'Yes, but...' Rhetoric, reality and resistance in teaching assistants’ experiences of inclusive education

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Introduction
This paper examines the role of teaching assistants (TAs) working in special educational needs (SEN) in an increasingly complex and diverse context. The role of the TA has been given significant attention in the last two decades, partly due to the increased focus on their effectiveness within an inclusive education system (Cajkler et al. 2007a, 2007b; Blatchford et al. 2009, Howes et al. 2003) in a time of workforce reform (Burgess and Shelton Mayes 2007, 2009; Groom 2006; Gunter et al. 2005). This study uses qualitative data to examine the experiences of TAs within inclusive contexts and focuses upon how their backgrounds and experiences impact upon their role within the classroom, as well as how their experiences within inclusive classrooms demonstrate ambiguity, tension and contradictions.

Rather than a focus on pupil and institutional outcomes, it is the intention of this paper to analyse the tensions between the policy and institutional frameworks of inclusion and how TAs experience this. TAs’ experiences of contradictions, tensions, resistance and also pleasures of their work will be explored from their own perspectives. The personal interpretations, understandings and day-to-day implementation of inclusion will be the focus (Sikes et al. 2007; O’Brien and Garner 2001).

This study builds on and extends previous research, and takes a case study approach to presenting the findings to focus on: how TA’s life experiences influence their work in the classroom; relationships with other staff; the impact
of gender on the TA role; TAs understandings of inclusion; motivations to carry out the role; perceptions of their status; and tensions between official policy on inclusion and their own practice on the ground.

The voice of the TA

The paper is inspired by the approach of O’Brien and Garner (2001) and their concerns about the TA role, such as their possible marginalisation within schools, uncertain contractual arrangements and poor pay. These working conditions were seen to undermine the important work that they do with children with very complex and challenging needs (O’Brien and Garner 2001). O’Brien and Garner purposely interviewed TAs about their experiences; often previous research tended to focus on TAs and be about them without including their own perspectives. O’Brien and Garner look at how the language in policy and research around TAs emphasises how they should be ‘used’, ‘or ‘utilised’, which seemingly undermined their value as people within the classroom. Therefore, O’Brien and Garner’s research was a way to bring back the unacknowledged ‘voices’ of TAs into the debate, an approach that this paper seeks to emulate.

TAs very often have a strong commitment to their work and an emotional connection to the people they work with. They have ‘strong and principled’ views on the work that they do and can give valuable input into how inclusion can work successfully (O’Brien and Garner 2001 p. 4). However, their status within school is often poor (Hammett and Burton 2005), and in policy, there is little guidance on mutual collaboration; TAs appear to have little say in what should happen to them, and appear to be often excluded from discussions about the children of whom they have expert knowledge of.

Therefore, this paper is an attempt to acknowledge the voice of the TA and present TAs’ stories on their own words as far as possible, ‘recognising that empowerment of the ‘researched’ is the most potent (ethical?) position to adopt...’ (O’Brien and Garner 2001 p. 6). However, it is recognised that any account for TAs views will be partial and subject to the selective processes inevitable in any research of this length. It is also recognised that drawing out
themes, commonalities and implications of the responses will inevitably involve the interpretations and subjectivities of the researcher (Lawson et al. 2006; Sikes at al. 2007).

The policy context

TAs have long been employed in the primary classroom, particularly to support the needs of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) and more recently they have been involved in supporting the now-defunct national literacy and numeracy strategies (Hancock et al. 2010). The numbers of TAs has grown since the 1990s. There are 178,900 full-time equivalent TAs employed in English mainstream and special schools, increased from 70,300 in 1999 (DCSF 2009). The role of the TA is shifting to include work that would previously only have been carried out by teachers, such as teaching, planning and assessment (Blatchford et al. 2009), and in the case of HLTAs, the covering of classes (Hancock et al. 2010).

This shifting of occupational boundaries has lead to a widely-noted lack of clarity about the TA role and TAs moving closer to the role of the classroom teacher (Adamson 1999; Howes et al. 2003; Cajkler et al. 2006) together with concerns that TAs need effective management, training and a clear career structure (Alborz et al. 2009) (a concern that has been widely discussed for some time). An emerging body of research is examining the impact of TAs on achievements (Blatchford et al. 2009) and although Hancock et al. (2010) assert that the impact of TAs is comparable to that of teachers, Blatchford et al. (2009) did not find any impact of TAs on the academic achievements of pupils with SEN although the research did find other benefits of the TA role.

The recent development of the higher level teaching assistant role (HLTA) rose out of a response to a review of teacher’s workload (PriceWaterhouseCooper 2001 cited in Hancock et al. 2010). HLTAs are allowed to cover classes so that teachers can be released for PPA time (‘planning, preparation and assessment’). This was objected to by the National Union of Teachers who did not support HLTAs covering for qualified
teachers (and indeed did not sign the wider workforce agreement which reviewed school staffing structures, performance management and new professional standards).

Despite this objection, the HLTA role was established and many schools are now using HLTA s to release teachers for PPA time and to cover short-term absences. Studies have focused on their training and assessment and how this impacts upon HLTA’s work, academic impact and relationships with other staff (Burgess and Shelton Mayes 2007, 2009) their impact (Blatchford et al. 2009) and the experiences of HLTA s themselves (Hancock et al. 2010). Research is finding that the HLTA s have wide-ranging job domains and sometimes are being asked to become involved in planning and cover duties that are beyond their experience, expertise and knowledge (Hancock et al., 2010). It has also been found that using HLTA s to cover classes to enable the release of teachers is not the best use of their expertise given that many felt out of their depth (Hancock et al. 2010).

**Teachers/TA relationships: possibilities for collaboration**

A growing body of research has focused on the relationships between teachers and TAs and the impact this has on inclusion. Research is moving away from focusing solely on the role and working conditions of TAs and onto the relationships between teachers and TAs and the ways in which collaboration and support between them can be engendered. Devecchi and Rouse (2010) carried out an ethnographic study of two secondary schools in England and reviews how collaborative practices were established to support children with SEN. Effective collaboration is central to effective support for children with SEN and the effectiveness of this support is also the result of clearly defined boundaries around roles and responsibilities together with the ability of team members to respect each other’s knowledge, experience and competence, which often resulted in redrawing previous professional boundaries. Schools need to also include adults as well in successful collaboration if the inclusion of children is to be embedded (Devecchi and Rouse 2010).
How teachers and TAs support each other is complex but appears to be closely dependent on whole schools systems of staff support, participation, training and induction. TAs supported teachers in terms of teaching but also as a person by ‘taking the pressure off’ within the classroom (Devecchi and Rouse p. 96; Blatchford et al. 2009). TAs also supported teachers through sharing knowledge, both about a child or keeping them up to date with other developments. This was particularly important in a secondary school where teachers did not have daily contact with the children. While teachers appreciated such support, they also felt guilty that they could not do more for the children or pay them more individual attention. TAs felt supported when lesson plans were shared in advance, being clear in their instructions and when openly acknowledging the TA’s presence and skills, which improved their status with the children. All the teams in the schools discussed collaboration in the same way, although this support was complex and varied. Both a functional and personal dimension of collaboration was highlighted, mainly based around acquiring and sharing knowledge. Despite previous research demonstrating difficulties in this area (for example Moran and Abbott 2002; Maliphant 2008; Hammett and Burton 2005) this research demonstrates that teachers and TAs can work effectively together and collaboration can be of benefit to both the students and the professionals that work with them (see also Groom 2006). What was key in the schools in the study was that being collaborative and supportive allowed people to reflect on their needs, consider other people’s view points consider their practice, problem-solve and consider ways in which they could support inclusive practice more successfully. In this way, TAs were not marginal to the school but an integral part of school life (Devecchi and Rouse 2010).

**Understandings of inclusion: ‘Yes, but’**

Despite this picture of successful collaboration, other research has found that teachers and TAs often do not have commonality in how they view their roles in the classroom. One area in which there has been a lack of shared understanding is in teachers’ and TA’s understandings of inclusion (Sikes et
Whilst it is unsurprising that each account of inclusion is individual, what is interesting in Sikes et al.’s research is that although participants may have had a definition of inclusion that seemed to chime with some aspect on government, local authority or institutional definitions, people’s own stories about inclusion were more likely to focus on the human and personal aspects of daily involvement with pupils, often couched in terms of ‘care and support’ (Avramidis and Norwich 2002 in Sikes et al. 2007 p. 359; Avramidis et al. 2002). Therefore, rhetorical expressions of inclusion and the reality of it in the day-to-day life of the classroom were only tenuously linked.

Participants in Sikes et al.’s study often illustrated what the researchers called the ‘yes buts’ of inclusion, for example: ‘Yes, inclusion is a good thing. But the money for doing it properly isn’t there’ (Sikes et al. 2007 p. 360). Participants also mentioned tensions between the principal of inclusion and an inappropriate curriculum, the lack of effective training for teachers, and meeting the needs of the rest of the class. Respondents often expressed contradictory aspects within their own thinking; a support for inclusion in principle but also experiencing ambivalent feelings about the practice. There was a clear tension between the ideal of inclusion and their own subjective experiences and personal understandings of inclusion (see also Croll and Moses 2000).

In summary, previous research has focused on TA’s conditions of work and status. More recently, research has concentrated more on relationships between TAs and teachers, both their difficulties but also how they can collaborate together to support inclusion. This study will draw on TAs’ own understandings of inclusive education and illustrate how these experiences are full of contradictions, ambiguities and tensions, partially due to the difficulty of relationships within the classroom and ambivalence about inclusive education.
Methodology

The sample was comprised of thirteen TAs, all working in schools in east London. The data was collected through interviews (three respondents) and four focus group discussions (ten respondents). The sample of TAs was taken from a wider study of professional’s experiences working with children with SEN (total sample is n=44). The focus groups were mixed and comprised of these various professionals due to the availability of respondents on particular dates. Following on shortly after the focus groups, semi-structured life history interviews were carried out with three different respondents. Like Cole (2004), the study used an opportunity sample based on responses to an advert placed in two major special needs magazines and an electronic request that went to all students in the university in which the author was working. The respondents were all working in east London schools, and were following degree courses in education at the author’s university. This makes generalisation difficult, and it may be the case that the participants’ experiences are typical only of working in schools in London (Mackenzie 2009 in Ang et al. 2009).

Like O’Brien and Garner (2001), I tried to apply a general overarching criterion for the selection of the stories to include in this paper, which was whether the stories offered the reader a new or alternative insight or perspective into their work. I also attempted to select stories that might be informative for future practice. Hopefully the stories do reflect these criteria but I accept that the selection will reflect my own interpretations of what is interesting and significant and there will inevitably be a degree of selection when presenting the stories.

The use of qualitative techniques provided respondents with the opportunity of telling their diverse stories in their own ways. The diversity of each story illustrated clearly the complexity of working in SEN and the emotional demands this complexity gave rise to. This helped in the reconstruction and interpretation of meaningful features and incidents in respondents’ lives. Within qualitative research in education, there is a developing body of thought
concerning the connection between teachers' and TA's private lives, the personal and biographical aspects of their careers, and how these interact and shape professional reflections and actions (Day et al. 2007) and this article is embedded within this approach. The value of a qualitative approach is demonstrated in the literature on teachers' and TAs' work and professional lives, which has established that factors such as expertise, capability, personal and professional biography, situational, emotional and psychological factors, as well as the complexity of the pupils with whom they work, and changes over time and circumstance, influence their effectiveness as staff (Hargreaves 2005).

The interviews and focus groups were piloted with students from the author’s current university. The pilot study found that the research instruments appeared to work well although some warm-up activities were removed from the focus group as they were too time-consuming.

The focus group samples were geographically clustered to allow ease of attendance at meetings. Three groups were in London with one in the Midlands due solely to ease of attendance for the participants. The research was funded by the Promising Researcher grant from the author's university and the data collection took place over 10 months in 2007. The broad themes for the focus group and interview questions were initially drawn from the work of Day (2007), Goodson (1992), Measor and Sikes (1992) and O’Brien and Garner (2002) and focused on issues such as beginning to work in education, training, who influenced them in their job, why they stayed in education, where they saw themselves in 5 years' time, and good and bad aspects of the job. The interviews and focus groups all began with the question ‘How and why did you become a TA?’ In this way, broad ‘process’ questions were asked initially such as when participants began working with children with SEN, what motivated them to work in the area, why they stayed, had they thought of leaving, the qualities they thought were important to working in the field, and what critical incidents or events had lead to their decision to stay begin work in this area (Goodson, 1992). These questions then lead on further to participants discussing deeper issues such as the emotional experiences
within their work, their attitudes to inclusion and the personal events in their lives that culminated in a decision to enter education.

Focus groups were also useful to enable a relatively large sample to be accessed at one time. The participants could also talk in a relaxed and open manner. The groups were run using the ‘funnel’ technique so that relatively broad and impersonal questions were asked at the start to warm the group up such as what job they were currently doing, whereas more probing questions were asked later such as the particular life events that had lead them into working in SEN. The focus groups allowed and facilitated conversations between participants, which are often the most significant aspects of the method (Kitzinger 1994). The groups enabled participants to engage with one another, formulate their ideas verbally and draw on thought processes that may have been previously unarticulated (and indeed several participants stated that they had not considered these issues before).

The respondents were all volunteers which may mean that they were perhaps more motivated to work in SEN than in other groups, or at least had more intense or significant experiences than other TAs. Therefore, questions can be raised about the representativeness of the sample. As the respondents were all known to the researcher as current or former students, it could be argued that they might be more likely to give a more positive account of inclusion (or at least, a more censored account) although this does not appear to be the case in this study. It is also possible that the status differences between the researcher (as the students’ current or former lecturer) and the respondents may have affected the responses although it is difficult to ascertain what effect this had, if any.

The transcripts of the focus groups and interviews produced the data for analysis via the software programme NVivo. The programme was used to analyse the focus group and qualitative life history data, as it was suitable for a very detailed study using relatively small amounts of data.
The transcripts were coded via NVivo after an initial first paper analysis. Initial themes emerged after reading the transcripts and NVivo was used to help to draw those threads together. The topics came directly from an analysis of the transcripts rather than being decided by the researcher beforehand. It could be argued that to a certain extent the emerging themes were determined by the kinds of questions asked initially although a semi-structured approach did allow themes to emerge from the respondents. After the analysis on paper, NVivo was used to more systematically draw out the frequency and the intensity of the emerging themes.

**Ethical issues**

It has been argued that most projects involving focus groups pose few ethical issues (Morgan 1998) However, privacy remains the central ethical concern in focus group research. The first step was to restrict access to information that revealed the participants’ identities, and therefore anonymity and confidentiality needed to be addressed. Few focus groups qualify as offering true anonymity (Morgan 1998) and indeed in this research many of the respondents knew each other. Instead, it is more common to promise confidentiality, which means that identifying information will be gathered, but it will be carefully protected.

The relationship between the researcher and the participants is particularly important in research using interviews. The method hinges on developing a relationship and trust (Ball 1983 p.93). As a consequence of the relationship, some key ethical dilemmas emerged. It was important to establish that the relationship is solely for research purposes and not for the purposes of friendship to avoid any over-familiarity between the researcher and the respondents. This was difficult at times as I knew the participants relatively well, and sometimes they shared quite personal, biographical material. Subsequently, it felt rather abrupt when the interview ended and little contact was subsequently maintained other than sending respondents updates about the progress of the research. There was a dilemma in wanting to keep a distance to prevent myself from imposing my own meaning on the situation,
whilst getting close to participants so that they opened up (Munroe 1998). I tried to avoid self-disclosure being a manipulative strategy in order to gain reciprocal information. Therefore, I did disclose something of my own background when asked to do so, but did not attempt to proffer any personal experiences or life history details. This became difficult at times when participants asked about my own background and the resulting discussion sometimes derailed the interview for a time.

**Findings**

The findings are presented as individual case studies. Points of commonality and difference will be drawn out in the discussion section.

**Jill: ‘they set unrealistic expectations’**

Jill is a TA in the early years sector who was also following a part-time degree course. She began working with children with SEN because her step-brother had global developmental delay and a brother with ADHD and so she had always grown up around people with SEN. Jill’s mother works with children with SEN, and two years ago Jill started a summer holiday play scheme job for children with very complex disabilities which encouraged her to work in the field.

i. Tensions with staff

Jill’s major concern regarding working in mainstream schools was that the mainstream staff (and herself) had a lack of training on SEN issues. In her setting, the SENCO role had gone to the manager solely because she was already in the role of a manager. The SENCO role was seen as just ‘a label…a bit of a badge’ without the required knowledge and training being attached to the role.
Eventually, her manager realised that the SENCO role required skills and knowledge and so she passed the role to Jill. However, this proved to be difficult to manage and teach as well.

ii. Teachers and pressures

Jill believed that the pressures on teachers to meet Government targets was leading to bad practice within the classroom:

A lot of teachers especially in this country feel so much pressure to hit those league tables and prove that they are doing all these things that they think, ‘I haven’t got time to deal with the SEN children. [sic] They are never going to reach the potential of the other children so I’ll set them the minimum amount that I can get away with and I’ll just move on to those ones that can achieve’, and there’s a bit of me that see that because obviously they need to prove their worth to the government, but I also think that these children are missing out on so much. Probably half of them could achieve.

iii. Role of the TA: problems

The TA role could also cause tensions within the classroom between children:

If you’ve got a child in a reception class who has got for example Downs syndrome and they have a one-to-one LSA everyday, because nobody knows what to do with her. She would just run up and down the corridor if she was left to her own devices. So that child gets one-to-one help and nobody else does, so they’re getting positively discriminated because they’re not as bright as everybody else. That’s not fair because then the other children think, ‘what’s going on? They get someone sat with them all day helping them; they get someone sharpening their pencils.’
other children start thinking ‘well, that’s not right’ and then starts the clashing of heads and they think they’re being left out.

iv. ‘Yes, inclusion is good. But expectations are unrealistic’

Jill was generally supportive of inclusion but believed that expectations of what children with SEN could achieve were unrealistic.

I think some teachers are unrealistic about expectations. I mean the child I was talking about before [who has Down’s syndrome] their LSA has been told that they are not allowed to hold her hand and I’m thinking ‘why, why?’ Because they have a policy of not holding the other children’s hand unless they are hurt or walking down the street or whatever. But she’s not of that ability, her natural reaction is ‘if we’re going somewhere, you’re going with me and I’m holding my hand out’. I just think it’s a bit, you know …they are not allowed to sit her on their lap and it think it’s a bit sad, because she is not of the maturity yet to understand. It’s not expected of other children and I just think they are still little. They are only 4 years old anyway, and I don’t think that should be expected of any of them especially someone with a special need.

v. Experience, youth and gender

Jill believed that it was important to have more mature and experienced staff working with children with SEN, particularly SENCOs, who have lived through the shifting ways in which the needs of pupils have been met in recent history:

I suppose it’s a bit more about life. You’ve seen more and done more and had more experience, and have moved on past those time when people just use to call them ‘retards’ and ignore them in the corner and you’ve gone through that…[mature teachers have] got more staying power perhaps, and I think you need that
with SEN children. You need to go over stuff and over stuff and over stuff generally and you know a lot of young people probably just [can’t do that].

Jill felt sometimes that young SENCOs were ‘shoved into posts’ without the knowledge or the experience to carry out the role. She commented on the female-dominated nature of the profession. In particular, she believed that children see women as ‘being more approachable general especially with young children’. She noted that how men within the profession were in a minority and were often seen as a novelty:

In the early years school we were all female and 99% of the parents that came in were female. You got the odd dad bring them in but then they just shoved the children in and run out quickly. When you got a man in to school the staff just use to dive on top of them and go mad.

**Femi: ‘the system is exclusionary’**

Femi is a TA in east London and in the third year of a degree course. She was originally from South Africa. She became interested in SEN when working in a mainstream school in England:

I realised that some of us couldn’t effectively assist children because some were autistic, so I couldn’t communicate with them. Then we had some self development courses and other programmes to assist the teachers and support staff. My interest started there, to pursue my education in special needs.

i. ‘Yes, inclusion is good. *But* the system excludes pupils’

Femi was generally supportive of inclusion, but she believed that ‘the system’ was letting down children with SEN: ‘They’re not supporting them effectively. Well, the policies are there but what is happening really is that this system is
not effectively supporting this special needs group.’ In fact, she believed that many pupils were integrated rather than included and faced internal exclusion within the class:

Some of them are excluded within the class. They are arranged a class in such a way that the child sits by the corner and doesn’t participate in the learning with their peers. I think affects the child.

She believed that units attached to mainstream schools were also exclusionary:

Some of the units they are opening are not helping these children at all. They are just to keep them there whilst they are school age. They are not actually assisting them to accomplishing something which will help them in their future.

ii. Tensions with staff: Role of the SENCO

Like Jill, Femi was sceptical that SENCOs carried out their role adequately:

I wanted to speak to the SENCO and have a look some of their records of special needs. She is the SENCO and a teacher in school but there are no records, there is no assessment, nothing, but she’s says she is the SENCO because they say every school must have a SENCO.

Jane: ‘What I don’t like is working with teachers’

Jane initially began working as a TA by supporting a child returning to school after a long illness. This then led her to follow a degree in education after completing an Access course. Her eventual goal is to become a teacher, something that she had always wanted to do.
i. Tensions within TA groups

One of the most uncomfortable aspects of her TA role was relationships with others, particularly the ‘stupid politics’ in school. There was a hierarchy of TAs in the school, with those being there for a long time, who ‘know how to work the system to their advantage.’ Communication problems were also common:

We’ve got a lack of information, terrible communication problems at the moment. I’m really lucky. I work with a TA who is really fantastic and she will go to the meetings at 8 in the morning, the whole school meeting, and tell me everything that’s gone on, there are no minutes to it. I have no idea what’s going on, but I don’t need to be in work for 8.30 in the morning. I have to be in for my contract hours and I’m not about to put myself out to be in for these meetings because you don’t get any ‘thank you’ for it at all, you know.

ii. ‘Yes, inclusion is good. But teachers do not collaborate well’

This lack of communication and collaboration was her major concern with how inclusion was working in mainstream schools. Jane found it particularly difficult to work with teachers:

I never get lesson plans. You’ve got to think on your feet, you’ve got to adapt material when you don’t even know what they’re doing. You have to listen to what the teacher is teaching the class so that you understand everything. But at the same time you are meant to be out of the class changing all the materials. You don’t get any time to change or adapt things.

She also felt unsupported after being attacked by a pupil and was expected to carry on working with that child without counselling or support after the event.

Jane believed that problems of collaboration were often to do with gender:
I don’t like the all female environment and the cattiness that goes along with it …and you should bow to this one because she’s been there fifteen years and they’ve got so much experience.

Jane did give an example of good collaboration with a teacher, particularly when the teacher had already differentiated the lesson plan. ‘Good’ teachers were seen as ‘fair, firm, adapting the curriculum, understanding the needs of the classroom, making sure that the kids love you and empowering them so that they become active learners’.

iii. Status, role and working conditions

Jane also had concerns about TAs’ working conditions and role, particularly as they had few breaks and were expected to also do playground duty. TAs also had a lack of support and guidance, and when TAs reported difficulties, they were told ‘it’s your job, get on with it’.

Despite the difficulties, Jane still wanted to work in SEN:

I am more passionate about SEN and mainstream education because I just think that children get such a raw deal. I do believe I could make a difference. I like being in the classroom with the kids. I don’t know what it is but I’ve always liked it. I like the naughty one sitting over there that’s giving me the grief, and the one that’s sitting there reading the book and saying ‘but miss I can do this’ and I like ones that are just trying to get on and watching them grow and develop.

Angela: ‘It’s very physically and emotionally demanding’

Angela had just finished her degree and was also working in special schools where she had been employed for 7 years in a peripatetic role helping pupils
to transition to mainstream school. She has a son who attends a special school, and a brother who has ADHD. Growing up with him sparked her interest in special needs. What inspired her to work as a TA was her feeling that teachers could not meet the needs of pupils with emotional and behavioural problems. She now mainly works with pupils with physical disabilities but she finds that working with children with high dependency needs is unfulfilling, as their needs would largely remain unchanged, whereas working in behaviour management enabled her to see more progression with particular pupils.

She feels that many teachers are not able to meet the needs of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD):

I think there are a lot of teachers that go into special needs and then are quite happy to [work with children with] medical needs and physical needs. But when it comes to EBD, not a lot of teachers really have time for it, and I think there is such a shortage of them and that’s part of the reason the main reason I want to go into EBD eventually.

Despite these difficulties, Angela still wants to remain in special education, but with children with EBD:

I’d stay in inclusion [sic] but I think I’d like to either be in an EBD school or in a mainstream as part of an inclusion team. I don’t think I’d like to work in special education with other [physical] needs.

i. Isolation

Angela found her role isolating, particularly as she had a peripatetic role:

I think the problem for me is because I’m never based in one place for any length of time, no more than a couple of hours at this school, a couple of hours at that school. I’m never not very
often in the classrooms there, I never get to build relationships with anybody so I just find it very isolating, you know. I go into all these schools and every one says ‘hello’ to me but you never really build a relationship with anybody.

ii. ‘Yes, inclusion is good. But teachers have a medical model of disability’

Angela was particularly concerned about teachers’ view of children with behaviour problems:

I think a lot of teachers do, or have done in the past, they do see behaviour as just naughty children. They never looked beyond the being naughty. My son goes to a special school for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties and he went to a mainstream primary. It was a split placement, but my experiences with him was very much ‘he’s just being naughty, it’s just for attention’. They didn’t look for any environmental factors you know, it was just a naughty child, and sometimes if you look beyond that it’s a very different picture.

iii. Emotional demands

Angela found the role of a TA ‘demanding, very physically and emotionally demanding’, particularly trying to find the balance between meeting the needs of children with SEN whilst also promoting independence:

I find some of them [pupils] are quite happy for me to do everything for them but then there’s also the few that are like ‘I can do that myself you know, I can hold my own drink, I can hold my own pencil’ So there’s kind of two areas really, one area that are quite happy for you to do it, another area that wants more independence but I found it very demanding really.
Angela also found that ‘it is hard not to get emotional’, particularly when children were ill:

It is hard not to get emotionally involved especially when you have worked with the same child for a long time. You’ve got that bond with them, and then when they do get ill, it is quite hard.

iv. TAs and status

The greater need for TAs to meet the needs of children with SEN lead Angela to believe that the role now has higher status. However, she believes that working in SEN is still not seen as an ‘intellectual job’:

I think a lot of the time you are just classed as an extra pair of hands…a carer. I did the diazepam training because if you are taking that child out of the special school and you are taking them into mainstream and they have a fit, you have to know what to do. You have to be trained to meet all their medical needs, catheters, and so on.

v. Role of qualifications/training

Angela was sceptical about the role of qualifications and experience:

I think with a qualification it can teach you about all the different needs but it doesn’t actually teach you how to deal with a child with autism in the classroom. It doesn’t actually give you that hands-on experience of how to deal with all the different needs in the classroom. It might give you the theoretical side of it but it doesn’t actually teach you in practice what to do if a child has a fit in a classroom how do you deal with it.

vi. Gender
Angela believes that more men should be working in SEN, especially in the areas of behaviour management:

I think that for a lot of boys especially secondary aged, especially black boys, they would have more respect for a man doing the job. Somebody else to relate to. I think that especially for older boys, a lot of them tend to have their Mum but I think for a lot of them it is positive to see a man doing that job. I think they can get different things from a man as a SENCO as well. You tend to find that the children you work best with are the children you can relate with to more and I know from my own experiences my sons related better to the male SENCOs and the male teachers. They have that bond because they’ll talk about football and they’ll talk about all different things before they really get to the root of the problem and I just think that if there were more men in the role of the SENCO I think for older boys it would be more positive.

vii. Role of the SENCO and relationship with the SENCO

Angela had experienced some difficult experiences with SENCOs. Many she saw as:

[…] working their way up the ladder. In my experience I’ve come across some really good SENCOs but equally I’ve come across some very bad ones. You can see that they are there purely because they wanted to step up the ladder as opposed to wanting to do what’s best for the child.

She saw some SENCOs as using the role to ‘hide’ from the classroom:

There’s one SENCO at a school that I go into once a week, you can never find her. You never know where she is. She accepts
all these children into the school with all these different needs but then she provides no support for them. I’ve driven down the street in the middle of the day and I’ve seen her going into Tesco’s and she never seems to be in her office. You can never get hold of her. She never provides any training for the teachers and to me, she’s just there to get a higher status than a teacher. I might be wrong but that’s my impression. She’s taken the role just to get out of the classroom and have an easier life although it’s probably not easier life. Or it shouldn’t be. You can see the SENCOs that are passionate about their job and are passionate about what they are doing. You can tell the ones that are not really bothered.

Elaine: ‘I was more of a nurse’

Elaine was completing a higher degree and had worked as a TA in a special school for six years. Her interest in SEN began when she was 15 when she did voluntary work at a play scheme for children with SEN. Ever since then she has worked with children with SEN. She enjoyed working with children with complex needs although this did bring some difficulties, explored below. In the future, she planned to be a deputy head or a head of an outreach centre for children with SEN. Elaine found the work particularly emotionally demanding, particularly when children died. She found hiding her feelings in these circumstances to be extremely difficult.

i. ‘Yes, inclusion is good. But the curriculum isn’t differentiated enough’

As well as being emotionally demanding, Elaine found that a lot of her time was not taken up with academic work, but being employed as a ‘nurse’:

Because we work with children who had really bad medical needs and I was seen as more a nurse rather than a
[teacher]…it was more needs rather than the curriculum, I think. I must have seen children being read the same story about five times and painting and things like that. It was more ‘right, we need to do catheters, we need to do the tubes, we change their nappies’. They had nurses in but I was trained to do diazepam for epilepsy. I was trained to do catheters, other needs, things like that, so I was more of a nurse more than a teacher.

ii. Role of the SENCO

Like the other respondents, Elaine had concerns about the SENCO role:

I worked at a primary school and I asked the SENCO why she wanted to be a SENCO, and she said ‘I got bored of teaching’. I just feel that she doesn’t care; she’s lost her passion for children which is why she’s in the SENCO role. She feels as though she hasn’t got the responsibility of caring for 30 children now, she’s got the responsibility of caring for about 800 children at that school. I just think she’s lost her passion for children and she just thought the SENCO role would be easier.

iii. Relationships with parents

Elaine found that working with parents was more satisfying than working with teachers:

[Communication with parents] is really important because parents know their children best. Although teachers have children for five days a week, it’s the parents who gave birth to their children. They know their children, they know the heart of their children, and they know what can trigger them off. A teacher might not know that so I do think communication with parents is important.
Relationships with parents and children were often couched within a caring discourse:

I want to make a difference to their lives ...so that I can make it better in some way and help them get over any problems that they face and also just let parents know that I am there and that I will get things done and I will follow things up. The children and the parents are my main priorities really.

**Una: ‘At the end of the day I could pull my hair out but I love my job’**

Una is a learning support assistant in Essex. She has been in the role for nine years and is also an undergraduate student. She has always wanted to be an infant teacher.

i. ‘Yes, inclusion is good. *But* behavioural issues have made the job more difficult’

Una described how behavioural issues had made her job more challenging. The nature of children’s behaviour problems had changed over the years in which she had been in post:

In the school I’m in, there are quite a lot of children with behaviour issues. I couldn’t believe it. I know when I was in school years ago there didn’t seem to be anything like that. You didn’t run out the class, you didn’t answer the teacher back, you didn’t throw a chair. But now it seems that all the children seem to have so many issues and then it comes out in behaviour or the children will play up. Perhaps some know how to play the system, how to play the teachers up, how to get out of class... they just want your attention, don’t they? If you don’t it’s ‘eff off, you’ve always helping everybody else but not helping me.’
Despite an increase in behaviour problem, Una found these aspects of the job rewarding:

I get on with children that I now know are ‘special educational needs’. [sic]. Those with behaviour problems, they will come and talk and I can get on with them all right. That has opened my eyes really to how they are, and look beyond why they are like it, why they do this behaviour, and I find it really interesting.

ii. Emotional aspects of the role

Una did not want to work in a special school with children with more complex needs: ‘I don’t know if I could cope with that’. She remained committed to working in mainstream, despite the emotional demands of the job:

I’m bad enough when the year 6 go, in the year 6 assembly I howl. I have to take my tissues and when the young boy in the wheelchair went and I’d looked after him for 5 years that was just well, [looks sad] no way could I do that all the time.

Like some of the other respondents, Una also exhibited elements of a care discourse when discussing her role:

I think I’ve got a lot I’m patience with the children with behaviour problems. I don’t want to say that they are a challenge, but I like something that makes me think or try to use strategies to keep them calm. I get on with the children very well. Thinking about my own childhood when there wasn’t anything like that [behaviour problems] and also my daughters are quite privileged, but a lot of these children have issues. Where we live is not the most affluent area, and I just sometimes feel that I want to take all the children home. You get that sense that you just want to look after them. Maybe that’s the wrong attitude to have, I don’t know, but I do like the naughty children.
Despite her concerns about behaviour and the frustrations in the role, Una still wanted to work with children with SEN: ‘Sometimes at the end of the day I could pull my hair out, but I love my job, I love the children. I love my job even if they’ve driven me around the twist.’ She particularly wanted to work with children with behaviour needs, perhaps in a Pupil Referral Unit, despite recognising the difficulties in that role.

**Moira: ‘For a lot of the children, the help is not enough’**

Moira is a TA and an undergraduate student who originally came from Malaysia. She was unhappy with the isolation that children with SEN in Malaysia experienced, as SEN issues were not recognised. In Malaysia, she had organised an art club, particularly for children with EBD, which she particularly enjoyed. In the future, Moira would like to have her own special school, particularly for children with more complex needs to particularly focus on their artistic and creative skills.

i. Isolation and status

Since coming to England, Moira has worked in inclusive settings, but had experienced isolation, partly due to people’s reactions to her ethnic background:

> I communicate well with people, but then probably I speak too fast. Being Chinese, sometimes it’s very very difficult. I experienced bullying in my work place and people sort of isolate me as well. And it’s quite difficult.

ii. ‘Inclusion is good. *But* there are not enough resources’

Despite largely enjoying her work in mainstream, Moira was not convinced that inclusion was working:
I don’t think that mainstream school actually provide enough help for them. There’s not enough resources, enough help for them for the children especially. I work with teachers who have many, many years of teaching experience there is a lack of experience to help the children with special needs. Even though they try their best, they work together with their TAs to help the children, but for a lot of the children actually the help is not enough. I am the only one here, I can’t support the whole group. The TA role is quite difficult. We have to work with the whole group of children but for the individual support worker it is easier because they work one-to-one but still it’s not enough.

Moira particularly found supporting children with behaviour difficulties to be challenging:

Children who have behaviour problems, I think it’s because of the family background. I have worked with some children who have behaviour problems, and they come from broken homes. Some of their parents are not there when they go back because the parents have to work so they attend after school clubs so a lot work arises from the family background as well.

Moira described the after-school club and lunch and break time activities for children with EBD she was involved with but believed that there was not enough staff involved to support them.

iii. Role confusion: lack of training

Moira described the lack of training she experienced: ‘the TA is not trained properly to help the SEN children [sic]. I’m not very confident; I do not have the ability to help them understand.’
Despite enjoying some aspects of her work, Moira does not want to work in mainstream education:

I will work in a mainstream school if the funding is right, if the resources are right, if there are enough resources. I won’t do it unless they sort it out. It is very difficult for these special needs children, [sic] a lot of these children need help, they have not been identified or not be given enough support...I mean the SENCO is trying her best for the children but eventually its down to the school as well isn’t it?

iv. Rewards

Despite the difficulties in mainstream education, Moira found particular aspects of the role rewarding, for example when working with a child who had a problem with his fine motor skills after a stroke:

My husband has seen me working with children before and he says ‘you a different person when you are working with children’. Even though they can be noisy or naughty or whatever, they achieve something when you help them, they achieve and the feeling is... you can’t explain it.

v. Problems with collaboration

Like the other respondents, Moira also had problems when collaborating with teachers and outside agencies. Teachers were sometimes negative and uncooperative about including children with SEN, and outside agency support was difficult to access. Moira ended up being ‘velcro’d’ to a child with high support needs:

[…]So he’s always with me, by my side, and sometimes I can’t help other children because of him. I don’t mind because
eventually he was able to draw a circle and things like that, but then the rest of the other children suffered.

She believed that mainstream teachers were too focussed on the National Curriculum at the expense of meeting the needs of children with SEN. In contrast, teachers in special schools were different:

It is entirely different to the teachers in the mainstream school. They have more empathy and they are more tolerant as well. They are more patient because their whole teaching is for the children.

She believed that it was important for staff to have empathy with children, and was very critical of those who didn’t. She also believed that working in SEN was not something to drift into, but something one must have a vocation for.

Discussion

TAs are seen as central to the successful operation of inclusion within schools. The illustrations show that working in SEN is partly characterised by contradictions, tensions and ambiguity about how inclusion is operating in practice. Previous research on trainee teachers has similarly found both commonality and difference in experiences of inclusion (Pearson, 2009).

On the whole, TAs felt ambivalent about inclusion. Most respondents were supportive of inclusion in principle, but were less certain about how it worked in practice, expressing reservations about inclusion in the same way as respondents in Sikes et al.’s study (Yes, but…). Indeed, only one respondent was unreservedly committed to working in inclusive education (Jane) and even she had concerns about the knowledge and experience of staff.

In line with Sikes et al.’s study (2007), respondents’ understandings of inclusion were full of tensions. For Jill, staff had unrealistic expectations of what children with SEN should be able to do; many respondents felt that
mainstream schools could not cope with children with challenging behaviour and had negative perceptions about teachers with EBD (Avramidis et al. 2002).

In line with O’Brien and Garner’s study (2001), TAs were concerned with their roles and poor status within schools, particularly Jane, Angela, and Moira, and concerns were expressed that they were being used mainly in terms of supporting children’s’ medical needs rather than for academic support.

Devecchi and Rouse (2010) analysed positive examples of collaboration in relationships with staff. This study, however, did not find such positive examples and respondents were almost wholly negative about their relationships with teachers and fellow TAs. There were particular tensions between TAs and ‘ineffective’ SENCOs and between TAs and teachers that did not have adequate training, or who had less positive attitudes towards inclusion (Avramidis et al. 2002). There were also emerging tensions within groups of TAs (see also Burgess and Shelton Mayes 2009). It is difficult to know if these negative relationships reflect the pressures of working in London (Mackenzie 2009 in Ang et al. 2009) or if they reflect wider tensions within the workforce, or if they are just particular to these respondents and their schools.

TAs tended to discuss children with SEN in terms of a ‘caring’ discourse (Avramidis 2000) and often talked about ‘looking after’ and ‘caring’ for the children that they supported. ‘Caring’ and ‘love’ for children was seen to be a major part of a TA and teachers’ role and they were particularly critical of those who were seen not to ‘care’. TAs also almost uniformly used a more medicalised, category approach to discussion children with SEN with expressions such as ‘special needs children’ being common, and children being discussed in category terms (such as ADHD, dyslexia, Down’s syndrome and EBD) (see Pearson 2009).

All respondents either had personal experience of SEN in their own family (see also Cole 2004) or had early work experienced that influenced their
decision to work with children with SEN. It is possible that their adoption of ‘caring’ and ‘medicalised’ discourses are a result of growing up with children or siblings with SEN and experiencing them as the recipients of medical support, diagnosis and intervention. Many saw their role in terms of one-to-one support for particular pupils (although two respondents (Jane and Moira) were ambivalent about this) and it could be argued that this way of working added to their more medicalised, individualised view of SEN and disability (Jordan and Stanovich 2003). Perhaps TA’s partial adherence to a medical model of disability had lead them to be less positive about inclusion, and most believed that special education would be most appropriate for some pupils (as above, only Jane remained totally supportive of mainstream education).

TAs also tended to see their work in somewhat stereotypical ways, in that ‘caring’ was seen as the preserve of women with men being more suited to working with children with EBD. Although some respondents expressed ambivalence about this and some disquiet that SEN was seen as the preserve of women, many accepted unquestionably that SEN was naturally a very female-dominated profession.

Conclusion

Devecchi and Rouse highlighted examples of positive collaboration between teachers and TAs (2010). Although this study had a different focus, it did not find the same examples of positive collaboration. Indeed, relationships between TAs and teachers in the study were full of tensions, misunderstandings and even antagonism. All of the TAs remained committed to working with children with SEN, but they experienced ambiguities and conflicts around inclusion, and only one remained totally committed to working in mainstream education. However, as the sample was mainly London-based, this may reflect some of the difficulties of working in London schools and the tensions that result. It is therefore important to avoid generalisations from this sample. The negative perceptions of teachers that appear to be held by TAs may reflect the pressures that TAs and teachers are under, working in more complex and changing environments (Mackenzie 2009 in Ang et al. 2009).
TAs also appear to hold a medicalised and individualised ‘category’ approach to children with SEN, particularly reflected in their view of language and their view of the importance of special education and individualised, one-to-one support for children. This appears to demonstrate an ambiguity towards inclusion (‘yes, but…’). In a time of perhaps changing policy on inclusion, TA training needs to take a different approach to looking at the role of the TA in a whole-school context as their role does appear to be moving away (in policy terms) from a one-to-one approach to support. Schools could examine how to promote a more collaborative approach (Devecchi and Rouse 2010); policy and schools needs to value the role more; and perhaps training needs to be re-visited.

The study also highlights that the impact of inclusive policy should not be measured solely in terms of policy outcomes but also on the ways it impacts on TAs in personal, subjective and emotional ways. If inclusion is to be successful, the ambivalence that TAs feel about the policy and practice needs to be explored further, which therefore means addressing directly some of the issues that lead to this ambivalence. It is hoped that the forthcoming Green Paper will address these issues (DfE 2010).

**References**


32


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