Work Force Reform for Teachers in England: a Perspective on the Impact of Teaching Assistants on Teacher Trainees

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(Original Abstract title submitted in January 06: Training teachers in the context of workforce remodelling – is the whole more than the sum of its parts?)
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Abstract

The Teachers’ Workforce Remodelling in England, which was legislated for in 2003 and has been fully implemented for all teaching staff in September 2005, requires teachers to have 10% of their teaching time outside the classroom for preparation, planning and assessment. This is being implemented within a context which requires the employment of additional non-teaching staff as Teaching Assistants. The intended outcome of this workforce remodelling is to bring about reductions in workload and further improvements in the standards of teaching and learning and the satisfaction and status of the profession, as exemplified in the quotation below:

‘Remodelling is about giving teachers more time, extra support and renewed leadership. This is essential if they are to go on improving standards in schools. By restructuring the teaching profession and reforming the school workforce, we can reduce teacher workload, raise standards, increase job satisfaction and improve the status of the profession.’ (Teachernet. 2003)

One consequence of the Teachers’ Workforce Remodelling in England is the development of the role and nature of the work of teaching assistants; this has been fully recognised by the Department for Education and Skills and the Training and Development Agency in the development of a structure for the role, training, and career development of teaching assistants.

Providers of Initial Teacher Education are still coming to terms with the all the implications of the Teachers’ Workforce Remodelling and its possible consequences for the training of teachers. This paper focuses on the impact of the Teaching Assistant upon teacher trainees working on placement, from the perspective of the trainees themselves, and their views of their preparation to work with teaching assistants.

Introduction

A major plank of the Teachers’ Workforce Remodeling consists in the increase in the numbers of support staff working in schools and in the changing nature of their role and nature of their work. Numbers of support workers have increased from 61,300 to 148,500 in recent years and the job is in the process of changing and developing beyond that of offering support to individual and groups of children, to delivering whole class teaching and extended school services, including pastoral care for pupils, mentoring for trainee teachers, study support and enrichment opportunities.

An issue which arises immediately in relation to this subject is that of the varied terminology in use for such support workers; terms such as ‘Learning Support Assistants’, ‘Classroom Assistants’, and ‘Teaching Assistants’ are all in use.
interchangeably along with the generic term ‘Support Staff’. For the purposes of this paper I have chosen to use the term ‘Teaching Assistant’ from this point referred to as the ‘TA’.

The importance of this topic for teacher training is clearly reinforced by the inclusion of an item in the Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) Survey entitled ‘preparing them to work with support staff in the classroom’, newly introduced in 2005, for response by NQTs in relation to their recent training. The analysis of the NQTs’ responses in 2005 for the whole sector indicated that this is an area needing further work and development, with less than half the sector (45%) describing this preparation as ‘good’ or ‘very good’, as compared with much more positive evaluations for other more established items such as ‘preparing them with the relevant knowledge, skills and understanding to teach their specialist subject’, which merited a 75% response in the ‘good’ and ‘very good’ category.

A further motivation for undertaking this study has come from an initiative at the provider in question, which sees trainees on first placement working in pairs, alternating between the roles of ‘Lead Teacher’, ‘Teaching Assistant’ and ‘Observer’. The research undertaken for this study has attempted to assess the value of this experience in terms of enhancing the trainees’ understanding of the work of the TA.

**Literature Survey**

There is an extensive body of literature written in the last decade on Teaching Assistants, which falls broadly into two categories: the first being policy documents from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), its predecessor the DfEE, and OFSTED, (the national inspection agency) and the second being independently funded evaluative and research studies, which chart the policies underlying the development of teaching assistants and focus predominantly on the themes of the role of the TA, the nature of the job and its impact upon children’s learning, the identity of the TA in relation to the teacher, good practice in the management of the TA, and the training and development of the TA, together with recommendations for improvements across the board.

As I could find little in my literature search of pertinence to the impact of TAs on trainee teachers, I have limited my search to the literature on teaching assistants which resonates with the findings of my research, as described later on in this paper.

Farrell et al’s contribution to the debate (Farrell et al 1999) represents a combination of both policy and its evaluation and set forward some classical views of the value of the work of the TA and how the role should be executed, but also raises issues about how the role is managed, in the following paragraphs:

‘Although the teachers play a crucial role in planning and monitoring programmes, finding time for day- to- day meetings to fine tune programmes and make necessary adjustments was a major problem in the majority of the mainstream schools visited. There were many occasions when the LSA would arrive at a lesson being unclear about what teacher was intending to do. All the teachers interviewed were extremely positive
about having LSAs in their class. “We could not manage without them” and “It’s essential for inclusion to work” are just two of the comments that were made. The evidence of this study suggests that there is a clearly understood distinction between the role of LSAs and teachers. In the particular context of pupils with special educational needs, teachers are responsible for the overall success of the teaching programmes; they plan the programmes, monitor their success, plan review meeting and liaise with parents. Meanwhile, LSAs are seen as being responsible for implementing the programmes under the teachers’ guidance. ‘In order to work in this way it is important for LSAs and teachers to get on well together, to trust each other’s judgement and to have sufficient time for planning.’ (Farrell et al 1999)

Recent studies, however, have suggested that the traditional model of the teacher working as the leader and manager of the TA, even within a context of trust is less helpful than the notion of a partnership between those working in the same class planning and problem solving together (Jackson and Wilson 2005). In this study teacher respondents were asked to ‘identify the key recommendations’ they would recommend to enhance the way teachers and TAs 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.’

Recent studies also support the perception of the TA as very valuable (Durant and Kramer 2005), but raise questions about the extent of the role and strategies for managing TAs, as is evident from the following quotations:

‘The teaching assistant is a remarkable person. Working at the behest of the teacher or another senior member of staff, she, (it is at present overwhelmingly a female role) will regularly undertake a diverse range of para educational activities, to support the pupil, groups of pupils, the class group and the teacher.’ (Durant and Kramer 2005) The varied nature of the work of the TA, is however qualified by Durant and Kramer in a further statement in their study:

‘Although TAs spend different proportions of their time working with and without children, the top three tasks identified ……are all concerned directly with children;

- Raising the self esteem of children by showing interest in what they do
- Keeping children on task
- Assisting individuals in learning activities’ (Durant and Kramer 2005)

Durant and Kramer’s study, and the conclusions of Jackson and Bedford (Jackson and Bedford 2005) ring alarm bells about the effects of Workforce Remodelling, concerning the need for further support for TAs 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)

**Research**

The research was undertaken in the context of a university provider of initial teacher training which works with cohorts of secondary and key stage trainees, both of which were surveyed in the final days of the course. This provider has developed ‘Paired Placement’ provision in recent years, predominantly for secondary trainees on first placement. A characteristic of this development is that one member of the pair of trainees works as a teaching assistant in the class, whilst the other member takes the lead teacher role.

**The aims of the Survey were as follows:**

1) To establish the extent of trainees’ experience of teaching assistants on first and final placement, and to distinguish working with a Teaching Assistant (TA) employed by the school from that of working with a Placement Partner on a paired placement. (Questions 1-6 on Questionnaire)

2) To set forward a range of categories within which a TA might work with a trainee and to determine the usefulness to the trainee of working with a TA within these categories. (Questions 7-16 on Questionnaire)

3) To investigate the perceptions of trainees in relation to the provider’s preparation for working with the TA across a range of pre-determined categories.

4) To give trainees the opportunity to comment on the impact of the TA on pupil learning in their placement schools

5) To give trainees the opportunity to comment on their course preparation for working with TAs and ways of improving this.

A questionnaire was prepared reflecting the above aims which was given to trainees for completion in the final days of the course. (The questionnaire is included in Appendix A)

It should be noted that the generic term *Teaching Assistant*, abbreviated as *TA*, was used throughout the questionnaire, in order to promote clarity of understanding for respondents. Other terms used by respondents for TAs included the ‘Learning Support Assistant’, often abbreviated as ‘LSA’ and the terms ‘Classroom Assistant’ and ‘Support Worker.’

**The rate of response to the questionnaire was as follows:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Secondary Cohort Response</th>
<th>Response %</th>
<th>Key Stage 2/3 Response</th>
<th>Response %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>41/179</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>53/62</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The response to the questionnaire was at a rate of 39% response overall, although not all respondents answered every question. As it was not possible to pilot the questionnaire in advance, because of trainee work load, trainees were asked if they were willing to give contact details for post-questionnaire explication should this be necessary. 22% of the
secondary trainees and 26% of the key stage 2/3 trainees provided this information. Moreover, the quality of feedback in the Comments above all from Key 2/3 trainees, showed a high level of engagement with the subject matter.

**Analysis of the Questionnaire**

The questionnaires were analysed separately for secondary and key stage 2/3 trainees; this is because key stage 2/3 trainees complete their first placement at Key Stage 3 in a secondary or middle school and the final placement of 12 weeks in a primary school, whereas secondary trainees complete both placements in the secondary school context, working in the main with the 11-16 age group.

As respondents did not answer every question on the questionnaire each line of results was analysed independently for percentage purposes in order to produce as high a degree of accuracy as possible in the final results.

**Findings of the Questionnaire**

The questionnaire generated a considerable amount of data which has been organised for the most part as Charts giving comparisons between the Secondary and Key Stage 2/3 Cohort responses. In the interests of clarity, the Charts refer to the individual questions for which the responses have been analysed. The description of the findings given below takes each of the above aims of the Survey in turn and discusses the findings in relation to these.

**Aim 1: To establish the extent of trainees’ experience of teaching assistants on first and final placement, and to distinguish working with a Teaching Assistant (TA) employed by the school from that of working with a Placement Partner on a paired placement.** (Questions 1-6 on Questionnaire)

It is evident from the data in Figure 1 that for secondary trainees the experience of working in a paired placement with their placement partner accounts for almost 50% of the experience of working with a TA on first placement, as the opportunity to work in a significant way with a TA on the six week placement is limited to only 69% of the cohort. This indicates the importance of this Paired Placement Initiative in providing the opportunity to gain experience of working with a TA for secondary trainees. It also points up the need to hone this experience to ensure that trainees gain as much from this Paired Placement experience as possible.

On final placement for secondary trainees the situation is reversed with an increased opportunity to work with a TA; this difference may be explained by the considerably greater length of the placement providing enhanced opportunities for the TA, and by the fact that this year a Training Activity involving the use of the TA was expected of trainees on final placement. Even on final placement however 25% of the cohort claim only limited or no experience of working with TAs; one trainee made it clear on the questionnaire return that s/he had no experience on either SE1 or 2 of working with a TA.
Key Stage 2/3 Trainees on SE1 (first placement) and SE2 (final placement – in a primary school working with the KS2 age group)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TAs were supporting pupils’ learning in my classes for all/most of the time on SE1 (8 week placement in sec/mid school)</th>
<th>Placement Partner (PP)</th>
<th>Teaching Assistant (TA)</th>
<th>Total TA Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key Stage 2/3 trainees have enhanced opportunities on SE1 (58%), as compared with secondary trainees, to work with Training Assistants, perhaps because TAs are more abundant in Middle schools; fewer opportunities are provided for these trainees to work with placement partners since this is their only placement at KS3 hence the Paired Placement initiative is utilised less for this cohort.
On final placement 85% of Key Stage 2/3 trainees have significant experience of working with TAs in the context of the primary school, as compared with 75% of trainees in the secondary context; 15% have limited experience, however, even in the primary school, where TAs are more in evidence, and again one trainee claimed to have had no experience of working with a TA on either placement. Walsh also identifies primary school teachers as having more opportunities to work with TAs than secondary teachers, particularly in relation to the teaching of literacy and numeracy. (Walsh 2005)

**Aim 2: To set forward a range of categories within which a TA might work with a trainee and to determine the usefulness to the trainee of working with a TA within these categories.** (Questions 7-16 on page 1 of the Questionnaire)

The categories determined for the purpose of this questionnaire included both those activities traditionally associated with the role of a classroom support worker and those which have developed more recently as part of the role of the Teaching Assistant, including that of the Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA). For instance, as examples of the traditional role of the TA, trainees were asked to evaluate the usefulness to them of the TA

- (Q8) ‘helping to prepare materials for teaching and/or getting out equipment’,
- (Q9) ‘interpreting the trainee’s instructions for individuals or groups of pupils’,
- (Q10) ‘helping individuals or small groups with practical tasks set by the trainee’
- (Q11) ‘Promoting the inclusion of SEN pupils’

Findings of this part of the Survey, as demonstrated in the Charts 1-10, show that Key Stage 2/3 trainees are consistently more positive than secondary trainees, in ticking the ‘Very Useful’ box, whereas secondary trainees have ticked the ‘Useful’ box. However, when the two boxes (‘Very Useful’ and ‘Useful’) are totalled for each response the totals for each cohort become more comparable. Thus in Summary Chart A the totals of the two boxes have been summed in order to enhance the impact of these findings, and to provide more valid comparisons between the two cohorts.

It is evident from Summary Chart A that the questions associated with the more traditional role of the TA, in particular questions 9, 10 and 11, are those which have generated the highest responses from the trainees in terms of perceptions of ‘Very Useful’ (VU) and ‘Useful’ (U). Differences between the totals (of VU and U) for secondary and key stage 2/3 trainees are less noticeable. The highest rating from key stage 2/3 trainees (12 % points higher than secondary) is given to Q10 ‘helping individuals or small groups with practical tasks set by the trainee’, which would appear to reflect the traditional role of the support worker in the primary classroom, also reflected in the middle school context, which was often in the past carried out by parent helpers. Secondary trainees, however, give their highest rating of 85% to Q11 ‘Promoting the inclusion of SEN pupils’, (with key stage 2/3 trainees close behind on 78%); this again reflects the traditional role of the support worker assigned to children with Special Educational Needs. It is also evident from the Summary Chart A that secondary trainees attached much more value than key stage 2/3 trainees (24 % points more) to the Q7 ‘Helping me to adapt my plans to the needs of individual children’, which probably links
with the value attached to the TA working with SEN children, for whom the plans need to be adapted.

**Summary Chart A**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trainees' Estimation of the Value of the TA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total trainee response (%)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q 16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Range of Activities represented in the Questionnaire (7-16 on page 1)**

Questions 12 ‘Promoting positive behaviour for the whole class’ and 13 ‘Facilitating and encouraging participation in learning for the whole class’ are valued at a comparable level by secondary and key stage 2/3 trainees; although as we will see in the responses to the Comment Boxes, the usefulness of the TA’s role was generally perceived as that of working with small groups, thus permitting the trainee to work more effectively with the whole class. Similarly, 36% of secondary trainees find the TA’s support in evaluating lessons (Q14 ‘Helping me to evaluate my lessons and providing me with support generally’) ‘VU’ or ‘U’ (compared with 20% of key stage 2/3 trainees) suggesting that this also links with the work of the TA with SEN pupils, and the support given by the TA in evaluating planning for SEN pupils. By comparison, 44% of key stage 2/3 trainees found this ‘Not applicable’ in the contexts in which they had worked (Chart 8).

Responses to Q15 ‘Modelling the role of the teacher by delivering whole class lessons/group work observed by me’ indicated that this less traditional role of the TA is less valued by trainees; in most cases this would be because trainees have not been able to observe TAs working in this capacity. This is evident in the response to Q15 for which 56% of secondary trainees and 52% of key stage 2/3 trainees have ticked the ‘Not Applicable’ box, thus indicating that they have not observed a Higher Level Teaching Assistant, or a TA acting in the capacity of a ‘Cover Supervisor.’

Finally for this section, Q16 asks trainees to rate ‘Giving me an understanding of the role of the TA in the wider school context, for example in pastoral care, booster/homework/enrichment class support.’ This is valued particularly by secondary trainees (63% thought this was either VU or U, compared with 50% for key stage 2/3), and indicates an appreciation of the more developed uses of TAs in schools, where this exists.
Aim Three: To investigate the perceptions of trainees in relation to the provider’s preparation for working with the TA across the range of pre-determined categories.
(Questions 1-10 on page 2 of the Questionnaire)

Again, it was found that key stage 2/3 trainees had answered consistently more positively than secondary trainees, in view of which the same device was adopted of summing the totals of the ‘VU’ and ‘U’ boxes, as can be seen in Summary Chart B.

Overall this Chart presents a very positive picture of the trainees’ perceptions of their preparation for working with TAs across a range of activities, with generally comparable responses from secondary and key stage 2/3 cohorts. However, the responses in the Comments Box sections, analysed below under Aims 4 and 5, present a somewhat different picture, particularly in respect of key stage 2/3 trainees’ perceptions. The questions with the highest response ratings of VU + U are Q1 ‘I have been enabled to develop my understanding of the role of the TA in the classroom’, and Q3 ‘I have been enabled to work effectively with a TA in my classroom’ correspond broadly with the percentages of trainees who experienced TAs in their lessons for ‘all/most’ and ‘some’ of the time – these were 75% for secondary trainees and 85% for key stage 2/3 trainees. This suggests that the positive answers about the preparation for working with the TA, in particular from secondary trainees, may be related to their ‘on the job’ learning in the classroom with the TA, and indicates a vote of confidence in the work of the TA in preparing them for this, in addition to the University preparation. However, as emerges in the following sections, key stage 2/3 trainees felt less well prepared by their University-based training and this has impacted on the response to some of these questions in Summary Chart B.

Summary Chart B

![Summary Chart B](image-url)
Question 10 asks trainees to respond to the question ‘I have been enabled to develop my understanding of the wider role of the TA in the Teacher’s Workforce Reform Act’ and this has elicited, one of the least positive responses from both cohorts of trainees, at 52% from secondary trainees and 48% from key stage 2/3 trainees. This indicates that around half of the respondents have a less well developed view of the impact of the Teacher’s Workforce Reform Act, and the role of the TA in implementing this.

Aim Four: To give trainees the opportunity to comment on the impact of the TA on pupil learning in their placement schools. 41% (17) of secondary trainees used the opportunity provided to give brief comments, making the following points, mainly positive but with some more negative points:

- The Use of TA in paired SE1 placement was helpful. The TA was used as a tool for feedback and creation of resources (3 similar comments)
- The class teacher on SE2 took on the role of TA for the purposes of carrying out the Training Activity
- TAs helped the lesson run more smoothly allowing more than one group to be monitored at any one time reducing behaviour problems (3 similar comments)
- TAs at (named school) were ‘fantastic - supportive and enthusiastic – a real help’
- Two Trainees specifically mentioned the work of TAs with SEN pupils: ‘I found it useful for preparing resources and for including SEN students more in the lesson’
- ‘Often the role of the TAs was very unclear (often class teachers themselves are unclear about this) Sometimes this seemed to be a wasted resource’
- ‘They mainly just help the pupils they are assigned to’
- ‘Although the role of the TA I believe is very important I do not think that they should have an input on behaviour issues of the class as it undermines your authority’
- ‘TAs were a great help to me although I wish I could have had the opportunity to have meetings with them to discuss individual pupils’

72% (38) of key stage 2/3 trainees commented on the impact of TAs in their placement schools, and again the majority of these comments were very favourable about the work of the TA, and the support given, particularly in the primary context. Again the work of the TA is perceived mainly as being about working with assigned groups of pupils, in particular those needing additional help; in primary schools often through withdrawal from the classroom. However, again the impact on whole class learning and behaviour is acknowledged by a considerable number of trainee responses, and at least one trainee cited below has used the TA to guide her in improving her teaching. Again some negative comments were receiving, indicating confusion about the role of the TA in the placement school. The following comments give the flavour of this:

- I was lucky enough to work with several skilled TAs who were great at working with small groups of pupils to keep them focused. Pupils’ learning was undoubtedly enhanced by the presence of the TAs
- I found the TAs really helpful on both teaching placements. I had more TAs in my primary placement and I encouraged them to give me any ideas they thought could aid my teaching and the children
- Had very good experience of TAs at school in SE2 and they have been very good at aiding pupils’ learning. On the whole they were very professional.
During SE2 my TA was fantastic and we were able to work together very well. A definite aid to pupils’ learning.

Without my LSA the pupils to whom she was assigned would’ve made little or no progress at all. She was excellent, a model professional – on SE1 the TA was more specific to individual pupils. On SE2 the TAs were for specific pupils but helped the whole class as well, which really helped individual and whole class learning.

The LSA that I worked with on my SE2 placement in primary has been invaluable in teaching me the above. She has been consistent, caring and a wealth of knowledge.

TAs offer another helping hand in the class so when lots of pupils need help can share the load. Good for Spring Board sessions.

Within my class (primary) here were 2 TAs present the whole time with a further present during select lessons to support a specific child. They help control and focus the children’s behaviour and supported specific children.

The TA sat with a particular pupil that would have struggled on her own. This helped control her behaviour which impacted on the whole class.

Received excellent TA support. TAs offered advice, suggestions and really aided pupils’ learning especially SEN pupils.

At secondary school only saw one TA who was new and unsure of her role in the classroom so I guided her. At primary school the TA was used by the teachers mostly to put up displays and do jobs around the classroom. I used her to work with students.

Aim Five: To give trainees the opportunity to comment on their course preparation for working with TAs and ways of improving this.

32% (13) of the secondary trainees responded to the invitation to comment on their course preparation and ways of improving this. Trainees identified the ways in which they felt the course had prepared them, as following:

- Course preparation through the school-based General Professional Studies programme in which a TA Work Shadowing Activity was undertaken in the school context for a period of time. This was mentioned as valuable by 6 respondents.
- One Trainee also mentioned as useful a school-based training activity on final placement, which required the trainee to prepare a plan for a TA to undertake.

68% (36) of the key stage 2/3 trainees responded. Trainees identified the following ways in which they felt the course had prepared them, as following:

- Part of my SE1 placement was completed as a paired placement and this was good preparation.
- All planning proforma had a section on work for TA. Constant reminders in observations as to continue to plan for their use.
- This was done more by my mentor who gave me great instruction (SE2 placement)

The following suggestions were set forward to improve the quality of course preparation for working with TAs; mainly these came from the key stage 2/3 cohort, by whom it was felt, in the words of one respondent: Some good ideas (were presented) but a mismatch to what is actually happening in the school:

- I think more could be done on explaining their job descriptions and what we should and shouldn’t ask them to do
• The GPS lectures should include a lecture on TA, describing their job role, how teachers can best plan for and use TAs in the lesson – including using TAs to assess pupils and prepare resources
• Have a TA in one of the meetings to describe the role of the TA and how we should use them in classes and how they expect to be used
• Need to see some good examples of use of TAs and what the role should really be about.
• Just need some info on their changing role in schools
• Need to see modelled lessons with TAs supporting or providing group/individual work
• Useful to observe ‘best practice’ e.g. through DVDs

Summary of Findings

1. Overall, the experiences of working with TAs have been very positive, and the contribution of the TA to successful classroom teaching and learning is highly valued by the trainee teachers. This chimes with both earlier and more recent studies of teachers’ views of TAs. (Farrell et al 1999) (Jackson and Bedford, 2005) (Durant and Kramer 2005) Trainees value the work of the TA for its own sake, in working to support individuals and groups with literacy and numeracy in the primary context and with pupils identified as needing support in the secondary context.

2. Trainees on the key stage 2/3 cohort, working predominantly in middle and primary schools, had a greater level of engagement with TAs than secondary trainees. (Walsh, P. 2005 also set forward a similar finding in respect of primary and secondary teachers’ experience of TAs) Trainees did, however, feel very positive about the on-the-job training that had taken place through working with the TA and through the help of the mentor. The comments of the key stage 2/3 trainees will result in a specific focus on enhancing the range of training inputs and activities for this cohort.

3. 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 developing in the direction of the role of the TA as set out in Workforce Reform policy documents. (E.g. the use by one trainee of a TA in a primary school to assist her with her teaching) Some trainees also perceive the impact this role has, albeit indirectly in the views expressed, on whole class management, behaviour and learning, enabling the trainee to manage the teaching of the whole class more effectively; there is little evidence that trainees perceive the role of the TA as being about working with the whole class. This resonates with the findings of recent studies such as those of Durant and Kramer, (Durant and Kramer 2005) and Jackson and Bedford (Jackson and Bedford, 2005)

4. 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. Such issues have also been raised in earlier and more recent studies already cited in this study, relating to teachers’ perceptions of
how their work with TAs could be improved. (Farrell et al. 1999) (Durant and Kramer, 2005) (Jackson and Bedford, 2005) (Walsh, 2005)

5. 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, as highlighted in the afore-mentioned studies of Durant and Kramer and Jackson and Bedford. (Durant and Kramer 2005) (Jackson and Bedford 2005) Developmental work in this area for teacher trainees would need to clarify more fully one of the most sensitive areas, over which there is some debate expressed in the studies cited above, of the interface between the role of the teacher and that of the TA, including the potential threat to the teacher’s professional identity posed by the TA, to which threat only one trainee makes reference in this study.

6. The ‘Paired Placement’ initiative has been perceived as valuable by trainees in providing insight into the work of the TA; clearly this could be developed further, with a more specific brief to achieve such ends and a range of tasks to be carried out in the school context in working with the TA and the mentor.

Conclusion

This paper indicates that the findings of a small scale study of the impact of TAs on teacher trainees mirrors the findings of more recent studies carried out in relation to teachers and TAs working in a range of school settings. The paper recognises the need for further improvements to the training for working with TAs and that such improvements would need to focus on fundamental issues of roles and expectations, areas which are not yet fully clarified for members of the teaching profession.

A study carried out recently by Jackson and Wilson (Jackson and Wilson 2005), which asked teachers to identify the skills and/or personal attributes needed by teachers to enhance effective working relationships with TAs, pinpointed personal qualities such as Communication (27%), Flexibility (17%), Respect (10%), Listening (10%), Trust (8%), and Respect (8%), in addition to Organisational skills (11%). Since these are fundamental skills in the development of trainee teachers this also signposts the way forward for teacher training in preparation for working with TAs.
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