

The role of teaching assistants in supporting literacy

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The term 'teaching assistant' refers to those who are employed as support staff in schools under the direction of the class teacher. Teaching assistants (TAs) received their first official mention in the Plowden Report (1967) where the need for teacher-aides – as they were described – was acknowledged. TAs have been integral to the primary school community ever since.

Their role has changed significantly over the past two decades from a more care-oriented general support (Clayton, 1993) to an increasingly pedagogical responsibility, particularly in relation to literacy support where evidence exists that they can make a positive impact on attainment. Maximising the role of TAs is an ongoing challenge but one which needs to be addressed



in every school, in order for children to fulfil their potential.

Historical Context

The two key ways in which TAs' roles have changed is reflected in imperatives enshrined in two key

policy initiatives; the first, relating to reducing the workload of teachers: *Teachers: meeting the challenge of change* (Hillage et al. 1998) and the second relating to their role in supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities in

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mainstream schools: *Excellence for all children: meeting special educational needs* (Department for Education and Skills 1997). The policies represented a dual agenda: the first to enable the inclusion of more children with special educational needs in mainstream schools and the second, to address the issue of sustainable recruitment and retention within the teaching profession (Blatchford et al. 2009, Blatchford et al. 2007).

This dual agenda has caused a number of challenges in clarifying the role of teaching assistants in what has been described as a ‘blurring of boundaries,’ with TAs taking on some of the responsibilities usually associated with a class teacher – particularly TAs with the Higher Level Teaching Award (HLTA) status. Yet there has also been an expectation that TAs will ‘specialise’ in supporting those with individual needs. The diversity of roles is reflected in the range of titles used to describe TAs’ positions. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) (2005) survey reported forty-eight different job titles, including ‘non-teaching assistant’ and ‘learning support assistant’.

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Since the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy in 1998, TAs have played an important and increasing role in supporting ‘at-risk’* readers in addition to their ‘wider pedagogical role’ (WPR) as noted by Blatchford et al (2009). Compared to the WPR, the body of research evidence is relatively



stronger, reporting a significant impact on literacy attainment (Savage and Carless, 2005).

Researchers note that a constant stumbling block to maximising the impact of TAs, is the lack of training. A systematic literature review (based on eighty-one studies), for example, conducted by Cajkler et al. (2007) explored how training and professional development activities were impacting on teaching assistants’ classroom practice between 1988 and 2006. Training for classroom support staff was described as ‘patchy’ and ‘uncoordinated’ (Cajkler et al. 2007:1) with no consistent or coherent practice in relation to training. In the case of the UK, the only exception was the training provided for the HLTA status.

A spotlight on TAs in the national Every Child a Reader (ECaR) project

A national project - *Every Child a Reader* (ECaR) - which ran between 2008-2011, provided a unique opportunity to consider the role of TAs within a layered intervention with national funding and endorsement from the then, Department for Families and Schools (DCFS). Reading Recovery (RR) was the prime intervention, delivered by highly trained teachers; the other interventions, based on the same model, were most commonly facilitated by TAs.

A large-scale independent national evaluation of ECaR undertaken between 2010 and 2011, (Tanner et al. 2010), provided strong evidence for the impact of RR, but it also found



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that it was most effective when the intervention was aligned with other layered interventions as part of a local authority strategy.

Fischer Family Trust Wave 3

One of the interventions - Fischer Family Trust Wave 3 (FFTW3) - was developed by an RR teacher leader and taught by TAs. The programme required explicit approval by the senior leadership team (SLT) in schools to secure funding; initial TA training took place alongside the class teacher and ongoing support for the TA was available. The requirement that the class teacher trained alongside the TA was unusual and for this reason, FFTW3 was chosen as a case study to examine more closely the ways in which TAs were deployed to support literacy (Johnson, 2018).

The case reports – fragmentation and integration

The case reports from TA interviews explored role, communication and training. TAs were placed on a continuum of fragmentation to integration shown in table 1. **

The term ‘fragmentation’ was used where TA’s effectiveness in working with children was compromised. The term ‘integration’ was used where the TA’s role, though diverse, demonstrated integration in that the ‘component elements [of the role, training and communication] combine harmoniously’ (Soanes and Stevenson 2003). All TAs had a diverse and flexible role, but not all felt fully integrated within the school teaching and learning community.

Table 1: Indicators of integration and fragmentation

Indicators of integration	Indicators of fragmentation
TA has access to good quality CPD on an ongoing basis	TA feels unable to access training for CPD
TA perceives that support is available if needed	TA perceives that support is minimal or unavailable
TA has good communication with the class teacher and is linked to a particular member of staff	TA has little communication with the class teacher
TA has good communication with the SLT	TA has little or no communication with the SLT
TA perceives that her voice is heard.	TA perceives that she has no voice.
TA has clear timetable and is largely able to keep to it.	TA has timetable but this is frequently abandoned.
TA perceives that she is valued and respected.	TA perceives that she is not valued and respected.
TA feels ‘in control’ despite flexibility of role	TA feels out of control within the flexibility of the role.

Hallmarks of integration: agency, affiliation and sustainability

TAs who were most integrated into their school community felt they had some degree of agency and were able to act autonomously, where appropriate, because they had received a good level of training. At the same time, they felt fully affiliated within the school community, where professional dialogue around children’s learning was welcomed and valued. Such agency and affiliation resulted in a degree of continuity and coherence of support for children which ensured sustainability of provision over time.

Current Guidance

Current guidance echoes the body of research related to the deployment of TAs. The Education Endowment

Foundation toolkit (Sharples, Webster, and Blatchford 2015), in particular, provides a comprehensive, research informed guide to the deployment of TAs more generally – not simply in relation to literacy intervention. The toolkit includes a *Recommendations Summary*, an *Interventions Health Check* and a *TA observation schedule* which may inform leaders for future training and support for TAs in school. The principles of providing good training, time for liaison with teachers and targeted deployment apply to all aspects of the TA role, including literacy support. They also apply in all contexts in which schools currently operate including Multi-Academy Trusts, Community or Voluntary schools.

It should be noted that, although this article focuses on TAs’ involvement



in literacy support, it is important that TAs are trained to work with children of all abilities, enabling teachers to work with children who have the most complex needs and thus gain a fuller picture of teaching and learning across the classroom.

Conclusion

It is vitally important that principles of effective deployment, as demonstrated in the FFTW3 case study and the wider body of research are properly noted and acted upon in schools, namely that:

- high quality training is offered;
- there is a structure of ongoing support;
- there is an opportunity to participate in CPD;
- there is active support from the SLT.

Evidence is strong that TAs are valued by class teachers and the wider school community, yet their professional status is almost entirely

dependent upon the school context. Sustainable intervention requires a group of TA practitioners who are, themselves, professionally supported – mirroring the support structures in place for teachers and the children with whom they work.

*A term encompassing less able, and less experienced readers in addition to those with dyslexia or dyslexic tendencies.

** All TAs interviewed for the case study were female, hence the use of she/her in Table 1.

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**Dr. Krishan Sood, Nottingham
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Pen Portrait

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