Mapping the changes: a longitudinal study of the career trajectories and experiences of classroom teaching assistants who undertake a Foundation Degree.

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Abstract

This paper presents the key findings of a three-year, two-phased research project. The study considered the experiences of teaching assistants from primary and secondary schools who studied a Foundation Degree in Supporting Teaching and Learning at a university in the northwest of England. One of the aims of the study was to track personal and professional changes experienced by those engaged in the degree.

The research presented in this paper follows on from the first phase of the study that investigated the experiences and perceptions of a cohort of Foundation degree students, all teaching assistants, who graduated in 2006. The findings indicated a lack of career progression following graduation and a lack of awareness or recognition in the workplace of Foundation degrees as higher education qualifications. This paper reports on a second cohort of teaching assistants studying for the degree who were tracked throughout their three years of study from 2006 to 2009, in order to re-visit and illuminate issues raised in relation to personal and professional development in the first phase of the research.

The second phase of the research began in September 2006. A cohort of 120 teaching assistants who were in year 1 of their Foundation degree were invited to respond to a questionnaire that asked open ended questions relating to their role in school, reasons for doing a degree and aspirations. The questionnaire was followed up by two focus group interviews with the same cohort in order to identify and track changes, the same cohort of students were invited to respond to a further questionnaire in October 2007 and again at the end of their course in December 2008. The focus groups were also re-convened and the groups were invited to talk about their experience of personal and professional change as a consequence of studying for a Foundation degree.

The researchers were particularly interested in considering how teaching assistants’ perceptions of themselves and their positioning within schools was influenced by their experiences of ‘earning and learning’, as located in the UK government’s lifelong learning agenda (Higher education Funding Council for England [HEFCE] / Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 2000). The researchers engaged with Foucault’s work regarding power and knowledge and some of the recent literature on the role and experiences of teaching assistants (e.g. Bach et al., 2006; Barkham, 2008; Dunne et al., 2008; Woolhouse et al., 2009) and considered the potential effects of changing power relations within schools as a consequence of UK school workforce remodelling (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2003a).

The questionnaires, and the focus groups in particular, provided illuminating data in terms of teaching assistants’ perceptions of roles, hierarchical relationships in schools, career opportunities, aspirations and perceived professional status. There were similarities and differences between the way the primary and secondary teaching assistants talked about their experiences. Questionnaire and focus group responses for both primary and secondary teaching assistants indicated a lack of official recognition of a Foundation degree as an
academic qualification within schools and local authorities. Whilst there were personal benefits stemming from further study, such as a perceived increase in self-confidence and self-esteem, and other benefits relating to perceived increased professional status within the staff room, financial recognition as a consequence of professional development remained limited. These findings correlated with our earlier 2006 phase-one research findings, where a significant number of teaching assistants who had graduated indicated that they had an increased responsibility or a change in job role without an accompanying salary, suggesting a form of potential exploitation.

Those who took part in the phase-two, longitudinal research also consistently indicated that ‘juggling’ the demands of work and further study had effects on, and implications for, personal relationships and family life. This also reverberated with phase-one, 2006 research findings. There was a powerful conflict between fulfilling professional aspirations through obtaining a qualification and fulfilling personal responsibilities. This conflict of interests sometimes deterred further study.

In presenting a summary of the main findings of the research project, this paper draws attention to some of the benefits and challenges involved in lifelong learning forms of study. In particular, it raises questions about the UK government rhetoric surrounding courses like Foundation degrees that suggests that further study can lead to promotion and career advancement (HEFCE / DfEE, 2000). The absence of financial benefits or recognition for those involved in this research project suggests that the apparent enticement of people to ‘earn and learn’ to advance their careers may represent a false presumption. This paper exposes some of the personal challenges and hidden costs involved in vocationally driven lifelong learning courses like Foundation degrees that target particular ‘non-traditional’ student groups into higher education. It calls for a more candid acknowledgement of the conflicts and challenges involved in earning and learning.

Key words: Lifelong learning, professional development, teaching assistants, power.

Introduction

This paper follows on from a paper present at BERA 2007 that questioned the official rhetoric surrounding Foundation degrees and the skills culture promoted by the UK government. In this paper we summarise the findings of a three-year, two phased research project that explored the personal and professional life experiences of teaching assistants. All were working in the primary, secondary and special school sectors and had studied a Higher Education Foundation Degree in Supporting Teaching and Learning. One of the aims of our research was to find out if doing a Foundation degree had, as the UK Government’s Foundation degree website claims, ‘kick-started careers’ (2007), or if the teaching assistants experienced barriers regarding this promised advancement. The researchers were particularly interested in
considering how teaching assistants’ perceptions of themselves and their positioning within schools was influenced by their experiences of ‘earning and learning’, as located in the UK government’s lifelong learning agenda (Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE] / Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 2000). Consideration was also given to exploring how recent policy changes to the role and status of teaching assistants (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2003) might impact upon individuals.

**Contextualising the research**

The English education system, in response to a variety of British Government policies, has undergone a significant shift in recent years with the establishment of a remodelled Children’s School Workforce [CSW] (DfES, 2003a, 2004). One aspect of this remodelling has involved crystallisation of three agendas: lifelong learning, widening participation and work-based learning. Workforce remodelling was intended to ‘re-professionalise’ teaching and reduce teacher workload, as well as create new professional roles needed for the implementation of the UK Government’s *Every Child Matters* agenda (DfES, 2003b). In particular, the hierarchy in schools shifted with the ‘revolutionary’ re-positioning of teaching assistants (Goddard et al, 2007) who were offered new responsibilities, opportunities and challenges.

Educational researchers (e.g. Coburn 2001; Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Goodson, 2008) have worked closely with teachers in ascertaining their experiences in a shifting policy climate. There is also some existing research
that considers the views and experiences of other educational practitioners, such as teaching assistants (e.g. Bach et al., 2006; Barkham, 2008) but research remains a little sparse, perhaps reflecting their marginalised role as members of the professional educational workforce (Sorsby 2004; Kerry 2005; Mansaray, 2006). Our research project, which began in 2006, sought to foreground the trials and tribulations of a number of teaching assistants engaged in a programme of lifelong learning, namely a Foundation degree.

Foundation degrees were set up in the UK to enhance skills in the work-place, promote employability in an increasingly competitive global economy and widen participation in learning (Doyle, 2003). They began in 2001 and were intended to make higher education study more affordable, accessible and appealing to a broader range of people (HEFCE, 2000). It was also hoped that such courses would advance individuals’ aspirations and careers:

‘a Foundation degree gives you the learning and workplace experience to help kick-start or further your career…so you’re prepared for the working world, or ready for promotion’

(Foundation degree website, 2007).

In our previous research (Dunne et al., 2008) the teaching assistants themselves suggested that Foundation degrees are uneasily located between vocational and academic traditions, and those who undertake them have been viewed by schools and local authorities as less academic than those who study traditional degrees. Such a stance might risk setting up hierarchical divisions in schools between those who have traditional teaching qualifications and those who have the newer and still frequently mis-
understood Foundational degrees (Dunne et al., 2008, Woolhouse et al., 2009).

**Theoretical perspective**

In order to explore the potential effects of changing power relations within schools as a consequence of UK school workforce remodelling (DfES, 2003a) this project sought the perspectives of teaching assistants and in this paper we cast a Foucauldian lens on the data collected. In particular we engaged with Foucault’s (1982) work regarding how power and knowledge intersect to produce subjects. Foucault considers how the connectivities between knowledge and power create what he terms ‘truths’, and he conceives these truths as influencing how individuals come to know themselves and become subjects. However, the power of truths to ‘act upon’ individuals cannot be assumed, as Foucault points out: ‘power is not a commodity, a position, a prize or a plot’ (1990b:82). Power relations can be studied by looking at the effects of power, by looking at how networks of power operate through individuals, technologies and institutions.

To apply Foucault’s work to the context of the teaching assistant’s role in school, we explore how knowledge about teaching, learning, the aims of education, and the roles of those in school circulates and is put into practice. This knowledge is engaged with and (re)constructed by all those within the education system including researchers, policy makers, those in schools, parents and pupils via such things as educational policies, educational texts and through people’s day-to-day practices. This knowledge influences how
individuals come to ‘know’ themselves as teaching assistants, how they act and relate to others. In order to investigate how teaching assistants come to know themselves as professionals we asked two Foundation degree cohorts (described below) about their perceptions of their roles, experiences in the classroom and the impact studying had on their professional and personal lives at various points over a three year period (2006-2009).

**Methodology**

We have taken a broadly qualitative approach by concentrating on the perceptions of teaching assistants, with the view that ‘reality is socially constructed’ (Robson, 2002: 27). The project has employed a range of research methods, including questionnaires, individual case studies and focus group discussion. All the teaching assistants engaged in this research were working school settings in the North West of England and the majority were female, reflecting a national, historical gender bias that other academics have noted (Bach et al, 2006, Barket, 2008).

Cohort one were the first teaching assistants to undertake a foundation degree in the UK and they graduated in 2006. We invited all 189 on the course to respond to a questionnaire which asked some general questions about age, setting, job title and then asked questions about their experiences that were designed to elicit qualitative responses. 89 completed questionnaires were returned, 63 who responded were based in primary schools and 26 were in secondary settings. The four men on this course all returned questionnaires. From the questionnaires key themes and issues
were indentified that were taken forward to the next phase of research which comprised of six, self-selecting, ‘case study’ interviews with five women and one man. These interviews were conducted as narrative life histories (Goodson and Sikes, 2001) in which the teaching assistants were asked to draw a ‘life history line’ that included significant events or points in their lives and careers (Webster and Mertova, 2007:73). Each individual was invited to narrate their history line.

Having explored and disseminated the findings from the research associated with the graduate cohort, the second phase of the research began in September 2006, in which we tracked a cohort through their three years of study. This cohort comprised of 120 teaching assistants (116 women and four men) who began their studies in 2006 and graduated in 2009. The majority of the students (including all four men) were in the 26-55 age groups and many had young families. Two thirds worked in primary (including three men) and the rest in secondary settings.

In each of the three years a questionnaire was handed out in the Autumn term which elicited mainly qualitative responses relating to role in school, reasons for doing a degree and aspirations. Focus groups were conducted in the following spring terms with the same cohort who were asked to talk about their experience of personal and professional change as a consequence of studying for a Foundation degree.
For our research project the use of life history lines, individual narrative interviews and focus groups were chosen as these are data collection methods that can be negotiated in-situ by the participants. We felt this was valuable since the public voice of teaching assistants has historically been marginalised (Sorsby, 2004). One of the aims of this project was to provide an opportunity for individuals working as teaching assistants to offer views, interests and concerns that may have previously been unheard to draw attention to the benefits and challenges involved in lifelong learning forms of study.

In the third year of the project the research appeared to reach ‘saturation point’ with regards to the data. The key issues that arose for the graduates, namely: rewards and recognition, struggling and resisting, negotiating the professional and the personal, were again raised by the second cohort of teaching assistants. The following sections will address each of these themes in turn and discuss the possible implications.

Discussion

Rewards and recognition

The overriding theme that featured in the accumulated data was the official lack of recognition of a Foundation degree. In terms of receiving financial rewards or promotion, the 2006 graduates were fairly evenly divided: 31% received a promotion, 34% gained more responsibility and 34% experienced no change. The 2009 graduates had a different experience: 36% were promoted, 48% were given more responsibility and only 16% said they
experienced ‘no change’. The financial rewards received were often directly attributed to the teaching assistants’ engagement in study:

In our school I am the only TA (out of 10) who’s at Level Three and that happened last year, I do think that was because I was doing the Foundation Degree.

I was actually appointed in role after a year of doing the Foundation degree, I was a parent helper before.

The 2009 graduates report that they were slightly more likely to receive a promotion and/or more responsibility than the 2006 graduates. This shift implies that those in schools are beginning to have a better understanding of Foundation degrees as academic qualifications. It also suggests that hierarchical relations of power between the teaching assistants and their school colleagues are starting to diminish. However, the teaching assistants are still in a deficit position, since those in both cohorts noted that although they have taken on increased responsibility, they have not received a commensurate increase in salary, which, the researchers noted in a previous paper, suggests a form of exploitation (Dunne et al., 2008). As one of the youngest primary 2006 graduates stated: ‘Although my skills are recognised and used I am not paid any more (money).’

This official lack of recognition can be identified as systematic rather than specific to individuals’ situations since both the primary and secondary teaching assistants in both cohorts felt there were misunderstandings about their qualification. Indeed, one of the Secondary 2006 graduates noted:

Employers do not recognise the work and commitment required to undertake the Foundation degree. They do not recognise the level of qualification it is either; she went on to say ‘Gaining the
Foundation degree had no bearing on my job as they did not realise I am quite highly qualified now.

While another directly attributed the lack of promotion and recognition to the schools’ economising practices made possible by the remodelling agenda:

*We all had to apply for our jobs … they actually came back and said none of us were qualified, in both schools … in their eyes, none of us are qualified, no matter whether you’ve got the NVQ Level Three plus Cover Supervisor certificate, which I’ve got, plus the HLTA, which I’ve got, plus the Foundation Degree.*

Many of the teaching assistants also felt that the promotion and/or increased responsibilities they had were due to the fact that they had gained Higher Level Teaching Assistant status [HLTA] (in addition, or separate to the FD).

*One of my colleagues has done a Foundation Degree she went on to do the full degree but her (Primary) job role hasn’t actually changed, therefore, her pay hasn’t changed, but she is actually better qualified than me but she chose at the time not to do the HLTA. I think it depends on the policies in school, some want you to have the HLTA status before they’ll pay you that level.*

These accounts suggest that some students felt a sense of disappointment and betrayal, in that doing the degree and committing themselves (and in many cases their families) to a long-term challenge had not provided the promised ‘passport’ to increased pay and career progression. They had come to view themselves as educated professionals but felt that others did not share this understanding. In 2009 there are still questions about how Foundation degrees are viewed in schools and by local education authorities and there seems to be discrepancies between the UK government’s rhetoric and the teaching assistants’ experiences of engaging in work-based lifelong learning. The UK Government’s intention to professionalise and remodel the
Children’s Workforce in Schools has unfortunately been experienced as a mixed blessing for some of those at the forefront of these changes.

Of course, professional recognition does not only entail financial rewards. Changes occurred in the relationships between teaching assistants and their colleagues. Those who graduated in 2006 felt they were not always recognised as professionals, a secondary teaching assistant claimed:

‘Just a couple of years ago all TAs were TAs. I mean it doesn’t matter what qualification you’ve got, you’re a TA and that’s it! You didn’t get any higher than that whereas now they will probably take into account the Foundation degree as well.’

In contrast, the teaching assistants who graduated in 2009 had different perceptions and felt they received more respect from other staff. Several indicated that they felt ‘more included’ and that there was ‘more acceptance’ and involvement in school activities:

‘(I have) more respect from teachers and am being trusted to undertaking whole class teaching’.

‘I think colleagues have recognised my abilities, therefore are happy to ask my advice/assistance … (I have) greater respect and recognition from colleagues … I am more involved in teaching and teachers see me ‘on their level’ rather than a TA’.

‘(I have) teachers confidence in my ability to plan PPA cover and take whole classes’.

Perhaps the perceived shift in the teaching assistants’ knowledge has altered colleagues’ views regarding their capabilities, which might impact upon power dynamics and relationships in the staffroom and classroom. There appears to be a greater equity in the respect between school staff that the teaching assistants’ from the 2009 cohort directly attributed to their studying. This shift
has also given the teaching assistants a different sense of who they are as professionals. Although, conversely, there is the inference that teaching assistants start from a deficit position in terms of status and respect, and that teachers have the power to significantly change the relationships between school staff, as one teaching assistant noted in a secondary focus group:

TA: I think I am fairly lucky in my school that TAs are treated very fairly but it’s coincided with a change in Head who has included the TA’s in everything that happens.

Researcher: Didn’t that happen before?

TA: No we were invited as and when it was felt it was necessary to come (to meetings).

Whatever the view of teachers regarding the professionalism of those they work with, both cohorts of teaching assistants the researchers worked with felt they had ‘developed considerably’ as professionals due to HE study, as signified by these comments made by the graduates during interviews:

‘The Foundation Degree really made me look at the actual teaching and learning the children get in the classroom and focus my role around that and not the subject knowledge and just my assistance. It’s that supporting role and it being child led and not me leading it as the support, you know, it’s made me make the child lead more’.

‘I understand more about the teacher’s role in planning, assessment and targets. Looking at the programme of study, where the children are and where the teachers would like them to be and how is this delivered’.

In general, the teaching assistants were very proud of their accomplishments, but, despite some increase in the recognition of their professionalism, the 2009 graduates, like their 2006 counter-parts, were still expected to take on complex tasks, even though their competence and responsibility was often not explicitly acknowledged by the teachers they worked with. Unfortunately, this
failure to formally register the professionalism of teaching assistants was accepted, albeit with reservations, ‘as the way it is’ by the teaching assistants.

The teaching assistants were insightful as they discussed their own practice and experiences in light of UK Government education policies and the particular demands of their schools and colleagues. As one noted:

‘There should be much more encouragement for head teachers to recognise the foundation degree as excellent training for working as a TA and career structure and pay scales should reflect it’.

Such comments demonstrated that the teaching assistants were able to critically reflect on how they developed individual ways of working that enabled them to meet the needs of their school and ‘fit into’ an educational hierarchy, which at times they felt misrecognises their role and influence.

Teaching assistants can be identified as becoming subjects (in Foucauldian terms) in that they are implicated in (re)producing particular truths through their language and practice; they produce understandings regarding what a teaching assistant is, what a teaching assistants does and how they relate to others in schools. However, this (re)production is not necessarily consistent and the teaching assistants involved in this study were engaged in a process of constantly managing and mediating their positions and relationships with others in their own localised settings. In doing so, they engaged with and refigured truths to accommodate their own experiences and their views of how things should be in contrast to how they were.

Struggling and resisting
The ways in which teaching assistants refigured truths can be interrogated further with an exploration into how they actively negotiate how they practice as professionals while also struggling against and resisting complete assimilation into the prevailing educational truths (such as the ‘Raising Standards’ agenda, DFES, 2004). For example, several noted how hard they had been working to accommodate particular revisions of educational policy such as workforce remodelling, as one stated: ‘we’ve all been remodelled’. However, many of them also positioned themselves as working for parents and pupils rather than as part of the educational establishment:

*When I went into observe Year 6 in their Science and in the first half hour the teacher just completely went on about SATS and they didn’t do anything. They all just sat there and I thought you poor children.*

*These young people are not trusting of adults or authority in any way so you have to build a relationship, it’s very much trying to get on a level with them.*

*We support all the surrounding villages, we do one-to-one support with families.*

*I’d like to stay pastoral and I am getting more involved with parents now and things like that which I do.*

Teaching assistants have a unique role in schools; they frequently conceive themselves as ‘outside’ the traditional authority of their schools and as positioned more closely with parents and pupils. In part, this may be because women are assumed to choose to work with children because it is an extension of their ‘natural’ mothering role (Barkham, 2008; Miller, 1996). A positioning that may be aided because some of them are, or were, parents themselves who ‘started helping out’ in their children’s schools before their roles became more formalised. Also, many live in the local area and so may
have informal links with other parents and the wider community. The teaching assistants are symbolically aligned with mothers rather than with other professionals working with children. As such their work is ‘entrenched in a history of institutionalising women’s labours’ (Dillabough, 2005:129) and formalised as gendered work that utilises natural capabilities rather than professionally developed skills, but this means that they can identify themselves as understanding the desires of parents and the needs of children more closely than teachers.

However, the teaching assistant role is not solely defined as a gendered role. Perceived status is also integral to the distinction drawn between teaching assistants and teachers (who are more formally aligned with educational authority). Teaching assistants can be viewed as inhabiting a particular community of practice, they are distanced from the (valued) positioning of the teacher in terms of the level of authority they have, and so can actively resist alignment with teachers’ roles. Such resistance was often particularly focused on criticising the present emphasis on standards and standardised models of curriculum delivery:

‘I think it’s really, really tough on children and that puts me off a bit, because I’d feel so mean on them (if I was a teacher)’.

‘The present primary curriculum focus/climate puts pressure on children, … it’s just so much pressure on the children. You know, it’s not like a primary school should be’.

‘There is too much emphasis on exams and SATS it’s just not good. It’s not good for the children.’

Indeed, some teaching assistants explicitly rejected teaching as a possible future career:
The degree I am hoping to go for is multi agency, because it’s non QTS then it could give me other options.

I am now 52 and as I don’t want to be a teacher I feel I am already overqualified for the position I am.

I am not sure (whether to be a teacher), on embarking on the FD I wanted QTS, but I have been re-evaluating this.

The fact that some of the teaching assistants were re-evaluating their choices regarding QTS and the teacher role demonstrates their professional reflexivity, which can alter how they come to know themselves as professionals and how they interact with other educators. One example of this increased professional assurance was demonstrated by a primary teaching assistant who stated:

(Since doing the foundation degree) I think I have got a lot more confidence to … turn around and say ‘well actually no, this could be the reason’, whereas before you’d take the teacher’s word for it. Now I say ‘well there could be another reason for that, it could be something else’. So it gives you the confidence as well, not to criticise but to give other arguments.

Although many of the teaching assistants claimed that the Foundation degree had profoundly changed their view of their roles, the respect they were shown and their view of the education system, which could identify them as successful students, some went on to reject the lifelong learning agenda. Many felt that their experiences of studying while working were not attended to by the school management and a small number (11%) of the 2009 cohort were adamant they would not study again.

‘I feel that being a single parent & working full time doesn’t allow enough hours to study and to enjoy family life. I feel my children have made enough sacrifices for me to complete the FD.

I do not want to gain QTS so further study would make me a more qualified TA but there are few job opportunities for anything above
TA3. The rewards of further study would be outweighed by the frustration of being unable to use it.

Comments such as this infer that there is a disjuncture between what the UK Government says about the benefits of lifelong learning and workplace professionalisation and the experiences of the female teaching assistants we have been working with. It is also perhaps of note that none of the men in either cohort were put off further study (with all intending to study for QTS) suggesting they had a somewhat different experience to many of the women. Also, although the teaching assistants were engaged in working as part of the educational establishment and positioned themselves as effective and extremely professional, many appeared to experience a dissonance between their roles as educators and how they felt about particular aspects of schooling. This dissonance led them to the stance of an outsider who could openly critique current UK government policy and its implementation in their schools.

**Negotiating the professional and the personal**

The disjunctures between government rhetoric and the experiences of our teaching assistants seemed almost irreconcilable when accounts were provided of the personal difficulties encountered as the demands between work, study and home life were traversed. Many of the women in both cohorts consistently indicated that ‘juggling’ the demands made on them had effects on, and implications for, personal relationships and family life:

‘I’ve felt that I’ve had to make sacrifices in terms of time with family and job focus. Juggling all this has left me suffering with exhaustion once the course finished’.
‘I have had to use all my spare time for study often at the detriment of family time’.

‘FD had a big impact on family life/time with my boys. I often felt guilty about spending so much time studying when I could have been spending time with them’.

It seems that there was a powerful conflict between professional aspirations and fulfilling personal responsibilities. Indeed the issue of juggling family responsibilities and feeling guilty for taking time to study was visited in a dialogue in the secondary focus group conducted in Spring 2009:

‘We are working and we’ve got families as well, so it’s trying to juggle everything isn’t it’.

‘I mean I am sort of weighing up, I keep thinking to myself yes go on and do the next two years and get the full degree, but, my husband keeps saying to me ‘oh you’re not going to do another two years’, no weekends and all the rest of it, you know’.

‘I know I feel really guilty because I am literally locked in my room for days and days and weekends and I don’t really get to see them and that makes me feel guilty because I’ve got a young family’.

But in many instances the teaching assistants tried to find the positive in their experiences and had a kind of ‘optimistic pragmatism’ as displayed by a discussion in the 2009 secondary focus group:

‘Oh I’m hoping that things are gonna change …’

‘… and there’s going to be a better future for us so I’m sort of basing it on that, that, you know it is, I’m glad I’ve done it’…

‘…Money in the pocket as we say, put the thing in the pocket ready to use when the opportunity comes … so I do think it’s been worth it, but obviously it has been difficult’.

This optimism was repeated by the primary teaching assistants:

‘I had to put family and house on hold during studying but got lots of support from my family, however, I found it very difficult and stressful but now I am proud of my achievement’.
‘It has not been easy to juggle family life with the demands of study at this level, my house is a tip and at times I have felt overwhelmed by the workload. However, my family seeing my commitment to study have seen me as a good role model’.

Although this research seems to highlight the problems faced by teaching assistants who choose to study, it is also important to draw attention to how the teaching assistants experienced their engagement in lifelong learning forms of study as having personal benefits. In particular, many offered comments about how they experienced notable increases in their confidence and self esteem:

‘My personal belief increased and I have a better outlook on life’.

‘I feel I’ve just come such a long way, I really do, I’ve learned so much, it’s made me a better person for it, because you see you’re not quite as judgemental’.

‘I have the confidence to start to look for a more challenging job and an increase self esteem in knowing I can study at degree level successfully’.

It seems that the truths produced about what professionally qualified teaching assistants are and what they do are informed by Government policies and by the everyday practices of those in schools. However, the teaching assistants engaged in this project also highlighted a process of negotiating how their professional, personal and study lives intersected. This had particular implications for the female teaching assistants who worked hard to traverse the competing demands of their professional and personal lives. This process of coming to know a new self (Foucault, 1982:208) of becoming a professional teaching assistant who is also an HE student and a parent, required the teaching assistants’ participation. They managed the competing demands
they were subject to, gained confidence in their own abilities, developed their own understandings about their work role and negotiated their status. In some circumstances this involved contesting the established truths regarding what comprises a ‘good mother’ (Barkham, 2008; Kingfisher, 1996), a successful student or an effective teaching assistant.

Conclusion

This paper presented a summary of the main findings of a three year longitudinal research project. This project attended to some of the benefits and challenges involved in lifelong learning forms of study in order to question the UK government rhetoric that suggests further study leads to promotion and career advancement (HEFCE / DfEE, 2000). The absence of financial benefits or recognition for many of those who graduated with a foundation degree in teaching and learning support suggests that the apparent enticement of people to ‘earn and learn’ to advance their careers may be a false promise. In particular, the researchers have attempted to expose some of the personal challenges and hidden costs involved in vocationally driven lifelong learning courses that encourage ‘non-traditional’ student groups into higher education.

It would appear from our research that in many cases Foundation degrees do what they promise in terms of developing teaching assistants’ applicable knowledge, enabling them to take on more responsibility and advancing their ability to reflect on their roles. However, in writing about the experiences of two cohorts of teaching assistants we have tried to bring attention to the
conflicts and challenges involved in work-based, and/or lifelong learning. In doing so we have argued that these conflicts and challenges are exacerbated by the gendering and thereby devaluing the professionalism of teaching assistants and by their hierarchical positioning in schools. However, a foucauldian perspective of power suggests that the teaching assistants are active subjects and we engage with this view by detailing how they negotiate their positioning and traverse the difficulties they experience, for example through their deployment of an optimistic pragmatism.

The spirit of this paper, and of our whole project has been to bring to the fore the experiences of teaching assistants, accordingly we feel the final word should go to them, most of whom were very positive about their experiences of ‘earning and learning’:

‘I have personal and professional satisfaction, greater perceived opportunities in the job market, greater technical and academic knowledge. I found the whole experience generally rewarding’.

‘I am truly glad to have been given the opportunity to achieve my degree and am very thankful for all the support I received from my family and employers. I am very proud of myself for achieving this degree’.

‘I don’t regret for a second embarking on this degree I have learnt so much. Having said that I am so relieved to have completed it and I feel a huge amount of personal achievement’.
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