

An exploration of the features of effective collaboration between teachers and teaching assistants in secondary schools

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This article explores notions of support and collaboration between teachers and teaching assistants (TAs) in two secondary schools in England. In particular it reviews how team members created opportunities and established collaborative practices aimed at including each other in the task of providing support for children who are described as having difficulties in learning. The data from the ethnographic study, which were collected through a variety of methods and were generated with the support and participation of teachers, heads of departments, special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) and teaching assistants, suggest that the successful inclusion of students is dependent on how schools as organisations and communities are able to support the inclusion of adults as well.

Key words: inclusion, teamwork, teaching assistants, collaboration, secondary education.

Introduction

This article explores notions of support and collaboration between teachers and teaching assistants (TAs) in two secondary schools in England. It takes the view that effective collaboration between teachers and TAs is pivotal to how they can plan and implement effective support for children's learning and well-being. It also argues that the effectiveness of the collaboration is not only the result of clearly defined roles and responsibilities, but also the ability of team members to respect and trust each other's knowledge, competence and experience, which may require challenging and redefining traditional lines of professional demarcation. This study is particularly relevant and timely since it responds to and articulates further the findings of Blatchford *et al.*'s (2009b) recent evaluation of TAs' deployment and impact on teaching and learning. It puts forward the case that TAs' impact on children's learning has to be assessed not only by academic achievement, but also by taking into account the nature of the support TAs receive from teachers and the school, and seeks simultaneously to explore the dynamics of their collaboration with teachers.

Much of the existing literature on teaching assistants tends to be descriptive and prescriptive, being concerned with management issues of TAs' deployment, roles, responsibilities and training needs. Yet such prescriptive formulations are based on still ongoing, inconclusive and problematic research findings. Blatchford *et al.* (2009a), for example, show how TAs' impact on children's academic achievement can actually be negative, while acknowledging that TAs can have a beneficial impact on children's emotional well-being and on reducing teachers' stress and workload.

Therefore, any discussion about TAs' supportive classroom practices entails a three-fold examination of how TAs are deployed as part of the provision available to meet the need of those children who are labelled as having special educational needs, an examination of the benefits that TAs can bring to teachers, and to teaching and learning in general, and finally an examination of how TAs are supported by teachers and the school. Such a line of inquiry is complex due to a number of interrelated and contrasting discourses which have shaped the views about inclusion and which have constructed a notion of additional support as something 'special', namely different from that which is otherwise available (Florian, 2007).

The study reported here took an innovative stance in applying an ethnographic approach to the exploration of what was 'special' about the collaboration between teachers and TAs. The analysis of the data from the two schools suggests that the successful inclusion of students is dependent on how schools as organisations and communities are also able to support the inclusion of adults. Teachers and TAs emphasised the role that collaboration plays in achieving inclusive goals. In this sense, collaboration is not only seen as a means, but most importantly as the end through which adults are included as well. Collaboration, as a process by which people work co-operatively together to accomplish a task, or series of tasks, of benefit to one or more people by reaching a mutual understanding of how to solve problems and resolve complex ethical and practical dilemmas, becomes a pivotal factor in determining the quality of the working relationship between the adults.

The findings of the study validate a number of previous studies, which have stressed the importance of a whole

school approach to inclusion and of collaboration as central in sustaining the inclusion project (Ainscow, 1991; Rouse and Florian, 1996; Giangreco, 1997; Lipsky and Gartner, 1997; Kugelmass, 2001). In particular the findings validate, as Carrington (1999) suggests, the importance of creating a school culture and ethos that builds a collective sense of belonging and participation. The quality of the inclusive experience therefore needs to be evaluated not only in terms of placement or academic achievement of students but also in broader terms of collective well-being.

The aim of this article is to unravel what is 'special' about teachers and TAs collaborating to support each other. The article is divided into four sections. The first will locate the topic of collaboration within the major policy and educational changes in England over the last 20 years. The second will introduce the two schools and focus on their organisational dynamics, while the third section will disclose how the four teams that took part in the study collaborated and supported each other. The final section will offer a discussion on what was 'special' about the way in which the teachers and TAs collaborated.

The educational and political context

Since the publication of the Warnock Report (DfES, 1978), which paved the way for the integration and then inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream schools, a number of national and international policies, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), have reaffirmed the right of all children to have access to education and to be educated with their peers. In the English context, this right has been affirmed by a series of education acts and government policy guidelines such as the 1981 Education Act, the Green Paper *Excellence for All* (DfEE, 1997), the *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice* (DfES, 2001) and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (HMSO, 2001). Parallel to the need to create opportunities for physical inclusion, there has been an interest in providing meaningful and qualitatively relevant personal and academic participation of all children in the life of the school enshrined in the document *Removing Barriers to Achievement* (DfES, 2004).

At the same time different and markedly contrasting discourses have set boundaries around the implementation of inclusive practices, and have, as a consequence, created conflicts of interests and practical ethical dilemmas for teachers and other professionals. One such discourse has been the preoccupation with raising academic standards and with ensuring that schools are able to change and improve. The increase in the number of TAs and development of their roles and responsibilities has to be located in the structural and systemic changes begun in the 1980s. It was the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher that attempted to tackle the perceived poor performance of schools with the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) (DfES, 1988). The Act

introduced parental choice, local management of schools (LMS), the National Curriculum and, most controversially, the establishment of a national framework for assessing children's performance with tests at ages 7, 11, 14 and 16, the results of which were published in national and local league tables. As Rouse (Rouse and McLaughlin, 2007, p. 87) points out, while the framework was aimed at raising standards and making the teachers accountable, 'the involvement of children who experience difficulties in learning was not considered'. Despite this, the idea of both a common curriculum and national standards was cast in the overall principle that all children should be entitled to a broad, balanced and relevant curriculum as stated in the Dearing Report (Dearing, 1994). The Labour government, elected in 1997, continued with the same overall policy, and tackled underperformance by returning to the basics of literacy and numeracy while simultaneously redefining the very notion of inclusion (Jayal, 2009).

TAs have been seen as a solution to both educational challenges. According to the latest Department for Children, Schools and Families statistics (DCSF, 2009) there are 178,900 full-time-equivalent TAs employed in English mainstream and special schools, a marked increase from the 70,300 employed ten years before (DfES, 1997). For several reasons, including the use of different job titles and the fact that the DCSF calculates their number on a full-time equivalent scale rather than on the part-time basis on which the vast majority of TAs work, the number is undoubtedly much higher. In England recent legislation aimed at reducing teachers' workload (DfES, 2003) has invested TAs with roles and responsibilities that had previously been the remit of teachers. This has resulted in a debate about the roles, responsibilities and professional identity both of teachers and of TAs. While Watkinson (2002a, b) views such changes as positive because they recognise the professionalism of well-trained and competent TAs, others, such as Thompson (2006), Wilkinson (2005) and Yarker (2005), have seen such changes as further proof of the de-professionalisation of teachers' work. Framed within markedly managerial discourses emblemised by the modernisation of the school workforce in general which view teachers as managers (Tyrer *et al.*, 2004) and TAs as apprentices or 'servants' (Quicke, 2003), this view of collaboration contrasts with its conceptualisation as dependent on democratic and participatory principles, as Griffiths (1998), Fetterman (1993) and Forbes (2003, 2006) suggest.

In practice, Balshaw (1999, p. 3) points out that defining the roles and responsibilities of TAs is complex because of:

- the wide-ranging nature of their work;
- the ways in which they are expected to function; and
- the complex nature of their management and support.

Hence, TAs play a fundamental, although still misunderstood and poorly researched, role in supporting the school, the children, the teachers and the curriculum. It is within this

context that their collaboration with classroom teachers becomes of pivotal importance.

The methodological and conceptual context

Much research on teachers and TAs working together has so far centred on reporting and describing what teachers and TAs do, what their roles are and how they can be managed (Balshaw and Farrell, 2002). Within a general functionalist and managerial paradigm, TAs have been viewed as means or resources as part of the overall provision for students with special needs (Cremin *et al.*, 2003). There is also research that has focused on the lived experiences of TAs, but mainly from a phenomenological and experiential point of view (O'Brien and Garner, 2001). While more recent research has highlighted the fact that TAs often share with teachers a common pedagogical understanding of teaching practices (Watkinson, 2002a), and like teachers they are able to reflect on their practical choices (Collins and Simco, 2006), not enough attention has been paid to a conceptualisation of how their knowledge impacts on the nature of collaboration.

Because the literature on school organisation and inclusion stresses the importance of school culture and school ethos (Prosser, 1999), the focus of the ethnographic study was not only on what people did to support each other, but above all in understanding how they justified their actions and practices, and how this justification was validated within the educational environment in which they worked. The study was conducted within a broad critical ethnographic approach, which sought to involve the participants in discussing and reflecting on their inclusive and collaborative practices. Its aim was that of comparing, as Carspecken (1996) suggests, collaborative classroom practices with school practices and policies so as to describe and reflect on the system dynamics and cultural factors that influenced effective teamwork. By interrelating the macro-system of policy, the meso-system of school organisation and the micro-system of daily classroom activities, the study aimed to answer the following questions:

- How do teachers and TAs plan, deliver and evaluate their practice?
- How do they think their collaboration supports the inclusion of children with learning difficulties?
- What impact do the school organisation, management and ethos have on the way in which they can support each other and the inclusion of all children?
- How do political and educational discourses influence collaboration and inclusive practices?

Data were collected and generated through the use of participants' and non-participants' structured and ethnographic observations of TAs and teachers' supportive practices across the school and a more in-depth focus on four teams; semi-structured and unstructured ethnographic interviews with TAs, teachers and special needs professionals; questionnaires to TAs and teachers; and the analysis of school

policy documents. The data analysis looked for patterns of supportive and collaborative practices among the teams and in relation to the schools' overall provision for students with difficulties in learning. The patterns and themes that resulted from the analysis were then compared within the same school and across the two schools. The focus of the research was both that of understanding the challenges of working effectively together and that of focusing on successful teams in order to explore the features of effective collaboration.

Four teams took part in a more in-depth exploration of the features of effective collaboration. Each team was observed for two consecutive lessons in addition to more general and less structured observations on other occasions during fieldwork; team members were then interviewed and also responded to a whole school questionnaire. The two consecutive structured classroom observations recorded teachers' and TAs' activities, their time and duration. The participants were then given a sheet detailing the activities observed and a narrative account. To aid triangulation and reliability, teachers and TAs were both invited to comment on the observation reports prior to the semi-structured interview. The exercise was a useful tool in recalling events, and in building confidence and openness between participants and researchers, but also in improving the authenticity of the data. The disclosure of how they supported each other will begin with looking at how teachers were supported.

Introducing the schools and the teams

Because, as Griffiths (1998) points out, collaboration as human interaction needs to be studied in the particular environment in which it takes place, the disclosure of how team members supported each other will begin with describing the two schools and their provision for children and adults.

School A

School A is a rural, secondary comprehensive school for students aged between 11 and 19. Before that it had been a selective, boys only, grammar school. The school's examination results have been consistently above the national average. At the time of data collection, there were around 10% of children labelled as having special educational needs, of whom 1% had a Statement of Special Educational Needs that entitled the child to 1:1 support, while the others were on various stages of the *SEN Code of Practice* (DfES, 2001).

The school's mission statement promoted both academic excellence and inclusion. Support for inclusion was the responsibility of the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) and the TAs, who supported the children either on a 1:1 basis or as general classroom support where needed. Consistent with national patterns, the number of TAs increased dramatically from 4 to 15 and then to 20 during the time of fieldwork.

School B

School B is a rural secondary comprehensive designated as a 'village college', namely a school that reflects a vision of community-based, lifelong and informal learning. At the time of the research it had around 1,200 students, 10% of whom were described as having special educational needs. The school had a history of collaborative practice and it was also a training school responsible for supporting other schools. On average between 80% and 85% of children achieved A–C in GCSE exams and 100% of children, irrespective of their learning needs, were entered for GCSE and achieved a grade between A and G. As such, the school was, at the time, one of the highest-achieving state schools in the country. The TA team comprised over 20 TAs with varying responsibilities and job titles.

Both schools had a similar way of meeting the needs of children with disabilities or difficulties in learning which broadly followed government guidelines in terms of identification and assessment, managing provision, a graduated response and evaluation through the participation of parents and pupils. While provision included an array of measures, the deployment of TAs was pivotal. The SENCOs in each school had overall management responsibilities for TAs' deployment, while the teachers were responsible for deploying the TAs in their classrooms. While classroom deployment varied, TAs were observed working closely with individual children, with small groups and, in the teams observed, by alternating support with the teachers.

However, such similarities were based on different organisational cultures. Whereas in school A the SENCO did not have any teaching responsibilities and managed the learning support department almost single-handedly, in school B the SENCO worked part-time as an English teacher and was helped by two assistant SENCOs, both with part-time teaching duties, and two TAs with administrative duties. In school B some TAs were also formally attached to the Maths department, while in school A such attachment was informal and based on TAs' preferences to work with specific teachers or children, or likes and dislikes of particular subjects. In both schools, the deployment of TAs was a complex activity that required taking into account TAs' hours of work, their knowledge, interest and experience, school timetable, and last but not least the children's needs and support plans. How TAs were deployed and perceived by teachers was also linked to how the provision for children with special needs was included in the fabric of the school.

In school A, for example, the learning support department occupied two small rooms at the top of one of the oldest buildings. Only TAs and children used these rooms, while teachers visited only when they required the assistance of the SENCO. Likewise, TAs tended to have their breaks and lunches in the department and rarely joined the teachers in the staffroom. When they did, they sat at a table in a corner and rarely mixed and talked with the teachers. Besides this lack of informal opportunities for teachers and TAs to meet,

there was also a lack of structured formal opportunities, such as joint training opportunities or regular liaison meetings. During the time of fieldwork a liaison system had been trialled, but had failed on the ground that there was not enough time for it.

While, on the whole, the students were well looked after, TAs' support was seen as additional to what the teachers could otherwise provide given limited time and knowledge resources. The responses from a questionnaire distributed to teachers and TAs showed that teachers and TAs complained about a lack of time and poor collaboration. Those teams that worked effectively together, including the one that took part in the research, acknowledged that generally effective collaboration was more the result of being comfortable with working with particular people than a concerted school effort.

School B was different. In school B, the department for learning support, called 'the Centre', was located in the heart of the school, on the ground floor, easily reachable for all teachers. It consisted of a very spacious and bright central room surrounded by four smaller rooms, one of which was the SENCO's office. The other three rooms were used for small group teaching, private talks with parents, teachers or other professionals, or for children when they needed a quiet place. In the middle of the main room there was a round table big enough for ten people. Unlike school A, the Centre was a busy place throughout the day, especially so during lunch when it was bustling with TAs, teachers and children, some of whom had special needs, and some who just came to 'chill out'. Teachers, TAs and children had lunch together, but TAs were also welcome in the staffroom.

Physical spaces were not the only ones that could demarcate boundaries between teachers and TAs. In the responses to the questionnaire and in interviews TAs emphasised training and induction as pivotal not only to their professional ability to support the children in their care, but also to their sense of belonging to the school. Opportunities to train and, most importantly, to use the knowledge acquired were seen by TAs as ways to become visible and breach the gap between them and the teachers. Both schools regarded the professional development of teachers and TAs highly. For the TAs it was mainly through a system of in-school training and external courses, while teachers had more opportunities for courses leading to a qualification.

In school A, training was planned on the basis of TAs' interests and, most of all, on whether there was an immediate need for it. Since the TAs' workforce was less stable, the SENCO acknowledged that long-term training of TAs was not cost-effective. Induction was also patchy and not formally organised. In school B, on the other hand, training needs were discussed partly during the year, but mostly ahead of time so as to plan provision for new children. The school also worked closely with a neighbouring special school and training opportunities were planned for both

schools. Unlike in school A, TAs in school B were also responsible for the induction of new TAs and for training the other TAs and the teachers. Partly, the success of the training was dependent on the fact that school B devolved part of its overall training budget to pay TAs while undertaking training if this took place during a day when they were not expected to work. Neither of the two schools employed higher level teaching assistants (HLTAs) or had any TA who was interested in acquiring HLTA status because neither school had sufficient budgets to meet the increased salary costs.

Training was only one way in which knowledge was acquired and distributed within the school, and only one example of how TAs were included in the process. In school A, for example, knowledge was distributed vertically at formal meetings in which TAs were not included unless it was a special education department meeting. TAs and teachers occupied different knowledge spaces with little opportunity for cross-fertilisation. In school B, on the other hand, knowledge was part of a collective sharing which took place both vertically and horizontally, between and across people and departments. Most importantly, TAs were seen as having relevant and necessary knowledge, and they were enabled to contribute to the school approach to providing resources for inclusion and were responsible for providing informal up-to-date knowledge to teachers. Of course, not all TAs took part in this activity, but including them in the process of knowledge acquisition, use and distribution was beneficial, as TAs remarked, in improving their status and self-esteem. It was also beneficial to the teachers because they had collaborators who could support them in a variety of ways. Ultimately, it was beneficial to the children as well.

The description of how the two schools supported their TAs shows the importance of breaking down physical and knowledge boundaries. While school A was not entirely successful in doing so, teachers and TAs' responses in interviews and questionnaires stressed the importance of access, distribution and knowledge in fostering TAs' participation and effective team collaboration.

The teams

After an initial whole school exploratory phase, the study focused on understanding the features of effective collaboration. Based on interviews and classroom observations four different teams were selected for the second phase of the research in which initial impressionistic classroom observations were followed by event sampling observations and semi-structured interviews. Since generating data on working relationships could be unsettling and could undermine the support adults could provide to the children, participation was voluntary. Thus only one team in school A and three in school B took part.

Two teams were in modern foreign languages, one in science and one in maths. The teams in science and maths

comprised two TAs. In all four cases, the participants were women in their late 30s and mid-40s who had worked together for a year or longer. Being in secondary schools, the TAs also supported a range of students with varying disabilities and/or learning difficulties, and teachers across all subjects and years. This means that both the teachers and the TAs belonged to a number of teams, some consistently working together and others supporting each other in a more erratic manner. The four teams in the study had a more consistent working pattern, based either on TAs' expertise in the subject – one TA had a BA in foreign languages, while the other was bilingual – or on formal attachment to departments. While the teams might not be fully representative of general patterns, it is worth noting that one reason why their collaboration was effective resides both in TAs' knowledge of the subject and in systematic and continuous opportunity to work together.

Teachers and TAs working together to support each other

Disentangling how teachers and TAs supported each other was a complex enterprise. It became clear through the analysis of the data collected in the first general phase that classroom collaboration was closely dependent on whole school systems of staff support, participation, training and induction. In order to gain an understanding of factual working relationships, the semi-structured interviews used the observations notes to focus the discussion on actual practices rather than on how they *wished* to be supported. In order to explore the extent of agreement between teachers and their TAs, each participant was asked to elaborate both on how they supported the other and how their team members supported them.

Support for the teachers

Generally speaking, the items in the table show that supporting the teachers involved a number of activities, of which some were related to supporting the children's learning, some related to supporting teaching and some that had more to do with supporting the teacher as the adult professionally in charge of the whole class, but also as a person. Table 1 reports in schematic form how teachers were supported both from their perspective and from the perspective of the TAs who worked with them.

In all four teams, teachers felt that TAs supported them by sharing knowledge. This could be specific knowledge about the child's emotional state, or by keeping them up to date with other developments. This was a very important function since teachers in secondary schools do not have daily contact with the children. TAs were also supportive when they shared knowledge of resources, or devised specific resources by differentiating the topic by content, task or form of assessment. While teachers were positive about the

Table 1. How TAs supported the teachers from the TAs' and teachers' perspectives

TAs' perspective

- Sharing knowledge of the children, resources and strategies
- Taking pressure off the teacher
- Allowing teachers to teach the whole class
- Monitoring and managing children's behaviour
- Ongoing feedback
- Alerting teachers to child's difficulties or problems
- Not undermining the teacher
- Being an extra pair of eyes
- Being approachable
- Knowing about teacher's work and workload
- Keeping children on task
- Backing teacher up
- Empathise with the teacher
- Differentiating the curriculum
- Respecting the teacher
- Spotting the children who need extra help
- Supporting the whole class
- Planning with the teacher
- Doing little jobs

Teachers' perspective

- Sharing knowledge of the children, resources and strategies
- Ongoing feedback
- Carrying out teacher's planning
- Ongoing child assessment
- Supplementing differentiated strategies
- Making instruction become sharper
- Managing child's behaviour
- Allowing teachers to teach the whole class
- Enabling the teacher to monitor child's learning and progress
- Not creating a barrier between the child and the teacher
- Being autonomous
- Being mobile
- Being a huge relief
- Keeping lesson record
- Working in partnership
- Taking the initiative
- Taking pressure off the teacher
- Adding a different perspective

pedagogical support the children received from their TAs, they also felt a sense of guilt for not being able to do more or for paying more personalised attention to the children. In school B, the sense of guilt was reduced by the fact that TAs had a more active role within the school. Proof of their higher status was the fact that teachers referred to them as professional and called them teachers when talking to the children. Teachers emphasised TAs' ability and willingness to share important and relevant knowledge as pivotal to the effectiveness of the collaboration.

While supporting individual students was the main reason for having TAs in the classroom, both teachers and TAs agreed that TAs also helped the teacher to teach the whole class. They did this by ensuring that all the children were on task and were behaving appropriately. In this case TAs were an extra pair of eyes and their role was that of monitoring the children's progress and alerting the teacher to any problems the children might have had in completing the task or understanding instructions. On a number of occasions teachers were observed to act upon the TAs' suggestions.

Whole class supportive practices were achieved by allowing TAs to circulate freely in the classroom. As a result, teachers and TAs were observed exchanging roles and responsibility

for the children, thus ensuring that students with difficulties in learning were supported by the TAs as well as by the teacher. TAs were therefore rarely seen sitting next to the same child for the whole lesson, and even when this took place the TA was also responsible for attending to the other children who were sitting at the same table. Besides being functional to the need of supporting all the students, sharing the space of the classroom is also indicative of the fact that both adults trusted and respected each other. This is because the classroom is traditionally associated with the teacher's authoritative space and sharing it was a way of fostering autonomy and sense of self-esteem. More research is needed to capture the complex dynamics of power, authority and status within the relationship. Both TAs and teachers agreed that TAs supported teachers' authority by reinforcing the behavioural rules and expectations the teacher had set, and also by taking into account the teacher's personal needs including a working knowledge of teachers' workload and pressures.

Teachers also stressed that having TAs in the classroom made their instructional techniques sharper and more focused. Teachers also appreciated TAs' support because TAs were a '*huge relief*' and they could help in '*taking the pressure off*'. These last two items are, in my view, those that constitute a link between supporting the teacher in the role of the person who facilitates learning and supporting the teacher as 'a' person with whom TAs empathise. The emotional and personal support aspect of TAs' work in relation to teachers does not figure widely in research, nor is it part of TAs' overall roles and responsibilities. Yet the human aspect of the collaboration was pivotal in building a relationship in which the presence of a TA did not undermine the teacher's professional authority and competence.

Support for the teaching assistants

Much of what teachers did to support the TAs was similar to what TAs did to support teachers. So both teachers and TAs stated that supporting TAs involved sharing knowledge, skills and understanding. Table 2 reports how TAs and teachers portrayed their practice of support with regard to helping TAs.

On the whole the teachers reiterated the need for TAs to have access to relevant knowledge, and to participate in the decision-making process. The mutual agreement between team members revolves around the common goal of supporting the children's academic and emotional well-being. This required teachers sharing the lesson plan in advance, being clear in their instructions about the lesson and learning objectives and the tasks the children were to be set, and having clear and consistent behaviour rules. Openly acknowledging to the children TAs' presence, skills and support was highly appreciated by TAs who claimed that this improved their status and authority with the children. Being openly acknowledged and respected enabled them to be more authoritative with the children, to manage the chil-

Table 2. Teachers supporting TAs from the TAs' and teachers' perspectives

TAs' perspective

- Praising TAs
- Asking for TAs' opinion
- Supplying schemes of work
- Discussing pupils and lessons regularly
- Encouraging TAs
- Valuing TAs' opinion
- Sharing lesson plans
- Seeking ongoing feedback
- Allowing TAs to be mobile
- Acknowledging TAs' knowledge, skills and expertise
- Acknowledging their presence
- Acknowledging their support
- Including TAs as members of staff
- Being approachable
- Giving TAs freedom of judgement, responsibility and autonomy
- Being clear in their exposition and instruction
- Providing resources
- Being consistent with behavioural rules
- Suggesting strategies
- Listening to TAs' concerns
- Not undermining TAs in front of the children
- Backing TAs up

Teachers' perspective

- Acknowledging TAs' skills, knowledge and expertise
- Acknowledging their presence
- Acknowledging their support
- Sharing lesson plan
- Being approachable
- Valuing TAs
- Solving problems together
- Being clear in exposition and instruction
- Giving TAs freedom of judgement, responsibility and autonomy
- Briefing them at the beginning of the lesson
- Helping TAs when they need emotional support

dren's behaviour, to keep them on task and to support their learning. TAs' autonomy of action and freedom of judgement, reciprocal trust and respect for each other as both professionals and persons were essential features of effective collaboration.

In conclusion, teachers and TAs supported each other in a complex and varied way. In their accounts they stressed the importance of developing and sustaining both a functional and a personal dimension of collaboration. The acquisition and sharing of knowledge was central to sustaining collaboration as a means to support each other and the children. Simultaneously, the collective effort to build knowledge enabled them to treat each other with authority and autonomy. In achieving this they were helped by the schools' training practices and organisational systems. However, the school input was better integrated and developed in school B. In school A, effective collaboration was more on an individual team basis. Irrespective of this difference, all four teams talked about the features of effective collaboration in very similar ways.

How to conceive support and collaboration

The analysis of classroom observations and post-observation interviews resulted in a long and detailed list of

ways in which the adults worked together. According to the participants the success of their collaboration was based on the following:

- sharing knowledge, skills, resources and ideas useful to support individual children and the whole class;
- knowing each other's teaching strategies and classroom behaviour management;
- having clear but also flexible roles and responsibilities;
- being professional and competent;
- being knowledgeable of the subject;
- being approachable;
- being respectful of each other; and
- being and enabling others to be autonomous, independent, and self-determined.

The items on the list show that teachers and TAs formulated the benefits of collaboration partly in functional terms directly linked to the need to support teaching and learning, and partly, as Fielding (2000) remarks, in terms of fostering a personal dimension of reciprocal care, respect and trust. Being part of a collaborative team also created a mutual space for reflecting on practice, during practice and after practice. The knowledge that decisions were taken collegially through mutual discussion and understanding highlights the fact that collaborative teams share responsibility for action. Collaboration enabled them to *be* and *become*, by taking into account their personal needs for autonomy, independence and reciprocity.

More systematically, the benefits of being collaborative and supportive can be summarised by using Huxman and Vangen's (2005) theory of collaborative advantage in which they listed the benefits of collaboration as follows:

- access to resources;
- shared risks and shared successes;
- efficiency and effectiveness;
- co-ordination and seamlessness;
- learning; and
- the moral imperative (p. 6).

If the list above portrays teachers and TAs' accounts and practices, what was innovative in the way they managed to sustain their collaboration was the fact that they challenged traditional views about professional roles, responsibility and status. So while the teacher remained fully in charge of whole class teaching and was ultimately responsible for all the students, TAs were allowed the autonomy necessary to prepare resources, differentiate tasks and ultimately be part of the decision-making process. By acknowledging each other as knowledgeable and competent, the team members could establish a system by which respective knowledge and authority did not challenge each other's sense of professional self-esteem, but rather reinforced it. Finding a balance between knowledge and power rather than following strictly defined roles and responsibilities seemed to be most relevant to the teams.

Drawing from the data, the collaborative process can be defined by three interrelated and mutually inclusive elements: the availability of shared resources; the establishment of practices and opportunities that foster, encourage and sustain the process of reaching a consensual agreement; and the opportunity to act in accordance with a mutually respectful acceptance of individual free will, autonomy and determination. The views of the teachers and TAs show that while clear roles and responsibilities were important, it is better to conceive them as partly the result of ongoing collaboration. A still widely unexplored area is how teachers and TAs managed to reach a consensual agreement on how to support the children. It would be no doubt challenging to do so since TAs and teachers' collaboration develops with time and through time, and the opportunities they have to engage in a sustained dialogue are not easily found in their busy schedules. Yet the fact that the four teams achieved a sense of mutual understanding points to a need to address this gap in our knowledge.

Within the limits of the present study, it is however possible to say that the data from the study show that teachers and TAs can work effectively together and that collaboration can be of benefit not only for the students, but also for the quality of life and professional learning of the adults involved.

Conclusion

The teams in both school A and school B shared a common understanding of what was needed to support each other and work effectively together. The findings show that collaboration between teachers and TAs is beneficial both to the adults and to the children they support. While individual teams alone can achieve this, how schools deploy, train and include TAs also has an impact on what and how TAs can contribute. The study also shows that despite general concerns about TAs undermining the professional identity of teachers, when schools are able to include TAs by constructing opportunities to gain access to relevant knowledge and enabling them to participate in its production and distribution, not only the school and the students but also the TAs and the teachers benefit from a collaborative and supportive culture. Collaboration is an important means to support the inclusion of children with special educational needs. It is also a site where collaborators define their identities through the knowledge, skills and expertise they have, and by redefining their roles and status through supportive daily interactions. Collaborating, therefore, requires people to support each other with technical knowledge, but also with personal and affective knowledge to facilitate and aid the inclusion of children with learning difficulties.

However, this can be achieved only if inclusion and the people who are directly in charge of it are an integral part of the school organisation. Inclusion is not a chimera, an ideology or a costly exercise but, as the study shows, a real possibility. There is no better way to close than to quote

from Florian's (2007, p. 15) call for re-imagining how we can think of TAs:

'It is the process of providing something "additional to" or "different from" that which is "otherwise available" in school that defines special education provision. The task is not to defend what is "special" about this kind of provision but to challenge complacency about what is not "otherwise available".'

What was 'special' about the teams and school B was that through their collaboration and support they challenged the way in which they viewed each other as persons rather than a means to an end. Being collaborative and supportive built spaces for reflecting on their needs and enabled them to consider other people's viewpoints, to think about their practice, solve problems together and to find ways in which they could make a difference and re-imagine what they could do to be inclusive. Rather than being complacent about what was not available in terms of knowledge and resources, they challenged the view that TAs are marginal to the school. Rather, by including them and encouraging collaboration, TAs became an important resource 'generally available' for the benefit of all.

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