What is ‘special’ about effective teachers and teaching assistants’ collaboration? Drawing new lines of professional demarcation

Cristina Devecchi
Faculty of Education
University of Cambridge
(mcd25@cam.ac.uk)

What is ‘special’ about effective teachers and teaching assistants’ collaboration?
Drawing new lines of professional demarcation

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the notion that allowing teaching assistants to take on more demanding roles can be detrimental to teachers’ professional identity. It will argue that given the right conditions, namely a collaborative and equitable school environment which recognises and encourages the development of the skills, knowledge and understanding of staff and allows them to use such knowledge, the collaboration between teachers and TAs can be a space where traditional lines of professional demarcation can be overcome. When this happens, it can enhance the professional identity of either adult and ultimately benefit the children. Yet, this is not without tensions, struggles and dilemmas both at the classroom level and at the level of policy development and implementation. Based on data collected in a recently completed doctoral research, this paper focuses on three teachers and five TAs’ reflections on the topics of collaboration, support, and inclusion. It will show that when teachers and TAs are able and enabled to acquire and share the knowledge they need to support the inclusion of children labelled as having special educational needs, lines of power, authority, autonomy and responsibility between them are re-drawn.

Being a teacher, teaching or just assisting: How can we tell?

It is about knowing the lines of demarcation
(Katherine, TA)

Just picture the following scene. We are observing a Year 8 French lesson. The room is long and narrow with windows on two sides. The desks are in two rows with four desks per row and a narrow aisle in between, wide enough for two adults to squeeze through. There are around 15 children and two adults. One of the adults greets the children coming in while the other stands behind the central desk. Once the children sit down, the first adult moves to the back of the room, while the second adult explains the objectives and tasks of the lesson and lays down what children should do and how the adults would help them. During the next 40 minutes the second adult will assess some of the children’s oral skills as part of the end of year testing exercise, while the other adult will move around the room helping the children go through a number of tasks of increasing difficulty. Every now and then both adults will exchange few words and then go back to their duties.

Now picture another lesson. This time it is a Science lesson, Year 8. One adult is greeting the children coming in, while another one is talking to the ones who have already arrived. A third adult comes in and the class calms down. While the third adult explains what the topic of the lesson would be and what the children would be doing, the other two adults sit with the children. It is a chemistry lesson and the task is that of carrying out a number of experiments to learn about chemical reactions. During the next two hours two adults will move around the room helping all
children, while one will be sitting next to one girl with Down Syndrome while also supporting the two other children at the same table. All the children are working on the same topic and keep at the same pace. At the end of the lesson the third adult thanks the colleagues and then they stay behind for a short talk and debriefing.

Now picture another French lesson, but this time you come in for the observation while the lesson has already started. The children are already on task. Two adults are moving around the room helping all children who insistently and on equal basis call out either of them. Finally, you are observing a Maths lesson, Year 8. The children, in groups, are busy working out ratios and fractions. Two adults are sitting with two groups of children, while a third adult moves around the room. One of the adults is supporting a girl with Down Syndrome working on modified worksheets the adult had differentiated for her. While she makes sure the girl works well and understands the notion of fractions, she also helps the other girls sitting on either side. She also invites the girls to help their friend.

These are four examples taken from the classroom observations carried out as part of an ethnographic study which explored the notion of collaborative support, namely the way in which teachers and TAs in a secondary school work together to support each other in order to support the inclusion of those children labelled as having special educational needs. The four vignettes aim to be thought provoking and unsettle few certainties about the distinctiveness of teaching versus assisting roles, and thus of introducing the topics of collaboration between teachers and teaching assistants, and the dynamics of their professional practice. Most probably, we would assume that in the first two sketches the teacher was the person who stood behind the main desk, assessed the children, or introduced the topic of the lesson while the TA was the person who greeted the children, went to the back of the classroom, moved about the room or sat next to the children. If this was our conclusion, we would be right.

However, the last two examples challenge us to review our assumptions. The third example is unsettling. Firstly, this is because sharing the physical room of the classroom, and sharing the children’s attention challenge ideas about the territorial ownership of the physical and metaphorical space of professional control, besides the commonly held view that TAs and teachers are responsible for different children. Second, and most importantly so, this is because by calling out either adults the children showed that they regarded both of them as competent in supporting them. The last example goes further in challenging ideas about professional authority. The person sitting next to the child was here responsible for more than ‘acting under the guidance of the teacher’, as prescribed in many official policies (DfES, 2004a, 2003, 2002, 2001, 2000), and as suggested by Tyrer et al. (2004). In this case, not only there is recognition that the other adult has content knowledge, but also that she has the pedagogical knowledge appropriate to the task. What is shared in this instance is not just the delivery of the curriculum as previously planned, but rather the authoritative space of autonomy, responsibility and accountability in making decisions about how best to facilitate the child’s learning, or as McIntyre (2003) says, teaching. If we add the fact that the teachers and TAs portrayed in the four sketches claimed they were working successfully together, the question arises on how individual with different legitimately acknowledged professional status can collaborate without undermining or threatening each other’s professional authority.

My purpose in this paper is to show that when collaboration is effective, TAs do not undermine teachers’ professional knowledge and identity, but they can actually help them to improve their response to the goal of facilitating teaching and learning. I contend that this is achieved by ‘remodelling’ the team’s internal power structures through a redefinition of roles, responsibility and authority with regard to how relevant knowledge is acquired, use and shared. Yet this process is not
without personal dilemmas and conceptual challenges. Above all, a discussion about how to conceive professional status and knowledge is relevant to the many strategies that aim to change the way schools and teachers work. This paper will address these issues by locating the topic in the historical and policy context of school change, professional development, raising standards, and inclusion. It will argue that the movement towards inclusion and the deployment of TAs are, although related, not the main challenge to teachers’ professional identity, job satisfaction and workload. Rather, it will contend that given the right conditions the principles underlining inclusion and the presence of TAs can actually be beneficial. In order to support this claim, the teams’ supportive and collaborative practices will be analysed against traditionally held criteria of professionalism. The paper will conclude with some recommendation for policy and practice.

**Between the devil and the deep blue sea: TAs’ new roles and teachers’ old concerns within the remodelling of the workforce,**

While broadly speaking the issues raised in this paper are valid for a discussion about the relationship between teachers and support staff in general, this paper is interested with collaborative and professional practices that are specifically related to the inclusion of children labelled as having special educational needs. It thus reduces the scope of the investigation to one subgroup of the wide support staff workforce, namely the teaching assistants. While this does not necessarily clarify matters since neither the terminology used to refer to this group of people nor their roles and responsibilities are far from consensual (Balshaw, 1999; Kerry, 2001), the nature of the relationship between teachers and TAs is different from that of teachers and other members of the support staff team such as librarians, laboratory technicians, secretaries, or bursars. In essence the difference lies in the frequency and closeness of the professional interaction. Consequently, the impact TAs can have on teachers’ sense of professional adequacy is of a more direct nature, and more pervasive. By impact I broadly mean, as Howes et al. (2003) state, the difference TAs make. Because, as they continue, impact is a ‘deceptively simple notion’ (2003: 11) it is hasty to conclude that TAs in general, or more appropriately the changes to their roles and responsibilities as envisaged by the government (DfES, 2003; TDA, 2006) can have a negative impact as Thompson (2006), Wilkinson (2006) and Yarker (2005) contend. It is also hasty and reductive to conclude that the teachers’ feelings of de-skilling, increase in workload and reduction in job satisfaction is the result of inclusion, as MacBeath et al. (2006) seem to suggest. While all of these can indeed be causes of uneasiness and concern, it is how people work together, and how the school can support them that are more important factors. Undeniably, though, the number of TAs employed in English schools has increased dramatically in the last decade and consequently there have been changes to how they are deployed, to what they are asked to do, and how this is perceived by teachers.

Since the publication of the Green Paper *Excellence for All Children* (DfEE, 1997) the deployment of teaching assistants has been viewed as one way of improving the support for teachers and children. The trend has continued and therefore it is not a surprise that ‘people working in support roles are at the heart of school reform’ as Jacqui Smith, former Minister of State for School Standards, claimed in the introductory paragraphs of the *Developing People to Support Learning* report (TDA, 2006: 5). The same report claims that in the period between 1997 and 2005 the number of support staff has gone from 136,500 to 268,600, that is, a 97 per cent increase. Although reading DfES statistics is problematic (Devecchi, 2007), the number of TAs has increased from
61,300 to 148,500 (TDA, 2006: 7)\(^1\). 13,876 have registered in the higher level teaching assistants (HTLA) programme since it was launched in 2003 (DfES, 2003) and 6,872 have been awarded HLTA status.

While, the Plowden Report (DES, 1967) had already identified classroom assistants as being in charge of supporting children and teachers alike, it was the 1992 Education Act and subsequent SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 1994) which introduced significant changes in the number of TAs, their status, roles and responsibilities. These were boosted with the implementation of the literacy and numeracy strategies (LNS), especially in primary schools, although not all agreed that TAs contributed to the raising of literacy and numeracy standards (Mujis and Reynolds, 2003). Yet, despite the changes, TAs’ roles have remained unclear, their status still marginal and marginalised (Farrell, Balshaw and Polat, 1999), and their identity, at best, liminal and blurred (Mansaray, 2006). Despite the ongoing debate whether TAs are of benefits to the children and whether they are deployed effectively, OFSTED reports (OFSTED, 2002) recognised the merits of TAs’ support while acknowledging the existence of problems with regard to the their deployment, training, roles and status (OFSTED, 2005, 2006). As we shall see shortly TAs became part of the solution in the government strategies aimed at reducing teachers’ workload (DfES, 2003), but also part of the problem since the professional parameters within which they are asked to operate is more ambiguous than ever.

If on the one hand, TAs’ needs for having their skills, knowledge and experience recognised through better training opportunities, clearer qualification networks, and career development, as laid out by the School Workforce Development Unit (SWDB) in the Building the School Team report (TTA, 2005), on the other old professional boundaries and long held concerns have remained unchallenged. Quicke (2003), Mujis (2003) and Watkinson (2004), for example, recognise that concerns in terms of lack of clarity about TAs’ new roles and responsibility, threat to professional integrity, and further undermining of teachers’ professional identity respectively, as valid. However, they also point out that TAs have not necessarily gained from remodelling strategies that, as Howes (2003) contends, ‘are clear about the relationship between teachers and support staff: it is characterised as one of leadership and management’ (2003: 148). More recently, critical voices such as those of Thompson (2006), Wilkinson (2005), and Yarker (2005) have refuelled the debate about the relationship between the remodelling strategy and teachers’ professional status and claimed that the deployment of TAs can be one of the factors in undermining teachers’ professional confidence. This state of affairs compounded with the lack of exemplars of successful partnership, as Watkinson (2004) points out, and training for teachers on how to work in collaboration (Edmond, 2003) begs the question of how TAs and teachers can work effectively together without undermining each other’s professional integrity.

Issues about de-professionalisation and de-skilling, workload, and job satisfaction are neither new, nor solely related to the deployment of more TAs, or the enhancement of the role of support staff. Rather, they are part of the consequences of the radical changes in education by the previous Conservative government during the 1980s. The policies of marketisation, accountability and performance related pay and career progression, as Pierson’ (1998) historical account shows, were

---

\(^1\) DfES sources are far from consensual about the exact number of TAs employed in our schools. The document School Workforce in England (revisited) (DfES, 2006) puts the number of TAs to 153,000 FTE equivalent. Either reports calculate the number on the FTE equivalent. However TAs work mainly part-time and therefore their number might be even higher than estimated. Furthermore, different statistical sources make use of different classifications and therefore it is difficult to gauge the exact number of people in support staff roles which fall within the broader TAs label. Despite this incongruence, the fact remains that the number of those adults who work more closely with teachers and the children has increased dramatically.
grounded in the conviction, expressed more vehemently by Chris Woodhead, the Chief Inspector of schools, that ‘the English education system was plagued by many thousands of incompetent teachers’ (Pierson, 1998: 138). While the debate about what being professional meant took momentum (Hargreaves, A., 1994; Hargreaves and Goodson, 1996; Hargreaves, D. 1998, 1994; Hoyle and John, 1995), the government pressed ahead with a managerial notion of professional accountability which resulted in a bureaucratic overload. In response to the looming crisis, the Labour government commissioned the PricewaterhouseCoopers (2001) study on teacher workload. In 2002 the DfES (2002b) published *Time for Standards: Reforming the School Workforce* in which Estelle Morris set out her intentions to change the working practice of teachers. In 2003 the government and teachers’ unions, but not the National Union of Teachers (NUT), signed the *National Workload Agreement* (DfES, 2003) which in order to relieve stress on teachers redefined TAs roles and responsibilities, some of which similar to those of teachers such as taking all classes to free teachers for planning, preparation and assessment (PPA). In order to pacify teachers, but also in response to a number of studies which stressed the importance of a nationally agreed training scheme for TAs (Farrell, Balshaw and Polat (1999), in 2004 the DfES published the document *School Support Staff Training and Development* (DfES, 2004d). The document which set up ‘plans for support staff development in which there would be developed a flexible, generic, vocational qualification for all school support staff’ (Vincett, Cremin and Thomas, 2005: 4), gave the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) broader roles in training the whole school workforce, defining competencies, setting standards and establishing career pathways.

If, as stated in the government three-year strategy for developing the potential of support staff, (TDA, 2006: 13) the objectives are to:

- Support schools to develop new ways of training and deploying support staff
- To create a framework of standards and qualifications to enable schools to develop the potential of all support staff
- Extend training opportunities to meet the development needs of support staff

how can this can be achieved without undermining teachers’ confidence is paramount. My answer would be to look at the power structures that define the dynamic of the interaction between teachers and TAs. In so doing I locate my argument side by side with Gunter’s (2005) insights in need to view the Remodelling exercise as more than a neutral and benign effort to improve our schools. Unlike her, though, I contend that the very same power structures can be used to overcome what she appropriately calls a state of ‘tyranny’. The rest of this paper will examine how three successful teams practiced and talked about collaboration and support. It will show that the presence of TAs actually helped teachers to support the children and to improve their confidence in their professional abilities. It will also show that this is not without having to reach compromises and in some cases overcome feelings of professional guilt.

**More than sharing a room: overview of teachers and TAs supporting each other**

The doctoral critical ethnographic study set to explore the notion of collaborative support by conceptualising it as the dynamic interplay amongst three interrelated systemic levels: a macro level of educational and social policies; a meso-level of school organisation, ethos and culture; and, a micro level of individual and team practices. It was located in the debate about how schools can respond to the overlapping and at times contrasting discourses of achieving inclusion and higher academic standards. In particular it focused on how through support and collaboration secondary
teachers and TAs can build a class environment which is conducive to creating positive learning experiences for all children. However, it also aimed to support the findings and recommendations of those studies (Carrington, 1999; Florian and Rouse, 2001) which have emphasised the role the school plays in building a community in which teachers and TAs are also included.

The study was conducted in a secondary rural comprehensive village school in Cambridgeshire with 1250 students on roll, ten per cent of whom on any of the SEN Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) stages, and three per cent with a statement of special educational needs. The Centre, the department responsible for managing the provision for inclusion, comprised one SENCo, one Vice-SENCo, one member of the senior management team as line manager, and 20 part-time TAs. The provision also included working in collaboration with a number of outside professionals and agencies, primary feeder schools, special schools and further education colleges. Seventeen TAs were women, and three were men. They had a variety of qualifications, a number of them had BAs, and one TAs had previously worked as a teacher in a special school. None had a HLTA status and neither the school nor the TAs had taken it into consideration at the time. All TAs but two were on level 2. Those on level three combined classroom assistance roles with helping the SENCo with the daily administration and running of the Centre. On average they were in their 40s, and the majority had worked in the school for more than two years, the oldest serving TA having worked in the school for sixteen years.

The study involved two phases of research. The first aimed to explore the meso-level of the school organisation, policies and practices which had an impact on inclusive provision. Time was spent observing and interviewing teachers and TAs in different locations in the school, and it was followed by a questionnaire to the 20 TAs and the analysis of school policy documents. The second phase focused on classroom practices and involved observing and interviewing three voluntary teams, three teachers and five TAs, in Science, Maths and French. the teams were chosen because of their already successful working relationship. The aims of the second phase were multiple. First, it aimed to ground the knowledge acquired through the first phase in the daily activities of teachers and TAs, and as Carspecken (1996) claims, use this knowledge to apply a systemic and cross case analysis of the relationship between levels. The second aim was that of involving teachers and TAs with reflecting critically on their team relationship so as to understand how effective collaboration works and how and why it can be a valuable means to support the inclusion of the children and of the adults. The data reported here comes from three sources: classroom observations, post-observation interviews, and the questionnaire to the TAs. In all instances they were asked to reflect on how they supported each other and the children, and how they thought the school supported them.

None of the TAs at the time of the study in 2005 were formally responsible for carrying out any of the 25 tasks of administrative and clerical nature which according to the Workload Agreement (DfES, 2003) should be done by support staff. Their main responsibility was that of supporting the children and thus for both the teachers and the TAs the tasks were conceived as part of their professional duties. None of the TAs freed teachers for PPA and only one, a TA with years of experience who was on level 3, had received support and training from the school to act as a cover teacher. However, in more than one occasion TAs were observed being in charge of the children in case the teacher was late, or suddenly called to attend other matters. TAs also mentioned being informally in charge when the lessons were taken by cover teachers. In such cases they felt exploited by the system, but rewarded by having their knowledge and expertise acknowledged, albeit by necessity.

The teachers interviewed never aired concerns about their workload, although one teacher mentioned that ineffective collaboration due to ‘TAs’ over-dependency from the teacher actually
increased her workload. The same teacher, though, was quick to add that it was otherwise true that self-determined and competent TA could actually relieve her stress and increase her job satisfaction. However, it was the TAs who on more than one occasion complained about the increase in their own workload. Mainly this had to do with an increase in bureaucratic and administrative duties with regard to ongoing child monitoring tasks such as carrying out observations of the statemented children and filling in reports which many did in their spare time at home since the weekly one hour they had was not enough. Likewise, many TAs reported looking for resources and working on differentiating material outside their contract hours. This was especially the case for longer serving TAs who could make comparisons with how things used to be. While overall TAs were adamant to say that they were satisfied with the working conditions in the school, the increase in their workload is a factor that cannot be dismissed especially when, due to their general employment patterns, TAs are paid hourly. It is therefore a paradox, if not a blatant case of exploitation, to claim that TAs, and support staff in general, ‘are making a difference to virtually every aspect of life in a school’ (TDA, 2006: 9) since they support learning, inclusion and achievement, building relationships, offering a broader curriculum, and delivering extended services, but such a difference is not equitably and fairly remunerated.

Generally speaking TAs supported teachers in fulfilling their responsibilities of supporting the children as learners and as persons (Devecchi, 2007a, b) and show that there was a consensus amongst team members on how this could be done which, as suggested by Lacey (1998), is a sign of teamwork and collaboration. Not dissimilarly from the findings of a number of other studies on TAs’ roles, TAs supported the teachers by being an extra pair of eyes, ears and hands and alerting the teacher to what was happening, what the children were managing, and how they were able to tackle the task (Fox, 1998; Lee and Mawson, 1998; Moyles and Suschitsky, 1997; Watkinson, 2002). In essence, this meant to support and manage the behaviour of the children, but also to construct a general positive learning experience. To this effect, TAs also differentiated the activities by content, task, or outcome, and further simplified the instruction by modifying teaching strategies which, according to the TAs, they had learnt by modelling the teachers’ own strategies. The differentiation was of three different kinds: planned by/with the teacher and under her direct guidance; planned by the TAs but prior to consulting the teacher; and, ad hoc during the lesson, and in some cases discussed after the lesson. Mainly, though, exchanging views about effective strategies took place in the Centre within the TAs’ community.

Besides being of direct support in the classroom, TAs were also pivotal in finding resources and sharing them with the teachers during the termly liaison meetings, or most likely at the beginning or end of the lesson. TAs’ ability to find and compile resources was enabled by having access to the internet, but also by an extensive and ad hoc training policy either available in the school, or in the form of external courses. To this end, the school had devolved some of the funding for teacher training to pay TAs for attending courses out of their contracted hours of service. Supporting teaching also meant helping the teachers with monitoring children’s progress through observations and depending on TAs’ knowledge and expertise of the subject content and of the child they also devised assessment tests for them. Finally, teachers claimed that TAs’ feedback on the lesson was pivotal in enabling them to improve their strategies and support for the children, it sharpened their lesson delivery, their presence was a huge relief and made them feel less stressed and more satisfied, a finding which is supported by Blatchford, Russell, Bassett, Brown and Martin’s (2007) study. However, some teachers also pointed to the fact that TAs could be a source of anxiety or frustration. In the first instance this was the case when they did not know the TA well and thus they felt uncomfortable with having a stranger in the room. It is however worth mentioning that the same concern was aired with regard to having outsiders in general observing them. Many times teachers talked about feeling ‘ofsteded’, continuously under the assessment lens and thus one wonders the extent to which their sense of de-professionalisation and de-skilling is just the result of having TAs
working with them. Being held accountable seems to be a more pervasive and corrosive practice than otherwise thought. TAs shared such feelings as well and thus working well together meant to find a balance between preserving one’s professional identity while not undermining that of the other colleagues. Hence, TAs were supportive when they did not create a barrier between the teacher and the child with learning difficulties, and the teacher supported them by sharing their pedagogical and content knowledge. Moreover, TAs also added that they supported the teachers by not undermining them, by respecting them as teachers, and by empathising with their responsibilities and workload.

Conversely, teachers stated that they supported their TAs by sharing the responsibility for the child with learning difficulty starting with sharing the lesson plan in advance, or at least the topic of the lesson, by openly acknowledging the TAs’ help, and by managing classroom behaviour. Moreover, support also came when teachers were approachable to listen to TAs’ concerns about the children, but also their own concerns about being seen as authoritative in front of the children. In practice TAs felt supported when teachers created the opportunities and the environment that allowed them to fulfil their obligations towards the children they were formally attached to. This meant to allow them to be mobile, to share ideas, to be listened to, and to be openly acknowledged as members of the team. When this happened, TAs claimed that it raised their self-esteem, self-awareness, confidence, and overall job satisfaction. Teachers agreed with the TAs when they claimed that TAs were most supportive when they were mobile, autonomous and took the initiative.

The above portrayal of how teachers and TAs talked about their support is interesting in many ways. It shows that effective support was grounded on TAs’ ability to be flexible and cover a number of roles of increasing responsibility. They ranged from working under the guidance of teachers and being a supervisor, to making autonomous decisions on what were in the best interest of the children. It also shows that teachers were able and willing to accept this, and that they actually sought autonomous and independent thinking TAs. Far from being simply a matter of the teacher being a manager, as Tyrer et al. (2004) envisage, and consequently of defining clear and fixed roles and responsibilities dependent on differential status and on different levels, the teachers’ views add a new and interesting dimension to the effectiveness of collaboration and support. Of particular interest for our discussion about professional identity, are the practices of seeking TAs’ feedback on their lesson delivery, on the strategies they used to support the children, and on allowing TAs to plan and carry out differentiation and assessment tasks. This is because traditionally such activities define the professional authority of teachers as the ones who have the specialised knowledge required to make valid judgements on what is best for learning.

Yet despite this, old dilemmas and traditional lines of demarcation are still present. With regard to the first, teachers talked about a sense of guilt for not doing enough for the children and feeling unprofessional in delegating tasks like differentiation and assessment to the TAs. On the other hand, they talked about the TAs as professional in their conduct because they were competent and knowledgeable. Even the issue of TAs having a better knowledge and understanding of the children and of specific strategies that could help the teachers was not perceived as undermining the teachers’ authority. On the contrary, teachers appreciated and expected TAs to come forward with ideas and feedback on how the lesson had been effective. With regard to the second, it was interesting to mention that while teachers talked of TAs as professional, TAs did not use the term to talk about themselves. They, on the contrary, were keen in stressing that one way of supporting the teachers was to make sure of not stepping out of line, namely of openly not undermining the authoritative status of the teachers.

Supporting each other, therefore, was a complex enterprise which went beyond what could be observed in the classroom. In brief, it involved direct support for the children, support for teaching,
and support for each other as persons and as professionals. The complex balance of meeting each other’s interests, needs and expectations about teaching, learning and working together was sustained through ongoing feedback which, all parties agreed, was important for acquiring and sharing knowledge and understanding. In this sense being collaborative meant to build a sense of belonging to a community of meaning, besides that of belonging to a community of practice. In this sense, the teams and the school worked in unison. As Fieding (2000) argues they enacted through their support the features of a person-centred school in which, as Macmurray (1961) envisaged, the ‘functional dimension’ was for the sake of the ‘personal dimension’, namely the social and moral networks that enable people to be valued as ends and not just means. However, sustaining the ongoing feedback required creating opportunities for a particular form of critical dialogue which was dependent on notions of respect, equality and value. In practice, being collaborative was not just the result of finding time to talk, or having clear roles and responsibilities, but more than that in finding quality time to get to know each other so as to build an ideal space for communicative action (Habermas, 1976) in which barriers of professional status were removed and TAs could be included fully as ‘members of staff’. By promoting access and participation the knowledge gained through the dialogue and the experiential knowledge gained in the classroom allowed the TAs to know what the teacher’s style was, what their pedagogical and behaviour expectations were, but also to empathise with them. The same was valid for the teachers as well. Basically being collaborative and supportive meant to build the structural opportunities for the communicative exchange to take place.

Collaboration as functional to enhancing partners’ professional identity

The account above showed that being of support for each other was the result of a number of different but intimately related factors which created a dynamic practice of mutual support at all levels of the school. Indeed as suggested by research and policy documents, as already mentioned, issues of school organisation, culture and management of human resources were pivotal in building and sustaining opportunities for staff development, and training. No less important were the formal and informal opportunities for discussion, exchange of ideas and communication. At the micro-level of team practice, though, supporting each other was a more complex endeavour. The brief account does not do justice to the variety of the actions teachers and TAs carried out, nor to the depth of their reflections. It showed, however, two important findings: first, that collaboration is possible, and second that for it to happen collaborators have to give up part of their personal and professional freedom in order to gain support and more freedom to fulfil their goals. Without going deep into the philosophical debate about the nature and features of freedom, or the kinds of social and moral obligations which bind collaborators together (see Habermas, 1987), this section aims to review the findings in relation to the claim that TAs are not necessarily de-skilling and de-professionalising teachers, but that on the contrary there can be a mutual and fulfilling development of an alternative professional practice.

In order to introduce the discussion, it would be better to start with identifying the features of professional practice. Lieberman (quoted in Hoyle and John, 1995: 4-5), for example, lists such features as follows:

a) ‘a unique, definite and essential social service;
b) an emphasis on intellectual techniques in performing this service;
c) a long period of specialised training;
BERA, London, 5-8 September, 2007

d) a broad range of autonomy for both the individual practitioner and for the occupational groups as a whole;
e) an acceptance by the practitioner of broad personal responsibilities for judgement made and acts performed within the scope of professional autonomy;
f) an emphasis upon the serviced rendered rather than the economic gain to practitioners;
g) a comprehensive self-governing organisation of practitioners’.

Hargreaves and Goodson (1996) further claim that professional attitude and conduct can be identified by three basic criteria:

1. shared technical culture;
2. a strong service ethic;
3. a self-regulatory procedure.

In brief, being professional and being acknowledged as ‘a’ professional can be conceived as being dependent on having a specialised and officially recognised body of knowledge which confers the particular power of making informed judgements in the best interest of the client, namely the child, but in reality clients in education comprise parents and also other specialists who have an interest in the wellbeing of the child, thus including the partners in the collaboration. Even more schematically, the concept of professionalism revolves around the four notions of knowledge, authority, autonomy and responsibility, more managerially speaking accountability. While there is ample debate on whether the knowledge required by teachers is only of technical nature, or actually more akin to practical reasoning (Carr, 2005; MacIntyre, 1981) the fact remains that when teachers work in collaboration with others, the two criteria of service ethics and self-regulation acquire a different meaning. I contend that it is how these four notions are applied to inscribe roles and responsibilities that can define the nature and quality of the collaboration. This is because the very act of working together implies the acceptance by all parties of a consensual understanding of the meaning of being professional. In brief, this requires all parties to accept the value of the knowledge each brings to the collaboration, and thus to establish channels for its use that are grounded on the freedom to exercise authority, autonomy and responsibility.

If this is the theory, in practice the above features are problematic when applied to the field of education. As Hoyle and John (1995: 5) comment, the articulation of Liebermann’s components is wanting since it has ‘been inducted from the existing high-status professions’ such as law and medicine. It follows, as they aptly argue, that some occupations such as teaching, or being a TA, meet some but not all criteria, and even those criteria can be met in full or in part. In practice this leads to an inevitable overlapping of the distinction between ‘being professional’, and being ‘a’ professional, or even more appropriately in our case between teaching and being a teacher, and teaching and being a TA. On this matter Strike (2007) contends that the main challenge is in supporting the claim that the expert knowledge of teaching is distinct, better and exclusive. If the pedagogical knowledge-base is what defines teachers as different from a lay person understanding of teaching, what will the implications for collaborative practice be of the present drive towards national schemes for TAs’ training and qualifications as envisaged by the government (DfES, 2002a, 2002b; TDA, 2006)? Will it mean that in order to retain professional boundaries training for TAs will be less informed, specialised and exclusive than the one afforded to teachers? And if this is the case, will this be in compliance with the criterion that defines professional practice as having the knowledge required to meet the interest of the child as a client? And when it comes to work in collaboration, would the same knowledge be sufficient to meet the interests, needs and expectations of the partner?
I will propose an answer to some of the above questions in the final section. For the time being I am more concerned with exploring in more depth how the teachers and the TAs in the study resolved some of the issues I have just raised. While I acknowledge that the ensuing discussion is still wanting, the aim is that of problematising the knowledge we presently have. I claimed elsewhere (Devecchi, 2005, 2007) that the effectiveness of the collaboration lied in the way in which teachers and TAs could find a balance between the knowledge they brought to the task and the freedom by which they could make use of it, namely the control and power they had. The nexus between knowledge and power is what defines how each collaborator conceives the other as professionally competent to the task of supporting the children. Knowledge therefore is a pivotal factor in building professional identities if by identity we assume the interplay between what we have to offer and how we are enabled to do it. The fact that TAs claimed they were supported when teachers listened to them, appreciated their feedback and allowed them to implement differentiated approaches shows that teachers acknowledged TAs as knowledgeable and competent. Conversely, teachers were supported when TAs were willing to acquire and share their knowledge, mainly of the children and of how the children behaved and progressed in other lessons. For both partners, the issue of having the knowledge the other needed resulted in a heightened status which was the result of, but also the cause for, increased autonomy, authority and responsibility.

The effectiveness of their collaboration can be seen, therefore, as the result of a newly defined process of legitimation of lines of authority that while conforming to traditionally held views of professional conduct, also challenge them. Far from denting teachers’ authoritative hold on the classroom, or on their professional knowledge, the newly defined spaces accrued each other’s professional capacity. In essence the purpose of providing support for the children, or what would constitute the ‘service ethic’, was achieved by establishing new spaces of authority on the basis of which adults could better contribute to the task. Collaboration, therefore, was based on a collective practice of sharing which while demanding each adult to forego some of their freedom it also enabled them to acquire the freedom to fulfil the aim of supporting the children as learners and as persons.

In the final analysis, collaborative support is not only a means to support the inclusion of the children with difficulties in learning. While this is indeed the case, the ethics of service which defines part of the features of being professional needs to be integrated with an ethics of care. This demands a shift in the way in which teachers and TAs redefine their professional competencies, autonomy and responsibilities. However, what matters most for the implementation of effective support and collaboration is that both notions are not just the means to achieve inclusion and excellence, but they are also the ends the adults aim to achieve. This construes collaborative support as a pivotal ethical goal which overlaps and integrates with the performative goals. Above all else, the teachers and TAs managed to be collaborative and supportive because the ethics of caring for each other and for the children was conceived as one of the self-regulatory values within the classroom. That is to say, that by being collaborative the adults taught and demanded collaboration and support from the children as well.

**Implications for remodelling the school workforce**

An understanding of collaboration as challenging professional lines of demarcation between knowledge and power in the form of authority, autonomy and responsibility has many implications for the implementation of the numerous strategies and policies which have resulted since the signing of the Workload Agreement. They range from issue about leadership and school organisation, to the issue of affording valuable and worthwhile training opportunities for all
members of staff, teachers, support staff and external professional as well. The findings from the study show that teachers and TAs can work successfully together when their respective professional and human needs are met, and when the school builds opportunities for an ongoing space for communication. While acquiring knowledge and skills is pivotal to being effective in supporting the children, what is even more important is that such knowledge does not build barriers of status amongst partners.

The implications for leadership and management, therefore, are related to the ability to build a school that is united in the aim of supporting the inclusion and achievement of the children and of the adults as well. However, the technical knowledge that is at base of many training courses is only one aspect of what a school needs to be successful. Such knowledge is necessary but not sufficient because what matters most is the opportunities that are afforded to teachers and support staff to use such knowledge and to transform it in something that enables all of them to pursue their respective professional responsibilities. Furthermore, the fact that part of the effectiveness of the teams was to be found in their ability to communicate and use dialogue to come to a consensual agreement and understanding, points to the need of having joint training. The implication for policy, therefore, is that of funding joint courses of professional development between teachers and TAs. This however requires breaking down barriers and assumptions about what TAs should and can learn. Conversely, higher education institutions need to overcome their own barriers and design courses which are mindful of the common needs of both teachers and TAs. If as Miliband (2004) claimed:

Remodelling is a great opportunity to support the professionalism of teachers and support staff. It is about ensuring that time of all staff is focused on what will add most value to pupils’

it is also true that remodelling the workforce can be about what will add most value to the teachers and TAs. Above all, it should be about valuing them, their efforts, knowledge and expertise. This will mean to build opportunities that are socially just, and respectful of their common but distinctive professional identity.

REFERENCES


15