

Discuss the role of the Teaching Assistant as a provider of pastoral care to students, making reference to relevant literature and drawing on your own experiences.

In this busy, complex, changing world, with differing personal experiences, it can make coping difficult for young people if they don't always have the right resources to help them. Feeling embarrassed, ashamed to talk to family members or not having the attention of a listening adult within the home/care setting, the responsibility falls to schools to fill this need. With little time for teaching staff to build relationships and support students emotional well-being, this task is often allocated to the Teaching Assistants. The introduction of TA positions in schools were primarily taken up by mothers wishing to return to work, whilst allowing them to still care for their own families. However, over the years, the role has evolved and what was once regarded as a job, should now be viewed as a specialised career. There are now vast differences in what is expected from TA's within their settings and as to how they are utilised. Unlike teaching staff with very clear directives and expectations, TA's can often be seen taking on several roles on an extremely full timetable. As stated by Marilyn Nathan, the advantages of non-teaching staff in a pastoral care role are their availability to deal with incidents immediately after they occur, leaving the teacher in place with no disruption to the teaching of the class. It can also improve engagement with families that can be hard to reach for many reasons, such as dislike of the authoritative teacher stereotype and past personal experiences. During the many daily duties that TA's carry out, there are opportunities for students to approach and ask for help. Breakfast club, break/lunch duty, interventions, 1:1 and after school clubs provide students with reliably placed and accessible staff. These periods of social interaction are an ideal time to get to know students on a more personal level. Who they like to play with, in groups or individually and what they like to play? There is more opportunity for conversations around their favourite topics and pastimes, giving insight into their individual world. When next you see them, ask about their dog Norman or if that update on the latest video game was as good as they hoped, showing you listened and cared enough to ask. This type of interaction is part of the "emotional currency" that Paul Dix refers to. Banking these moments for a time that requires the TA to cash them in, in order to avert a crisis or halt an angry situation.

With less need to focus on levels, data drop downs or syllabus completion, TA's have more time to focus on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. It has never been more necessary than during 2020's Covid-19 pandemic, that students' physiological needs are being met. It is often the keen, watchful eye of a TA that notices a change in a child's behaviour, hygiene or eating habits. Certainly, this becomes more difficult to address in older secondary aged students, when children naturally become more secretive amongst adults. Taking the time to ascertain whether a child has eaten something that day, could reveal potential issues. Financial hardship, neglect, fear of using a busy canteen or simply not having a friend to sit by during lunch. If a child's needs are not being met at the first stage of the hierarchy, then they may fail to reach their full potential and feel self-fulfilment in the time to come. How to address the psychological needs of a student is complex question, yet it has a simple answer, according to Rogers (n.d) :

When the other person is hurting, confused, troubled, anxious, alienated, terrified; or when he or she is doubtful of self-worth, uncertain as to identity, then understanding is called for. The gentle and sensitive companionship of an empathic stance.... provides illumination and healing.

Unknowingly, TA's have been applying Carl Rogers' core conditions in their approach to pastoral care for many years. With an empathic reaction to their plight, the student feels validated and, in some instances, heard for the first time. Students can often be heard saying that TA's are their favourite members of staff. This is due to the congruence shown to them by TA's, knowing that TA's genuinely care about their well-being and want them to be happy, ambitious, capable learners. This is also outlined in the New Welsh Curriculum. It states under its four purposes that children "will be healthy confident individuals who are building their mental and emotional well-being and are ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society". For this to happen there must also be un-conditional positive regard. For a student to know that even though they may have displayed some negative behaviour or thoughts, that there is one member of staff that will still greet them the following day with a smile, proceeding, regardless of possible past misdemeanours. It is imperative that a young person does not feel judged, or that a grudge is held, or the pastoral relationship will inevitably suffer.

In 2001, Sheila Burton developed the ELSA (Emotional and Literacy Support Assistant) initiative within her position as Educational Psychologist in Southampton. Catering to students' emotional needs within the schools means, using individual support programmes, TA's began what is now a successful intervention across many schools in the UK. Trained by experienced Educational Psychologists, with professional supervision, that ensures the best practise for staff and students alike, TA's are awarded the title of ELSA. Under strict conditions that they are working regularly with their settings and attending half termly supervision sessions, TA's are gaining valuable skills and recognition for the pastoral care they are giving. Working on a 1:1 or group basis, there is often a long waiting list of children needing to access this specialised, tailored attention from TA's. ELSA sessions do not occur on an ad-hoc basis, these meetings are allocated at a scheduled time, convenient to both pupil and TA alike. Depending on the setting, the TA should have access to a designated room free from interruptions, for open disclosure. This area will also be necessary for the TA to plan the intervention, preparing tailor made sessions requires careful thought and time. These will have been agreed to in a contract signed by a senior member of staff at the end of the ELSA's training. In signing this contract, the setting agrees to key stipulations in order for the ELSA sessions to be a success. A suitably available space to work in, a budget for resources, regular opportunities to implement ELSA program, planning time and agreeing to release the TA for the afore mentioned supervisory sessions half termly. Having access to a venue free from interruption, for open disclosure and privacy is a must. Knowing that they have the undivided attention of a trusted adult in a safe space, reinforces to young people that they are important, valued and heard. During the first ELSA session, it is quite often common for a contract to be drawn up between the TA and student. Including reference to confidentiality, safeguarding and expectations of how each will behave during their time together.

Egan states that “The contract need neither be too detailed nor too rigid” and this is true of verbal and written contracts. This forms an important part of ELSA group work and is often the intended target of a student's social interaction. Knowing that there are unspoken codes of conduct and that they differ from person to person and within groups. These implicit and explicit contracts can be considered more difficult given the digital age we now live in and navigating them as a developing young person, needs careful guidance. There is no set script for these sessions, letting the student steer the direction and conversation without pressure. The aims of the ELSA sessions are decided usually by the ALNCo, that is not to say that the students have no say in it, in fact, students should be encouraged to set their own goals. In a blend of Carl Rogers and Gerard Egan's theories, with the help of an empathic listener, aiding the exploration of their feelings, the student's participation in planning and implementing the changes needed for progression is a positive combination. With a suggested timeframe of 6 sessions, students are released from the ELSA programme. Although this differs depending on the individual, there is an open-door policy should the student ever feel the need to access help. In some situations, for instance the transition from primary to secondary school, ELSA's double up as a point of contact for students identified through multi-agency meetings prior to them attending. Due to the regularity of the scheduled ELSA sessions and the counselling style skills, communication is enhanced, leading to a smoother transition for the student.

In essence, the role of the TA in pastoral care to students is varied and invaluable. From the welcoming off the school bus, to the personalised greeting in the corridor, the scheduled interventions and most importantly the reliance of the emergency snack drawer when lunches have been forgotten. Maybe it is time for a change of title, Teaching Assistant hardly seems befitting to someone who in “7 minutes of empathic listening can grow a neural pathway” in a child, stated Harper (2020).

1,533 words.

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