Teaching Assistants in Schools
- some reflections on their changing roles

Jennifer Woods, Linda Hammersley-Fletcher and Martin Cole

(Liverpool John Moores University)


Working Paper

Contact Details:
Jennifer Woods
Liverpool John Moores University
IM Marsh Campus,
Barkhill Building
Barkhill Lane
Liverpool
L17 6BD
Email: j.a.woods@ljmu.ac.uk

1) Context
As the number of pupils with Special Educational Needs being taught in mainstream schools in England continues to increase and as the Government drives forward the standards agenda, the need for additional support in classrooms has become ever more acute. This, combined with attempts to reduce the administrative burden of teachers has clearly re-defined the roles and responsibilities of teaching assistants, increasing, in particular, the diversity and range of tasks which they undertake (Butt and Lance, 2005). It has been argued that “as teaching assistant numbers have increased, so the role itself has also undergone a rapid transformation from that of classroom ‘helper’ – assisting the teacher in general classroom organisation – to one that is more specifically directed to support the teaching and learning process” (Groom, 2006, p.199). The national agreement ‘Raising Standards and Tacking Workloads’ (2003) between the Government, local authority employers and a number of the school workforce unions has also, in part, formalised these changes and this paper will explore the nature of these changes in relation to research conducted in the North-West of England region.

The union Unison has called for tighter regulations on the use of teaching assistants in schools. Speaking at the union’s annual conference in Bournemouth in 2008, Christina McAnea, UNISON National Secretary for Education, said: “Our members tell us they are often being asked to take on additional duties including taking whole classes. Many of them have not received the right training or support. Importantly, they are also not paid for these extra responsibilities... We are pushing the government and the employers to provide much tighter regulations and for these to be more closely monitored” (http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/em/fr/-/1/hi/education/7462691.stm accessed Jan 2009). McAnea further argues that without appropriate training and pay teaching assistants can be seen as exploited and the Government will run a risk of compromising its wider agenda around extended services, personalised learning and targeting resources towards the most disadvantaged children. These concerns are echoed by Mary Bousted, General secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers who, in response, stated that “We have grave concerns about the number of teaching assistants being asked to do more than they are paid to do or feel comfortable doing. It is unfair on them and unfair to pupils. Heads are breaking the terms of the national agreement between unions, employers and the government if they are using teachings assistants to teach a class of pupils when a teacher is absent. Teaching assistants (TAs) play an important role supporting teachers, but they should not be taken advantage of by schools” (http://www.bbc.co.uk/email accessed Jan 2009).

Wilson et.al. (2007), in research investigating the deployment and impact of support staff who have achieved Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) status, demonstrate that HLTAs are deployed in a variety of ways. These include working with whole classes, most of their time being spent supporting individual pupils and small groups, particularly children and young people with Special Educational Needs who experience some difficulties accessing the full curriculum. In order to achieve
HLTA status teaching assistants need to demonstrate their capabilities against a preset list of competencies. The role of HLTA was promoted by government and the expectation was that HLTAs would operate at a higher level than other TAs and achieve higher pay. In the statistical first release on SEN in England (DFES, 2009), when asked to consider the role of HLTAs in their schools, senior school leaders suggested that HLTAs were most commonly deployed in working with groups of pupils and leading whole-class learning. Many HLTAs argued that while certain aspects of their role had changed, many remained unaltered, 64% feeling that their workload had increased. In this paper we consider if and to what extent the achievement of HLTA status has improved the status and conditions experienced by HLTA’s situation in the North West region.

Consequently the shifting deployment of teaching assistants can be seen as controversial and raises some serious concerns. For example Gunter (2007) argues that teachers are being distanced from the classroom using this time to design schemes for others (ie: non-teachers) to implement, whilst less well paid non-teachers take their classes. Whilst this may provide opportunities for teaching assistants (TAs) to develop new skills, this has potential consequences for the philosophies underpinning education as well as our understandings of what children need. Through the collection of questionnaire data (78 responses) we consider the extent to which changes in the roles of TAs have acted to enable staff within schools to think and behave differently. We consider the uptake and implications of achieving HLTA status and also consider the extent to which TAs have become increasingly responsible for the planning and delivery of SEN programmes. In addition to this, we will evaluate responses regarding issues of training and pay. Finally we discuss the both the ‘highs’ and ‘lows’ of the TAs experiences in relation to the wider national agenda.

2) The Policy Climate Related To Teaching Assistants

Support staff roles and particularly that of the teaching assistant (TA) has been developing rapidly over the last few years following changes introduced by the remodelling of schools. As Hammersley-Fletcher and Adnett (2009) argue, workforce remodelling was,

“primarily designed to reduce constraints on school-level decision-making and enable schools more freedom to develop their own solutions to meeting the government’s key objective of raising standards” (p.182)

The most significant change in relation to TAs was the introduction of Planning, Preparation and Assessment time. This gave all teachers a guaranteed 10% non-
contact time. Schools have covered this non-contact time in a variety of ways but one of the solutions (and one particularly used in primary schools) has been to use teaching assistants to cover classes. Further, there were a number of administrative tasks (24) that teachers were no longer expected to undertake, many of these now falling to teaching assistants. Gunter (2007) argues that remodelling operates to distance teachers from the classroom, who use this time to design schemes for others (ie: non-teachers) to implement, whilst less well-paid non-teachers take their classes. As Hammersley-Fletcher and Adnett (2009) argue, the ways in which TAs have been deployed is somewhat varied.

Other policy initiatives have also had an impact on TAs’ roles, for example Every Child Matters, the 14-19 agenda, extended schools and the Children’s Plan. Since 1997 the number of support staff working in schools has nearly doubled. Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA, 2006) full-time equivalent figures show a 97 per cent increase in the number of support staff employed between 1997 and 2005, from 136,500 to 268,600. This compares with an eight per cent increase in the number of teachers employed over the same period. Increasingly, schools are recruiting support staff with specialist skills from diverse backgrounds, including business, industry and the arts. DfES figures suggest that one of the fastest growing groups over this period are teaching assistants (TAs) (61,300 to 148,500), which includes special educational needs (SEN) staff (24,500 to 48,100).

3) HLTA

The higher level teaching assistant (HLTA) role was introduced as part of the National Agreement (ATL et al., 2003) to reinforce and improve the skills of support staff, thus allowing them to assume additional roles and responsibilities. The objective of this was to reduce the workload on teaching staff, as well as raising standards by providing specific, targeted support to pupils. The TDA state that, HLTA s should ‘work in the school alongside the teacher, providing valuable support for teaching and learning activities’. They go on to state that HLTA s will often work right across the curriculum, ‘acting as a specialist assistant for a specific subject or department or helping to plan lessons and develop support materials’. Consequently the HLTA should work closely with the teacher and complement their role thus freeing the teacher to spend more time in planning and designing learning programmes, to allow staff to have more time to develop each child to his or her potential’ (http://www.tda.gov.uk/support/support_staff_roles/learningsupportstaff/hlta.aspx accessed June 09). A recent national study however has identified that over a third of HLTA s have reported working in split roles, with 65% of these being paid differentially for those elements of their jobs which were considered non-HLTA duties (NFER 2007). Whilst this suggests a clear delineation between TA and HLTA roles, 19% of respondents to the NFER survey reported that there had been no change to
their role as they had already been fulfilling those duties prior to achieving HLTA status.

On a national scale, there has been discussion regarding the lack of HLTA vacancies available and debate considering whether the increase in pay associated with HLTA status is a barrier, when schools can frequently access the same commitment and level of input from economically more appealing TA's. As the CfBT (2009) point out, achieving the HLTA status does not of itself result in a change in job role or an increase in pay. In reality, it is only on being appointed to an HLTA role in school that staff can attract the HLTA pay and schools will make their own decisions as to whether they wish to appoint HLTAs. O'Brien and Garner (2001) have referred to the situation faced by TAs and ‘their frequently tenuous contractual situations and their woeful rates of pay – all of which belie the importance of the work they do….’. (pg.1).

4) SEN

In their Guidance On The National Occupational Standards For Supporting Teaching And Learning In Schools, the TDA highlight a number of standards which “may be relevant to teaching assistant roles” (p.1) (http://www.tda.gov.uk/upload/resources/pdf/n/nos_guidance_teaching_asst.pdf accessed July 2009). Of the 11 standards, none relate specifically to SEN, even though in practice, this is often the area where TA’s are most commonly sought and devote much of their time. It is worth noting that the level at which an individual is working and by implication remunerated, is determined by the job role rather than by any qualifications which they may bring to that role. 60% of HLTA's represented in the NFER national study reported that they had a specialist role, the most common of which was support for pupils with SEN. As Armstrong (1998) pointed out, for over two decades there has been a transformation of the provision of special educational needs. The inclusion agenda in the UK (SEN Code of Practice, 1994a and 2000b, SENDA, 2001) have been supported by international drivers (UNESCO, 1994). In recent years educational inclusion policy has been focussed upon children’s rights and in the UK, this has translated into inclusion into mainstream education for many children who were previously educated within a special school environment. If inclusion is ‘the “keystone” of today’s government policy’ (Booth et al, 2006, pg 2) then it is evident that the teaching assistant is crucial to this process.

In January 2009 some 221,670 (2.7%) of pupils across all schools in England had statements of SEN and over 55% of these were placed in mainstream schools (nursery, primary, secondary) (DFES, 2009). In addition there were 1,433,490 pupil with SEN without statements (17.8%) across all schools. A wide range of difficulties are experienced by pupils. These may include developmental disorders, specific learning difficulties, general learning difficulties and emotional and behavioural problems to name but a few and for most of pupils additional support is required in order to allow these pupils to access, engage and achieve in education. Input from
school staff to provide the levels of support required by these pupils is often intensive and this support has increasingly fallen exclusively within the remit of TAs. Whilst research suggests that training is now more widely offered in the light of the changing and demanding role undertaken by TAs and the increased emphasis on SEN, we may ask how readily specialist and appropriate training is available nationally and if it is encouraged by school senior management.

5) The North-West School Context

Bayliss and Sly (2009) reporting on national trends, suggest that there is a direct correlation between educational attainment and poverty, the former being adversely affected in areas which experience economic deprivation. All respondents in our research lived and worked in the North West of England across six North-West local education authorities. These are geographical areas which experience high levels of unemployment and social deprivation. In 2007, the North West had above the national average proportion of children residing in deprived households (Bayliss and Sly, 2009). In fact, the North West was nationally the fourth highest geographical area in the country to experience this, with one in five children living in workless households. The regional and sub-regional variations in relation to poverty, poor health, low educational attainment and juvenile criminality present additional barriers for school staff; the figures for these issues are frequently significantly above the national average rates for these difficulties. Many of the issues relating to achievement and engagement in education appear to be related to deficits in these areas and are therefore likely to be a significant factor in the work daily work conducted by the staff contributing to our research. The government has recently reiterated their commitment to the eradication of child poverty in the UK, with the introduction of the Child Poverty Bill into the House of Commons on June 11 2009. The key factor they have considered relating to this issue are the number of children living in low income or workless households which are dependent on out-of-work benefits. This is also relevant to the implementation and realisation of government policy and legislation relating to education and child welfare, in particular the Every Child Matters agenda (2004) and the Children’s Plan (2007).

The North West region also experiences higher than national average class sizes, exceeding the national average of 12%, with 14% of primary school classes attended by over 30 children (Bayley and Sly, 2009). This again is a significant issue for support staff as this relates directly to their work and has implications for behaviour and educational support. Although schools in sub-geographical areas of the North West considered for the purposes of this research evidence a reduction in the number of schools where fewer than 30% of pupils achieved 5 or more A* - C grades at GCSE and equivalent, from 162 in 2005-2006 to 112 in 2006-2007 (DCSF, 2007), these figures continue to demonstrate that there remains, in the North West, a high proportion of ‘failing’ schools in England which numbered 912 in 2005-2006 and 631
in 2006-2007. Pupil absence from school is also significant when considering the role of learning support personnel. In 2006-2007, pupils in England missed an average of 7.9% of half-day periods (DCSF, 2008). In the North West region, figures were above this and it was one of the two national regions with the highest overall school absenteeism rates (Bayley and Sly, 2009). Further, the North West domiciled the third highest national rate of youth offenders being prosecuted in the Magistrates’ court; 156 per 10,000 of the aged 10 to 17 population (Bayley and Sly, 2009). The significance of this information for our research is in understanding the importance of the classroom and learning support roles in this region. Thus we might expect to see an emphasis on Special Educational Needs and behavioural issues.

6) Method

This paper is based on 78 questionnaire responses from teaching assistants in the North West Government Office Region. The questionnaire was designed, piloted and issued as part of a PhD research study by Lowe (on-going). This data collection is designed to complement and be integrated with that collected by Lowe (see Lowe and Hammersley-Fletcher, 2009). Questionnaires were distributed around all teaching assistants attending developmental training associated with the teaching assistant role such as Higher Level Teaching Assistant programmes (HLTA) and subject specialist programmes. Respondents were from a variety of settings: 55 from primary school settings; 6 from nursery/primary school settings; and 17 from secondary school settings. For the purposes of this paper the nursery and primary teaching assistants’ responses have been combined.

The questionnaire posed questions the roles played by teaching assistants, their pay, hours worked and how they felt about this. There were also free response opportunities at the end to add comments about issues that TA’s considered to be important. Data was examined using SPSS and each of the authors looked at the results separately and then met to discuss their findings and agree common themes. For the purposes of this paper we have focussed on issues around the roles played by TAs and how this is changing, their satisfaction with the role, SEN related aspects of their role, their pay and the impact of HLTA status.

7) Findings

In this section we look at the variety of tasks undertaken by TAs by primary and secondary school sectors. We will then consider the emphasis on training and development as an indicator of regional priorities and finally consider TAs’ thoughts on their developing role as illustrated in the free-response section of the questionnaire.
**Tasks Undertaken**

Teaching assistants were asked to indicate whether they were engaged in various teaching and learning-based tasks. When considering the data it is helpful to remember that overall there were 61 responses from primary school TAs and 17 from secondary schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task engaged upon</th>
<th>Primary TA</th>
<th>Secondary TA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planning for a single pupil</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning for a group</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning for the whole class</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching a single pupil</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching a small group</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching a whole class</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with a single pupil</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with a group</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with a whole class</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table indicates that at least some of the time TAs are carrying a substantial responsibility for the teaching and learning environment, albeit for small periods of time and on the whole, infrequently. They were also asked if they were used to cover classes, thus taking full responsibility. Here 37 (just under half) of the sample agreed that they did this, although interestingly only 1 response was from the secondary sector. This is likely to be because secondary schools have largely covered PPA and staff absence with cover supervisors. Of those taking responsibility for classes in primary schools, 21 were working under 4 hours per week on this and 10 between 5 and 10 hours per week. Others said that their commitment was varied.

TAs reported that a considerable amount of their time was devoted to working with individual pupils (58 primary and 15 secondary) and small withdrawal groups (58 primary and 17 secondary). For almost two thirds of TAs this was a significant feature of their role and this time was usually dedicated to children with SEN. This is indicative of the emphasis placed on this aspect of their role and suggests that a high proportion of responsibility for the teaching and learning of children with SEN has now become part of the work of the TA exclusively.
TAs also indicated the extent to which they were involved with a variety of other administrative roles associated with governmental expectations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task engaged upon</th>
<th>Primary TA</th>
<th>Secondary TA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collecting monies</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyse attendance</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chase absence</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photocopying</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produce letters</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produce class lists</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Record keeping and filing</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom display</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process exam results</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collate pupil reports</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administer teacher cover</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICT trouble-shooting</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stocktaking</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordering supplies</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving advice</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing pupil data</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Looking at the table it becomes apparent that TAs are involved in a whole variety of administrative roles, creating classroom displays and record-keeping being prevalent in both sectors. In fact, roles look remarkably similar across sectors in this regard, with the exception of handling monies and processing exam results.

**Changing Role**

The TAs were also invited to comment on recent changes to their role and whilst not all took the opportunity to do this the responses from those who did (62) indicated their dedication to and enjoyment of their role but also their feelings of a rising level
of responsibility which was not recognised through their pay. The following quotations taken from the questionnaires demonstrate the range of responses received.

Teaching assistants do a lot more now i.e.: covering classes, planning for their own groups and keeping records, no extra time is allocated and pay is inadequate (Primary TA)

This quotation clearly demonstrates the increasingly demanding and varied roles of the TA. It also begs questions about allowing people take on such roles without adequate remuneration. This level of responsibility was also a vehicle for discussion about why TAs weren’t always valued as highly as they felt they deserved to be as the following quotation demonstrates.

Teaching Assistants have a better understanding of children on a personal level and build close relationships whilst simultaneously providing equal access to education for all. So why then are we not allowed to attend staff meetings and are told things on a need to know basis? (Primary TA)

This was not the only TA who questioned their relationship with teaching staff. Another TA demonstrated that relations and the respect afforded to TAs by teaching staff varied considerably, almost on an individual basis.

I have been asked to plan and prepare and teach a class for a week, whilst a different member of staff gave me a sticker for sitting through her preamble without losing attention (Primary TA)

The varied response highlighted in this quotation was argued to be true of schools and even at a borough level as the next quotation indicates.

In my experience, the role of teaching assistant and the way they are utilised depends on the school or placement and from borough to borough (Secondary TA)

**Job Satisfaction**

Variations in the ways TAs were treated and the roles they performed in each classroom were common themes. This didn’t mean that TAs weren’t enjoying their roles. In fact, when asked on the questionnaire about this, only 5 were dissatisfied with their role with a further 16 being neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Some were extremely positive about their job, but even in this case the pay is still an issue.

I work in an outstanding school. In my particular case I feel very valued and supported – although my role and responsibilities have grown – sadly the salary hasn’t (Primary TA)
It seems likely that TAs continue as willing and enthusiastic staff because they gain a lot of value from working with children. These are also jobs that fit well around childcare responsibilities. Thus there is likely to be an on-going market of people in these roles. Other concerns raised were around TAs’ relationships with pupils. Firstly, as the next quotation demonstrates, TAs could feel vulnerable when covering a class as they perceived that they could be held responsible should anything go wrong and this was a huge responsibility to carry.

I feel strongly that as a cover supervisor responsible for a class, we are leaving ourselves open to criticism and are incredibly vulnerable. Would much prefer to work as part of a team, helping and supporting each other (Primary TA)

It is really important that all staff feel protected and supported so that they do not feel exposed in this way. One secondary TA thought that their time was used to help improve exam grades for the school. Again it is worth asking how responsible for results this TA felt.

TAs support learning of individuals which is reflected in the positive outcome of exam grades – particularly SEN departments (Secondary TA)

Finally, a few TAs expressed a concern that the additional duties that they were now being asked to undertake, took them away from individual pupils who needed their time.

Children who need support just have to get on with it, or manage with the odd programme of help (Primary TA)

**SEN**

This issue around supporting individual pupils is a crucial one, especially as it has already been demonstrated that the North West is a region in which SEN needs are greater than the national average. An interesting aspect of this would be to consider the attitude of parents and guardians towards the provision offered for their child with SEN. Due to the wider public perception of TA’s as ‘teachers assistants’, as opposed to ‘teaching’ assistants and the general lack of understanding of the true role of school support staff. Some respondents have reported that parents were frequently unhappy with the idea that the ‘specialist’ provision allocated to their child with SEN was not delivered by the ‘qualified’ class teacher and was instead delivered by TA’s, who they assumed were less able, regardless of their experience or training. Perhaps this is a further consideration in the plight of TAs in relation to public perceptions of their roles as minor and untrained staff an image reinforced by the low levels of pay that the job attracts.

**Qualification and remuneration**
The training of TAs may also be an indicator of the priorities placed on the support required in schools. Asked whether they had attended any development courses over the last year, 55 primary and 11 secondary TAs agreed that they had. Of these, 18 of the primary school-based TAs claimed that they had attended multiple (over 3) numbers of courses (a large proportion of these included SEN programmes). What was interesting was the concentration of Special Educational Needs (SEN) and behaviour-related programmes with which TAs had engaged (18 SEN – 4 secondary TAs; and 10 behaviour related – 2 secondary TAs). A further 11 TAs had attended specific subject knowledge-based courses. Therefore it seems that there was an emphasis on SEN programmes, this being suggestive of a focus on SEN within their schools and of the responsibility they are being asked to take for children with SEN. When asked about qualifications only 12.7% had achieved HLTA status. This may appear statistically low considering the stress that the government has placed on this, however as many respondents were in training for that particular qualification at the time they were completing the questionnaire, we can assume that this was a status many were hoping to achieve.

The government promoted the title of HLTA as something that would ensure a higher level of pay and responsibility if conferred. The title however is not related to any accredited academic development but is simply conferred when TAs can prove that they meet the set list of duties and requirements. In reality, few schools have been able to pay the higher salaries envisaged for HLTAs and some have had to accept no pay increase at all. One TA stated,

Having worked very hard to achieve HLTA status it should be (along with pay) instantly recognised (Primary TA)

The quotation demonstrates the frustration of those HLTAs who discover that achieving this status is unlikely to affect their role or pay. A further interesting issue related to qualifications arising from the data is that vocationally based training appears to be readily available and encouraged by school management and yet with just over 11% of respondents answering that they have no qualifications, it suggests that the training is frequently non-accredited. Without recognised qualifications, movement between roles and advancement as proposed by the CWDC is potentially difficult to achieve for TAs and in addition, this training often has limited currency outside very specific areas of education.

The dataset reveals that 85% of TAs have a vocational qualification as a Teaching Assistant. The general level of qualification for TAs is high. In their study of the UK labour market qualifications, Dickerson and Vignoles (2008), in a study using Labour Force Survey (LFS) for 2000 to 2004, note that only 9% of women in England hold a vocational qualification at level 3 or above and our data set indicates that the vast majority of TAs are women. There are currently 146,500 TAs in schools (DfES 2006) the majority of whom are female - 97.7% (DfES 2002). 92.5% of respondents to our questionnaire were female.
What is your highest level qualification?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-graduate</td>
<td>.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cert HE and T&amp;L</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The dataset indicates high numbers of TAs with Level 3 qualifications. Not having the Level 3 qualification would impact on progression to Foundation Degree and as this could be a barrier for some, we would have expected more TAs to have embarked upon study at this level, however due to the nature of training many staff appear to be engaging in, it may be that school management are not supporting more generalised and long term training opportunities.

What is your highest level TA qualification?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3</td>
<td>26.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNEB</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STAC</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HLTA</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Qualifications</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cert HE –T &amp;L</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lowe and Hammersley-Fletcher (2009) argue that TAs accept lower pay despite their qualifications having the potential to earn them more money in other markets. They report ONS data which shows that in the second quarter of 2008, ‘average gross weekly earnings ranged from £695 for those qualified to level 4 or above, £500 per week for those with a level 3 qualification. Those with no qualification were typically earning £350 per week. The average gross pay for those with a level 3
qualification was £13.51 per hour’ (pg.9). They go on to argue that the average pay rate per hour for TAs who have an average pay rate of £7.09’. Also Lowe and Hammersley-Fletcher report earlier arguments by Lowe that TAs pay rates can be as low as £2.24 gross pay per hour, which is below the minimum wage rate and takes in to consideration the hours worked by TAs rather than the hours employed for (thus good will is a significant aspect of the role.

8) Final Thoughts

We have presented a picture of the developing role of the teaching assistant who is being asked to undertake ever more varied tasks, which now encompass some class teaching responsibility and increasing sole responsibility for the design and implementation of SEN provision. TA’s are being promoted by the government as an answer to a number of problems in schools but this is not being questioned in relation to the moral, or educative value of such practice. For example, they can help provide classroom support to release teachers; they can take on a number of administrative roles from teachers; and most recently they are also seen as an answer to a number of the special educational needs identified as a government priority in recent weeks. From our data we argue that TAs work extremely hard. They are likely to enjoy their work but are at the same time undervalued and underpaid.

Our findings leave us considering whether, as the government continues to drive the HLTA qualification as a desirable attainment for both schools and TAs, whether this has is changing the working conditions of TAs and whether it will provide the benefits suggested by the TDA. Alternatively will TAs continue to provide the same level of support, without the remuneration or status promised? The current situation looks to us like a form of exploitation albeit with willing victims. We must ask ourselves whether it is acceptable and ethical to allow TAs to be utilised in this manner. Additionally as there are so few vacancies calling for HLTA’s, will this become a status which TAs come to view as pointless. As one primary TA put it,

TA is a very rewarding role which most people go into because they want to make a difference. The flip side is that you are taken for granted at times and are over worked and under paid. The changes that the government brought in gave teachers a good work/life balance, but not the TAs (primary TA).

This raises a valid point that as the government has supported teachers, teaching assistants have not had access to the same level of protection or consideration. Changing job roles mean that TAs are assuming a greater level of responsibility without support or pay. With increasing diversity in the role TAs are taking responsibility for a range of key areas within the school and whilst many TAs remain committed and enthusiastic about their jobs, the evidence from this research suggests that dissatisfaction with pay and ever increasing workloads will present a challenge. As one TA remarked her role felt like she was a,
...substitute mother, babysitter and occasional bouncer. I am taking more and more responsibility, not just for the children’s learning but the child’s emotional wellbeing (Secondary TA)

What kept the TAs working in these roles was that on the whole respondents felt that their role was both valuable and appreciated within schools and that they played an active role in the success of their school. They also felt that pupils benefited from their support.

9) References


Lowe, M. and Hammersley-Fletcher, L. (2009) “From general dogsbody to whole class delivery - the role of Teaching Assistants in the education of pupils in England” *Paper presented at the Canadian Association for the Study of Educational Administration, Carleton University, Ontario, May 23rd-26th*


NFER, 2007 Research Into The Deployment and Impact of Support Staff Who Have Achieved HLTA Status


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