Starting a foundation degree: teaching assistants self-perceptions of their personal and professional identities

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Paper presented at the 38th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 2-4 July 2008
University of Edinburgh

Introduction

One of the key aims of our research was to explore the experiences of the teaching assistants (TAs) on the university’s Foundation Degree in Teaching and Learning Support and to discover how further study impacts upon their professional and personal identities. This paper concentrates on a cohort and tracks them from registration in 2006 to graduation in July 2009. They are working in the primary, secondary or special schools sectors in the north west of England, and all are female.

Foundation degrees, teaching assistants and policy change

Foundation degrees were introduced in 2001 in England. They are representative of the present government’s dual objectives of raising workforce skills for employability in a global economy and widening participation in lifelong learning (Doyle, 2003).

Our institution has offered Foundation degrees for support staff since their inception.

Over the last decade, following the English Government’s initiation of the inclusive education agenda (DfEE, 1997), the number of support staff working in English schools dramatically increased (DfCSF, 2007). Prior to 2003, research highlighted the need for more professional training and development programmes for this group of educators (Farrell et al., 1999; Howes, 2003).

Workforce ‘remodelling’ (DfES, 2003c) and the Every Child Matters agenda (DfES, 2003a) has presented fresh opportunities and challenges for TAs; offering wider responsibility and change that could be considered revolutionary in terms of traditional and professional hierarchies in education (Goddard et al., 2007). The subsequent introduction of Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) standards (TTA, 2004), based on standards for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), appeared to provide a degree of professional autonomy and enabled those TAs who held the status to teach whole classes. These changes and opportunities may have strengthened the TA voice in education (Goddard et al., 2007).

Foundation degrees, as well as widening access to higher education, may have helped to raise the profile of this hitherto marginalized group of people (Sorsby, 2004). Indeed, according to Kerry (2005) the Foundation degree provides a sense of value that has long been neglected. The ‘parent helper’ role of the past has evolved to the point where TAs are now officially recognised as ‘paraprofessional’ partners in the teaching and learning process (Butt and Lance, 2005). Our research involves the perceptions of those at the heart of this process of professional development.
Methodology

The methodology takes a qualitative approach and uses questionnaires and focus groups. We determined to follow a broadly interpretivist paradigm, the basic tenet of which is that ‘reality is socially constructed’ (Robson, 2002, pp.27). We wanted to explore TAs’ beliefs and experiences to develop insight and understanding of their personal realities (Bell, 2005). The research draws on individual experience using ‘insider accounts’ that are grounded in specific school settings (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). The authentic voices of TAs are prioritises by this method.

To formulate issues to be explored in the focus groups, we conducted a brief questionnaire that invited open-ended responses around aspects relating to present roles, experiences and future aspirations. Initially, 125 participants were invited to respond to a survey and 91 were completed. The data from this highlighted themes that were considered to be important by the TAs and these were explored in depth in focus groups. Two key themes related to negotiating personal and professional identity and learner identity emerged. These were discussed with one primary and one secondary group each consisting of 10 TAs.

Findings

Negotiating personal and professional identities

In the focus groups’ discussions, there was unanimity between the secondary and primary groups on what they thought were the characteristics and attributes of a TA. They collectively identified adaptability, patience, sensitivity, empathy, teamwork, sense of humour and listening skills as being essential attributes for the role. The primary group also came up with observation skills, perhaps confirming that they see themselves as the ‘eyes and ears of the classroom’. What was of particular interest was that secondary group felt that curriculum subject knowledge was also necessary but the primary group were less convinced that knowledge was needed for TAs to be effective; as one put it, ‘ideally, some knowledge’ was needed. The primary group when asked directly if they thought there was a difference between a TA with pedagogic ‘knowledge’ and one without, one reply was ‘I don’t think there is’ [any difference]. This viewpoint might be influenced by the historical perception that the role of the primary TA has been seen as one of carer, parent helper, and / or substitute mother without its own recognisable professional discourse or knowledge base. As Kerry (2005) points out: connotations of ‘the classroom helper’ did little to raise the profile or status of those supporting teaching and learning in the classroom. One member of the group affirmed that ‘most people go into it [TA job] without any experience at all.’ and there was an assumption that what knowledge is necessary would be acquired ‘on the job’. This perspective denies the wealth of knowledge and experience many TAs have with their families and rearticulates the devaluing of the TA role. This appears to support the persistent traditional perception of the different purposes of primary and secondary schooling: the first involving the development of life skills and values, the second involving the transmission of knowledge and key vocational skills.

The suggestion that TAs have limited respect from those they work with, prior to doing a Foundation degree, was a particular feature of the secondary discussion. This lack of recognition and low status means TAs are potentially situated within a derogatory discourse, on the margins of education. They are perceived to be at the bottom of the staff hierarchy, lacking in motivation (Hammett and Burton, 2005). The secondary group were quite strident about the ‘value’ of the Foundation degree in raising status as perceived by other staff:
Yes, you’re sort of getting recognised, in a way, for your qualification, whereas even just a couple of years ago all TAs were TAs. I mean it doesn’t matter what qualification you’ve got, you’re a TA and that’s it! You didn’t get any higher than that whereas now they are taking into account your qualification and they will probably take into account the Foundation degree as well.

There followed a discussion that offered views surrounding the notion of respect in schools:

‘the role of the TA is sort of being recognised that it’s a more professional role’.
‘yes they’re taking you seriously’.
‘they’ve never treated me any less than them’.

Analysis of the dialogues signified that this group of educators think and speak in terms of an invisibly present and controlling ‘they’ or ‘them’. The pervasive sense of passivity with undertones of resentment may possibly be a consequence of their perceived professional marginalisation (Sorsby, 2004). Studying for the degree may disrupt this perception of power differentials, or it could potentially heighten frustration. The ‘them and us’ theme that characterised much of the discussion continued, and was made explicit: ‘I think there’s a them and us attitude’.

I’ve gone [from primary] to a secondary school and there isn’t a ‘them and us’ attitude with the main staff, the teaching staff. I think some of the TAs are putting their own them and us attitude. Like they don’t go into the staff room at break times and things like that because ‘Oh no, that’s for the teachers.

One TA later said that there were ‘glaring differences’ between the two sectors. Her counter argument identifies the potential negativity of self-perception of the TA role. Although the TAs are located as in some way ‘at fault’ for this, we would question and possibly pursue the apparent insidious processes of othering that creates a ‘them and us’ discourse.

There was agreement that a perceived rigidity of the support role prevented the application of new skills learnt in NVQ’s and on the Foundation degree. The secondary group appeared to be frustrated that despite studying for work based qualifications: ‘responsibility is not allowed in secondary’. The secondary TA role was presented as a utilitarian one and the phrase ‘teachers use you’, was iterated on more than one occasion. This utilitarian discourse has implications for power relations in schools. The underlying power effects here suggest that the power - knowledge base resides with those (teachers) who hold a ‘real’ degree. Also, Foundation degrees appear to be seen in an instrumental way that more strongly resonates with information, training and with ‘doing’, rather than with knowledge or education.

There are parallels between the TA role in school and in their positioning within the staff hierarchy and the way a Foundation degree is perceived. The implication is that a Foundation degree is not a ‘real’ degree and the TA is not a ‘real’ educator.

In the workforce re-modelling documentation (DfES, 2003b), the work of TAs in relation to the curriculum appears to represent a mimetic prepare-deliver-test-report delivery model of education (Howes, 2003). Most of the primary cohort in this study agreed that the standards agenda is a deterrent to them wishing to go on to teach. Potential rejection of teaching as a career was accompanied, or explained, by a resistance to the present emphasis on standards and standardised models of curriculum delivery:
‘The present primary curriculum focus/climate puts pressure on children’.
‘I think its really, really tough on children and that puts me off a bit, because I’d feel so mean on them [if I was a teacher]’.
‘there is too much emphasis on exams and SATS it’s just not good’.

The perception of the role of the primary teacher as an instrumental core subject ‘trainer’ was very strong: ‘I don’t know if I could cope with the curriculum, so I don’t know whether I would rather specialise in a subject, because I teach art and DT which is lovely and a happy subject. It’s not like literacy and numeracy which are really grumpy aren’t they?’

For some of the members of the group, teaching as a career was resisted or rejected because it appears to go against a strongly held ‘child-centred’ philosophy of education, as exemplified in the following dialogue:

When I went into observe Year 6 in their Science and in the first half hour the teacher just completely went on about SATS and they didn’t do anything. They all just sat there like this, you know, and I thought you poor children. And it was just pressure. Listen you’ve got to study…and it shouldn’t be like that.

The nursery I’m in is really informal and its all learning though play but now we’ve got a link worker who is going into the schools and the schools are saying that we’re not preparing them for school because in a lot of the schools they [children] do go into school now and sit on the carpet and sit and write and that isn’t how it should be.

There was a perception that primary TAs fulfil a caring, nurturing role, rather than an educative one that was evocative of a mothering identity that appears to be intrinsic to a primary setting. The primary TAs appeared to operate within a discourse and culture of care.

The primary TAs signified that, within their age phase, TAs reach a ‘professional ceiling’ and the only way for greater career advancement is to gain QTS. This potentially perpetuates the narrow professionalised hierarchical tradition within school, which positions the teacher as the sole professional in the classroom. One TA suggested she wanted to become a teacher because: ‘I’m used to being in control and in charge of staff…but I think from a self-satisfaction point of view, I will, ultimately do that [QTS] and have a satisfying job’.

There was an awareness of aspects of systems of schooling that can stratify and exclude. There was also an awareness of the instrumentalism relating to the curriculum and what children are expected to learn: ‘Prior to doing a Foundation degree, I just delivered a DFES product…no personal judgement or skill was necessary’. A secondary TA who was critical of curriculum and saw it as exclusionary, emphasised how she had aligned herself with pupils whom she regarded as disaffected: ‘I find that the children that I work with have switched off. They aren’t interested. What will happen to them when they leave school? I find I can develop good relationships with them and get somewhere…but I worry for them’.

The secondary group also rejected the notion of teaching in favour of more pastoral roles and new roles that are emerging from recent policy agendas (DfES 2003a). When we asked directly ‘How many of you want to go on and do QTS?’ the response was so confused that the transcriber was obliged to record ‘All talking and laughing together’. This may be because the QTS honours route available to them at present is in ICT. It may also
be indicative of the TA / teacher power differential within secondary schools and the aforementioned ‘them and us’ culture. It is possible that secondary TAs do not plan to do QTS if they are more likely to get promotion as TAs in a secondary setting (Dunne et al., 2008). Also, age and family responsibilities may also deter TAs from gaining QTS: ‘If I did the QTS I’d be nearly 60 by the time I’d finish’ and ‘if there was a bit more flexibility then I might’.

Several of the primary TAs intimated that they did not want to progress to teaching: ‘I might go on to one of the other (honours) routes...but it definitely won’t be the teaching because I enjoy what I do’. Qualifications seemed to be less important than job satisfaction for some of the primary TAs: ‘I will ultimately have a satisfying job’ and ‘I felt really useful, I was actually having an impact on some of these little lives’. This utilitarian discourse defines the individual in terms of her usefulness.

A secondary TA signified that doing the Foundation degree had given her greater recognition ‘as a person as well as recognition for the qualification’ inferring that prior to studying for a degree level qualification she may have considered that she was viewed by others as a less significant person.

We have found that the professional identity of the TAs is framed by what they are not, i.e. they are not teachers. This identity is entwined with a personal identity that is characterised by a mothering role that draws on a discourse of care. 

Identity as learners
Narrative research by Goddard and Penketh (2009, forthcoming) suggests that TAs undertaking Foundation degrees frequently embark on the course with a deficit-learner identity. Our findings concur with this, but also suggest that a shift or change in self-perception occurs whilst on the course. The perceived benefits of doing a Foundation degree were largely associated with increased self-confidence, self-esteem, a sense of achievement, self-motivation and assertiveness. There was also a realisation of personal capability to engage with academic study at HE level. One TA exemplified this trend and claimed that doing this degree ‘pushed me beyond what I thought I was capable of doing’ and another commented that she had ‘a deep pride’ in herself ‘for gaining the qualification’.

Several TAs signified that they felt ‘more included’ and that there was ‘more acceptance’ and involvement in whole school activities. Others directly signified that they felt they had ‘more respect and acceptance’ and, as one put it, the ‘different attitudes from other staff’ afforded more peer and teacher recognition.

TAs commented that they were now reflecting upon, and questioning their own personal values and practice more than they had before and were less likely to take things for granted: ‘I have learned not to take someone at face value; to question… not to be so judgemental’ and ‘[it] made me stop and think about what I’m doing and why I’m doing it’.

Permeating the discourse was a discernable ‘opening up’ of ways of seeing and thinking that was quite revelatory: ‘I’ve started observing the children differently’ and ‘this course has really opened that out’.

Despite these benefits, there was a degree of guilt and sacrifice involved in studying for the degree related to negotiating the conflicting identities of mother, worker and learner. Many cited pressures relating to family life, work and study:
'At some points throughout the course my personal life suffered under the pressure of managing full time work, family and the course'.

'My young children missed out a lot over the three years'.

'You see I feel guilty about doing anything else at the weekend. Because you've got to fit everything else around it'.

'One of my colleagues said to me yesterday, she said: you're going to drop some balls, the amount you're juggling and it’s all going to go'.

**Conclusion**

We conclude with the major themes that emerged from our research. Firstly, one of the issues related to the widening access agenda is the complexity of mature TAs’ lives when entering higher education, particularly in part-time, vocational courses. The TAs involved in the focus groups evinced the difficulties, such as marital breakdown and personal health problems they experienced (also identified in Goddard and Penketh, 2009, forthcoming), with traversing their shifting personal and professional identities.

Whilst the British government’s rhetoric of ‘widening access’ implies only positive benefits, our findings indicate a critical risk of negative impact on the TAs’ lives, relationships and general well-being. This may be compounded by a high investment in this type of course in terms of personal identity and worth, such that, to fail or withdraw would be perceived as crushing (Dunne *et al.*, 2008).

Secondly, one of the most surprising, and most unanticipated outcomes of this research was the distinct demarcation of roles and attitudes between primary and secondary groups. There were glaring differences between the ways they were positioned in schools. The primary TAs defined their roles through a discourse of care that reflected a mothering identity. Whilst the secondary TAs frequently saw their future roles as distinctly pastoral, they adopted a utilitarian perspective that is in line with present British government policy relating to the *Every Child Matters* Agenda (DfES, 2003a) and Remodelling the Workforce (DfES, 2003c).

The secondary TAs were remarkably vociferous in their rejection of teaching as a career trajectory. This rejection may be a reflection of the ‘them’ and ‘us’ culture that was deemed to be prevalent in secondary schools. Alternatively, primary TAs were more in favour of pursuing QTS and sought to change the education system towards a more holistic and child centred model rather than reject teaching as a career altogether.

What is clear is that undertaking a Foundation degree may have a significant impact on TA's personal and professional identities, as one TA commented: 'I've seen a shift as we've developed. I've developed speaking for myself, they're (teachers) more inclined to consult with you and value your opinion'.

**References**


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This document was added to the Education-line database in June 2008