

THE WORK OF TEACHER AIDES IN AUSTRALIA: AN ANALYSIS OF JOB ADVERTISEMENTS

Jennifer Stephenson

Mark Carter

Macquarie University

Although teacher aides are often employed in schools to provide support for students with disabilities and special education needs, there is limited Australian research on their work and employer expectations. This article provides an analysis of advertisements for teacher aide positions, and compares the content of advertisements with role statements and teacher aide reports of their work. Employment for teacher aides is likely to be casual and short-term and qualifications are rarely required. A very wide range of criteria was identified and the most frequently mentioned criterion was generic, such as the ability to work in a team. Criteria relating to the actual work aides report they perform or to education department role statements were less frequent. Concern is expressed about the effects of generally poorly defined roles, the lack of required qualifications and the precarious nature of many positions on the education of students with special education needs.

Teacher aides or assistants are employed in many schools to provide support to teachers and students. Many are employed specifically to support students with disabilities and/or special education needs and their teachers within special schools and units and in mainstream classes. The Australian Productivity Commission (2012) has reported that the number of teacher aides or teacher assistants employed in schools is steadily increasing. The proportion of staff in schools who are not teachers, including teacher aides, increased from 16% to 23% of the workforce in schools between 1996 and 2011 and is expected to continue to grow strongly, with 80,400 people employed as education aides (although not all these positions are in schools) in November, 2011 (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace relations [DEEWR], n.d.a). The Productivity Commission noted part of the reason for the increase in teacher aides was the increase in the numbers of students recognized as having a disability who are in regular classes. Similar increases in the proportion of staff in schools who are teacher aides have been reported in the US and the UK (French, 2003; Webster, Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, Martin, & Russell, 2011).

The job titles of teacher aides vary considerably across Australia and include integration or inclusion aides, teaching assistants and learning support officers (Howard & Ford, 2007). Although Certificate level training courses are available from Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges and other providers, only around 40% of those employed as education aides (across all job settings, including schools) hold a certificate level qualification and around a quarter have no post-school qualifications (DEEWR, n.d.b). The report on the review of Disability Standards for Education 2005 (DEEWR, 2012) noted *considerable variation in the skills, knowledge and qualifications of teacher's aides* (p.18) and expressed concern about whether the skills of teacher aides would allow them to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Despite the increase in the employment of teacher aides, particularly in inclusive settings, there has been little Australian research on their roles and some criticism of the use of teacher aides to provide support to students with disabilities enrolled in regular settings (Bourke, 2009), echoing US and UK concern (Blatchford et al., 2009; Giangreco, 2010). Reservations about the desirability of increased numbers of teacher aides are supported by the lack of research that demonstrates a relationship between the employment of teacher aides and improved student outcomes (Webster, Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, Martin, & Russell, 2011; Giangreco, 2010). Not only may aides not have a positive effect, there are a

number of undesirable effects that have been reported from both the US and the UK, such as interference with teacher/student and student/student relationships (Blatchford et al., 2009; Giangreco, Broer & Suter, 2011). The lack of positive impact from the employment of teacher aides may be related to their inadequate preparation and training and related inability to deliver quality instruction, to reduced teacher/student interaction when an aide is present and to the tendency of some teachers to relinquish responsibility for the student to the aide (Giangreco, 2010; Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010). Indeed, Giangreco and Broer (2007) identified increasing use and over-reliance on teacher aides as problematic, especially when it represents a belief that this is an essential and effective way to provide support to students with disabilities.

In the Australian context, Bourke (2009) noted there is *much confusion surrounding the many and varied ways in which these teacher aides are deployed in schools to provide support* (p. 817). Howard and Ford (2007) found for their small sample of aides that none had been given a formal job description and there was ongoing uncertainty about their roles. Similarly, Snodgrass and Butcher (2005) reported the need for clearer role descriptions and definitions of responsibilities. More recently, some state education departments have provided general descriptions of roles (Australian Capital Territory Department of Education and Training [ACT DET], 2012; New South Wales Department of Education and Training [NSW DET], 2009), others have provided differentiated descriptions for aides working in various contexts (South Australian Department for Education and Child Development [SA DECD], n.d.), or at different levels (Victorian Department of Education and early Childhood Development [Vic DEECD], n.d.) while others provide both a role description and desirable attributes of applicants (Queensland Department of Education and Training [Qld DET], 2011; Western Australia Department of Education [WA DE], 2008). Only Queensland has a requirement that all aides assisting students with special needs have suitable training (Qld DET, 2011). The ACT DET noted that a nursing or first aid qualification may be an advantage and in Victoria, aides in positions that involve providing medical intervention support must have specialized training in relevant tasks. Generally there is little explicit specification of the skills and knowledge required in these descriptions provided by education departments.

An additional potential source of information about the roles and responsibilities, and desirable attributes of teacher aides is job advertisements for teacher aide positions. Although many positions are casual, and may not be filled through formal advertisement (Butt & Lowe, 2012; Howard & Ford, 2007), examination and analysis of positions that are advertised would provide some insights into the expectations of those employed in such roles. Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to report on the nature of the roles and desirable attributes of teacher aides in Australian schools through an analysis of job advertisements for teacher aide positions related to the education of students with disabilities and special needs.

Method

Websites in Australia that carried advertisements for special education positions including teachers, teacher assistants, support teacher and administration positions were located through a Google search. This paper reports on the data relating to advertisements for positions for teacher assistants (teacher aides, learning support officers). The data relating to teachers and administrative positions are reported in Author and Author (in press). Positions in schools, preschools and long day care were of interest. Altogether, 54 sites were located and searched (a complete list of the sites may be obtained from the authors). The search located sites belonging to all state and territory government education departments, Catholic education authorities, and the Association of Independent schools as well as commercial sites that listed teaching, education, preschool and/or childcare jobs, suggesting it provided broad coverage of the relevant education systems. All relevant advertisements for positions from all websites were downloaded at three different times: November 2009, January 2010, and February 2010 to provide a snapshot of the jobs advertised over this three-month period.

After downloading, duplicate advertisements were removed and the contents of each advertisement were entered into a Filemaker Pro database designed for this project. The title of the position as it appeared in the advertisement was used as the job title. The geographical location of the position was coded as the relevant Australian state or territory. School sectors were coded as state or territory government, independent, Catholic systemic, private preschool, government preschool or long day care. The level of schooling was coded as preschool, day care center, primary, secondary, or kindergarten to year 12.

The location of the position was coded as regular class (where the aide would work in one typical class), support class (a special class enrolling students with disabilities and/or special education needs), special

school (a school enrolling only students with disabilities), tutorial or support center (a center or class within a school or region that provides support and where students may attend on a part-time basis), early intervention, a position that provided support across classes within a school or a position that provided support across schools or unspecified. The terms of employment were coded as full-time, or part-time, and then casual or permanent or unspecified. Contract types were classified as permanent or fixed term or unspecified.

For the essential criteria relevant to teacher aide positions we coded experience in special education and the nature of any special education qualification, including Technical and Further Education (TAFE) post-school qualifications that were required. We also collected other criteria relevant to special education that specified skills or knowledge related to special education, but not a specific qualification, and further criteria that were not specific to special education. Qualifications had to be described as a formal education qualification, thus a statement such as *knowledge of* would not be considered a qualification. Criteria were coded as *essential* if the wording included terms such as *must have*, *will need to*, *be required to*, or *prerequisite* in relation to any job requirements. Criteria coming under headings such as *who may apply*, *essential* or *required* were regarded as essential. A similar set of codes was used for desirable criteria and for criteria that were not specified as essential or desirable. Desirable criteria were those that were described by terms such as *should*, *would be an advantage* or *ideally* or were listed under the heading *desirable*. Unspecified criteria were those where no indication of desirability was given and included terms such as *applications are invited from* or *we seek*.

The coding for one third of the positions across the entire sample (teachers and teacher assistant positions) was completed by two independent coders to allow calculation of inter-rater reliability. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using the formula agreements divided by agreements plus disagreements and multiplying by 100. The reliability was 84.5%.

For the teacher aide positions, criteria not related to specific special education qualifications or experience were analyzed further. As well as being classified as essential, desirable or not specified, additional criteria were classified by the first author into broad categories according to the nature of the criteria. For example, all criteria that referred to ability to co-operate with others, collaborate or to work as part of a team were classified as *work co-operatively/collaboratively with others, part of team*. This classification of criteria was independently checked for 20% of the advertisements by the second author and inter-rater occurrence reliability was 91.3%.

Results

A total of 78 advertisements for teacher aide positions were located. Several advertisements were recruiting for more than one position, thus the data refer to advertisements rather than to specific positions. Twenty-eight different terms were used to describe these positions including: education assistant – special needs, education support officer, integration aide, integration/learning support aide, learning assistant, learning support assistant, learning support teachers' aide, learning support officer, school support officer – special education, special needs assistant, special needs support officer, special needs teacher assistant, student learning assistant, teacher assistant – special needs, teacher's aide, and teacher aide-integration. Table 1 provides the distribution of advertisements by state and sector. There were no positions advertised in long day care, and only three in preschools. There were no positions advertised in the smallest state, Tasmania. Most positions were in Catholic systemic schools and there were more positions advertised in Victoria than in any other state.

Table 1. Geographical and Sector Location of Special Education Teacher Aide Job Advertisements

	NSW	Qld	Vic	SA	WA	NT	ACT	Total
State/Territory	1	3	17	0	3	1	6	31
Government School								
Independent School	1	3	4	1	3	0	0	12
Catholic Systemic	14	0	8	2	7	0	1	32
Preschool (private)	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	2
Preschool	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Government/Territory								
Total	16	7	29	3	15	1	7	78

As shown in Table 2, most positions were in primary schools. Practically all the job advertisements were for the provision of support across classes within a school, with no positions specifically in support classes or a single regular class as shown in Table 3. Most positions were part-time for a fixed term as shown in Tables 4 and 5. There were only five permanent positions offered.

Experience in special education was an essential criterion for one position in Queensland, desirable for eight positions (NSW, Victoria and WA) and not specified as essential or desirable for three positions (NSW and WA). A qualification in special education was essential for four positions, one unspecified qualification was required in WA and three positions (Queensland and WA) required a TAFE qualification. An unspecified qualification was desirable for seven positions (Queensland, Victoria, and WA) and TAFE certificate was desirable for nine positions (NSW, WA, and ACT). One position (SA) listed a TAFE certificate without specifying if it was essential or desirable. All except one of the Victorian state school advertisements and one Victorian Independent school (17) listed Aptitude, experience and/or qualifications to fulfill requirements as an essential criterion, and one other advertisement required relevant experience and/or qualifications. Three advertisements listed relevant experience as desirable. Three listed competency or appropriate experience/qualifications as unspecified criteria.

Table 2. Special Education Teacher Aide Job Advertisements at Each Level of Education Setting in Each State

	NSW	Qld	Vic	SA	WA	NT	ACT	Total
Preschool	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	2
Day care center	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Primary	9	1	17	2	5	0	2	36
Secondary	7	3	7	0	6	1	3	27
K-12	0	2	3	1	2	0	0	8
Unspecified	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Other	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	3

Table 3. Location of Teacher Aide Positions in Advertisements in Each State

	NSW	Qld	Vic	SA	WA	NT	ACT	Total
Special school	2	1	2	10	0	0	2	7
Early intervention	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	2
Provide support across classes within a school	14	5	27	3	12	1	5	67
Other	3	0	0	0	2	0	1	2

Table 4. Terms of Employment in Teacher Aide Job Advertisements

	NSW	Qld	Vic	SA	WA	NT	ACT	Total
Full-time	2	0	5	0	4	1	0	12
Part-time	13	6	23	3	8	0	1	54
Casual	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	2
Unspecified	0	1	0	0	1	0	6	8
Other	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	2

Table 5. Contract Type in Teacher Assistant Job Advertisements

	NSW	Qld	Vic	SA	WA	NT	ACT	Total
Permanent	1	2	0	0	1	1	0	5
Fixed-term	11	1	21	3	6	0	1	54
Unspecified	4	4	7	0	7	0	6	28
Other	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	2

All except 12 advertisements included more specific special education related and general criteria that were essential, desirable or were not specified as essential or desirable. The criteria were grouped, and those that appeared in 10% or more (8) advertisements are summarized in Table 6. The most frequently used criteria were to do with the ability to work co-operatively or as part of a team and to have good communication skills.

Table 6. Other Essential, Desirable or Not Specified Criteria Included in at Least 10% of Teacher Aide Job Advertisements

Groups of Criteria	Essential	Desirable	Not specified	Total (%)
Work co-operatively/collaboratively with others, part of team	17		29	46 (59%)
Effective communication skills	11	1	25	37 (47.4%)
Proficiency in using software, technical equipment or computers	8		13	21 (26.9%)
Able to provide support and/or attendant care to students (student and nature of support or care not specified)	6		14	20 (25.6%)
Support ethos/mission of school or system	12		5	17 (21.8%)
Good organizational/time management skills	7		10	17 (21.8%)
Ability to work or problem solve independently, show initiative	5		10	15 (19.2%)
Commit to professional learning, development	2		10	12 (15.4%)
Have a first aid qualification or willingness to train	3	8		11 (14.1%)
Able to carry out routine support tasks across a range of functions/environments (not specified as supporting teachers or students)	2		9	11 (14.1%)
Able to assist or support teachers/therapists in implementing programs, making resources and/or aids	4		5	9 (11.5%)
Knowledge/awareness of educational and/or social needs of students with disabilities or special education needs	1		8	9 (11.5%)
Ability to work with disabled children/wide range of disabilities/needs			8	8 (10.3%)

There were 10 advertisements that contained criteria specific to particular groups of students and asked for knowledge of/experience with/ability to work with/interest in students with high support needs (one advertisement, essential), students who are non/verbal or who have limited communication skills (one advertisement, essential), students with health and physical disabilities (two advertisements, essential), students with autism spectrum disorders (five advertisements, desirable) students with learning difficulties (two advertisements, one desirable, one not specified), students with language and social difficulties (one advertisement, desirable) students with intellectual and physical disabilities (one advertisement, desirable), students with severe language disorder (one advertisement, not specified) and students from a refugee or non-English-speaking background (one advertisement, desirable).

Content area skills were only mentioned in five advertisements and all these related to literacy and/or numeracy. Occupational health and safety knowledge was mentioned in seven advertisements (all except one from the ACT), and similarly six advertisements from the ACT asked for a knowledge of issues and policies related to students with disabilities. Behavior management was not mentioned in any advertisements, but six advertisements asked for the ability to interact positively or constructively or engage with students and three advertisements asked for the ability to manage small groups.

Some quite specific skills were included in a few advertisements such as experience using and interpreting Makaton signing and knowledge of Japanese braille. As well as objective criteria there were a few advertisements that mentioned personal attributes such as being kind, passionate, empathetic, having an eye for detail, having a high tolerance level, and having a caring nature.

Discussion

It is difficult to know how representative this sample of advertisements is of the available positions for teacher aides given that some positions may not be formally advertised. According to Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures (ABS, 2012) in 2011, 33% of schools were in NSW, 24% in Victoria, 18% in Queensland, 19% in SA and WA combined and 6% in Tasmania, Northern Territory (NT) and ACT combined. The proportions of advertisements in this study are 20.5% from NSW, 37.2% from Victoria, 8.9% from Queensland, 23.1% from SA and WA combined and 10.3% from ACT and NT combined (there were no positions advertised in Tasmania). Victoria is thus overrepresented in this sample and NSW is under-represented. Approximately 70% of the schools in Australia are government schools (ACARA, 2011), but only 41% of these advertisements were for positions in state schools, while 41% were from Catholic systemic schools and 18% from Independent schools. Thus the distribution of advertisements does not match geographical or system distribution. Similarly, only 16% of students with an identified disability are in Catholic schools and 6% in Independent schools (DEEWR, 2011), so Catholic and Independent schools are over-represented in terms of the numbers of students with disability enrolled. The largest single group of advertisements was from Victorian government schools.

The majority of the advertised positions were to support students with a disability within a regular school (67 out of 78 advertisements). The typical position was part-time for a fixed term or of unspecified nature, with only five advertisements for full-time positions. Howard and Ford (2007) similarly reported that 11 of the 14 aides they interviewed were casual and part-time, and Snodgrass and Butcher (2005) reported that 38 of their 94 aides were working full-time, with half of those working full time employed in special schools. Butt and Lowe (2012) reported that four of the seven aides they worked with (all from the same primary school in the ACT) were casual, but all were working full-time. Thus, it would seem that in this sample of teacher aide positions, teacher aides employed to support students in regular schools are commonly employed on a casual or fixed-term basis. Such precarious terms of employment seemed to be somewhat inconsistent with the pivotal support role to which teacher aides appear to be assigned within regular classes in the education systems.

Neither qualifications nor experience were requested in the majority of advertisements, and there was a strong focus on much more generic capacities such as the capacity to work collaboratively as part of a team (in 59% of the advertisements), to have good communication skills (47.4%) and to be competent with technology (26.9%). It is not surprising that so few advertisements requested qualifications, as given there is no requirement for teachers in special education or support positions to hold appropriate qualifications (Author & Author, in press), it would be unrealistic to expect teacher aides to hold a qualification. It is nevertheless of concern that those who might take a major role in supporting students with disabilities are untrained in that role.

There were only 10 advertisements that appeared to focus on working with students with a particular disability and only five advertisements mentioned specific curriculum content (all literacy/numeracy). Eight advertisements asked for a general ability to work with students with disabilities. Very few of the advertisements included anything related to capacity to instruct students except in the most general terms of *providing support* or *assisting* in program implementation. This lack of specificity about the job requirements may reflect the uncertainty of schools about exactly what they wish a teacher aide to achieve, and possibly a lack of a conceptually coherent approach to the education of students with disabilities. It might also reflect an intention on the part of the employer to provide more specific training once a suitable person is employed, but given the generally reported breadth of the roles of teacher aides and lack of specific job specifications this may be less likely (Butt & Lowe, 2012; Howard & Ford, 2007; Snodgrass & Butcher, 2005). Giangreco et al. (2010) noted that defining the roles for teacher aides *Persists as an elusive and unresolved issue in the field* (p. 52). The huge range of criteria included in the job advertisements, with a consensus on only the most general of skills, suggests the Australian experience aligns with this observation. The very few advertisements with extremely specific criteria (for example, knowledge of Japanese Braille) were in the minority, but do indicate a clear and specific role for the person to be employed.

It is possible to make some comparisons between the skills and knowledge requested in job advertisements and the actual work of teacher aides and their perceptions of important skills as reported by Australian aides (Butt & Lowe, 2012; Howard & Ford, 2007; Snodgrass & Butcher, 2005). Snodgrass and Butcher who ran focus groups with 94 aides from all sectors in SA reported that their sample identified strong interpersonal and communication skills as particularly important, and also personal attributes such as being resourceful, patient, flexible, and calm. The 14 aides from secondary schools interviewed in the Howard and Ford study also believed being able to work in a team, patience and flexibility were important, and the seven aides in Butt and Lowe saw *people skills* as essential along with related personal qualities such as being patient and calm. There is thus agreement that these skills, which were most prominent in the advertisements, are important for teacher aides to possess. In contrast, none of the aides in these studies mentioned the use of technology or supporting the ethos of their school, both areas that were featured in a proportion of the advertisements.

Snodgrass and Butcher (2005) reported that the majority of tasks their sample reported completing were related to individual learning and curriculum support, and for those in specialist settings providing personal care was an important role. Implementation of programs provided by other professionals (such as therapists) as well as those provided by teachers was also important. Many of this sample reported being responsible for program or task modifications, and support was provided to both individuals and small groups. Similarly, Howard and Ford (2007) reported the provision of instructional support to individuals and small groups and adapting materials were important roles. Butt and Lowe (2012) made the same finding, but noted that teachers viewed these tasks differently and saw the aides' role more as one of supporting the teacher, rather than the student. Snodgrass and Butcher noted that attendance at meetings, such as individual planning meetings, along with provision of reports to teachers on students' progress was an additional part of the role. Most of these roles were included in at least 10% of the advertisement, but do not feature as strongly as might be expected given they appear to form the bulk of the work of teacher aides.

Behavior management, an area not addressed directly in any of the advertisements, was reported as a responsibility by just over half the sample in Howard and Ford (2007) and was an element in the role of supporting the teacher in Snodgrass and Butcher (2005), and these aides stated that they needed behavior management skills. The Butt and Lowe (2012) sample, however, did not see behavior management as an essential part of their work but did think behavior management skills were essential and wanted more training in this area.

Further comparisons can be made between the criteria included in advertisements and the descriptions of teacher aide roles and competencies provided by state and territory education departments from which the advertisements were drawn, with the caution that only 31% of advertisements were for positions in the government sector. Criteria that were frequently included in advertisements were not present in all state role description. Only two states (Queensland and WA) specified the ability to work collaboratively (Queensland DET, 2011; WA DE, 2008) and three states (Queensland, Victoria and WA) specified effective communication skills (Victorian DECD, n.d.). Three states required proficiency with technical equipment (NSW, Queensland and WA) (NSW DET, 2009). More general capacities to provide support and/or attendant care and ability to assist or support teachers or therapists in implementing programs were part of the roles described by all states, but were only included in a quarter and 11.5% of the advertisements respectively. Although some of the more specific criteria in small numbers of advertisements may also relate to state education department criteria, the suggestion is of a mismatch between these role descriptions and advertisements.

Overall then, this sample of advertisements provides an illustration of the varied perceptions of the roles of teacher aides within Australian school systems and sectors. Very few criteria were commonly included in position advertisements, and those that were tended to be generic and not particularly related to the education of students with disabilities. When the attributes of teacher aides as described in the advertisements were compared to the work reported to be carried out by teacher aides in Australia, the advertisements did not seem to emphasize skills related to instruction of students which aides reported was a major part of their role. There was agreement that generic skills such as working co-operatively with others and communicating effectively were important. Similarly, there was not a good match between the criteria in the advertisements and the role descriptions provided by state and territory governments.

While data are surprisingly limited in Australia, overseas research (see, for example, Giangreco, 2010) has suggested that teacher aides have often been assigned extensive (and inappropriate) responsibilities in the support of children with special needs in regular classes, often without adequate special education teacher support. Research from the UK similarly found that teacher aides are given responsibility for intervention support and spend over half their time in an instructional role, providing support to students with difficulties, who then miss out on interaction with teachers. This work has also demonstrated that teacher aide support is associated with poorer outcomes for the students they assist (Webster et al., 2011). If this is also the case in Australia, the precarious nature of employment of these staff, frequent absence of any specific training requirements and diverse and generic criteria for positions, should be of considerable concern to administrators, teaching staff and parents. While certainly not a substitute for qualified and skilled special education support teachers, a clearer focus on the roles of aides, skills and required qualifications, may well enhance the quality of support of children with special learning needs in schools.

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