The views of children and parents towards Higher Level Teaching Assistants who teach whole classes

Keith Williams (Edge Hill University)  
Marie O’Connor (Liverpool John Moores University)

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Introduction

This paper will discuss the impact of Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs) on children’s learning. Previous research into HLTA status has focused on deployment and has sought to identify models of best practice (Prime 2007, NFER 2007). Researchers have understandably asked HLTAs, teachers and headteachers for their views. Our experience was that schools that have engaged with such research are confident that their HLTAs were having a positive impact on learning. One might argue that a school wishing to engage with research is unlikely to say otherwise. Nevertheless, this led us to the research question addressed in this paper,

Does the use of HLTAs with whole classes have a positive impact on children’s learning?

The objective was to identify whether there were factors that determine the success of the HLTA when deployed in this manner. Furthermore, we decided to target a previously neglected audience in the field of HLTA research, children and their parents. In this paper we draw on these previously neglected voices. As Meadows and Fraser note, there has been little research in the area of children’s perceptions of TAs and particularly of HLTAs.¹

There is a need to question the extent to which HLTAs can improve the quality of learning when meeting HLTA standard 31 (advancing learning when working with whole classes-under the supervision of a qualified teacher). It is common for HLTAs not only to deliver pre-set lessons but also to determine the pedagogical approach and range of activities used to meet the objectives drawn from the National Curriculum. The assessment process for HLTA confirms that holders of the status must possess these skills.²

Attempting to quantify the impact of any one variable within a child’s educative experience poses considerable challenges. Nevertheless, the introduction of 27,000 HLTAs in England since 2003 and their subsequent deployment with whole classes, usually to cover teachers Planning Preparation and Assessment (PPA) time, is worthy of investigation as a development that has had an impact on children’s attainment, or perhaps more realistically, children’s potential to attain.³

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² HLTAs must meet 33 standards relating to professional attributes and knowledge of pedagogy.
³ In 2003 the National Agreement – Raising Standards and Tackling Workloads (WAMG 2003), called for the expansion of support staff responsibilities. It acknowledged their key role in the delivery of the
The paper acknowledges two important questions. First, whether it is possible, from a small-scale research project, to confidently assert one way or another, that children’s learning is impacted on when their class is taught by a teaching assistant, and what that impact is. Second, whether the decision to focus on the child’s voice represents a tokenistic, decorative or manipulative intent (Hart 1997), or a genuine attempt to search for shared meanings. While the research presented here may not provide satisfactory answers to these questions it should allow us to deepen our understanding of the way children and parents perceive both teacher professionalism and school effectiveness. In particular, it will help us to interpret child and parent perceptions of the significance of existing hierarchical staffing structures and their subsequent impact on learning. It is hoped that by targeting classes at the end of Key stage 2 we may strike a particularly rich vein of data due to the impact of SATS as a marker of progress.

The investigation came about via the contractual obligations of the researchers who were obliged to look at different aspects of the HLTA programme as it bedded in to the changing school workforce. However, no one has asked the children or their parents how they saw this change. Fielding and Ruddock note that over the last 20 years ‘schools have changed less than young people have changed, and schools need to reflect the different capabilities of this new generation of young people’ (Fielding and Ruddock 2002 6). While they correctly identify this generation as the first to experience what Lyotard called the ‘computerisation of society’ (ibid 6), in fact the experience of the child in school has also changed radically. Of the eight schools surveyed here, an average of 4.5 adults worked regularly with year six children. The twentieth century image of the teacher alone with her class is no longer recognisable. The workforce remodeling agenda has had an impact on the school experience for children and this research aimed to determine whether we could use the voice of child and parent to identify what one aspect of that impact was.

Theoretical considerations

This paper recognizes concerns surrounding the received notions of child/pupil voice currently informing government policy (Cruddas 2006). Bragg sees the growth of interest in ‘voice’ as optimistic, unquestioning and suggesting a ‘readiness to share power on the part of adults’ (Bragg 2007 344). The rationale suggested is one of emancipation of previously unheard voices that were always there. The goal is to produce more motivated autonomous learners, and ultimately ‘better citizens’ (ibid 344). While it appears to be ‘common sense’ to consult children we must be aware of how this process may impact on the children and the adult.

government’s remodelling agenda (National Joint Council for Local Government Services 2003). Standards for higher level teaching assistant status (HLTA) were implemented in 2004 (TTA 2004).
4 That is, to conduct a significant piece of research into a key strand of the DCFS workforce remodeling agenda; namely the development of Higher Level Teaching Assistant status, on behalf of the TDA.
Cruddas identifies the contradiction in relation to the current rationale for consulting children. The difficulty is highlighted in Fraser and Meadows assertion that adults decide what is ‘best’ for children and make decisions on their behalf. This is right and proper in that parents, teachers and carers all have responsibilities towards children but it should also be remembered that children have unique rights, opinions and perspectives and need to be heard (Fraser and Meadows 2008 360).

This position assumes that children are ‘non-ideologically constructed subjects who are free to represent their own interests’ (Cruddas op cit 2). It is based on the ‘hegemonic view of childhood…located in a liberal mythology’ as represented in the philosophical ideas of Rousseau and Locke (ibid 3). Here, paternal authority (extended to the teacher via loco parentis) is natural; childhood is socially constructed and the adult aims to lead the child to full rationality utilising opportunities for self-expression. The accusation is that consultation with children may be tokenistic or manipulative. However, it appeals on a common sense level; if you want to know what children think then just ask them.

This framework suggests there is a danger that child voice might never amount to a real force for change and will be used only as a tool for discipline and surveillance. Voice work becomes a technology of power, where existing assumptions about childhood are further entrenched and deployed as a mechanism of control of the self by the self. Using Foucault’s concept of governmentality Bragg refers to the potential outcome of voice work as part of a broader neo-liberalist ideology which seeks to regulate the ‘conduct of conduct...in order to fabricate subjects’ who’s identity corresponds to the citizen able to function in, and reproduce liberal western democracy (Bragg 345).

If the child is not fully rational then their views can never be accepted as a basis for change. Research targeting their voices therefore becomes a form of ‘benevolent paternalism’ (Cruddas op cit 3). Despite the futility of attempting to alter the adult-child binary power relation it is important to ‘engage with the shifting power relations that have accorded students their new authority to speak’ and ‘to be critically reflexive about the means used to shape and channel what can be recognised as “student voice”’ (Bragg op cit 344).

We did not assume the position adopted was part of a handover of power, rather it was to recognise that there is always a dimension (arising from research methodology sanctioned by government policy) of ‘self-subjectification’ occurring (ibid 345). However, as researchers we believe that consulting children is a discursive and dialogic practice that can be productive rather than oppressive, since ‘the notion that freedom depends on and requires the presence rather than the absence of relations of power allows recognition of the positive effects of student voice projects in fostering particular capacities (ibid 345). Our approach was to recognize the binary power relation that favours the adult over the child. We were not seeking to manipulate children’s views nor do we feel that children are not capable of taking up a consistent and coherent position. Thus our focus groups were a creative and productive process.
We took as a guide Dockett and Perry’s interpretation of Thiesson’s guide to levels of engagement for research based on analysis of children’s perspectives. That is, knowing about children’s perspectives, acting on behalf of children’s perspectives and working with children’s perspectives (Thiesson 1997). These different levels of engagement outline the implications for our research,

Clearly, much can be learned about their [children’s] experiences of school and their sense of themselves within school, from actively seeking their perspectives. At the second level…it is imperative that any representations of children’s views are authentic representations, rather than those of researchers. Thirdly, it is important to…use children’s perspectives to inform and improve educational practice (Dockett and Perry 2005 519)

The researchers, ‘seek to promote children’s involvement in ways that recognize the competence of children and emphasize the importance of the perspectives of those living the experience’ (Dockett and Perry 2007 48). To achieve this, the researchers aimed to ensure the focus groups generated a space where children were comfortable enough to speak and, ‘where children’s perspectives are recognized as valid evidence and where adults take such perspectives seriously’ (ibid 48). We do not assume there is only one true interpretation of the data collected since there are, ‘historical and cultural influences that ensure that every child has an individual and unique experience of his or her childhood’ (Greene and Hogan, 2005: xi cited in Dockett and Perry ibid 47). This does not suggest that children’s accounts are unreliable. The focus groups were an interactional event for all parties and the data is therefore a ‘collaborative production’ (Danby and Farrell 2004 36). The children offered their thoughts freely and there was no sense that they were telling us what they thought we wanted to hear. The children carved out a space of their own. Contextual differences mean it is unlikely that interpretations are generalisable across a whole population. However, it is likely that the research findings will be accessible to other researchers and is therefore reliable (in the sense that the study could be replicated in other government office regions). In carrying out the research a level of reflexivity was essential since there is the influence of the ‘social and historical moments of both the context of the study and our own perspectives on childhood and children’ to take into account when interpreting the data (Danby and Farrell 2004 op cit 36).

Method

The data collection occurred in two phases, targeting primary schools in summer 2008 and spring 2009.

Eight groups of children were interviewed and four groups of parents. Interviewees were introduced to the aims of the research and the session was structured to provide participants with an opportunity to share their thoughts on each question asked. Initial contact was made and a meeting held with the headteacher to outline

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6 All groups contained six children (equally boys and girls) who had volunteered and, as far as possible, represented a cross section of the class in terms of levels of attainment. However, one school was an exception where 9 children were involved and some were year five.

7 Due to the dangers of unwanted disclosures questions were framed sensitively. The full list of initial questions can be found in appendix A.
the broad strategy. The involvement of headteachers was encouraged to identify strategies for contacting parents. The participating schools were all primary and all Local Authority (LA) maintained. Four were in Lancashire, two in Sefton and two in Cheshire. Five were in areas of socio-economic deprivation, two in affluent areas and one rural. They ranged in size from approximately 100 pupils to over 400.

Previous research into deployment indicated that we would find HLTAs working with whole classes but in markedly different contexts (see NFER 2007 and Prime 2007 op cit). For example, there were likely to be discrepancies in rates of pay and in levels of responsibility/accountability for the content and subsequent outcomes of whole class teaching incidences. The one common feature of the schools selected was that in every case the HLTA was responsible for teaching the whole year six class directly for some portion of their time.

The sample size though small provided a great deal of rich information. The initial sample of five schools was supplemented with a further sample of three in order to ensure findings reflected a saturation of the data. Unfortunately, only four parent groups were able to take place.

Although we were particularly interested in the views pupils have on their HLTA we framed the discussion within the broader context of adult identity i.e. who are the people who come into our classroom, what are their roles, what do they do, and how do they do it? The questions were transposed into suitable questions to use with the parental focus groups in order to allow identification of key themes. Also, we were able to adjust the emphasis on certain themes that had emerged from the first sample. The approach is underpinned by existing literature on critical incident methodology (see Panayiotis 2001 and Panayiotis et al 2004) and in particular the value of analysing vignettes to support interpretations of the data. Patterns may emerge during analysis of each case study but occasionally a single occurrence can provide meaning that explains the patterns. Therefore, despite the limited sample size we feel the data produced is of interest and value to those concerned with improving the educative experience of children and developing effective training for the school workforce.

Ethical considerations

As well as conforming to standard BERA guidelines (bera.ac.uk Para. 14 – 19 and 27 - 28), including the importance of having an adult present (or very close by) when interviewing the pupils, we were aware of the seriousness of unexpected disclosures and their implications for child protection. The nature of our enquiry made such disclosures unlikely. However we did anticipate the emergence of vignettes of such value as to inform the recommendations anticipated at reporting stage.

All participants were informed of the purpose of the research project and asked for their full consent for recording and transcription. All were made aware that they could withdraw from the research at anytime. It was made clear that confidentiality would be maintained to the best of the researcher’s ability. The data collected during  

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8 A short summary document was passed to the headteacher beforehand including details of how their children and parents would be contacted and a list of the topics/questions to be used in focus groups (see appendix one and two).
school interviews was transcribed and analysed at meetings of the researchers, utilizing thematic analysis. This involved comparing accounts to identify the ‘themes’ common in the dataset (Green and Thorogood, 2004).

Findings

A number of themes emerged from the data. Firstly, the children were keen to outline their ideas on what kind of person made an effective teaching assistant. Secondly, they identified different roles for adults who worked with them, indirectly providing evidence of a hierarchical structure in relation to authority. Thirdly, and arising from the second theme, they discussed what the role of the HLTA should be and identified their value.

As far as possible the voices of the children and parents have been used in the discussion and their interpretations will be related to the idea of what a HLTA is and what they should add to the school and classroom environment as defined by the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA 2003 and 2007).9 Future research might look for any level of correlation between what the professional educationists perceived what the HLTA standards should be and what children perceive are the significant elements of a HLTAs role. The following is a summary of the views of all eight groups.

Theme A – The HLTA is valued by children and parents

First, the findings from this piece of research highlight how much children value the HLTA role. The children talked enthusiastically about the HLTAs in their school. The data revealed the personal attributes children felt was required by the HLTA. What did the children feel, made a good teaching assistant? The responses can be subdivided into four sub-themes.

Sub theme one: Teaching Assistants need a good sense of humour

‘A good sense of humour’
‘When it was a really serious subject like SATS, she made it fun for us by telling silly jokes’
‘They have to be jolly, not a moody person and be fair.’
‘They have to be calm and not get annoyed’

‘Mrs X does it ‘fun’ – she likes us to have a laugh now and again and sometimes she’s a bit ‘mental’ but it’s funny.’

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The importance of humour was not surprisingly a prominent response though it would be interesting to see whether this was seen as such a high priority for describing a 'good' teacher. All learners respond better in an environment where they feel safe and humour is an effective tool for ensuring this is the case. School should be a happy place and in this sense it is unlikely that the children would ascribe this as a quality only applicable to teaching assistants. Nevertheless it was identified as an important category for a good HLTA. Humour can be an important element in establishing constructive relationships. The parents also stressed the importance of school being fun and the need for the adults working there to make it so.

“…you’ve got to have a laugh with the kids haven’t you and the kids will enjoy it…and they have had an enjoyable day and they can go back to school the next day and say ‘yes, I learned that yesterday’ because it was fun…rather than I don’t want to go back tomorrow because it was rubbish.” (Parent)

However, though an important attribute humour does not necessarily suggest learning will be advanced in the whole class scenario.

Sub theme two: A ‘Soft’ touch.

‘When we are with the teachers they just say ‘try’ and we know that we have to try but the teaching assistant takes it more softly.’

‘When you have an assistant teacher compared to a normal teacher - when you have a normal teacher you feel like you have to get it done with but when you have an assistant teacher they don’t make you feel as pressured – it feels better when you have an assistant teaching you.’

The children were clear that the teaching assistant communicated sensitively with them; a soft approach meant they did not feel pressurized by the HLTAs. This comment and similar phrases were used in a positive way to demonstrate their appreciation of the way HLTAs interacted with them during tasks. However, the examples above contain phrases that may tell us more about the way children perceive different roles than their definition of a good HLTA. A ‘normal’ teacher implies the designated qualified teacher and it could be argued that, ‘Class teachers are not simply seen as ‘more important’ per se but also to have a management role, which sets them above the other adults in the class’ (ibid 155). Equally, the children do not appear to view teaching as solely the role of the class teacher. An assistant does teach, but in the absence of an overall managerial role children see them as having the time to adopt a ‘softer’ approach. This does not imply that the class teacher takes a ‘hard’ approach but children may recognize that the hierarchical structure of the school staff carries different levels of responsibility.

Sub theme three: A good TA needs good personal attributes

‘They’ve got to be someone who likes kids and not someone who can’t stand to have kids around because that would be useless.’
'As well as being a good listener they have to be a good speaker as well.'

'It’s fun because you can sing and have fun singing but she also knows how to do it so you can learn as well as having fun.'

‘She puts a bit of sparkle into it a bit because in different schools they might just do the same old thing with the same teachers every day.’

HLTAs require sufficient sensitivity to be able to communicate in a way that children like. This requires empathy and a knowledge of the child as a whole i.e. their experiences away from school, their current peer relationships as well as an ability to listen. This challenge faces anyone who works with children and educationists should consider the children’s voice as a valid guide. TAs have traditionally seen ‘nurturing’ as part of their job and parents recognized and expected this. It may be that as TAs engage with professional development and become HLTAs holding more responsibility for teaching and learning, managing and organizing, they are taken away from this nurturing role which is based on strong relationships with the children. If this were the case it might be that a ‘positive impact’ on learning occurs in whole class teaching episodes, but at what cost?

“Miss X is down to earth and she’s so nice. I mean she is a lady you can actually go and talk to and tell her that you’ve got a problem and she will sort it out. My daughter really likes her so much – she would do every lesson with her if she could…I think she is really down to earth – she comes down to the kids’ level.” (Parent)

“…So the teachers have got to have a really good personality – and the assistants as well. It’s got to be the assistants as well, not just the teacher. There’s got to be someone they can approach if they’ve got a problem or they need help hasn’t there?” (Parent)

Theme B – The HLTA must have sufficient knowledge of curricula and pedagogy

The second theme is concerned with the way children recognize a distinction between HLTAs and teachers but that the nature of the distinction is ‘elusive’ (Eyres et al op cit 161). Data gathered indicated that children have a different perception to educationists of all persuasions on what are the different roles adults take in a classroom. This theme can also be divided into four sub themes.

Sub theme one: Ability to help ‘all’ children

‘They understand people with disabilities in subjects.’
‘Usually when I see her finish her sentence she usually walks off to the lower grade people and asks them do you understand what to do so she is helpful.’

‘She makes us active when she teaches PE, everyone gets involved and no one is left out’
The children gave a range of responses that identify the HLTAs ability to ‘help’. The children’s definition of help appears to hold multiple meanings. It could be helping with learning, understanding tasks set, scaffolding their ideas or reinterpreting teacher explanations. It could imply having a role supporting pupils who the children perceive to require extra support due to their needs. Equally it could mean helping in a traditional supporting role by helping the teacher to ensure all children can engage with set tasks. However, previous research by Eyres et al (2004)) found that, ‘the notion that teaching assistants ‘help’ may be less helpful than it appears’ since it can be inferred that, ‘teachers tell and teaching assistants help’ (ibid158). In this sense the use of the term help may be more a definition of role and a term used to differentiate between adult roles, particularly between the assigned teacher and other adults. Do children see teaching as, ‘teaching us what we have to do’, a matter of advancing knowledge and understanding or simply the setting of tasks?’ (ibid 159)

This remained unclear but the fact that children recognize that one of the primary roles (and benefits) of the HLTA was in helping children with ‘special needs’ was significant. The inclusion of children with a range of needs requiring designated support has been the most important explanation for the rapid expansion of the TA workforce over the last decade and HLTAs are drawn from this expansion. The groups interviewed were all familiar with ‘supported’ children in their classrooms. They were not as aware as the parents that the HLTAs were mostly deployed with low achievers when working with groups. Parents recognized their role in helping these children to ‘catch up’.

“…the teaching assistant can just work that little bit extra on the group of kids that are that bit lower and try and build them up to the standard in the same classroom and no one is getting singled out – they are not going to get bullied.” (Parent)

Sub theme two: The HLTA as ‘teacher’

‘We have mainly three or four who actually teach us – so we have one proper teacher and three teaching assistants with us.’

‘She teaches us sometimes. She’s good enough to teach, she doesn’t have her own class but she does teach us. She might one day.’

‘She’s very good at maths and she taught us maths all the time in year five.’

One teacher is better than another at different subjects so it’s better if they [the HLTA] teach it’.

‘Diff teachers teach diff lessons because they have diff strengths so we have more interesting lessons’

‘It would be mundane with one teacher’

‘She teaches all the things a normal teacher doesn’t like SEAL and RE’
‘Teaching maths and science is the teachers job but if they have worked in that class for years they will know it as well as the teacher so there would not be a problem’ [parent]

In every case the children were able to identify different roles for the adults they encountered on a daily basis without the need to ask ‘who is your class teacher’. The number of adults typically working in the classrooms was 4.5 and ‘the overwhelming impression gained...is that children are comfortable with the number of adults they encounter and with their comings and goings, so long as there is some degree of stability and continuity’ (ibid 154). The roles that exist are not mutually exclusive. Children see the adults as having a particular role but their descriptions indicate that they also see the teaching role as not being the sole property of their class teacher. Again there are similarities with Eyres' who notes that, ‘if a child says that teachers do a particular thing that does not mean they think that teaching assistants don’t do it and vice versa’ (ibid 157). The two roles identified in this research were the teacher who ‘tells’ and the teaching assistant who ‘helps’. These roles can be seen as categories in that they contain different levels of responsibility with the teacher having ultimate responsibility for management, curriculum and attainment. Children are not fully aware of this and, as Moyles and Suschitzky (1997) noted, are not particularly questioning of these differences. They are comfortable with different adults shifting roles from helper to teacher and this has clear implications for the potential of a HLTA to have a positive impact on learning when leading a whole class.

Sub theme two: The TA as ‘assistant’

‘They help the normal teachers in the classroom’

‘It’s a teacher’s assistant so if the teacher’s gone off to a meeting – this sometimes happens and sometimes doesn’t – they might take over the lesson.’ [parent]

‘Say we were doing DT you have to have more teachers in the classroom because some might be painting, some might be cutting, some might be drilling and you can’t keep your eye on every single child in the room so sometimes you need a bit more help...’...‘That’s why we have teaching assistants.’

Again we return to words like ‘help’ and ‘normal’. The third statement is particularly interesting since it suggests not that there are helpers and teachers but that there is too much teaching to be done and the help is in fact teaching carried out by the other adults. Design and Technology is a good example since it is unlikely that children being shown how to use tools safely would differentiate between being helped how to do it or taught how to do it. This raises questions about the hierarchy of knowledge not explored here. Do children see interaction with HLTA’s in foundation subjects as teaching and in core subjects as helping the teacher’s teaching? In the case of working with a whole class, is ‘taking over’ from the teacher the same as teaching the activity? Children’s understanding of such questions is explored below.
As well as describing the HLTA as an extra support for the pupils, the children in the focus groups also highlighted them as being an extra support for the teacher.

‘It’s good having teaching assistants because if there’s only one teacher going around you have to put your hand up for ages and wait and by the time they get to you it’s the end of the lesson.’

‘Like I was saying before, the teaching assistants do some of the teachers’ jobs – if there were no teaching assistants the teachers would get really stressed out.’

‘Mrs X told us that without Mrs Y and Miss Z she would go crazy.’

‘...because it’s hard work they have to work hours after school by law and the teaching assistants are like their friends as well. If there’s a standard teacher there will be a teaching assistant who will be supporting them.’

‘I think it would be hard and if we didn’t have any proper teaching assistants we wouldn’t be able to have breaks because it wouldn’t be fair on the teachers to go and have their breaks in the morning and at dinner time as well.’

The children are recognized that a school depends on the whole of its workforce and that there is an element of teamwork, with their designated teacher acting as leader but dependent on their HLTA colleagues. They were also demonstrating how much they value their HLTA.

Theme 3 The HLTA requires status conducive to support effective classroom management

The data indicated that the status of the HLTA within the school is very important. There is a suggestion that children view the primary school workforce in a different way to those who determine the possible structures of the workforce (at school, local and national level). This emerged from the children’s understanding of what a HLTA is, what their role should be and the way they are valued.

Sub theme one: children’s understanding of different roles

‘I think that we have got more than one teacher is because there is more children in classes now and there is more children who don’t understand what to do, how to do the work.’

‘Probably because there are people who have special needs and just one teacher won’t be able to look after so many people, so if there are more teachers in the classroom they will be able to help…and you’ll get more control.’
‘The assistant teachers don’t usually take the main lessons.’
‘They only take you for things such as RE, PHSE, Art.’
‘She teaches the fun way for kids who are not that clever with Mr B we could do tests all day’

‘Teachers have bigger voices’
‘Sometimes teachers tell you something to protect you so they don’t tell you the whole truth but TAs tell you the whole truth so you feel more grown up. You can tell them anything you are more wary with teachers’

HLTAs are required because there is more teaching to be done because there are more children to teach, or rather more needs to be met. The children were aware of the idea of some children having special needs, and not always ‘other’ children. One boy told us he needed the help of a HLTA because of his ADHD. This may also be the result of the children being aware of different levels of attainment in the classroom due to the setting by ability that takes place for at least 50% of the school day (taken up by Literacy and Mathematics lessons). It can be argued that school, from a very early age, has an individualizing effect on children.

As they are shown that their performance (or success) in school is a result of their own effort and application they quickly come to assess themselves and their potential. The ‘main’ lessons are those dealt with in the morning, the core subjects, and here the HLTA is seen as a source of help to the teacher because there are so many children who find these subjects challenging due to the self-assessments they have made. It may be the children are referring to other children but they might equally be interpreting the HLTA role in light of the way they view their own potential. Not surprisingly, parents held strong views in this area and the statements below contain both implicit and explicit statements of what is important (and therefore the teacher’s responsibility) and what can be left to HLTA’s to deliver.

“I think they should as well because if there’s more than one child struggling and you’ve got ‘Miss, Miss, Miss’ – if somebody else is there they take the extra pressure off and they can work around it.” (Parent)

“I think certainly I wouldn’t like an HLTA doing Literacy and numeracy – no, not with the academic subjects. I’m not happy with it to be honest – I don’t mind additional bits – RE and Games but for the actual academic…I think it’s important that we are thinking about Y6 as well because of the SATs and, certainly, I think I’d have some reservations…” (Parent)

I know a lot of the time the HLTA does things like dance or games – something expressive rather than the literacy etc…It’s still being heavily involved in the nurturing role but it all adds to the PSH and that role and mentoring and that sort of role.” (Parent)

‘They are just another teacher to the children but the children know that Mrs X is the ‘headteacher’ in that class’ (Parent)
The second quote was made by a parent with a lot of knowledge of school organization and curriculum and reflects some of the concerns raised by professional associations when HLTA was introduced. This is an ongoing debate and as Hammersley-Fletcher and Strain point out there is further research required on the outcomes of the shifting relationships between teachers and HLTAs in relation to, ‘assumptions concerning learning and pedagogy – are they understood?’ and also, as we have begun to investigate here, ‘are the learning outcomes achieved under these new conditions [of school structure and organization of learning] compatible with what might be termed a politically acceptable default measure of educational opportunity for all?’ (Hammersley-Fletcher and Strain 2008 9). The first parental quote, suggests these questions were not such a concern. However, the parent’s experience was of a school facing huge challenges in meeting all children’s needs due to the barriers to learning presented by multiple deprivations.

Sub theme two: Evidence of a hierarchy?

‘We’ve got some boys in our class who are really naughty but when Mrs Y is in they are alright – sometimes they are off and on and when the teaching assistant comes in they are naughty all the time.’

‘Yes, I think kids think they can get away with stuff with teaching assistants – they like get the hang of it…’

‘Because they are not the real teacher they think they can rule over the assistant and just because they are not the real teacher they can do whatever they want because they know they are not going to be as strict as the main teacher.’

‘The class does seem to be quite a bit noisier when we have Mrs Y then when we have Mr X.’

‘To be a proper teacher you need more time, you can’t go home for dinner because you have to mark and prepare lessons. TAs go home on their bike…but they do do playground duty’

‘It doesn’t feel like a ‘class’ it’s a different kind of atmosphere, you act differently without meaning to’

Children had some awareness of hierarchy between the adults in their class. This was demonstrated in examples they gave of the children’s behaviour changing depending on whom was taking the class. Again this is also evidenced in the language the children use to describe the adults such as ‘real’ teacher. One parent felt that provided the child’s needs were being met there was no concern over their title. Other parents felt that because of the level of subject knowledge required in primary school the importance of having qualified teacher status was less significant than in high school. However, this may also reflect their lack of awareness of pedagogical knowledge.
“I would tend to put them on the same level though – what’s the difference? Teachers, assistant teacher – they are both there to do the same job really.” (Parent)

‘HLTAs have more subject knowledge of SEN than regular teachers. They help to identify children with conditions like autism’

‘Teaching ma sci is the main teacher’s job’

Finally, children noted the importance of relationships between the HLTA and the teacher. The success of this relationship is dependent on many variables relating to management structures and styles, mostly outside the scope of this paper. However, as one child noted, for the HLTA to be successful

‘They need to be friends with the teacher they work with’

Sub theme three: Definition

Although only one child knew what HLTA stood for all were willing to give suggestions as to what it could mean. Some examples are provided below.

‘The person that hires someone to do the job.’
‘A Helping Learning Teaching Assistant’
‘Are they people who like to see what the teachers and people in the school are doing who come into the school?’

‘Is it an inspector?’
‘I think Mrs X’s got that because she’s a really good teacher. I think Miss Y might have it as well because they are both really good teachers.’

‘Happy Learning Teaching Assistant’

The children used terms like teacher, helper, assistant and supporter, interchangeably. While they are aware of a hierarchy they are not concerned with titles. They are capable of describing what activities and behaviours are typical of all of the different individuals who interact with them. During the focus groups they presented a mixture of description of what actions a HLTA should take, with observations of the personal qualities of their HLTA. Overall these descriptions provide a description of what a HLTA should be in terms of their ‘professionalism’. None of the parents knew what HLTA stood for although they did relate it to the role of teaching assistant and saw it as a career progression. One parent, with a great deal of knowledge of education was aware of the status and the potential controversy connected with its introduction though felt there had been no such tensions in her school.

“I understand it as the difference between a teaching assistant and a Higher Level Teaching Assistant is that a Higher Level Teaching Assistant can actually take a class, on their own unsupervised – that’s my understanding of the distinction…HLTA has their own set of
responsibilities aside from the teacher even though the work may be overlooked – they have lesson plans and responsibility for a certain area of the curriculum that’s not necessarily overlooked by the teacher.”
(Parent)

Sub theme four: Enthusiasm for their HLTA

During every focus group the children talked enthusiastically about their HLTAs,

‘I really love doing ICT in school because she makes it fun and it’s good to have a change every day or…with a different teacher, because they are not all the same – they are both different.’

‘It wouldn’t have been as much fun as well because the teaching assistants, like Miss X – she is really joyful and loves doing things and is always laughing.’

‘I like doing singing with Mrs X because she helps us learn how to do it…so it’s fun because you can sing and have fun singing but also know how to do it so you can learn as well as having fun.’

Children’s enthusiasm for the activities completed with their HLTA suggests a high level of professional skill as expected by the standards. The following parental view sums up the potential of the HLTA to advance learning.

“…when they come home and they have got excitement from what they have done as well and if they’ve done something different that they have never ever done or done it a little bit but have achieved it a bit more than…they are full of confidence and self esteem aren’t they?”
(Parent)

Sub theme five: The value of the HLTA

The focus groups highlighted just how much children value the work of their HLTAs.

‘We are lucky in school to have all these different teachers. Each one has a different personality which we are glad about and we like and that’s what makes them so different…’

‘I think it actually quite good to have more teachers me because it is quite hard for me to learn because I have got ADHD.’

‘I prefer it when there are more teachers in the room because, say if we are doing a Maths lesson, and everybody is at a different stage then somebody can be having one to do addition – then one could do another way to do addition – and then the higher group could do a different way to do addition – then they’d learn how skilful they were – it’s all good stuff.’
‘Because then if we are doing numeracy if the teacher thinks ‘oh heck they have got stuck’ if you have got a certain teacher for each part of the lesson that means they will get more help.’

It much better with more than one [teacher] it’s too busy and you’d get stressed with just one

‘It totally depends on how strict they are. If they are really strict you will learn’

The children value their HLTAs and the other adults who work with them and they appear to feel that they do learn when the HLTA works with them. From the descriptions of the various activities HLTAs were undertaking with children it is likely that the children feel they are learning, and enjoying doing so, in a whole class context. This was supported by the parents though they had several reservations.

“I think we’re very lucky that we’ve got positive experiences to draw from and certainly our children this year it’s been an absolute pleasure because the HLTA’s that we’ve had in school have really enhanced our children’s last year in school because they’ve been heavily involved with things like that and they’ve got such a fantastic relationship with them as well.” (Parent)

“My kids have really appreciated the work they’ve done with the HLTAs – it’s almost as if it’s a bit special, what they’ve done with them, a bit fun.” (Parent)

‘They are one step down from a teacher’

‘Being taught by a HLTA is slightly inferior to the teacher. I personally have not found it that way but that’s how I see it in my mind’

‘Better to have a teacher but we can’t afford it’

‘We need high quality HLTAs but we need to be sure they are as good as the teachers’

Discussion

‘Researching children’s perspectives is both a rewarding and an interesting task’ (Fraser and Meadows 2008 op cit 360)

This research recognized that, ‘children’s lives are complex and multi-faceted, and…quite different from the childhood lives remembered by adults’ (Dockett and Perry 2005 op cit). We did not focus on children as ‘victims of educational discourse’ (ibid) but as participants in the social world, albeit one dominated by adult constructions.

• The HLTAs were valued by parents and children. The findings from this piece of research highlight how much children and parents value the HLTA
role. Both the children and parents talked enthusiastically about the TAs/HLTAs in their school.

- **The HLTA requires sufficient knowledge of curricula and pedagogy.** Both the personal attributes and approach (to communication) adopted by HLTAs were considered important by parents and pupils. This pedagogical knowledge was considered essential for providing a supportive environment in which children could learn and develop. Parents showed some concern with subject knowledge in relation to Literacy and Mathematics i.e. could HLTAs acquire subject knowledge without having QTS?

- **The status of the HLTA within the school hierarchy determines their ability to practice effective classroom management strategies.** The evidence from this report suggests that HLTAs play a vital role in supporting not only pupils but also teaching staff. Both the parents and pupils recognize the need for HLTAs as they were considered an integral part of the whole school workforce. The children recognize a distinction between HLTAs and teachers but the nature of the distinction is ‘elusive’ (Eyres et al op cit 161) and there is a suggestion that children view the primary school workforce in a different way to those who determine the possible structures of the workforce (at school, local and national level). With this increased responsibility and blurring of roles the question of how important the distinction between a teacher and the HLTA is to children must be addressed. It appears that children do not demarcate roles as rigidly as adults, parents and educationists. Also, they are comfortable having more than one adult teaching a whole class regardless of whether they have QTS.

- As schools move toward extended provision and new forms and structures (Extended schools and ‘Building Schools for the Future’) decision makers should listen carefully to what children have to say before finalizing plans.

- The data collected with parents demonstrated their contrasting levels of knowledge (of school and curriculum organization and management) and differing perspectives on the roles of teachers and HLTAs respectively. Parents remain limited in their awareness of what is implied by different job titles in schools.

Finally, we would ask, where schools build on existing models of good practice in deployment and professional development, and where the HLTA is in possession of the right qualities, should the original research question not be turned on its head? Is there potentially a negative impact on learning if HLTAs are prevented from teaching the whole class? Neither children nor adults want to revert to the nineteenth and twentieth century model of one teacher –one class.

‘It is beneficial, much better than 30 children with one teacher, if it went back to that, the damage that would be done…’
References


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