

Perceptions and reflections on the role of the teaching assistant in the classroom environment

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This literature-based article examines a range of factors directly influencing and shaping perceptions of the role of the teaching assistant within UK classrooms. Drawing directly on research gathered and analysed through three systematic literature reviews into ‘pupils’ support and academic engagement’ and other contemporary literature, the article explores the roles, relationships, expectations and training needs of those engaged in classroom support. Consideration is given to how sometimes complimentary and sometimes differing views of school managers, teachers, teaching assistants, parents and children impact on matters of role definition curriculum contribution and home/school liaison. The development of the teaching assistant role is examined through the lens of workforce reform. A framework is provided to increase understanding of the range and nature of the factors that serve to influence how classroom support is conceived and understood, and the impact this has on matters of identity construction. The research examined offers an insight into the evolutionary nature of the role of the teaching assistant.

Keywords: *teaching assistants; perceptions; support*

Introduction

Step into almost any school classroom in the United Kingdom and you are likely to see a range of individuals working with children. Teachers, teaching assistants (TAs), parents, specialised support staff and volunteers offer to varying degrees, and with different levels of expertise, educational, social care, health and pastoral support. The development of multi-agency and multi-professional working has also brought with it the demand to connect the Every Child Matters (Department for Education and

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Skills, 2003a) agenda to teaching and learning (Westcott, 2008). Set within the context of such an emerging landscape, this article focuses on the challenges TAs face as they attempt to 'carry out many jobs that were once the sole remit of the teacher' (Fraser & Meadows, 2008, p. 351).

The article makes specific use of three major systematic literature reviews into 'pupils' support and academic engagement' (Cajkler *et al.*, 2006, 2007a, 2007b). For the purposes of the research, social and academic engagement was defined as the ways in which individual students actively participate in learning. This was seen to be dependent on 'adults fostering positive relations with pupils, providing pupils with appropriate and structured educational experiences that contribute to learning, that bring about interactions with peers and teachers, or boost confidence and develop skills' (Cajkler *et al.*, 2006, p. 9). The term 'teaching assistant' was used in a generic way to include 'learning support assistants', 'classroom assistants', 'specialist teaching assistants', 'classroom assistants', 'learning mentors' and 'learning supporters', and is used in a similar way in this article. At the heart of the reviews lay the intention to explore school managers', teachers', TAs', parents' and children's perceptions of the nature, value and relevance of the classroom support offered by support staff. The author was a contributor to this work. By focusing on academic literature generated from the late 1980s, it proved possible to analyse the changing nature of classroom support and the role played by support staff in defining and shaping that support. The reviews considered literature from the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom. Other contemporary research work is also explored within this article. In presenting a systematic theme-based review of literature, the intention is to explore and reflect on current change processes and emerging pedagogical arrangements.

The context of the discussion that follows is located within wider workforce reform issues for schools within the United Kingdom. The issue of workforce reform in schools has a relatively short but increasingly significant history. A policy reform that was intended to alter the nature of the school workforce by 'freeing up' teachers and developing the roles of support staff certainly had the potential to transform what was delivered in the name of learning and teaching within both primary and secondary classrooms (Department for Education and Skills, 2003b; Estyn, 2007). Evidence of the nature of that transformation is examined below.

A brief review of official data serves to demonstrate the human resource impact of the policy change. Numbers of TAs employed within schools expanded from 61,300 in 1997 to 148,500 by 2005. The introduction of the status of 'higher level teaching assistant' was accompanied by 6872 people achieving that status in 2005 (Burgess & Mayes, 2007). Fraser and Meadows (2008) note the perception of TAs providing 'ancillary support' to the teacher appears to have been challenged through a blurring of both responsibilities and roles. At the centre of a number of remodelling activities was the desire on the part of government to 'execute some tasks more efficiently', encourage support staff to take on 'extended roles' and thereby reduce workload (Rhodes, 2006, p. 158).

The purpose of the article, then, is to use existing literature to gain a clearer understanding of the policy into practice trajectory and potential outcomes; to analyse both

overt and more subtle signs of change in order to gauge their potential significance. Such a form of analysis is influenced by the work of Ball (1994, 2008) in terms of the way it is necessary to see any debate about the development of policy into practice from a variety of political, ideological, occupational, social and personal perspectives. As Ball points out:

The general effects of policies become evident when specific aspects of change and specific sets of responses (within practice) are related together. (1994, p. 24)

Change issues and responses are examined here in relation to matters of role definition, role construction, curriculum contribution and training.

Role definition

In this section matters of role definition and clarity are considered. Clearly a significant amount of investment has been required of government in order to increase the number of TA posts. At one level this reflects a desire to strategically reconfigure classroom roles and relationships; much less thought, however, appears to have been given to what is expected of TAs, the priorities that should be attached to their work and how that work needs to unfold in practice. Ebersold (2003), for example, points to some of the fundamental tensions and difficulties faced by those working in support roles. The argument is made that a pattern of classroom-based engagement can be frequently identified that sees:

... assistants either left alone, obliged to shape for themselves their function, or placed in a relationship of subordination to the teacher without recognition of their specific skills ... (Ebersold, 2003, p. 103)

A failure to clarify the nature of the TA role and the problems associated with it emerge elsewhere in literature. For example, Collins and Simco (2006, pp. 204–205) report TAs feeling like ‘spare parts’ with teaching staff failing to utilise their skills appropriately. Role definition problems, it is claimed by TAs, can also impact on the perceptions of parents and children, with for example one TA claiming that ‘the parents don’t know whether I’m support staff or a teacher’. Rhodes (2006), for his part, points to the impact of poor supervision by senior managers, a lack of general direction and guidance and role overlap contributing to ongoing problems in this area.

In reviewing the existing work patterns of TAs it is apparent that a degree of role confusion and conflict exists when it comes to describing and analysing specific tasks and functions. Consider, for example, the contribution of TAs to inclusion (variously described as special needs support, behaviour management, integration, etc.). This aspect of work is consistently defined as central to the role of many TAs by managers, teachers and parents alike. Yet at the same time there are indications offered through research that the contribution of TAs to inclusion is not always viewed as necessarily positive (Hemmingsson *et al.*, 2003) and some research reports suggest that the attention of a TA can in fact act as a cocoon, shielding pupils from both learning challenges and integration with peers (see Moyles & Suschitzky, 1997; Shaw, 2001; Moran & Abbott, 2002). Another criticism voiced by both managers and teachers covered the

fact that the presence of the TA can effectively decrease the quality and frequency of the interaction with teachers in the classroom (Hemmingsson *et al.*, 2003). In such circumstances, Moran and Abbott found instances where TAs were given explicit instructions as to what they must and must *not* do:

First, they were not to talk to the child when the mainstream class teacher was talking, but to deliver any necessary explanation later; secondly, they were not to sit only with the unit child as this would cause both social and academic dependence. (2002, p. 166)

Such matters undoubtedly cause a level of confusion for the TA. The nature of that confusion is further amplified through the work of Lacey (2001), O'Brien and Garner (2001) and Ebersold (2003). Reflected through these research projects is the notion that TAs need to know when to offer individual support to particular pupils and when to act as a general resource, to avoid in-class segregation or marginalisation of included pupils. This kind of contribution presupposes engagement with, and understanding of, the aims, content, stages and outcomes of each lesson. It is argued that successful TA support requires a cooperative system that binds all stakeholders. It is also maintained that high-level preparatory work is essential if the mainstreaming of, for example, disabled children is to be successfully achieved. Where good practice is identified within research, that good practice is seen to be heavily reliant on situations where teachers and TAs work together effectively with parents, carers and children to review and evaluate teaching and learning approaches and classroom management strategies (see Balshaw, 1999).

Role development and curriculum contribution

Despite problems associated with defining the TA role, research conducted by Cajkler *et al.* (2006, 2007a) reveals a level of proactive engagement by TAs when it comes to developing their roles and wider relations within the community. It is maintained that TAs are, to some extent at least, engaging in a level of role self-determination that reflects their perceptions of the priorities associated with the work. For example, TAs saw themselves acting in a 'go-between' role that involved a level of direct liaison between the home and school (Shaw, 2001). This idea is usefully illustrated by Cable (2003) in her exploration of how bilingual support assistants effectively bridge communication between home and school. This can involve explaining the school's mission or being the first port of call for parents requiring information and advice. Some TAs viewed it as *their role* to explain school policy and practice to parents; this included outlining school procedures and reporting on the achievements of individual children. Other roles adopted included: seeking clarification from the teacher on behalf of pupils; acting as an advocate or intermediary for parents; and offering support to parents where a special needs statement was being sought (Shaw, 2001; Cable, 2003). In part, this aspect of role self-determination can be attributed to the fact that:

The teaching assistants knew many of the children with whom they worked in class, in the playground and dining hall as well as in the local community. (Collins & Simco, 2006, p. 206)

The area of contribution to the curriculum raises other interesting issues for debate. It is fair to say that general recognition exists as to the value of the support offered by TAs to teachers, particularly in relation to performing routines that enable teachers to focus on securing academic engagement. For example, Wilson *et al.* (2002) reported that teachers felt TAs gave them more time for planning, and for teaching, and that they spent less time on resources and routine tasks.

It proved possible through the review of literature to achieve a greater level of clarity and understanding as to the range of strategies and tasks utilised to support curriculum development by TAs. A pattern of engagement with children and young people emerges over both primary and secondary sectors that supports the view that TAs tend to work with more than one person in the classroom. For the most part, TAs use group work to interact directly with pupils and support learning that is largely structured and organised by teachers. They also carry out a range of non-pedagogical tasks that include photocopying, display work, tidying up and distributing materials to pupils (Wilson *et al.*, 2002; Jarvis, 2003; Vulliamy & Webb, 2003). The development of such a diversity of roles and tasks to support curriculum development and delivery has brought with it, it is argued, a shift in attitudes in terms of how teachers now see the value of TAs. For example Bedford *et al.* maintain that following their research into 'new partnerships for learning', some teachers hold the view that:

... teaching assistants needed very similar skills and attributes to themselves, and that opportunities for joint training and development in areas such as behaviour management were crucial to their relationship. (2008, p. 21)

At the same time, a level of tension is discernible when it comes to agreeing on how the TA role might develop in the future. For while TAs and teachers felt that TAs were there to support teachers:

... there seems to be a growing sense of the supporters of learning (TAs) seeing their role as co-educators with teachers ... Other reports reported TA perceptions of whole-class supervision to enable teachers to work with smaller groups. (Cajkler *et al.*, 2006, p. 41)

Perspectives of parents and children

In order to gain the most comprehensive view possible as to the nature, relevance and value of the work undertaken by TAs, it is necessary to capture and analyse the views of both children and their parents and carers. However, it is important to stress from the outset that, of the various stakeholder perceptions presented within research, the perspectives of these groups are the most difficult to locate. There is clearly still much more work to do in this area and yet despite this fact important messages emerge that are worthy of specific consideration.

When it comes to understanding children's perspectives, most work is to be found within a number of key studies; these include Moyles and Suschitzky (1997), Bowers (1997) and Wilson *et al.* (2002). It is clear from the limited data available that children value the support and guidance offered by TAs. Children, it would appear, look to the TA for help and support in times of difficulty (Cable, 2003)—here evidence of

the importance of a befriending function emerges. Children see TAs as having a role to play in addressing their pastoral and social needs, and interestingly being involved in the management of behaviour and discipline within the classroom (see for example Neil, 2002). The view is also consistently expressed that children value what TAs do in terms of supporting the teacher to organise and run an efficient and effective learning space.

In a more recent study undertaken by Fraser and Meadows (2008, p. 355) into children's perceptions of TAs in the primary sector, children were encouraged to define what constitutes a 'good teaching assistant'. They variously described the 'good' TA as needing to be 'caring, happy and friendly' with 'comparable intelligence to a teacher, helpful, kind, with a good personality and importantly, [someone] who is good at listening'. They also reported that children could actually distinguish between the role of the teacher and TA and were aware of the 'power balance between these two adult roles' (Fraser & Meadows, 2008, p. 356). Whilst only a matter for speculation here (and an area that undoubtedly requires further research) it may be the case that, as children experience TA support as an enduring feature of their education, they begin to gain a more sophisticated level of analysis regarding the different types of support provided.

Views expressed by parents also raise a number of interesting areas for discussion. Parents reinforced the TAs' perception that they play an important role in giving feedback on progress to both teachers and parents alike. They saw the TA occupying an important position in the adaptation of pedagogy in terms of modifying both lessons and learning materials (Ebersold, 2003). Crucially TAs were seen by parents as the most likely people to secure a good level of inclusion and integration for their child within the classroom and the school more generally. In turn they played an important role in both mediating and supporting social interaction with peers and managing behaviour. Some parents, however, were concerned about the fact that an over-reliance on the TA by the child could lead to a level of social isolation (Farrell *et al.*, 1999).

The challenge of training

The final area for specific discussion here focuses on the variety and effectiveness of the training that is offered to TAs. Cajkler *et al.* (2007b) raise in their final systematic literature review a range of important issues and questions concerning the nature, availability and appropriateness of the training offered. What the research makes clear is that, until relatively recently, policy on training TAs has not been effectively coordinated and that a patchwork quilt of provision exists with opportunities relatively untargted. The situation, however, appears to be changing. There have been significant policy developments: developments in the United Kingdom include induction training introduced by the Department for Education and Skills in 2000 and 'higher level teaching assistant' training opportunities since 2003 (although there have been significant difficulties with the introduction of this status, not least of all around remuneration). Yet there remains a lack of pre-service training available nationally for those wanting to enter this kind of work. To what extent should a TA be trained

before taking up a post? And why is induction training still not obligatory for all TAs? Cajkler *et al.*'s (2007b) work demonstrates that tiers of TAs exist; some with little training, some with induction training only and some with a variety of in-service or initiative related training including foundation and bachelor degrees.

However, evidence also emerged in Cajkler *et al.*'s (2007b) review to support the assertion that TA knowledge and understanding seem to improve as a direct result of training, but the actual impact depends on a range of factors. The attitude of the school, and support from managers and teachers, are critical to the success of TA training (Wilkins, 2004). Unless teachers are primed and assisted to respond to the development of skills in their TAs, the impact of training may be stifled (Blatchford *et al.*, 2004, 2007).

More recent work, such as that undertaken by Bedford *et al.* (2008) through their three-year training and research project, has begun to provide a more sophisticated level of analysis in terms of understanding how teachers and TAs can work more effectively together and the training requirements involved. For example, the argument is made that increased emphasis needs to be placed on the development of planning and liaison opportunities during the school day; the sharing of training opportunities; and the need for a level of 'cultural change' to promote the value of the TAs role. In addition, consideration is given to the skills and personal attributes needed by both teachers and TAs to create more effective partnership working.

Understanding change

In this final section of the paper an attempt is made to provide a framework for analysis that brings together in a coherent way the themes and issues raised above. Through the exploration of recent research literature it has proved possible to tease out some of the challenges, problems and dilemmas that impact on the construction of the TA occupational identity. It would be relatively simple to view the data provided as merely representative of stages on a developmental path that need to be followed; necessary stages in the construction and confirmation of specific roles, relationships and responsibilities. To adopt such a position, however, fails to acknowledge the impact and interplay of macro and micro influences that serve to shape any policy into practice trajectory (Ball, 2008). Rhodes for his part usefully describes the policy into practice arena encountered by many TAs where there exists an expectation:

... to comply with a given authority figure's definition of a situation, with no trusting professional dialogue, and the sole requirement to respond to externally imposed determinism ... (2006, p. 163)

An attempt has been made in Figure 1 to capture the range of factors that serve to impact on the construction of the TA identity.

Captured within Figure 1 is the idea that at a micro level the school represents a 'site of struggle' where identity is not fixed but played out through the dynamic of human relations (Apple, 1993). In presenting such a picture, Apple attempts to move

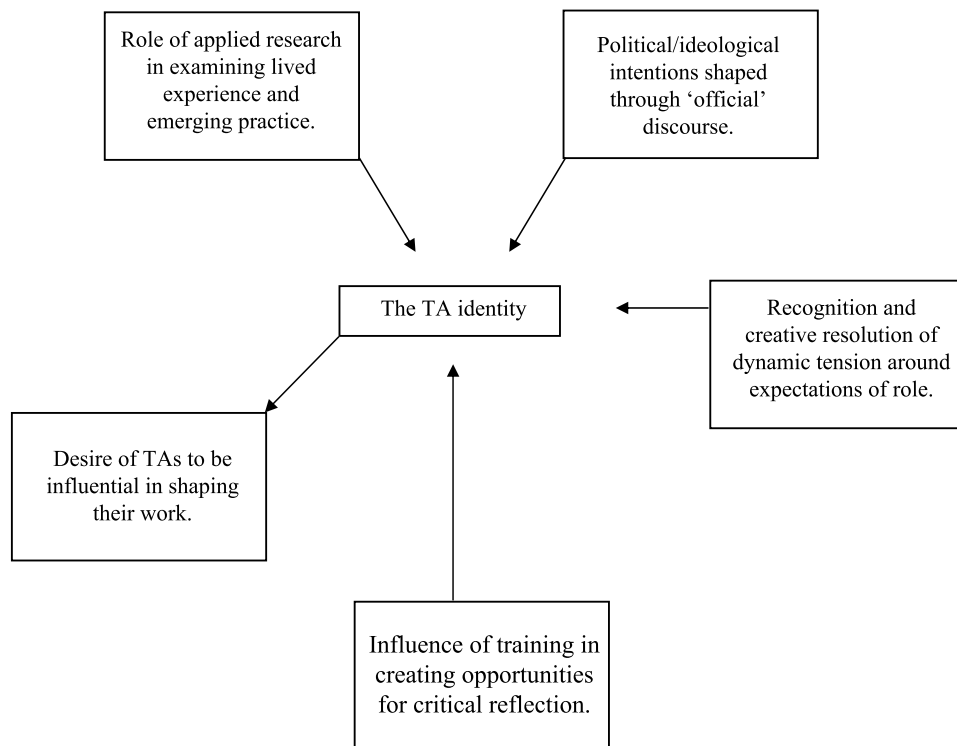


Figure 1. Factors impacting on the construction of the TA role

us away from what he describes as the ‘comforting illusion there can (and must) be one grand narrative’ under which all relations are subsumed (1993, p. 46). Instead it is argued that the knowledge base, processes and priorities for particular kinds of work are constructed, negotiated and contested.

Such a form of analysis then has the potential to improve our understanding of the difficulties and problems that have been encountered in the construction of the TA role. It is possible to map the political and ideological terrain for development by understanding the nature of the workforce reform agenda and the demands of government. Yet that level of understanding in itself is insufficient. For it is also necessary to comprehend how the macro and micro levels of experience intersect and relate. There is likely to be a level of conflict (and potential mistrust) between teachers and TAs as they vie to create their own clearly identifiable space in the classroom. Individual TAs may well want to challenge those who accord them an ‘instrumental technical identity’; that is, one that is low on the power to interpret, critically reflect, and so forth, and is instead dominated by ‘strategic compliance’. Indeed they may want to positively advocate for the development of an identity ‘characterized as “Creative and Professional”’ that is marked out by:

... a much closer working relationship with teachers and a desire to extend their role through active exploration and negotiation. (Rhodes, 2006, p. 164)

In adopting such an approach we concern ourselves more with trying to understand the ‘messiness’ of identity construction—we see the emerging policy into practice trajectory within the context of a broad socio-political framework where dynamic tensions occur and will continue to do so. And of course there is no end to the story in any absolute sense. For some TAs, managerial intentions will dominate and restrict role development. Others will make proactive use of the relationships they enjoy with parents and children to argue the case for particular kinds of social, pastoral and bridging functions. Others will welcome the opportunity to develop very close relationships with teaching staff in order to promote their value and worth within the classroom. The one outcome that we all hope will be avoided is TAs feeling like ‘spare parts’.

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