

## **The Voices of Teaching Assistants (are we value for money?)**

### **Introduction**

There has been a significant increase in the number of teaching assistants (TAs), employed by schools in England: from 60,600 full-time (FTE) assistants in 1997 (TDA, 2008) to almost 160,000 in 2010. These figures mean that TAs make up nearly one third of the school workforce. Factors contributing to this increase include the implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (DfES, 1998, 1999), the 'Raising Standards and Tackling Workload' agreement (DfES, 2003), the wider inclusion in mainstream schools of pupils with special educational needs and the requirement of schools to provide extended provision (Ofsted, 2010) in the form of breakfast and after-school clubs.

Ofsted (2010) reported that TAs commonly worked with lower-attaining pupils or those most likely to disrupt the lesson. These were also the pupils likely to be withdrawn from classes for specific intervention programmes. As a result, lower-attaining pupils spent considerably less time than other pupils being taught by a qualified teacher. As Blatchford *et al.* (2007:20) argue:

There is something paradoxical about the least qualified staff in schools being left to teach the most educationally needy pupils, and there is a concern over whether this provides the most effective support for the children in most need.

Furthermore, some pupils with SEN face isolation, leading to 'a new form of segregation within the mainstream' (Ainscow *et al.*, 1999:138), as 'velcro-ing' TAs to

pupils becomes a form of within-class segregation (Wedell, 2005:5). Richards and Armstrong (2008:124) further warn that TAs could become 'barriers to inclusion' if they are employed as 'bodyguards' to control the most challenging pupils, such as those with emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Higgins *et al.* (2011:7) have been dismissive of TAs, finding that they have a 'very low or no impact, for a high cost', making a case that the employment of TAs does not provide 'value for money'. Moreover, Blatchford *et al.* (2011) have suggested that more support for individual pupils does not of itself guarantee improved academic progress. In fact, they found there was a consistent trend for those with most support to make less academic progress than similar pupils who received less support.

These findings are challenged by the voices represented in this research: it is not that TAs are not value-for-money but that they are *undervalued* for the money they represent. All participants in this research were committed to making a significant difference in supporting their pupils and rejected the notion that their efforts might have an opposite effect. The purpose of this research has been to offer TAs a platform to voice their own ideas and experiences, their challenges and difficulties, and to 'set the record straight'.

## **Voice**

Education is a complex arena and one means to unravel that complexity is to listen to all involved: school leaders, teachers, pupils, parents and support staff. Cohn and Kottkamp (1993) maintain that efforts to improve education are doomed to failure if any teacher is absent from the dialogue and decision-making, stressing that all voices and views must be included. If the importance of voice is recognised for teachers, the same can be argued for para-professionals, and, as noted above, they

comprise approximately one third of school staff. However, so far, this large group of - mainly women - has remained 'quiet' and therefore 'un-heard'. In Belenky *et al.*'s (1986) terms, they have been in a position of silence, accepting their situations without questioning. This research has explored the backgrounds of eleven participants, their reasons for becoming a TA, the roles the participants fulfilled, the associated responsibilities they assumed, and the extent to which their voices have been heard. The participants were white females, aged 30 to 55 years, employed in primary, secondary schools and special schools with between three to eight years of experience as a TA.

**Figure 1:** Profile of the participants (names are pseudonyms)

| <b>Name</b> | <b>Age range</b> | <b>Type of School</b>                    | <b>Job Title</b>            | <b>Years employed</b> | <b>Previous employment</b>       |
|-------------|------------------|--|-----------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|
| Anne        | 35-54            | SLD                                      | TA                          | 3                     | Office                           |
| Brenda      | 55+              | SEN                                      | SNA                         | 8                     | Publican                         |
| Claire      | 35-54            | Prim/Sec/Short Stay schools (former PRU) | Behaviour Support Assistant | 3                     | Hairdresser                      |
| Debbie      | 35-54            | Primary                                  | LSA                         | 5                     | Admin officer<br>Social Security |

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|-------------|------------------|-----------------------|------------------|-----------------------|--|
| Emma        | 18-34            | Primary               | LSA              | 3                     | Beauty Therapist                           |
| Fiona       | 35-54            | Primary               | LSA              | 3                     | FE   |
| Gina        | 35-54            | Primary               | LSA              | 8                     | Supermarket checkout, hospital housekeeper |
| Helen       | 35-54            | Secondary             | LSA              | 4                     | Secretary                                  |
| Irene       | 35-54            | Secondary             | Maths TA         | 4                     | PA   |
| Katherine   | 18-34            | Primary               | TA               | 3.5                   | Sales Assistant                            |
| Laura       | 35-54            | Primary (Infant)      | LSA              | 6                     | Housing Benefit Officer                    |

## **Research design**

This research looked to capture first-person accounts of perceptions and experiences, illuminating phenomena (Punch, 2009), whilst giving the participants a voice. As pointed out by Jackson and Mazzei (2009), the use of voice has been privileged in qualitative research because it has been assumed that the voice speaks a truth, accurately reflecting meaning and experience. Access to this experience, therefore, is 'gained through talk' (Kitzinger, 2004:128). However, retrospective accounts can be unreliable because, as Kitzinger (2004:128) argues, 'experience is never raw but embedded in a social web of interpretation and re-interpretation'.

Accounts of the same experience can vary as several factors, such as the mood and circumstances of the participant, personality of the researcher, the purpose of the research, will affect the presentation and re-telling of the experience.

The data collection consisted of two focus group interviews, which provided rich and in-depth data. Group-think, however, could not be ruled out. The interviews were transcribed and inductive analysis generated a series of key themes. A number of validation processes were developed, such as respondent validity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), as transcripts of the focus groups were returned to the participants for commenting, thus ensuring the transcripts provided an accurate record of their contributions.

## **Discussion of data**

### ***The TA's backgrounds and previous employment***

These women came to be TAs from a wide range of previous employment: Anne worked in an office, but had also been a cleaner, website promoter, pizza delivery driver and waitress. Laura worked as a Housing Benefit Officer with a local council,

Claire had been a hairdresser, Emma a beauty therapist and Gina had worked at the checkout of a supermarket and as a hospital housekeeper. Ofsted (2010) emphasised that, for schools to be most effective, they must provide opportunities for support staff to develop their skills and also allow support staff to draw on their current expertise. These TAs, too, saw experience 'in life' as a positive attribute:

**Laura:** It's nice if people have previous experience because you can share and learn from each other...

The negative side is that, for these women, their schools failed to maximise this experience. There was no evidence to suggest that TAs have been given roles in which they could draw on specific skills and expertise from their public or private lives. Anne, for example, worked in a special school and is a keen horse-woman. She regularly provided horse-riding for disabled children on a voluntary basis. However, although some of the pupils at her school had weekly riding lessons, her skills went unused; she was never timetabled to support these. While there may have been institutional, insurance obstacles, it was not fully recognised that she actually had this valuable experience.

### ***Reasons for becoming a teaching assistant***

All participants had become a teaching assistant because they had children themselves and the school hours and holidays suited their family life: *'it fitted in with family needs'*. Most TAs began as parent-helpers in the class of their child, and found that they *'enjoyed helping children'* before applying for a post.

**Emma:** I think initially... because I had young children it fits school hours. I actually really enjoy helping children. To then actually get paid for it is even better!

The negative side of this was seen to be the tensions created by working at the school attended by one's own children. Gina described an instance where a class teacher reprimanded her son in her presence, causing her to feel acute embarrassment. Fiona had a similar experience when she overheard members of the teaching staff discussing her son. She found it difficult to remain professional and impartial, and not be a 'mum'.

**Fiona:** I think it's a bit funny working in the same class where your child is, you see too much and, to be honest, I find it difficult not to keep an eye on my little boy all the time. I know he can be a bit boisterous but I don't want him to make a fool of himself. Or, hmm...of me really, in front of the teacher and all that, it's embarrassing, especially if they then talk about it in the staffroom; makes me feel bad and inadequate.

### ***Job titles, roles and responsibilities***

Schools have developed a wide variety of job titles for support staff roles. These sometimes 'gave a false impression of the person's actual role' (Hutchings *et al.*, 2009:3). Responsibilities for many tasks, which were previously the sole remit of the teacher, have shifted, with many TAs taking on these tasks. As Vincett, Cremin and Thomas (2005:32) say:

Today, TAs are thought of as assistants who teach, and not merely as assistants to the teacher [...] they should be involved in the broadest range of activity in the classroom [...] and fulfil a wide range of tasks that parallel or shadow those of the teacher.

Anne and Katherine were 'TAs'; Irene was a 'Mathematics TA'; Brenda a 'Special Needs Assistant'; Claire a 'Behavioural Support Assistant'; all others were 'Learning

Support Assistants'. Their roles and responsibilities, though, did not vary significantly. There was some variation in the perceived status of the assistants. The highest status was awarded to full-time TAs, often higher-level teaching assistants (HLTAs). The lowest was attributed to part-time Special Needs Assistants, who might support one particular pupil. Claire, a Behavioural Support Assistant, visited schools to support pupils with behavioural issues, sometimes for only one hour a week. She felt her status within the schools was very low and that teachers saw her as interfering in their practice. Although she worked with the most challenging of pupils, she did not always feel supported by the school staff. Her voice or views were not ordinarily considered:

**Claire:** I feel like an outsider, a pain, not working towards the same goals. I work a lot with travellers' kids but the schools don't even bother to tell me if they're not in, let me drive to the school for nothing. That's how much they value me. No-one ever asks or tells me anything.

Brenda supported a child with Down 's syndrome, worked afternoons only, and experienced difficulty in maintaining contact with colleagues:

**Brenda:** I find it hard when I come in to find out what has happened in the morning. I don't want to pester the teacher in her lunch break. I don't feel I have a right to say anything; I'm only there for a couple of hours.

This was a usual comment: part-time employed TAs tended not to express themselves in school, because they had no opportunity or perceived 'right' to voice opinions.



### ***Roles and responsibilities***

These participants worked mainly with small groups of children, occasionally with individuals. In general, their pupils were on the lower end of the spectrum of ability and attainment, or displayed challenging behaviour.

TAs in secondary schools were usually allocated to a specific pupil, and moved with that pupil from lesson to lesson. They were seldom experts in particular subjects, yet supported pupils in these subject areas. They took notes, especially in science classes, without really understanding what they were writing. Helen, for example, felt tension between focusing on the lesson to note accurate information for the pupil, and focusing on the pupil to monitor behaviour. She further pointed out that some of the pupils she supported had become 'lazy':

**Helen:** He [the pupil] treats me more like I'm his PA rather than a TA, I feel I'm doing all the running around.

Data from these focus groups suggested that covering for teacher absence was more frequent in primary schools than secondary schools. While the appointment of TAs to cover lessons provides continuity for the pupils, their use was also driven by budgetary concerns. Emma reported that HTLAs, who usually supplied the cover in her primary school, were regarded as '*glorified supervisors*', simply saving the school money that would otherwise be spent on the recruitment of a supply teacher:

**Emma:** A supply teacher costs the school a hundred and fifty pounds, I just get an extra two pounds on my salary.

It was not only HLTAs who took responsibility for whole classes; other support staff also provided cover, working at HLTA level without the status. In this sense, participants did feel that the boundaries between the support roles were unclear. The duties carried out by different types of assistant appeared very similar. In general, these TAs were unhappy at the prospect of supervising whole classes and were reluctant to consider whole-class work as part of their role, as this was perceived to be the teacher's responsibility, especially in classes where behaviour of the pupils was challenging:

**Debbie:** I don't mind working with small groups, I have my own literacy group who I see every day. But I really feel out of my depth with the whole class, especially as there are some children I know I cannot control, I wouldn't know how and I don't think it's fair to ask me to do that.

This was contrary to the findings of Hutchings *et al.* (2009:5), who claimed that the majority of support assistants, in all sectors, agreed that they 'enjoyed being responsible for whole classes, and that this was a good use of their skills and experience'. Emma's account illustrated that a more structured approach to training and development is required, as not all TAs feel equipped to teach whole classes or to deal effectively with pupils with specific educational needs:

**Emma:** I have been on a training day on behaviour management, but it only covered the basics, looking at praise and sanctions and triggers for bad behaviour. It's a start, and I did enjoy it, but it didn't give us strategies to deal with really challenging behaviour, such as an autistic little boy we have in class. I really don't know how best to deal with him.

## **Planning**

As pointed out by Parker *et al.* (2009), teaching assistants can feel frustrated if they do not have advance knowledge of the lesson they are to support, fearing that it makes their contributions less effective. In the current study, participants agreed that allocation of tasks was often ad-hoc: TAs were asked to remedy immediate situations, often linked to behavioural issues, before being sent to the next one, without time for preparation or planning. In this sense, they could be seen to function as 'Elastoplast', a quick, short term solution to a situation.

The majority of participants were usually given the teacher's plan for the week although, as in Irene's case, she was not told in advance how lessons were planned.

**Irene:** I just turn up in the morning and do what I'm asked to do.

Collaborative teamwork with their teacher, including time for planning and evaluating teaching and learning, would allow teaching assistants the involvement and recognition they seek, while keeping the overall responsibility with the teacher. However, this requires designated time for such meetings to take place. Participants reported that lesson planning was often undertaken before or after school, during breaks or at lunchtime. They felt uneasy about attending meetings outside school hours because this meant they had to arrange childcare for their own children.

**Anne:** Planning meetings at my school are on a Monday after school, which is really awkward. I feel guilty if my daughter has to go to after-school club because I'm still in meetings.

**Brenda:** Mine are in the mornings, before school start. What do I do with my own kids? Ask them to hang around or get someone else to drop them off? I don't even start work until the afternoon, and won't get paid for it!

Furthermore, participants were often involved in supervision at break and lunchtimes (for some this was a separate job), which made it difficult to meet with the class teacher. Therefore, planning was sometimes carried out on an opportunistic basis. There appeared to be a real dilemma: TAs wanted to be more involved in planning decisions, and for some this was expected by their school. However, time for planning meetings did not always take the needs and commitments of the TAs into consideration. As a result, some teaching assistants in this research felt obliged to work outside their contractual hours; others declined to do this, thereby not contributing to planning decisions – despite having clear and valuable insights into the progress and further needs of the pupils.

### ***Review meetings***

Attending and contributing to review meetings was considered one of the most important tasks teaching assistants performed. The participants claimed to have in-depth knowledge of the pupils, understanding their needs while closely monitoring their progress and, therefore, felt they had an important contribution to make.

However, attendance at such meetings was not always possible as TAs could not be missed in the classroom, or because meetings took place outside contracted hours.

**Brenda:** There was a review meeting last week but as it was in the morning, I couldn't go. Normally I try to be there anyway, but I couldn't this time, they never think of when it's convenient for me.

**Debbie:** We also had a meeting in the morning but because it was during my literacy group time I couldn't attend, even though it was about one of my boys. I

really felt I knew more about this boy than anyone else, but that was it, I know my place.

Although the assistants informed others involved, such as teachers and special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs), it was felt that opportunities were missed to provide an in-depth view of pupils' situations. Further, assistants saw their potential contributions consistently under-valued. They felt they were in the best position to take an active part but, somehow, were not considered 'good enough'.

**Debbie:** I felt a bit annoyed but also sad. Why couldn't someone else do my group on that occasion? I'm good enough to take responsibility for that group, planning the sessions, but when it comes to the formal bits, they almost don't want to know.

**Brenda:** Remember talking about status earlier? That's when you know you haven't got any. You do your job and it is appreciated by everyone but not officially. It's like a punch in the face

It appears from Debbie and Brenda's accounts that they were aware of the significance their contributions made to the day-to-day running of a classroom. These contributions, however, were not always attributed to the TA and, in return, TAs failed to feel valued members of the school work-force.

### **Summary and recommendations**

This study was small-scale, with data collected from two focus groups. It can be questioned whether the sample could be considered to be representative: were the

participants typical TAs? Although all were employed in a small area of South East England, they were employed by a range of schools. They had different job titles and job descriptions, yet seemed to agree on a range of issues, recognising these from their own experiences and settings. Wide generalisations from this small sample, however, are not claimed. If representative, they spoke on behalf of 160,000 TAs, nationwide. United, their voices would send a loud message, not only to schools but also to education authorities and to policy makers. If the intention of employing TAs is to raise standards and to improve pupil attainment, a different approach should be adopted, which means they should not undertake tasks they are currently routinely assigned to do in the same manner. To extract the very greatest value-for money from a very willing part of the work force requires an organisational and institutional re-think.

The message voiced by these TAs suggests a change in policy as well as practice. There should be a clear career and related pay structure, which takes experience and qualifications into account, furthermore, TAs should have clear job descriptions. To ensure the most effective provision TAs and their teachers should be allocated time, within their contract, to discuss planning and other pupil or school related issues. If current TA deployment does not offer value for money, then maybe their voices should be heard to allow them to be more effective in their roles.

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