

Supporting the professional development of teaching assistants: classroom teachers' perspectives on their mentoring role

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The training of teaching assistants in the UK is undergoing considerable change linked to workforce reform in primary schools. This article examines the role that class teachers play as mentors in the training of teaching assistants on two types of programmes operating in England leading to Higher Level Teaching Assistant Professional Status. It considers the qualities required for mentoring teaching assistants compared to mentoring trainee teachers. The views and perspectives of a group of thirty-four school teachers who have carried out a mentor role for both a trainee primary teacher and a primary teaching assistant are analysed. The research aims to identify the common skills, strategies and approaches used by the school-based mentors and identify the perceived tensions and challenges facing these mentors.

Keywords: *Mentoring; Primary school teaching assistants; Professional development; Trainee teachers; Workforce reform*

Introduction

In an era of international concern about qualified teacher shortages and standards of pupil achievement, new solutions are sought to ensure school improvement and pupil achievement. Within this context, the role of teaching assistants to support pupil achievement has become increasingly important. The numbers of support staff working in schools have nearly doubled in the past ten years, with teaching assistants increasing from 61,300 to 148,500 between 1997 and 2005. By December 2005, 13,876 people had registered for the Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) programme and 6872 people were awarded HLTA status (TDA, 2006). These dramatic figures confirm that support staff lie at the heart of the government's radical

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plans for a modernized, remodelled workforce 'to find new ways, for the 21st century, of helping schools to realize the potential for all our children' (ATL *et al.*, 2003, para. 1). Clearly, the professional development of teaching assistants to prepare them for this role is of paramount importance, as is the impact they will have upon school-based teacher development.

Teaching assistants have a significant role to play in school-based professional development in this new era of workforce reform. The way in which they are trained, encouraged to develop as individual members of staff and incorporated into the school community will have an impact not only upon their individual development but also upon the professional development of those teachers who work closely with them. School contexts in terms of ethos, organization and culture are important in the developing practice and professionalism of teachers and school support staff. Schools that become learning communities (Blandford, 2000) consist of individuals who have opportunities for learning alongside the work tasks they perform, thus helping to bridge theory and practice for both teachers and teaching assistants. Indeed, teaching assistants who have been employed as support staff for several years in a particular school will have hidden intellectual and practical knowledge gained simply through participating in the cultural community of the school with its specific language, values and concerns. For schools to become an effective learning community teachers involved in school-based training of teaching assistants need to consider how this knowledge will impact upon their professional learning. In addition, as our research showed, the role of the teaching assistant is unique and one that teachers themselves have not been prepared for in terms of mentoring.

This article explores the role that class teachers play in the professional development and training of teaching assistants on two types of programmes operating in England leading to Higher Level Teaching Assistant Professional Status. It considers the emerging conceptualization of mentoring on these programmes and the relationship to the established model of mentoring operating in initial teacher training programmes in the context of the literature on professional development. We focus on the views and perspectives of a group of thirty-four school teachers who have carried out a mentor role for both a trainee primary teacher and a primary teaching assistant in partnership with The University of Northampton (formerly UCN). The research aims to (1) identify the common skills, strategies and approaches used by the school-based mentors in supporting the professional development of these two distinct groups of teaching professionals; and (2) identify the tensions, challenges and issues as perceived by mentors.

Background

Government policy to increase and provide higher level classroom support (ATL *et al.*, 2003) has formalized the shift in the role of the teaching assistant from someone who helps with the classroom 'housekeeping', such as putting up displays and washing pots, to that of providing direct pedagogical support to the teacher (Edmond, 2003). Training for teaching assistants is also undergoing radical change. A National

Workforce Agreement is being implemented which identifies a new professional status of Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) with a remit to 'make a substantial contribution to the teaching and learning process in schools and raising standards of achievement by pupils' (ATL *et al.*, 2003, para. 11). The agreement gives support staff access to training, development and career opportunities as professionals in their own right (WAMG, 2004), and for HLTAs there are national professional standards derived from the standards for Qualified Teacher Status (DfES/TTA, 2003).

The involvement of school teachers in the training and assessment of trainee teachers as part of initial teacher training programmes has been a government requirement for accredited teacher training in England since 1992 (DES, 1992) and remains a key feature of the partnership between schools and higher education institutions identified in Qualifying to Teach (DfES/TTA, 2002).

Within the past ten years two main modes of mentoring have developed in primary teacher training in the UK. In the first mode, the class teacher is the recognized mentor for the teacher trainee, and in the second an experienced teacher acts as mentor for all the teacher trainees throughout the school. Differences between these two modes of mentoring have been identified by Maynard (2000), whose research suggests that trainees often found the class mentor too task oriented. Edwards (1998) argues that these two modes of mentoring are underpinned by very different epistemological assumptions. The first mode views learning as knowledge to be acquired and then deployed in contexts. The second mode is based on situated cognition (Lave & Wenger, 1991) where knowledge is conceived as socially situated and constructed within communities of practice. Knowledge is therefore developed through participation within the community and the apprentice learns through observation and the co-construction of knowledge, initially as a peripheral participant and then through engagement. Such conceptions of mentoring and the impact upon teacher trainees have direct relevance for the mentoring of teaching assistants who are being inducted into a support role. In this article we explore the conceptualization of the mentoring role within the teaching assistant training programmes with reference to models of professional development (Maynard & Furlong, 1993; Craft, 1996; Blandford, 2000; Butcher, 2000) and apprenticeship (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Specifically, issues of transferring a successful established model of mentoring from one mode of professional development to another are examined.

Teaching assistant professional development and training programmes

The mentor role of school teachers in initial teacher training (ITT) programmes has been extensively researched (see Furlong & Maynard, 1995; Kerry & Shelton Mayes, 1995; Edwards & Collinson, 1996) and the quality of school-based training and assessment within ITT is an important feature of all national external inspection reports (Ofsted, 2002a, 2002b). In contrast, training and professional development opportunities for teaching assistants, while identified as important by schools, have generally been restricted to short courses provided by the local education authorities and informal mentoring and modelling opportunities within schools (Groom & Rose,

2005). Against this background, two accredited professional development programmes designed specifically for teaching assistants have emerged in England. First, foundation degrees for teaching assistants and second, Higher Learning Teaching Assistant (HLTA) training programmes. While foundation degrees do not provide HLTA status, students may draw on evidence produced during their study for assessment against the standards. An examination of these routes reveals major differences in the explicit and implicit roles of school-based staff.

The first TDA accredited HLTA training programmes began in 2004 with more than 7000 registered and over 700 awarded HLTA status. The numbers trained through this route grew to 14,000 in 2005–2006 (TTA, 2005). Less than one-third of the original 36 accredited providers of these training programmes were higher education institutions (HLTA, 2005). The fifty-day training programmes met TDA bidding specifications (TTA, 2003), including requirements for twenty days of provider-based training, twenty days of school-based training and ten days of e-learning that would directly support the development of the HLTA professional standards. The bidding specifications did not require the formal identification of a school-based mentor role to provide training, assessment or support for the HLTA candidate; indeed, to have done so would be contrary to the specification that the training programmes must minimize the impact and burden on schools. All HLTA assessment is carried out externally, though the views of school staff are sought in order to triangulate evidence on meeting the HLTA professional standards, through an external assessor school visit. However, the specification of twenty days' school-based training implies tacit support from the employing school and an implicit assumption that the day-to-day supervisory role of the class teacher in relation to a teaching assistant will be adequate for HLTA training purposes. An analysis of the school-based directed tasks from one accredited HLTA programme suggests teaching assistants will need at least informal support from a classroom teacher in order to carry out the school-based directed tasks associated with the training programmes and generate evidence against the HLTA professional standards. For example, one school-based task states: 'Using information acquired in the taught session and under the supervision of an experienced teacher, plan and resource a lesson within the specialist area' (UCN, 2003).

In contrast, foundation degrees, introduced by the DfES in 2000, are higher education awards that integrate academic and work-based learning (QAA, 2004). A defining characteristic of foundation degrees is employer involvement in programme design, review and, where possible, the delivery, assessment and monitoring of students in the workplace. In response, foundation degrees for teaching assistants have generally identified an explicit school-based mentor role to support the teaching assistant's professional development in the workplace. The University of Northampton's foundation degrees, for example, specify a 'critical friend' mentoring model which includes training, support and formative assessment. Agreement to this level of school-based support is part of the partnership arrangements formalized between school and higher education institution as part of the programme admission procedures. Implicit in this programme is the view that high quality training for

teaching assistants requires high quality school-based support over and above that provided as part of the supervisory role between classroom teacher and teaching assistant. This is further supported by the provision of training opportunities for school staff in carrying out this mentor role.

Unlike the government-funded HLTA training programme, foundation degree programmes appear to have adopted a model of mentoring closely based on the established initial teacher training model where the regulations, while not specifying a single model of operation, do require school staff to be fully and actively involved in planning and teaching, as well as in the selection and final assessment of trainees (DfES/TTA, 2002).

Our research explored two questions in relation to these programmes. First, what are the common skills, strategies and approaches used by school-based mentors in supporting the professional development of teaching assistants? Second, what are the tensions, challenges and issues perceived by mentors?

Research methods

The methodological approach adopted in this article takes the perspective of Rueda and Monzo that:

A sociocultural approach to teacher education supports an apprenticeship model in which social relationships mediate learning through collaborative meaningful activity. (Rueda & Monzo, 2002, p. 503)

Such an approach enabled an understanding of the way in which the social relationship between the teacher as mentor and teaching assistant as mentee could provide a foundation for professional development. Ideally, within this model the roles of learners and more competent others could be interchangeable so that both teacher and teaching assistant co-constructed and contributed to each other's professional development. However, the reality of practice and the factors that impinged upon or contributed to the development of a collaborative relationship that could enhance professional learning are reflected in our research.

Following the interpretative tradition (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), both the researchers and the researched were located within a particular time and space, and in a cultural and historical context. The research allowed for a layered analysis of data from documentary sources such as government publications and programme validation documents, and from questionnaires completed by primary school teacher mentors. An analysis of the questionnaire data led to a sub-sample of four mentors being selected to study in greater depth using semi-structured interviews. The four mentors interviewed in depth were all experienced teachers who had taught for between seven and thirty-three years and included a head teacher, deputy head teacher, senior teacher and a subject co-ordinator. Each had mentored a number of students in a range of contexts. The mentors who responded to the questionnaire were selected on the basis that they had carried out a mentoring role in the context of

a formal training programme for a primary trainee teacher and a teaching assistant. Both mentor roles are formally set out as part of two degree programmes at The University of Northampton—BA (Hons) Primary Education (an accredited Qualified Teacher Training programme) and Foundation Degree in Learning and Teaching (an accredited programme which is aligned to the Higher Level Teaching Assistant professional standards).

The data from documentary evidence, questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews provide the main sources of empirical evidence. The questionnaire required mentors to rate, on a five-point scale, the importance of different mentoring strategies and mentoring issues in relation to their work with teacher trainees and teaching assistants. T-test analysis of variance was carried out on both sets of data to identify if there were significant differences in the mentor responses to each statement comparing mentoring teacher trainees with teaching assistants. The questionnaire statements on common mentoring strategies and issues were specifically constructed for the purposes of this research, taking into account evidence of effective mentoring strategies drawn from a range of research studies and mentoring handbooks (see McIntyre *et al.*, 1993; OU PGCE programme, 1994; Kerry & Shelton Mayes, 1995; Edwards & Collinson, 1996; Wilkin *et al.*, 1997; Burgess & Butcher, 1999; ASE, 2000).

Emerging themes from the questionnaire responses

Tables 1 and 4 in the Appendix set out the mentors' responses when rating the usefulness of different mentoring strategies and the importance of mentoring issues in carrying out their role in relation to teacher trainees and teaching assistants. The mentor responses to each statement were organized in rank order based on overall usefulness/importance rating (see Tables 2 and 5 in the Appendix) and highest usefulness/importance responses (see Tables 3 and 6 in the Appendix).

The majority of mentors rated all 21 mentoring strategies as useful or better in supporting the professional development of both teacher trainees and teaching assistants; 68% of mentors identified all the mentoring strategies as useful or better for both categories of mentees. Nine out of the 21 mentoring strategies were identified by all mentors as useful or better for working with teaching assistants and 11 out of 21 received the same positive response for working with teacher trainees. One mentoring strategy, supporting pupils' with SEN (special educational needs) received positive rating from all mentors for their work with teaching assistants but not with teacher trainees. Three mentoring strategies (supporting the mentee's development of subject knowledge, supporting pupil assessment and reviewing mentee progress) received unanimous 'useful' ratings from mentors for supporting teacher trainee development while producing some 'less useful' responses for teaching assistants. This may suggest that a small minority of mentors do not perceive that their mentoring role should include these areas for both teacher trainees and teaching assistants. It is unsurprising that formal assessment as a mentoring strategy

for teaching assistants was rated as least useful compared with teacher trainees as this role is not commonly assigned to mentors within teaching assistant professional development programmes. This contrasts with the formal assessment required of mentors within initial teacher training (DfES/TTA, 2002). Seven mentoring strategies, giving oral feedback, observing, informal discussion, collaborative planning, sharing practice, supporting planning and supporting behaviour management receive the highest ratings from over 50% of all mentors for mentoring both teaching assistants and teacher trainees. This is in line with research literature (Edwards & Collinson, 1996) which suggests that these would be high ranking in any analysis of mentoring in education, and the inclusion of behaviour management is in line with the high priority that teachers give this area of their work with novice staff. The analysis of variance test did not indicate any significant difference when comparing mentors' responses on the five-point scale for each statement for teacher trainees and teaching assistants.

These results suggest that the current range of mentoring strategies used by school teachers supporting teaching assistants is comparable to that used in mentoring teacher trainees. The results suggest that teachers have adopted closely the model of mentoring that currently operates in initial teacher training for their new role in supporting the professional development of teaching assistants, with few differences emerging. The practices perceived by mentors to be most useful for mentoring teaching assistants do not deviate from the model presented by the professional development programmes and is likely to be based on their previous successful experience in ITT.

The mentor responses on the importance of different issues in mentoring also followed a very similar pattern with the analysis of variance test showing no significant difference when comparing mentors' responses on the five-point scale for each statement for teacher trainees and teaching assistants. Seven of the issues emerge as important or higher for the majority of the mentors: time; quality of mentee; difference in mentor/mentee roles; carrying out mentee assessment; mentor training; difference in education values; and personalities. More than 40% of mentors considered that the issue of the difference between mentor and mentee roles was of the highest importance. In contrast, no mentor rated the different statuses of mentor and mentee at this level of importance and overall it received the lowest importance ratings.

Analysis of qualitative responses

In the questionnaire qualitative responses and the semi-structured interviews, mentors were asked to identify the most important qualities and characteristics of a good mentor in supporting a trainee teacher and in supporting a teaching assistant. Only one of the four mentors, who were all highly experienced in terms of their roles and responsibilities, stated that these qualities and characteristics were exactly the same when mentoring a teaching assistant and when mentoring a trainee teacher. The mentors had experience of mentoring TAs at foundation degree level and HLTA

level and across the four of them had mentored ITT students at PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education), BA (Hons) (Bachelor of Arts with Honours), B.Ed. (Bachelor of Education), graduate training programmes and registered training programmes.

The most important qualities and characteristics of a trainee teacher mentor emerged as:

Mentor 1: Sharing everything! Planning, ideas, discussion, positive reinforcement. To be able to develop a professional relationship which is open and honest.

Mentor 2: Demonstrating good standard, relationships, confidence in mentors' ability. Able to listen and guide in bite-sized chunks. Too much correction breaks self-esteem—do it gently—nurture it.

Mentor 3: Ability to give TIME! It is very time-consuming planning and assessing and feeding back. Sometimes it is essential to do this after school, or during holidays or weekend times if trainees are to get the guidance and support needed.

Mentor 4: To be able to offer advice in a constructive way and to help to develop confidence.

Whereas for the teaching assistant the most important qualities and characteristics were perceived as:

Mentor 1: To be able to encourage, support and promote opportunities for ability and skill of TA to flourish. Again, an ability to build on an open, honest relationship.

Mentor 2: Time to remove preconceived ideas. Allow TA to see the difference in how teachers view the task in hand.

Mentor 3: The knowledge to help them with the educational parts of their course. They usually are natural practitioners but do not have the theoretical background. Access is also essential to new up to date research etc.

Mentor 4: As before. To be able to offer advice in a constructive way and to help to develop confidence.

The responses of Mentor 1 begin to indicate that, even though earlier in the questionnaire few significant differences in mentoring strategies were identified by all these mentors, their interviews reveal subtle nuances in their perceptions of mentoring a trainee teacher and mentoring a teaching assistant. 'Sharing everything!' and 'develop a professional relationship which is open and honest' contrasts with the comment to 'encourage, support, promote' for the teaching assistant and which is distinctly more nurturing.

Significantly, the relationship is not identified as a 'professional' one. Mentor 2 notes that the teacher trainee and the teaching assistant may well have different starting points. It may be necessary for the mentor to induct a new teaching assistant into the way teachers work in schools and if necessary 'remove preconceived

ideas'. Mentor 3 responses agree with Mentor 2 in terms of the different needs of a teaching assistant and a trainee teacher. Mentor 3 also identifies 'knowledge' as an important characteristic for mentoring a teaching assistant, suggesting it may be necessary to provide specific help with the theoretical aspects of the course.

The semi-structured interviews were even more revealing of mentor perceptions of the key issues and challenges when mentoring a teaching assistant and a trainee teacher, and a number of themes and issues began to emerge.

In this early stage of our research, we have selected three themes that appear to have particular importance for the mentors we interviewed. The themes highlight areas of difference between mentoring ITT students and TAs. These are: starting points for mentoring; mentoring for growth; and assessing the mentee.

Starting points for mentoring

The interviews revealed some of the complexity surrounding mentoring in primary schools in England, with the mentors training a diverse group of students working towards a range of different qualifications. These included trainee teachers on either a B.Ed. or PGCE course, and teaching assistants who were undertaking a foundation degree programme and TDA accredited HLTA courses. In addition, within this small sample (N = 34) were also teaching assistants who have a specialist support role for an individual child, general teaching support and those who intended to go on to train as a teacher. The mentors were also mentoring newly qualified teachers (NQTs) and some made reference to this kind of mentoring when making comparisons across the different mentoring roles. This diversity presented an initial challenge for the mentors, who noted that training had to be matched to the mentee and they outlined some of the issues.

Mentor 4: All come in at different levels (dependent upon stage). For the teaching assistant you have to spend a lot more time at the beginning—have to explain terms at the beginning and you do not have to do that for Initial Teacher Training (ITT) students.

All the mentors indicated that finding sufficient time to mentor was a huge challenge. Those schools that had set up strong mentoring programmes based on their own specific criteria relating to effective teaching assistant performance were concerned that the new requirements for HLTA professional standards could reduce their flexibility in terms of how they trained their teaching assistants. The school's established expectations for teaching assistants were going to be challenged.

Mentor 1: The teaching assistant is always going to be supervised—having said that, things are changing radically now and a teaching assistant may be expected to supervise a class of their own.

The need for teaching assistants to be effective in a specific school context and ethos emerged as a particularly strong thematic difference between the training and

professional development operating in schools for TAs and trainee teachers. This is perhaps unsurprising, as the established role of the TA is to provide learning support within the context of an established teacher's classroom and under their supervision, whereas the training programme for the trainee teacher is to enable the trainee eventually to shape the classroom according to the trainee's emerging teaching style within the school's and national frameworks.

The way in which the mentors worked with the teaching assistant mentee also varied from the way they worked with the ITT student, as the length of time in school affected the way the mentoring relationship developed. There was more sense of urgency attached to mentoring the trainee teacher, who would only be in the school for a short placement, whereas the extended relationship with the teaching assistant allowed time for growth.

Mentoring for growth

The more slowly evolving relationship with the teaching assistant and measured development of skills meant that mentors paced the training to match their own school-based established criteria for what constitutes effective TA performance and the mentor's need in terms of supporting pupil learning. Often, TAs would have worked in the school for a number of years and would continue to do so after completing a programme of training such as the HLTA. While this had obvious advantages in terms of training a teaching assistant for a specific context it was sometimes perceived as more difficult than mentoring a trainee teacher who had externally set standards and levels to meet in a short space of time. ITT student teachers on PGCE, BA and B.Ed. degree courses go into the schools for very specific short periods of time on placements lasting between three and eight weeks. These mentors appeared to find it easier to frame the mentoring within a specific period of time where there were standards that had to be achieved.

Mentor 1: There is growth with a teaching assistant—I have seen it in mine over the past three years. With student teachers coming in it is easier in that I make time for them. It is difficult to describe because although they are perhaps in the initial stage of training it is easier to deal with because it is a different level you are dealing with. With a teaching assistant you are building on their growth all the time. But with a student who is coming in on first teaching practice or second teaching practice you have levels that you are going to get them to so it is much easier.

The other mentors' views largely agreed with the above statement for a variety of reasons. These included feeling more professionally distant from the trainee teacher and having externally set standards that made it easier to judge the type of support required. However, the trainee teachers were perceived as less confident and sometimes their lack of maturity and commitment required more fostering. The learning curve was thought to be far steeper for the teacher trainee than the teaching assistant who could develop gradually over a long period of time,

immersed in the classroom and school environment. Length of time in school also had an impact upon the way the mentors assessed the mentees and assisted in the organization of their learning.

It would appear that these mentors, with their emphasis on standards and 'professional distance', are beginning to operate with a more limited model of mentoring than would normally be envisaged where a sociocultural perspective underpinned the model. Such a perspective sees the process of learning as being able to respond in increasingly informed ways in school and classroom contexts (Bruner, 1996; Putnam & Borko, 2000). A model of mentoring that supports a sociocultural view of learning enables trainee teachers and TAs to develop a capacity to make informed judgements about the curriculum, the classroom context and the pupils. This concern about the way in which mentoring is being shaped through the emphasis on achievement of competences is also noted in other research. Edwards and Protheroe, for example, found little evidence that student teachers were learning to:

break out of the diachronic constraints of planned delivery to work synchronically and connect learner and curriculum. (Edwards & Protheroe, 2004, p. 186)

School-based training is based on the premise that the knowledge of teaching will be mediated through the mentor as the trainee or TA is inducted into the community of practice, so why does the model not appear to be as effective as it should be? Other factors may also influence or constrain student teachers on placements. For example, Calderhead and Shorrock (1997) identify the taken for granted practices of teachers in schools as a constraint, where the mentee lacks the skill to adjust to the prevailing culture of the school (Hayes, 2000).

We continued to explore these issues through our third theme, assessing the mentee.

Assessing the mentee

A number of issues emerged from the mentor interviews that demonstrated the different approaches they sometimes adopted when assessing a trainee teacher and a teaching assistant. Assessment of the mentee was also linked to planning and organizing learning, including mentee study skills. The development of study skills was an initial difficulty that some teaching assistants faced.

Mentor 4: The teaching assistant who comes from a background where they haven't studied for a long time needs help with setting targets and doing assignments. The main difference is confidence-building and organization.

However, the new HLTA training programmes, and particularly the introduction of externally set HLTA professional standards, was considered to be helpful in assessing

teaching assistants as it brought the mentoring tasks closer to those required for initial teacher training.

Mentor 3: With the fifty-day fast-track training coming in for HLTAs there will be standards for that and it is going to make it a lot easier because they are going to have to do portfolios just like the trainee teachers.

Mentoring in order to prepare the mentee for demonstrating specific standards and set requirements for a particular stage of training was perceived as having advantages for the mentors. One mentor indicated that his sense of ‘everyday knowledge versus snapshot knowledge’ was an important aspect of assessing a teaching assistant, allowing him to make a more considered judgement. When assessing the trainee teacher he did not have a wide range of contextualized knowledge to draw upon.

Mentor 2: I can take a snapshot judgement and say yes I can see an improvement—what I can’t do is just breeze up and say when I observe you I can see you are doing this, this and this, but I can also see in your everyday teaching that you are not. I can see that it is much easier for a student (trainee teacher) to give me a false impression—because let’s face it, everybody does it—and I can’t see through that.

Daily interaction with the teaching assistant, therefore, had implications for the assessments the primary teacher made. A key problem identified for teaching assistants was the danger of falling back into the ‘comfort zone’ where they routinely performed those tasks already learned. A challenge for both the teaching assistant and the mentor was not to allow this to happen.

The real school context and previously learned knowledge and activities were perceived by one of the mentors above as factors which might prevent progress where the TA was concerned. Edmond (2003) focused upon experience as providing an illustration of theory and a means of reinforcing knowledge. She identifies as problematic what might be perceived as the gap between what is taught and what is observed in practice. For teaching assistants, this issue can be particularly acute as they are constrained both by where they work and who they work with.

Conclusions

This research focuses upon primary schools and teachers at a time of radical change for the role of the teaching assistant. Our evidence suggests that mentors have adopted a style of mentoring that is used in training primary teachers even though they recognized that the teaching assistant had different learning needs and requirements. However, this is not a criticism of the mentors who assisted in our research; rather, these primary teachers were working within the constraints of the partnership arrangements and the models of mentoring available to them. While some of the mentoring strategies worked well with the teaching assistants they also presented new issues and challenges for the mentors.

Research by Edmond (2003) and Rueda and Monzo (2002) supports some of the findings in this article. The role of the teaching assistant has a number of tensions that arise from the conflict between the teaching assistant as both learner and worker in the classroom. While mentors recognize that experience and reflection on practice are of considerable importance, there are both limitations and constraints on the way in which these are utilized with the teaching assistants. The context of the workplace limits the time for and quality of reflection on experience with the mentor. Edmond (2003) concluded, as our early analysis indicates, that the working relationship between the teaching assistant and the class teacher is a sociocultural contextual factor that impacts greatly on the learning potential of the workplace as a mentoring and mentored experience. Clearly, teaching assistants are influenced by their observations of teaching in their construction of models of teaching and learning. Evidence of power differences and teacher constraints were both factors that influenced the mentoring of teaching assistants.

We also draw on two other sources of evidence for triangulation. First, an internally commissioned programme evaluation of The University of Northampton's foundation degree for teaching assistants (Foreman-Peck & Middlewood, 2002) which was funded by a DfES grant and second, an external quality review report on the same programme carried out in 2003 by the Quality Assurance Agency as part of a national survey of foundation degrees (QAA, 2003). The evaluation and review suggest that mentors perceived strong similarities in their approach to mentoring teaching assistants and trainee teachers. Primary teachers who are aware of the current controversy surrounding the workforce remodelling agreement and potential threat to the teacher's role and the impact of professional HLTA in primary classrooms nevertheless do not perceive these tensions to impact on the specific mentoring arrangements within their own school. Instead, there appears to be an adoption of the ITT model of mentoring for this new group of mentees.

The picture that is emerging is a complex one of different mentoring arrangements, different teaching assistant programmes and mentees training for different roles. Like Edwards and Protheroe (2004), our analysis reveals just how difficult mentoring is. We need to understand how mentoring can fit the goals of schools in ways which allow mentors to work with both trainee teachers and teaching assistants as 'learners who acquire the capacity to responsively support pupils as learners' (Edwards & Protheroe, 2004, p. 195). The responsibility for developing teaching assistants as learners lies with the institutions that provide the training programmes and the primary schools who need to adopt a whole-school team-led approach to mentoring. Dew-Hughes, Brayton and Blandford emphasized that for outcomes to be effective, training roles needed to be addressed at all levels of teacher training, from initial teacher training through to national professional qualifications for head teachers (Dew-Hughes *et al.*, 1998).

School-based teacher development can be enhanced by a model of mentoring that is developed through working with mentors in schools. This would allow primary teachers to analyse their practice and reflect on their mentoring in the context of the goals of the school as a learning community and the professional role the mentee will

perform. Activities based around tensions, issues and challenges could be explored and seen as starting points for professional learning. Mentoring would be specific to the culture and context of the school and adapted to the role of the mentee. Importantly, with the rapid increase in the number of teaching assistants with HLTA professional status in schools, the involvement of experienced teaching assistants in the professional development of novice teaching assistants must emerge in line with the majority of professional models of training and development. Developing an effective model of mentoring for teaching assistants that will promote their continued professional development as key players within the educational community in primary schools is a major challenge for the future.

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Appendix: Questionnaires to mentors (respondents N = 34)

Table 1. Percentage respondents rating usefulness of strategies in mentoring trainee teachers and teaching assistants to support professional development (teaching assistants/teacher trainees)

	<i>Low</i>				<i>Useful</i>				<i>High</i>	
	<i>TA</i>	<i>TT</i>	<i>TA</i>	<i>TT</i>	<i>TA</i>	<i>TT</i>	<i>TA</i>	<i>TT</i>	<i>TA</i>	<i>TT</i>
Observing	0	0	0	0	3.3	0	33.3	16.0	63.3	84.0
Giving oral feedback	0	0	0	0	3.3	0	16.7	12.0	80.0	88.0
Giving written feedback	0	0	19.4	4.0	29.0	28.0	22.6	20.0	29.0	48.0
Collaborative planning	0	0	0	0	6.9	12.0	20.7	24.0	72.4	64.0
Informal discussion	0	0	0	0	3.3	4.0	23.3	20.0	73.3	76.0
Formal mentor session	7.1	0	7.1	4.3	46.4	47.8	17.9	26.1	21.4	21.7
Reviewing progress	0	0	6.2	0	25.0	11.5	21.9	30.8	46.9	57.7
Formal assessment	16.0	4.3	16.0	8.7	24.0	26.1	32.0	43.5	12.0	17.4
Setting tasks	0	0	17.2	8.7	34.5	39.1	27.6	30.4	20.7	21.7
Supervising tasks set by provider	7.1	4.2	10.7	8.3	39.3	45.8	32.1	25.0	10.7	16.7
Reviewing professional standards	3.3	4.2	3.3	0	30.0	25.0	43.3	50.0	20.0	20.8
Sharing practice	3.3	4.0	0	0	10.0	8.0	33.3	24.0	53.3	64.0
Supporting self-evaluation	0	0	3.4	4.0	27.6	24.0	37.9	36.0	31.0	36.0
Encouraging critical reflection	0	0	0	0	13.8	8.0	41.4	32.0	44.8	60.0
Supporting subject knowledge	0	0	3.3	0	20.0	16.0	26.7	40.0	50.0	44.0
Supporting planning	0	0	0	0	10.3	3.8	34.5	38.5	55.2	57.7
Supporting pupil assessment	0	0	3.4	0	17.2	8.0	34.5	36.0	44.9	56.0
Supporting teaching	0	0	0	0	13.8	16.0	37.9	36.0	48.3	48.0
Supporting behaviour management	0	0	0	0	6.6	7.7	30.0	26.9	63.3	65.4
Supporting SEN	0	0	0	4.0	23.3	4.0	20.0	48.0	56.7	44.0
Supporting ICT	0	4.3	14.8	0	37.0	30.4	22.2	39.1	25.9	26.1

Table 2. Percentage respondents rating different mentoring strategies useful or better in supporting professional development of trainees and teaching assistants

	<i>Teaching assistants</i>	<i>Teacher trainees</i>
Giving oral feedback	100	100
Observing	100	100
Informal discussion	100	100
Collaborative planning	100	100

(continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

	<i>Teaching assistants</i>	<i>Teacher trainees</i>
Supporting behaviour management	100	100
Encouraging critical reflection	100	100
Supporting planning	100	100
Supporting teaching	100	100
Supporting pupil assessment	96.6	100
Supporting subject knowledge	96.7	100
Supporting SEN	100	96.0
Reviewing progress	93.8	100.0
Sharing practice	96.7	96.0
Supporting self-evaluation	96.6	96.0
Reviewing professional standards	93.4	95.8
Formal mentor session	85.8	95.7
Supporting ICT	85.2	95.7
Giving written feedback	80.6	96.0
Setting tasks	82.8	91.3
Supervising tasks set by provider	82.2	87.5
Formal assessment	68.0	87.0

Table 3a. Percentage respondents rating mentoring strategies of highest importance for professional development of teaching assistants

<i>Rank order</i>	<i>Mentoring technique</i>	<i>Teaching assistants</i>
1	Giving oral feedback	80.0
2	Informal discussion	73.3
3	Collaborative planning	72.4
4	Observing	63.3
4	Supporting behaviour management	63.3
6	Supporting SEN	56.7
7	Supporting planning	55.2
8	Sharing practice	53.3
9	Supporting subject knowledge	50.0
10	Supporting teaching	48.3
11	Reviewing progress	46.9
12	Supporting pupil assessment	44.9
13	Encouraging critical reflection	44.8
14	Supporting self-evaluation	31.0
15	Giving written feedback	29.0
16	Supporting ICT	25.9
17	Formal mentor session	21.4
18	Setting tasks	20.7
19	Reviewing professional standards	20.0
20	Formal assessment	12.0
21	Supervising tasks set by provider	10.7

Table 3b. Percentage respondents rating mentoring strategies of highest importance for professional development of teacher trainees

<i>Rank order</i>	<i>Mentoring technique</i>	<i>Teacher trainees</i>
1	Giving oral feedback	88.0
2	Observing	84.0
3	Informal discussion	76.0
4	Supporting behaviour management	65.4
5	Collaborative planning	64.0
5	Sharing practice	64.0
7	Encouraging critical reflection	60.0
8	Supporting planning	57.7
8	Reviewing progress	57.7
10	Supporting pupil assessment	56.0
11	Supporting teaching	48.0
11	Giving written feedback	48.0
13	Supporting subject knowledge	44.0
13	Supporting SEN	44.0
15	Supporting self-evaluation	36.0
16	Supporting ICT	26.1
17	Formal mentor session	21.7
18	Setting tasks	21.7
19	Reviewing professional standards	20.8
20	Formal assessment	17.4
21	Supervising tasks set by provider	16.7

Table 4. Percentage respondents rating importance of identified issues in mentoring trainee teachers and teaching assistants (teaching assistants/teacher trainees)

	<i>Low</i>				<i>Important</i>				<i>High</i>	
	<i>TA</i>	<i>TT</i>	<i>TA</i>	<i>TT</i>	<i>TA</i>	<i>TT</i>	<i>TA</i>	<i>TT</i>	<i>TA</i>	<i>TT</i>
Time to carry out role	0	0	0	4.2	31.0	25.0	10.3	25.0	58.6	45.8
Concerns that mentee will clone practice	35.7	26.1	25.0	34.8	32.1	30.4	7.1	8.7	0	0
Carrying out assessment	0	0	10.0	8.3	33.3	25.0	26.7	33.3	30.0	33.3
Different personalities	13.3	16.7	30.0	25.0	30.0	29.2	10.0	12.5	16.7	16.7
Different education values	12.9	20.0	29.0	24.0	25.8	20.0	16.1	20.0	16.1	16.0
Lack of mentor training	3.4	4.3	17.2	34.8	37.9	21.7	24.1	21.7	17.2	17.4
Quality of mentee	3.3	4.0	3.3	0	26.7	28.0	26.7	24.0	40.0	44.0
Difference in mentor/mentee roles	6.7	8.0	3.3	0	26.7	28.0	23.3	20.0	40.0	44.0
Different status of mentor/mentee	53.8	57.1	23.1	28.6	3.8	4.8	15.4	9.5	3.8	0

Table 5. Percentage respondents rating mentoring issue important and higher in supporting professional development of trainees and teaching assistants

	<i>Teaching assistants</i>	<i>Teacher trainees</i>
Time to carry out role	100	95.8
Quality of mentee	93.4	96.0
Difference in mentor/mentee roles	90.0	92.0
Carrying out assessment	90.0	91.7
Lack of mentor training	79.4	60.9
Different personalities	56.7	58.3
Different education values	58.1	56.0
Concerns that mentee will clone practice	39.3	39.1
Different status of mentor/mentee	23.1	14.3

Table 6a. Percentage respondents rating mentoring issue of highest importance in supporting professional development of teaching assistants

<i>Rank order</i>	<i>Mentoring technique</i>	<i>Teaching assistants</i>
1	Time to carry out role	58.6
2	Quality of mentee	40
2	Difference in mentor/mentee roles	40
4	Carrying out assessment	30
5	Lack of mentor training	17.2
6	Different personalities	16.7
7	Different education values	16.1
8	Different status of mentor/mentee	3.8
9	Concerns that mentee will clone practice	0

Table 6b. Percentage respondents rating mentoring issue of highest importance in supporting professional development of teacher trainee

<i>Rank order</i>	<i>Mentoring technique</i>	<i>Teacher trainees</i>
1	Time to carry out role	45.8
2	Quality of mentee	44
2	Difference in mentor/mentee roles	44
4	Carrying out assessment	33.3
5	Lack of mentor training	17.4
6	Different personalities	16.7
7	Different education values	16.0
8	Different status of mentor/mentee	0
8	Concerns that mentee will clone practice	0

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