed to ESW’s awareness and to the positive results as seen in this study. In addition, recent New Zealand research has emphasised a collaborative learning environment was important for children with disabilities. For example, Glass et al. (2008) study had an inclusive focus where the ESW was considered part of the teaching team who worked with all children promoting a sociocultural approach to learning alongside peers. Similarly, Macartney (2008) followed a social model that promoted participation and learning for children with disabilities indicating that an inclusive learning environment is particularly important for children with disabilities.

A comparison was also made between who the child primarily interacts with and the ESW’s years of experience to see if those who were in the job for longer were more likely to involve teachers and peers. The majority of respondents indicated the child primarily interacted with

the ESW, teachers, and peers with these results slightly more prevalent for ESWs who had worked longer in the job, indicating some ESWs adopt a collaborative approach to learning as they become more experienced in the field.

In contrast, another group of ESWs reported working exclusively with a child with no interactions with teachers and peers. Kearney and Kane (2006) point out if students are perceived as socially different this may mean they are excluded from social interactions and the classroom curriculum. It is imperative for ESWs to understand that solely working with the child with disabilities and not promoting a collaborative approach to learning by involving others could be detrimental to acceptance and inclusion of the child in the kindergarten setting.

A comparison was made between the ESW's proximity in a group and ESW training to see if training had an effect on proximity. Most respondents used a combination of positions when working with a child and this did not appear to be influenced by training. Those with no training were slightly more likely to position themselves alongside the child. This may reflect the ESW's workplace, and that the ESW may be given sole responsibility of working with the child with disabilities rather than working with all children in the environment. It was likely that trained ESWs were more aware of the need for space between themselves and the child to allow for relationships to form, as opposed to those without training where they may not have the awareness or skill to use spatial intervention when working with their child. Creating space for a child with disabilities is important to allow for the possible involvement of teachers and peers to occur. McNaughton and Williams (2009) point out that hovering over children was likely to influence autonomy for children with disabilities and that teachers needed to provide space and trust children to be capable learners, though be available if needed.

## Government Funding

Twenty-five respondents reported the need for more government funding in the general comments of the questionnaire and was newly emerging data. Respondents noted that children with disabilities needed more hours of support otherwise these children were disadvantaged and that only children with the most needs qualified for Government funding. A lack of funding was reported to be placing stress on kindergarten staff and respondents felt there was insufficient time to meet a child's needs to further their learning. This was similar to an OECD (2006) report that identified "successful inclusion requires enhanced funding, low child-staff ratios, specialist staff and well planned pedagogies" (p. 17). In addition, UNCRPD (2008) has a focus on removing barriers that prevent disabled people from being fully valued participating members of society. More recently, the ECE Taskforce (2010) recommended an improved funding system that provides separate payments for priority groups of which this included children with special educational needs and that the Government could reprioritise their existing spending into this much needed area.

## Theoretical Implications

Since the late twentieth century, sociocultural theories have had significant influence on teaching and learning within early childhood and within inclusive education. Such approaches support children's equal opportunities regardless of any differences and therefore sit well with the sociocultural and ecological framework found in the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996).

Even though respondents in this study were assigned to work with an individual child, one of the key findings in this study was that some ESWs did include teachers, peers, and parents as part of the child's learning environment, which supports the *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of

Education, 1996) strand of Belonging or Mana Whenua, where “connecting links with the family and the wider world are affirmed and extended...” (p. 56).

The support and involvement of teachers in determining the work of ESWs with a child was favourable, however 20 respondents had no or little involvement of teachers in determining their work. This result positions the ESW as the key educator for delivering the curriculum, rather than the trained teacher. Vygotsky (1978) suggested children move between levels of competence, gaining knowledge through social interactions with teachers and more skilled peers. However, if some teachers have little involvement and ESWs are the primary support, some children with disabilities are missing out on learning opportunities involving everyone in the learning environment which is contrary to sociocultural principles.

In this study, nearly half of the respondents were without formal training in their role as an ESW. Although the majority of ESWs had attended PD, there were still 20% who had not attended PD or had reported it as insufficient. The organisation of PD and its delivery is imperative for informing ESWs about their work practice with children with disabilities, particularly as intimate working relationships were found in this study. Rogoff (1990) described a caregiver - child relationship, where the caregiver routinely adjusted their own involvement and encouraged a child's gradual contribution to facilitate learning.

A further key finding reported by respondents was that their role was to support a child's social skills, involve everyone in the child's learning, build relationships between the child, peers, teachers, and parents, and also to be alert to social opportunities and promote the child's independence. This finding is in accordance with sociocultural theories. Vygotsky (1978) understood that social interactions between the child and the people in their environment improved psychological, speech, and social development and were significant in the construction of meaning for the child. Vygotsky (1978) suggested that “the state of a child's mental development can be determined only by clarifying its two levels: the actual

development level and the zone of proximal development” (p. 87). That is, what a child can do now with help, they are able to do later on their own, supporting social interactions. In the present study, a high percentage (40%) of respondents working with children with Autism had attended PD relating to aspects of communication, an essential feature of the child’s social development. It is a positive finding that these children are being well supported by informed ESWs in this area of the curriculum. Rogoff(1990) recognised communication as important and while the spoken word was also important to Vygotsky, Rogoff noted non verbal communication in a young child’s early years of development was also significant and part of this communication.

The role of an ESW was reported as varied. Some respondents described their role as assisting a child to be involved and interested in their surroundings, while others described their role as working exclusively with a child. Similarly, Purdue et al. (2001) reported conflicting views of work practice that needed clarification and differed between various early childhood environments. Social constructivist theories of cognition identify guided participation as a key teaching technique. Rogoff (1990) agrees with Vygotsky’s theory that the child is an active participant of their social world and that guided participation should mean the fading out of adult involvement to allow the child to take responsibility for their own learning. In light of these theories, it is essential for teachers and ESWs to have knowledge of teaching strategies that minimise exclusive practices to ensure all parties are involved in the child’s learning environment, particularly as some respondents reported their relationship was very close, for example as play partner or mum. According to literature this closeness may counteract other relationships forming and accentuates the importance to balance how much support an ESW provides to ensure a sociocultural learning environment is promoted for children with disabilities.

Almost half of the respondents reported the child they worked with interacted in *combination* with the *ESW, peers, and teachers*. This was a favourable finding and is consistent with



having good access to the learning environment. In addition, a further key finding was that nearly half of respondents used a *combination* of positions when working with a child in a group setting. These included *alongside, hovering, opposite, and behind*. This was a positive finding because using a combination of positions was likely to provide space for the involvement of teachers and peers and for the child to explore their environment.

McNaughton and Williams (2009) noted that “careful positioning of people can enrich children’s planned and unplanned learning experiences” (p. 141). In contrast, Rogoff (1990) identified that young children seemed to position themselves for learning by staying near a trusted adult and watching activities. They then became involved and followed directions. This kept the child in the centre of their own learning.

## **Policy Implications**

The findings of this study highlight an important discrepancy between policy and practice. In particular, while ESWs and teacher aides are able to work with children with disabilities without a formal qualification, teacher aides working in New Zealand schools are able to obtain a teacher aide certificate. It would appear the school sector has been given precedence over the early childhood sector in providing a qualification for teacher aides and not for ESWs, even though they are equally responsible for supporting children with disabilities in the education system. The Ministry of Education (2000) policy’s goal is to “achieve a world-class inclusive education system that provides learning of equal quality to all children and school students” (p. 1). On the other hand, in recent research Kearney (2009) found disabled students in New Zealand were refused enrolment, unable to attend school full-time, and were deprived of access to take part in the usual class programme. Claiborne and Smith (2006) identify since the “passing of Human Rights Act (1993) disability has been acknowledged as an area of discrimination” and that such injustice needs prevention through appropriate practices in the delivery of services (p. 3).

The differences between early childhood and school personnel work practices is a second policy implication. It is likely there are organisational and structural constraints in New Zealand schools affecting collaborative relationships which are not prevalent in early childhood environments. The collaborative teaching approach is more evident in early childhood where three to four teachers and an ESW work in partnership as opposed to the school environment where there is one classroom teacher and a teacher aide. More than half of ESWs reported the positive support of teachers and their involvement in determining their work with a child with disabilities which suggests a collaborative approach to learning is being used in these early childhood settings. This is amiable with the *Te Whāriki* (1996) curriculum which has a focus on “reciprocal and responsive interactions with others” (p. 20) in a child’s learning environment. This favourable outcome implies children with disabilities were valued members and had some teacher involvement in their education. In contrast, just over one-third of ESWs had less or no involvement of teachers in determining their work, suggesting some ESWs were not receiving sufficient support from the teaching staff and were left to educate a child even though they were not qualified for the task. This is likely to be detrimental to a child’s learning as an ESW is not a teacher.

A further policy implication involves the issue of ESW training. In this study, almost half of respondents reported they were without formal training in their role as ESWs and approximately one-fifth of respondents had not attended PD, while others received insufficient PD. Consequently, this was likely to impact on job performance by reducing the quality of education a child with disabilities might receive, particularly if some ESWs were uninformed or inexperienced and yet working in the field. Children with disabilities require knowledgeable staff to adapt the curriculum and support their learning. According to Bricker and Cripe (1992) “for the successful placement of children in integrated settings, training must be provided to staff [as] most... preschool teachers are not trained in the behavioural technology that ensures the adaptations or repetitions necessary for learning to occur for children with special needs” (p. 58). The present education system relies on teachers to

guide ESWs on a daily basis. It is difficult for visiting advisors (EI teachers), who usually visit twice a term, to offer enough advice to teaching staff and the ESW when specialised intervention skills are required to embed IP goals into a naturally occurring curriculum on a daily basis. EI teachers are trained to work with children with disabilities (yet are advisors). While teachers support all children's learning, they may need PD to sharpen their intervention skills, and ESWs require no training yet are given the job to work with children with disabilities.

In this study, a small number of ESWs were willing to become qualified; however there is no formal qualification available. Consequently, children with disabilities may sometimes be supported by personnel who are not qualified, resulting in ESWs and children with disabilities being both undervalued and disadvantaged in the education system. This is contrary to the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (1996) strand, Contribution or Mana Tangata, which has a focus on fairness "where opportunities for learning are equitable and each child's contribution is valued" (p. 64).

The gender imbalance found in this study is an issue for children with disabilities being supported by a predominance of female support workers. This is a concern for all children in early childhood and shows more male teachers are needed as role models in the education sector.

The level of intimacy found in this study between the ESW and child might reflect the different backgrounds that respondents bring. For example, parents' experience of special education may differ from a teachers' experience with a different view of their role and use of language. The closeness of the relationship was not the usual adult/child working relationship and could be counterproductive to a child achieving independence. When a child with disabilities and their ESW may develop a very close relationship resulting from a child's social and physical needs, this relationship may also interfere with the involvement of

teachers and peers. The unique close relationship between ESWs and children with disabilities may need to be addressed to ensure all persons are being involved in the child's education, to alleviate any possible exclusive practice. The role of the ESW needs review along with sufficient PD to educate personnel in appropriate practice to reduce a child's possible dependency on one person, given the nature of their high needs.

Analysis of the data revealed there were differences in respondents' work practices. Some ESWs assisted a child to be involved and interested in the wider surroundings while others worked exclusively with a child. Instances of ESWs working one-to one with a child or with all children varied. Similarly, Purdue et al.'s (2001) study reported conflicting views and that ESW work practice differed between early childhood environments. Some ESWs used a one-to-one skills based approach when working with children, resulting in an exclusive relationship, rather than a sociocultural approach involving teachers and peers. In this study only a small number of ESWs worked exclusively with a child without including teachers and peers. Whilst these findings are commendable, some ESWs are not promoting a sociocultural education. Furthermore, these children may be socially disadvantaged if they are solely working with an ESW and unlikely to form relationships with teachers and peers or have sufficient access to the curriculum.

Respondents reported their main role as an ESW was to integrate a child into the kindergarten and to work in partnership with teachers and the visiting EI teacher supporting a collaborative working role. While some New Zealand literature reported ESWs and teacher aides had a collaborative working role supporting the teacher and working with all children (Glass et al., 2008; Rutherford, 2008) other studies reported teachers saw the ESW as solely responsible for inclusion of the child with disabilities rather than working in partnership with them (MacArthur, Purdue & Ballard, 2003; Macartney, 2008). It is imperative that the role of the ESW and the teaching team be clarified for a more unified approach toward working with children with disabilities and, as Macartney (2008) pointed out, without a clear

teaching direction, learning and participation were considerably reduced. It may be that some teacher aides need more support from the teaching staff. As noted in Rutherford's (2008) study, a teacher aide reported her role in a lot of cases was teaching the child in place of the teacher. In this study ESWs wanted more input from the teacher but understood the teacher had a number of children in the kindergarten and quality time with a child was not easy. However, in practice some children with disabilities may be educated by an untrained ESW unaided by teaching staff, falling short of the standard sought for in New Zealand policy.

Another main role reported by respondents was to support a child to develop social skills. This includes the involvement of all in a child's learning, to build relationships between the child and peers, teachers, and parents and to promote independence. This is in accordance with the *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996) strand, Exploration or Mana Aotūroa, where "children experience an environment where they develop working theories for making sense of the natural, social, physical, and material worlds" (p. 90). A favourable collaborative approach to learning involving others was supported by Giangreco et al. (1997) who concluded that the paraprofessional should work with all children rather than solely with a child.

The delicate balance of when to step in to support learning and when to stand back is described in Hemmingsson, Borrell, and Gustavsson's (2003) Swedish study that interviewed pupils. They found pupils preferred group social involvement rather than academic help from assistants who could either help or hinder their social relationships. Even though this study focused on school age students, it provides insight into a students' need to be in charge of their own learning, which applies equally to children with disabilities in early childhood settings. In contrast, the current study identifies a child with disabilities was reliant on the practices of an ESW and teaching team to interpret their needs and encourage choice making, as a young child may not always be able to articulate their social needs. This requires sensitive adults to provide space to facilitate social involvement and

promote independence as opposed to providing obvious adult help. In her New Zealand research, Dunn (2000) noticed ESWs encourage a child to join a group but then encourage the child to focus on a specific task, rather than providing support for social interactions with peers. A policy implication would be to ensure the promotion of social development for children with disabilities and that all are involved in a child's learning. This would be consistent with the *Te Whāriki* (1996) strand Communication or Mana Reo, which has a focus on the development of communication with peers and adults and a child's language development to build on young children's social competence.

Respondents identified several important factors were a part of their role, including building relationships with peers, as well as trust, friendship, and communication skills, to promote inclusion. Further, they noted that safety, self help skills and care, and preparing a child for transition to school were also a part of their role. This indicates the role of the ESW was quite comprehensive and was also evidence of their commitment to the job. It was not surprising that many respondents recognised they had developed a close relationship with a child due to the nature of their work that went beyond the usual educational boundaries. The implication for policy is to ensure a child with disabilities has equal opportunities to access the learning environment and interact with all personnel to minimise the development of closeness reported by some ESWs in this study. It is important for a child to have some autonomy in their learning in order to gain confidence with others and to be a valued member of their learning environment.

One quarter of respondents in this study considered Government funding to be a priority. They reported children needed more hours of support. At present only children with the most needs qualify to have an ESW, placing stress on kindergarten staff. It was also noted that ESWs do not have enough time with children to meet their learning needs. The ECE Taskforce (2010) identifies the need for an improved funding system. They recommended that the Government provide separate payments for specific priority groups, of which

included children with special educational needs, and that the Government could reprioritise their overall existing spending into this much needed area. It may be that the rollout of other government policies may have impacted on the funding available for EI work.

## **Limitations of this Study**

This study attempts to explore ESWs' perspectives on their work with children with disabilities. The lower than expected response rate is a limitation of this research. One cause was the February, 2011 Christchurch earthquake which caused unavoidable delays. This coincided with the telephoning of kindergartens in the Christchurch area to find potential participants for this study. A number of the kindergartens were closed, potentially reducing the number of participants in this survey. A second factor, also affected by the initial Christchurch earthquake and outside of their control, was the delay in feedback from the Ministry of Education Ethics Committee. Subsequently, this meant the questionnaire was posted later in the term and may have had an effect on the respondents' response rate as it coincided with the Christmas holidays.

The nature of surveys means that the data received derives from self report rather than from direct observation, and relies on the ESWs own perception rather than on concrete evidence. ESWs have not been interviewed nor have parents', teachers' or peers' perspectives been heard. However, the limited research in the field relating to the work of an ESW and their relationship with a child with disabilities was noticeable when planning this study. The strength of this research is that nobody has asked for ESW perspectives before.

A further limitation to this research was the focus only on the kindergarten sector whereas a larger sample could have been drawn from the wider early childhood sector. The general structure to locate and contact this group of ESWs made it difficult as they attended the

kindergarten for limited hours on certain days and it also relied on kindergarten staff to remember to pass on the questionnaire to potential participants. To reach the ESW by mail may not be the most effective method as a third party was required to pass on the correspondence. The alternative was to send the questionnaire via email however whether all ESWs had access to a computer was uncertain. Consequently, the mail option was considered more feasible to include all ESWs and was also considered more appropriate as it allowed respondents to complete the questionnaire in their own time.

## **Future Research**

In this study a small number of ESWs sat alongside a child without including others. This has the potential to halve the opportunity for teachers and peers to interact because an ESW consistently sits in the seat next to the child. In contrast, *hovering*, *opposite*, and *behind* positions allows more space for the involvement of others. Future research involving observation is needed to assess how much or how little involvement a child with disabilities has with others in their learning environment.

According to respondents in this study, the teachers had a very important role in determining their work with a child. Future research could focus more on the teacher's involvement with a child with disabilities to ascertain the level of input the teacher has in these children's education both with and without an ESW being present, and what skills and interest the teachers bring to special education in the early childhood setting. There were also other relationships identified in the data which included teachers, peers, and parents. Future research could include interviews and observations as to teachers', peers', and parents' perspectives and practices in the child's learning environment, as this is significant to a child's inclusion in early childhood and the school sector.



## Conclusion

In this study 103 ESW respondents from typical kindergarten locations offered their perspectives on their work as ESWs.

The main role of an ESW was to support a child's integration into the kindergarten and work in partnership with teachers and support a child to develop social skills, build relationships between the child, peers, teachers, and parents, and promote independence.

The majority of ESWs emphasised the positive role teachers had in determining their work in providing direction, support, and working in partnership as part of the teaching team. However, just over one third of respondents reported that teachers had limited involvement in determining their work.

Almost half of respondents did not have any formal training in their role as an ESW and aside from the teacher aide certificate; there was no provision in New Zealand for ESWs to acquire a qualification. Survey feedback in 2011 coincided with Massey University introducing a Diploma for ESWs (DipEducSuppWkrs) made available extramurally for support workers across all educational settings. This replaced the teacher aide certificate which was discontinued by 2012. None of the participants in this study indicated they had enrolled for this Diploma. The number of ESWs holding an ESW Diploma and the impact this may have on the teaching profession to teach children with disabilities in E.C. settings will need research in the future.

The majority of respondents indicated they had attended PD relating to their role although not all were able to attend. Respondents had attended PD sessions relating to sign language, speech language, communication, and behavioural management.

ESWs described their relationship with a child as warm, caring, and positive. They noted that trust was important and also described their relationship as intimate and at times taking on the role of “mum”.

Almost half of the respondents indicated the child they worked with interacted with the ESW, peers, and teachers which was important for a child to access the full learning environment.

The majority of respondents used a combination of *alongside*, *hovering*, *opposite*, and *behind* when working with a child and at the same time the child interacted with the ESW, teachers, and peers, which showed that the child was included irrespective to the ESW’s close proximity to the child.

Almost a quarter of respondents considered that insufficient Government funding disadvantaged some children with disabilities as only those children with the most needs qualified for ESW support.

Having undertaken this research I have gained a better understanding of the practices and perspectives that ESWs are using in the field and how they are interacting with the child, peers, teachers, and parents. I have also learnt that ESWs are using a combination of close positions when working with a child and this closeness is not always inhibiting the involvement of teachers and peers in the child’s learning environment.

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## Appendix A: Teacher aide interview guide (Rutherford, 2008)

### Appendix P Teacher Aide Interview Guide

*Date*

#### Background information

- How did you come to be a teacher aide? Can you tell me about the employment and orientation process you went through to begin work at your school?
- Please tell me about your work as a teacher aide—what might a typical day look like?
- How many students with disabilities do you work with? What kinds of support requirements do these students have? What kind of educational settings do you work in (e.g., supporting students in regular classes, in separate unit)?
- What kind of training/experience do you have? What training/professional development do you believe would be helpful to you in your work? What kinds of supports and barriers to training exist for you?

#### Role of teacher aide

- What do you consider the role of the teacher aide to be? What are your key roles and responsibilities?
- Who decides what you do? How are the roles and responsibilities of teacher aides made known throughout the school and with parents/caregivers? Where do teacher aides “fit” in the school system?
- Sometimes teacher aides may be asked to do things that they believe to be “outside their job description”. Can you describe any such experiences you have had, and how you have dealt with these?
- Can you tell me about supervision arrangements (e.g., who supervises you? To whom are you accountable?)
- Do you have any comments you would like to make about the role of teacher aides in schools?

#### Relationships with students who have disabilities

- You work with \_\_\_\_ number of students. For the purpose of this study, we will focus on the student with whom you spend the greatest amount of time each week. It would be helpful if you could give a general overview of your work with her/him (e.g., how you think of and know her/him, how long you’ve known her/him, how much time you spend with her/him each week, what kinds of supports you provide, what you enjoy and/or find challenging in your work with her/him).
- How would you describe the kind of relationship you have with this student?
- What helps you develop positive relationships with students in general and with this student in particular?

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- What gets in the way of your developing positive relationships with students in general and with this student in particular?

#### **Influence on learning/academic achievement**

- How is the academic achievement of the students you support measured?
- What influence do you think you have on this particular student's learning/academic achievement (e.g., describe the kinds of achievements experienced by her/him, and how you contribute to these)?
- What kinds of difficulties do you encounter in supporting students' learning/academic achievement?
- What kinds of support do you have in supporting students' learning (e.g., close consultation with teachers)?
- What do you think would be helpful to you to enable you to better support students' learning?

#### **Influence on relationships/friendships with peers**

- Can you describe this student's pattern of friendships with school peers?
- What influence do you think you have on her/his relationships with peers?
- What kinds of difficulties do you encounter in supporting students' relationships with peers?
- What kinds of support do you have in supporting students' relationships with peers?
- What do you think would be helpful to you to enable you to better support students' relationships with peers?

#### **Changes/General**

- What do you love about/gives you the most satisfaction in your job?
- What presents the greatest difficulties in your work?
- What changes would you like to see take place in schools/the education system regarding the education of students with disabilities and the role that teacher aides play in this?
- Do you have any other general comments you would like to make that may be relevant to this study?

*Thank you very much indeed for sharing your time and experiences.*

## Appendix B: Survey questionnaire

### Education Support Worker Questionnaire

#### Demographic and background information:

1. Can you please circle your gender: male female

2. How long have you been an Education Support Worker? \_\_\_\_\_ years: \_\_\_\_\_ months

3. How many children with disabilities do you currently work with? \_\_\_\_\_

*If more than one, please answer the remaining questions from the perspective of the child you work the most hours with in a kindergarten setting.*

4. Please circle the **main disability** of the child you currently work with:

Autism, Down syndrome, Cerebral palsy, deaf impairment, blind impairment,

other: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Please describe a little about the kindergarten session this child attends.

Session hours: \_\_\_\_\_ number of children: \_\_\_\_\_ number of teachers: \_\_\_\_\_

Describe the local community of your kindergarten, e.g. rural, urban, cultural make up:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. What kind of training (if any) do you have in relation to children with disabilities?

Please describe them: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. Have you attended professional development opportunities related to your role as an ESW?

**Yes** **No** (please circle)

8. Please describe any professional development you have attended:

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### Role of Education Support Worker

9. Describe your role as an ESW:

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### Proximity of Education Support Worker

10. When working with the child do you: *(please tick one box)*

- 1) pay exclusive attention to the child? ☐
- 2) include the child's peers during your interactions? ☐
- 3) adopt a combination of 1) and 2)? ☐

11. If working with other children in a group setting, where do you usually position yourself in relation to the child with disabilities, (e.g. alongside, hovering, opposite):

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### Child's interactions with others

12. Please tick which **one** of the following seven statements best describes who the child primarily interacts with (more options over page):

- 1) Primarily with ESW ☐
- 2) Primarily with Teacher ☐
- 3) Primarily with Peers ☐
- 4) A combination: ESW/Teachers ☐

- 5) A combination: ESW/Peers ☐
- 6) A combination: Teachers/Peers ☐
- 7) A combination: Teachers/ESW/Peers ☐

**13.** What role do the teachers play in determining your work with the child?

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### **Your relationship with a child with disabilities**

**14.** Please describe the relationship you have with the child you work with, in your role as an ESW: \_\_\_\_\_

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### **General comments**

**15.** Do you have any other comments regarding the education of children with disabilities in the early childhood sector and the role that ESW's have in their education?

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Thank you for taking the time to share your experiences. Your contribution helps us to understand the social learning environment for children with disabilities in early childhood education mainstream settings.

Survey based on Rutherford (2008) interview guide adapted to suit early childhood settings.

## **Appendix C: Telephone introduction slips**

### **Telephone introduction to enquire if an ESW is working at their centre.**

Hello, my name is Pam Backhouse; I am currently a student at Victoria University studying towards a master's degree in Education. My thesis involves the location of ESWs nationwide. Can you please tell me if you will have an ESW working at your kindergarten next term. If so, we will post a questionnaire in the next few days inviting their participation. Can I check we have your correct postal address? Thank you.

### **Telephone introduction to enquire if an ESW is working at their centre.**

Hello my name is Amie Backhouse, I am assisting my mother who is studying for a thesis at Victoria university. This requires the location of Education Support Workers nationwide, for them to complete a survey questionnaire. Can you please tell me if you will have an ESW working at your kindergarten next term. If so, we will post a questionnaire to them in the next few days inviting their participation. Can I check we have your correct postal address? Thank you.

### **Telephone introduction to enquire if an ESW is working at their centre.**

Hello my name is Paula Backhouse, I am assisting my sister-in-law who is studying for a thesis at Victoria university. Her study requires the location of Education Support Workers nationwide, for them to complete a survey questionnaire. Can you please tell me if you will have an Education Support Worker working at your kindergarten next term. If so, we will post a questionnaire to them inviting their participation. Can I check we have your correct postal address? Thank you.

## Appendix D: Information letter for Education Support Workers

1 November, 2010.



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

Dear Education Support Worker

**Project Title: What are Education Support Workers' perspectives on their work with children with disabilities in New Zealand Early Childhood Education settings?**

Kia ora, my name is Pam Backhouse and I am currently a student studying towards a Masters of Education Degree at Victoria University of Wellington. As part of my thesis, I am interested in Education Support Workers' perspectives on their work with children with disabilities within early childhood education environments. In order to gather information about these views, I would appreciate 15 minutes outside of your work time to complete the following questionnaire. You are under no obligation to participate in this questionnaire which is entirely voluntary. Your decision about whether or not you want to participate will not affect your present or future relationship with Victoria University of Wellington.

All paper-based data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and all electronic data will be kept in a password protected file. The data will be securely stored for five years after publication and then destroyed after the 5-year storage period, with the information available only to myself and my supervisors. Your anonymity is ensured within my thesis and any subsequent publications.

I appreciate your time and contribution in completing this questionnaire, which on its return will confirm your consent to participate. On completion, my thesis will be available in the Victoria University of Wellington Library. The results of this study may be submitted for publication in research and/or professional journals and may be presented at a conference. Should you wish to contact me or my supervisors about any aspect of this questionnaire, please feel free to ring or email to contact us.

This research has been assessed and approved by Victoria University Faculty of Education Ethics Committee (Reference AARP SEPP/2010/81). If you have any questions or concerns about your treatment as a research participant in this study, contact Dr. Allison Kirkman, Chair of the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee (telephone: +64 4 463 5676; E-mail: [allison.kirkman@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:allison.kirkman@vuw.ac.nz)).

Thank you once again for participating in this survey. Please return your completed survey in the attached post-paid envelope by 12 November, 2010.

Yours sincerely

Pam Backhouse  
(04) 383 6272  
[pambackhouse@hotmail.com](mailto:pambackhouse@hotmail.com)

Sue Cherrington  
(04) 463-9552  
[sue.cherrington@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:sue.cherrington@vuw.ac.nz)

A/Professor Vanessa Green  
(04) 463-9574  
[vanessa.green@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:vanessa.green@vuw.ac.nz)



## **Appendix E: Follow-up letter**

To the Education Support Worker,

Recently you may recall receiving a survey questionnaire exploring ESWs' perspectives on working with children with disabilities in New Zealand Early Childhood Education settings. If this has been returned, I very much appreciate your response.

However, if you have yet to return this survey, I would value your contribution and ask you to please consider completing and returning it at your earliest convenience.

Thank you,

Pam Backhouse, Telephone (04) 3836272  
Postgraduate Student, Victoria University, Wellington.

To the Education Support Worker,

Recently you may recall receiving a survey questionnaire exploring ESWs' perspectives on working with children with disabilities in New Zealand Early Childhood Education settings. If this has been returned, I very much appreciate your response.

However, if you have yet to return this survey, I would value your contribution and ask you to please consider completing and returning it at your earliest convenience.

Thank you,

Pam Backhouse, Telephone (04) 3836272  
Postgraduate Student, Victoria University, Wellington.

To the Education Support Worker,

Recently you may recall receiving a survey questionnaire exploring ESWs' perspectives on working with children with disabilities in New Zealand Early Childhood Education settings. If this has been returned, I very much appreciate your response.

However, if you have yet to return this survey, I would value your contribution and ask you to please consider completing and returning it at your earliest convenience.

Thank you,

Pam Backhouse, Telephone (04) 3836272  
Postgraduate Student, Victoria University, Wellington.

## Appendix F: Information letter for the Ministry of Education Regional Managers



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

10 September 2010

To the Regional Manager,

### **Re Master of Education Research Project: What are Education Support Workers' perspectives on their work with children with disabilities in New Zealand Early Childhood Education settings?**

My name is Pam Backhouse and I am currently a student studying towards a Masters of Education degree at Victoria University of Wellington. As part of my thesis, I am interested in Education Support Workers' perspectives on their work with children with disabilities within early childhood education environments.

I wish to advise you formally of this research project, as I will be recruiting ESW participants and the Ministry of Education is their employer. Randomly selected kindergartens nationwide have been telephoned to determine if an ESW works there. An information letter attached to a questionnaire and a reply paid envelope will be posted to invite ESW's participation which will be entirely voluntary and anonymous. Should they agree to participate, the completion of the questionnaire will occur outside of their allocated work time.

All paper-based data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and all electronic data will be securely stored for 5 years after publication, with the information available only to myself and my supervisors. All data will then be destroyed after the 5 year storage period. Participant anonymity is ensured within my thesis and any subsequent publications. On completion, my thesis will be available in the Victoria University of Wellington Library. The results of this study may be submitted for publication in research and/or professional journals and may be presented at a conference.

This research has been assessed and approved by Victoria University Faculty of Education Ethics Committee (Reference AARP SEPP/2010/81). The survey questionnaires intended to be sent out as soon as possible.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Dr. Allison Kirkman, Chair of the Victoria University of Wellington Ethics Committee (telephone: +64 4 463 5676, E-mail: [allison.kirkman@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:allison.kirkman@vuw.ac.nz)) or one of my supervisors listed below.

Yours sincerely

Pam Backhouse  
(04) 383 6272

[pambackhouse@hotmail.com](mailto:pambackhouse@hotmail.com)

Sue Cherrington  
(04) 463 9552

[sue.cherrington@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:sue.cherrington@vuw.ac.nz)

A/Professor Vanessa Green  
(04) 463 9574

[vanessa.green@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:vanessa.green@vuw.ac.nz)

## Appendix G: Information letter for the Ministry of Education District Managers



## COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

10 September 2010

To the District Manager,

### **Re Master of Education Research Project: What are Education Support Workers' perspectives on their work with children with disabilities in New Zealand Early Childhood Education settings?**

My name is Pam Backhouse and I am currently a student studying towards a Masters of Education degree at Victoria University of Wellington. As part of my thesis, I am interested in Education Support Workers' perspectives on their work with children with disabilities within early childhood education environments.

I wish to advise you formally of this research project, as I will be recruiting ESW participants and the Ministry of Education is their employer. Randomly selected kindergartens nationwide have been telephoned to determine if an ESW works there. An information letter attached to a questionnaire and a reply paid envelope will be posted to invite ESW's participation which will be entirely voluntary and anonymous. Should they agree to participate, the completion of the questionnaire will occur outside of their allocated work time.

All paper-based data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and all electronic data will be securely stored for 5 years after publication, with the information available only to myself and my supervisors. All data will then be destroyed after the 5 year storage period. Participant anonymity is ensured within my thesis and any subsequent publications. On completion, my thesis will be available in the Victoria University of Wellington Library. The results of this study may be submitted for publication in research and/or professional journals and may be presented at a conference.

This research has been assessed and approved by Victoria University Faculty of Education Ethics Committee (Reference AARP SEPP/2010/81). The survey questionnaires intended to be sent out as soon as possible.

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Yours sincerely

Pam Backhouse  
(04) 383 6272  
[pambackhouse@hotmail.com](mailto:pambackhouse@hotmail.com)

Sue Cherrington  
(04) 463 9552  
[sue.cherrington@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:sue.cherrington@vuw.ac.nz)

A/Professor Vanessa Green  
(04) 463 9574  
[vanessa.green@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:vanessa.green@vuw.ac.nz)