Learning guides leading trainee teachers: a case of the blind leading the blind?

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1) Abstract

The massive growth of support workers in the school context over the past few years has now come to include a wide range of different types of school and classroom assistant, some of whom, like Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs), may be responsible for teaching whole classes for which they are trained and qualified, and others who may be working with individuals and groups of pupils.

The report of the 2020 Vision Group, led by Christine Gilbert, now Chief Schools Inspector recommended the appointment of a ‘learning guide’ for every secondary pupil, although it is not clear from this report whether the role should be undertaken by existing support staff or whether these should be new appointments.

The new Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) Standards, now known as the Professional Standards for Teachers (DfES 07/07) which trainee teachers in England must meet from September 07, require more than ever before of trainee teachers in terms of understanding the roles support workers are expected to fulfil and of developing the skills of working with adults supporting learning in the school context.

The main focus of enquiry for the research explored in this paper is that of understanding more fully the contribution of support workers to the training of teachers, together with the development of new ways to train teachers to understand the roles of the range of classroom support workers and the skills to work collaboratively with such colleagues. Research methods have involved a survey undertaken with all trainees in the University’s secondary and key stage 2/3 cohort.

The theoretical framework underpinning this research is that of action research, as the author seeks to analyse the implications of changes being implemented through developing practice in this area within the scope of the project. The research findings illuminate policy and practice in initial teacher training as this adapts to the impact of the changes brought about in school as a result of workforce reform and remodelling, and the challenges of the new QTS Standards.

The paper demonstrates unequivocally the value to trainee teachers of all aspects of working with school support workers and in particular of time spent in liaison with them in order to come to terms with the diversity of ways in which this role is played out in the classroom.

2) National Policy Context for this Research

a) The Teachers’ Workforce Agreement in England

The Teachers’ Workforce Remodelling Agreement was implemented in schools from 2005 as a measure undertaken to address the drain of teachers from the profession within five years of qualification, through the reduction in teachers’ workloads. A key finding from study by Blatchford et al (2006), comparing data on support staff numbers from 2004 to 2006 indicates the following increases in support staff during that two-year period:

‘Higher Level Teaching Assistants (232%); ICT support staff (317%); cover supervisors (471%); catering staff (100%); data managers (69%); creative arts specialists (96%); and
examination officers (68%). The teaching assistant (TA) equivalent staff category was the most prevalent group (including higher level teaching assistants, teaching assistants, learning support assistants, therapists and nursery nurses.)’ It is also interesting to note from this study (Blatchford 2006) that 38% of the cohort studied had qualifications above GCSE, and only 10% had no qualifications at all.

Moreover, government policy changes to the role of the TA, particularly that of the Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA), have extended this role from that of offering support to individual and groups of children, to include that of delivering whole class teaching and extended school services, including pastoral care for pupils, mentoring for trainee teachers, study support and pupil enrichment opportunities.

Key findings from the Blatchford research (ibid) on the deployment and impact of school support staff from 2004 to 2006 suggest that although support staff were more likely to possess a job description and to have been appraised in 2006, there is no evidence that their attendance at training has increased or that teachers had been trained to work as line managers of support staff. Particularly in secondary schools the majority of teachers were not given time with TAs for planning (66%) or feedback (71%). This study confirms a pattern which has emerged in other both recent and more dated research (Farrell et al 1999, Durant and Kramer 2005, Jackson and Bedford 2005, Jackson and Wilson 2005). In the Jackson and Wilson (2005) study teacher respondents were asked to ‘identify the key recommendations’ they would recommend to enhance the way teachers and support workers work together.

‘A total of 45% of the teachers said their most important recommendation would be for paid time to liaise and plan work together, and this was reinforced in every one of the interviews conducted to date.’

The conclusions of the Jackson and Bedford (2005) research raise concerns about the effects of Workforce Remodelling, concerning the need for further support for school support workers if this development is to achieve its potential in raising the standards of children’s learning:

‘It appears that whilst schools are making valiant attempts to introduce workforce remodelling there remain some serious concerns. The focus on supporting teachers and reducing bureaucracy within schools has been at the expense of how the support staff are inducted, trained, remunerated and supported in their new roles.’ (Jackson and Bedford 2005)

b) Focus in Schools on Personalised Learning

As part of the new approach to Personalised Learning all secondary schools are recommended by the Report (DfES 2006) to establish the role of the Learning Guide, based on the principle that all pupils should have access to at least one person in the school who:

1) knows them and understands their learning needs, with continuity of personnel where possible, particularly for those from the more vulnerable groups;
2) agrees the targets for their learning (in the context of an individual learning plan) and monitors the child’s progress;
3) meets pupils regularly – at least once per half-term – for review of progress;
4) uses the knowledge of any wider factors impacting on learning, and draws upon the resources of other specialists;
5) act as an advocate in the school context, especially in the design of learning and teaching experiences.

Surprisingly, the ‘20 20 Vision’ Report does not identify TAs (or HLTAs), as the workers who are the most likely to take on the role of Learning Guide in the secondary school context. The report refers to ‘support workers’ as those who, with teachers, need to be committed to the delivery of this vision, but there is no specific identification of TAs with the support role which they are already carrying out, albeit with particular individual and groups of pupils. This paper, however, does presume that the role of the Learning Guide is subsumed by an extended TA (or HLTA) workforce, since these support workers already operate in this capacity and have a wealth of experience on which to draw for this work.

c) The New Standards for Qualified Teacher Status

The new Standards for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) for implementation in England from September 07 onwards, require greater attention than the previous Standards (DfES 02/02) to training teachers to work in a collaborative context and to meet Standards in the ‘sharing of collective responsibility’ for practice in ‘coaching and mentoring’, for knowing and understanding the roles of colleagues with ‘specific responsibility for learners’, for working as a ‘team member’, for identifying ‘opportunities for working with colleagues’ and for ensuring ‘that colleagues working with them are appropriately involved in supporting learning and understand the roles they are expected to fulfil.’ (DFES 07/07)

A previous paper presented at BERA (Fursland 2006) based on research carried out by the author of this paper, which investigated the impact of workforce reform on trainee teachers and strategies for improvements in training for working with support workers, reached the following conclusions:

1. The contribution of the TA to successful classroom teaching and learning was highly valued by the trainee teachers, in terms of support given to individuals and groups of pupils.
2. The range of activities carried out by TAs, as experienced by trainees, corresponds with the more traditional model of the work of the TA, in supporting children in the classroom, although this study does indicate that there are some signs that this role is being extended.
3. The importance of specific planning time for working with the TA, and the difficulty of achieving this in the school context, was raised in both secondary and key stage 2/3 trainee comments as an area to be addressed.
4. Trainees’ comments on how their course preparation could be improved indicated that they need more help with the role and expectations of the TA. This is more problematic than it might sound at first sight, given that on the ground there appears to be a considerable variety of interpretations of the role and of practices associated with the work of the TA, and of strategies for their management in the school context.
5. Teacher trainees were very positive about the on-the-job training that had taken place in school, with the help of the mentor, to prepare them for working with the TA.
6. The ‘Paired Placement’ initiative, which required trainees to take on the role of TA in assisting the trainee acting as lead teacher, was perceived as valuable by trainees in providing insight into the work of the TA.

3) Research Aims and Implementation

The purpose of the research reported on in this paper is to explore the contribution which TAs, indubitably the closest role to the Learning Guide (DfES 2006), can make to the training of teachers. This paper reports on initiatives undertaken in the academic year 06/07 with Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students with the intention of enhancing the provision of training for work with TAs, building on the findings from the previous year’s study (Fursland 2006). A range of initiatives to develop trainee teacher’s understanding of the work of the TA has been undertaken by the University and partner schools; one of these initiatives, which has been ongoing for several years in some partner schools, has involved trainee teachers in the work of the Learning Guide, as defined in ‘20 20 Vision’ (DfES 2006), otherwise known as Learning Mentor in some partner school contexts. Other training activities aim to familiarise trainee teachers with the work of the TA have involved workshops on the work of the TA, work shadowing a TA, discussion with a TA, and others including the mentor and paired placement partner about the role, and preparing lesson plans for TAs to teach individual and groups of pupils.

A small group of TAs involved with a Partnership Development School (PDS) Project, funded by the Training and Development Agency, attended a day’s University-based conference entitled ‘Working together: helping teaching assistants/school support workers to work with trainee teachers.’ Support workers were able to participate in discussion of what they had to contribute to the training of teachers; an introduction to the (new) Standards for teaching facilitated a matching exercise with the intention of raising the awareness of the support workers of the Qualifying to Teach Standards which are now referred to as the Professional Standards for Teachers (a hierarchy of Standards developed to apply to the teachers’ career structure). Challenges to the involvement of support workers in the training of teachers were debated, including the issue of funded time for meeting purposes, and finally an Action Plan for future developments was identified.

4) Research Methods

Essentially a small scale action research study, the project utilised predominantly an end-of-course survey of the views of all trainees in the secondary cohort (171 trainees in the cohort – 60% of participants responded) and the key stage 2/3 cohort (40 trainees in the cohort – 73% of participants responded), for which the total number of respondents was 132 out of a cohort of 211 trainees. Trainees were informed that the findings of the research would be used to improve future provision of training for working with TAs.

The findings must be assumed to be highly tentative for this small scale study; on the other hand some congruence can be identified with other studies of teaching assistants and with the author’s findings of the previous year, which does suggest some reliability and validity in the results.
5) Research Findings

a) Training activities for trainees working with TAs and the value accorded

i) On First Placement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Activity</th>
<th>Cohort engagement in this activity by %</th>
<th>Value attributed to this activity by participants by %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work shadowing a TA</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking with TA about their work</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking with paired placement partner about work of TA</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking with Mentor about work of TA</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working as a Learning Mentor with individual/groups of pupils</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing a lesson plan for TA to teach to individual pupil</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing lesson plan for TA to teach to group of pupils</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ii) On Final Placement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Activity</th>
<th>Cohort engagement in this activity by %</th>
<th>Value attributed to this activity by participants by %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talking with TA about their knowledge of the learning needs of individual pupils</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking with Mentor about TA’s knowledge of the learning needs of individual pupils</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking on the role of the TA (or Learning Mentor) and working with individual/groups of pupils to improve their learning in my subject</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking on the role of the TA (or Learning Mentor) and working with individual/groups of pupils to improve their learning in a core subject</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing a lesson plan for TA to teach to individual pupil</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing lesson plan for TA to teach to group of pupils</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

iii) Interpretation of findings

On both first and final placement it can be seen that of the above activities undertaken by trainees the most frequent and the one to which the highest value was attributed, was talking with a TA about their work, albeit in the context of a range of other complementary training activities, including working as a learning mentor, planning a lesson for a TA etc.

*I spent a great deal of time liaising with the science TA who gave me further insight into the needs of pupils in my class on register. He helped me to appreciate the importance of differentiated worksheets and I would run my lesson plans past him for those that he...*
would be present for. I could therefore request his help in specific areas of the lesson.’ (First placement)

‘Because I could ask in depth questions about the learning that takes place in the classroom and the facilities/time available for those students who require support - behavioural or SEN.’ (Final placement)

‘Talking with the TA helped me to understand her perspective on learning - My mentor provided a useful school approach to the role of a TA - Preparing a lesson plan helped to understand the management of a TA’ (Final placement)

This finding about the fundamental significance of talking with the TA may be associated the finding which recent and earlier studies have indicated, that the role of the TA is very variable, both within the school as well as between schools. Indeed, it would seem from one of the quotes below that the role needs to be individually negotiated between the TA and each individual lead teacher. This is attested by the following comments:

‘Each TA I spoke with had a slightly different role. Therefore it is essential to talk to them to ascertain what that role is and how best to accommodate each other in the classroom.’ (First placement)

‘When observing the TAs it is quite different from every class because each teacher asks them to do different things. Whereas when speaking to the TA/teacher acting as a TA, you find out what they think they should be doing and what they like to do.’ (First placement)

‘It helped me to understand the important of the TA and the importance of agreeing the roles and expectations of the TA and myself, and also they gave me invaluable insight to the needs of the pupils and how to meet their needs.’ (Final placement)

b) The experience of working as a Learning Guide/Mentor

The comments below and a number of others demonstrate the value to trainees in actually taking on the role of the Learning Guide/Mentor, and the insights into what the work involves and the need for appropriate management by the class teacher.

‘I was able to spend a significant amount of time talking with individual and small groups of pupils about their progress on the exam course and provide individual feedback and targets.’ (Final placement)

‘I had first hand experience of what it was like to be a TA and not be fully planned for or utilised.’ (Final placement)

c) The importance to trainees of experiencing a range of strategies

The majority of trainee responses identify the value of a range of strategies which operate together to provide insight into the nature of the work of the Learning Guide/Mentor, albeit in the context of talking with the TA.
‘Talking with TAs you could understand the extent of their roles and how they were deployed in different departments. Working as a TA with small groups you understood how it was to be a TA in that situation.’ (First placement)

‘It was good to discuss the role with a TA, hearing their side of the story. Discussing what they expect and what is actually expected of them was very useful. I soon found that if I gave them a lesson plan, it helped them as much as it helped me!’ (First placement)

‘It allowed me to understand the role of the TA from a range of perspectives; acting as one, talking with one and talking to a teacher who works with one.’ (First placement)

‘Shadowing a TA gave me an idea as to how they work with another teacher, taking on the role of the TA, showed me how much more effective it is when the teacher works with the TA and talks about the lesson before and after, and preparing the lesson helped me to understand the level of differentiation needed for that individual.’ (First placement)

‘I found that talking with a TA helped me to understand my role as a TA more and I was able to draw on their experiences to make my own experiences as a TA beneficial to all. Also, talking to the TA was great at making sure that I included them in my lessons as a teacher as well, and being a TA helped to develop my relationship with the students and support certain students more effectively.’ (Final placement)

d) Trainees’ views of what the work of the TA involves

Answers to the question ‘I believe that working with a TA in my class helps me with the following’ elicited the percentage responses as set out below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assertion</th>
<th>% of participants agreeing with this assertion about what a TA does</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To adapt my plans for the needs of individual pupils</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To prepare materials for teaching and/or getting out equipment</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To assist individual pupils or small groups with learning tasks set by me</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To promote the inclusion of pupils with Special Educational Needs</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To promote positive behaviour for individual pupils and groups of pupils</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To promote positive behaviour for the whole class</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To model the role of the teacher by delivering whole class or groups sessions for me to observe and learn from</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To observe my teaching and support me in the evaluation of my lessons and developments in relation to the Standards</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The finding which emerges here from trainees’ perceptions of the work of the TA indicates that, in their experiences, the majority of TAs are still performing the traditional support roles rather than those which exemplify the new roles associated with the government’s workforce reform, particularly in relation to working with whole classes. This again resonates with the findings of my previous year’s study (Fursland 2006).
e) Value attributed by trainee teachers to the work of the TA

The value of working with TAs emerges strongly from trainee comments, which are almost entirely positive, which emerges consistently from teacher evaluations of the contribution of the TA and from comments in my earlier study:

‘As I could start to understand the role of a TA; how they can assist with the whole class management, children with SEN and be another adult in the room to gain an overall ideas of the children’s skills, understanding and motivations related to tasks in the lessons.’ (First placement)

‘It enabled me to get to know the students that they worked with and any special needs or requirements I was then able to direct the TA and plan for these students in my lesson maximising their learning.’ (First placement)

‘The TAs at my SE2 school had been there a long time; they knew both the pupils and their families very well - I was able to get a full picture of the educational background of the pupils I needed the TA to work with specifically, as well as all the pupils in the class I was teaching.’ (Final placement)

‘Having the opportunity to spend time with, talk to, work with and plan for a TA increased my knowledge and understanding of not only what an important role they play in the classroom but also how to use their abilities effectively.’ (Final placement)

f) Issues which emerged for trainees in working with TAs

Of the 132 responses about the work of the TA only 14 comments (11%) suggested any negative aspects, which fall into the categories identified below.

Some comments (5) referred to the management of the TA and the fact that they were associated with an individual or small group of pupils, whilst the teacher worked with the rest of the class. Additionally 4 other comments referred to the fact that in their views the TA represents an under-utilised resource, and 2 comments bemoaned the idea that TAs are less prevalent in their subjects (Art and PE).

‘I think I would use the TA more in my classes-sometimes they just sit there and don’t do anything and this can be frustrating for the teacher. I think they need to help more with discipline and ideas for the class too.’

‘In reality teachers and TAs in secondary schools, particularly in subjects where you only see pupils once a week/fortnight, do not have enough time to make use of a TA’s potential’

Further trainee comments (3) pinpointed the funding and resource issue, the fact that TAs are not paid sufficiently to cover the work of liaising with the teacher, and the inadequate number of TAs.

‘I believe that the work of a TA is generally undervalued and that TAs are underpaid considering the value they can add to a lesson and the support they give to teachers.’
‘Allocated time to be spent with TAs in co-producing differentiated resources. TAs are not paid or given time to spend with students.’

‘Schools do not have enough TAs in my experience. This is a shame as many pupils could be benefitting from the attention.’

Again, these comments highlight the same issues as those to which attention has been drawn in large-scale studies of TAs, and their own and teachers’ views about the work of the TA. (Blatchford et al 2006)

g) Trainees’ Recommendations for course improvements in relation to working with TAs

The satisfaction rate from trainees in relation to their preparation for working with TAs and understanding the wider role of the TA in the school is 87% in both cases. The question about recommendations for improvements was amongst the two littoral questions which received the lowest rate of response (68.2%), presumably since a proportion of trainees had no recommendations to make. The comments also contained a large number of statements to this effect (38%).

Trainees’ recommendations for programme improvements in relation to preparation for working with TAs fall broadly into three categories:

1) 8% of trainees requested the opportunity to work as a TA – not all trainees had been accorded this opportunity on school experience, and generally those that had found it useful, although this has been contradicted by two recommendations, including that expressed in the quote below.

2) 32% of trainees asked for University-based lecture/workshop inputs on the work of the TA and expectations of the role.

3) 22% of trainees asked for more opportunities for liaison with TAs, in line with the comments expressed below:

‘Less time working as a TA myself within the classroom (perhaps by just doing 1 or 2 full days as a TA rather than 2 hours per week) and more time available to talk to TAs about how they see their role in the classroom and what they want/need from me as a teacher.’

6 Conclusions

1) In answer to the original question this research set out to consider, it is evident that far from being the blind leading the blind, those school personnel who possess detailed knowledge about individual pupils’ learning and can take this forward in mentoring and target-setting for learners, whether they be known as Teaching Assistants or Learning Guides/Mentors, are seen as beacons of light by trainee teachers.

2) Trainees have a high degree of appreciation of the work of the TA/Learning Mentor/Guide, which they perceive as playing a crucial part in the learning of identified pupils.

3) The majority of trainees greatly value all the opportunities provided through a range of training activities to work with TAs (including that provided by the paired placement initiative), but above all trainee teachers value the time to talk with TAs in order to tap into the store of knowledge which they possess, not just about the backgrounds and learning needs of individual pupils, but also about the most
appropriate teaching and learning styles for learners, approaches to class
management, and strategies to encourage and support learning. This emerges
strongly not only from all the evidence in relation to comments about first and
final placement but also in relation to suggestions for improvements, for which
again the majority comment centres on greater provision of liaison with TAs.

4) Trainees perceive the role of the TA largely in terms of the traditional approach to
supporting learners who need help in the classroom, rather than in terms of that
recommended in Government Workforce Reform policies.

5) Trainees recognise, in line with current studies of TAs’ operation in the school
context, that the role of the TA is under-funded and that the potential benefit to
learners of the TA role is under-exploited, largely as a result of the inadequate
provision of planning time for teachers and TAs.

6) The findings of this study are congruent with the findings of other studies, in
relation to the work of the TA in the school context.

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