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Teaching Assistants managing behaviour – who knows how they do it? A review of literature

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Abstract

This paper will reflect on the specific challenges facing teaching assistants (TAs) when managing behaviour. It will consider the variety of existing research into this area, and consider why the paucity of specific research is problematic. How difficulties in access to, and available training, levels of preparation for lessons and the lack of guidance on teacher and TA working relationships impact on how TAs manage behaviour will be discussed. The paper will also highlight some of the conflicts inherent within broader issues which impact, either positively or negatively on TAs ability to manage behaviour, including TA role definition, deployment and the wider pedagogical aspects of their evolving role.

Keywords

Teaching assistants (TAs); behaviour; behaviour management; teachers; relationships; role definition.

The term teaching assistant (TA) is used within this paper to define roles which include Higher Level TAs (HLTAs), classroom assistants and learning support assistants.

Introduction

This paper considers the findings of research which has been undertaken, both the range and type of literature available on TAs' management of behaviour, as well as discussing conflictual issues and those which require further research.

Twenty years ago Bower's (1997) research showed that TAs often fulfilled the role of teachers with children frequently cited their 'disciplinary function'. The DfES (2003) stated that TAs were expected to have 'advanced roles in relation to behaviour and, and as part of the consultation on 'Developing the Role of Support Staff' (DfES, 2002) specific 'routes' for TAs were proposed. One of which was the 'behaviour and Guidance Route', where it was proposed TAs could become a 'behaviour and guidance manager', take on responsibility for the 'co-ordination and management of the behaviour team' or be a 'behaviour policy co-ordinator'. This clearly shows that TAs were explicitly expected to play a senior, whole-school role in managing behaviour. This continued to be highlighted in research by, for example Groom and Rose (2005) who noted TA's 'implicit' role in managing behaviour. Later research (Blatchford *et al.*, 2007; Webster, Blatchford, Bassett, Brown & Russell, 2011) continued to reinforce this suggesting that 'paraprofessionals' such as TAs had become the 'default person' to carry out behaviour interventions, with the TA often viewed as the 'eyes and ears of the classroom' (Dunne Goddard and Woolhouse, 2008). TAs' responsibility for managing behaviour also continued to be asserted in recent government documents (DfE, 2013; DfE, 2016)

Paucity

Prior to the landmark 'Deployment and Impact of Support Staff' (DISS) publication (Blatchford, Russell & Webster, 2012), the largest piece of research conducted into TAs worldwide; there was a paucity of exploration of TAs' work in general. Earlier research had been lacking in empirical research and mainly focused on 'describing at the classroom level' what TAs did (Cremin, Thomas & Vincett, 2003; Devecchi 2005). However, research into TA's efficacy at improving educational standards and deployment has increased (HMI, 2002; DfES, 2003; Blatchford, Russell, Bassett, Brown, & Martin, 2007; Alborz, Pearson, Farrell & Howes, 2009; Hammersley-Fletcher & Adnett 2009; Hammersley-Fletcher & Qualter 2009; Webster *et al.*, 2011; Blatchford *et al.*, 2012; Webster & Blatchford, 2013; Graves, 2013; Russell, Webster & Blatchford, 2013; Webster 2014; Radford, Bosanquet, Webster, & Blatchford, 2015; Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015; Sharples, Webster, & Blatchford, 2015; Blatchford, Russell & Webster, 2016). However, despite the increase in research there are still issues within the body of research which exists. Giangreco, Suter, and Doyle, (2010) collated research into what in the US are termed 'paraprofessionals', which equates to the UK TA role. A survey of thirty two studies showed that seventy eight percent were descriptive, pointing to problems in illuminating patterns. Giangreco *et al.* (2010) also suggested that the studies at that time 'do little to help answer questions' specifically related to 'appropriateness' or 'effectiveness'. Despite the range of foci, none of the publications surveyed were explicitly concerned with how TAs managed behaviour. Figure 1 below shows the references from a literature review (Clarke, 2016) considering TAs' role in managing behaviour.

It can be seen from Figure 1 that research reports make one of the smallest categories of references cited. The literature review used cannot be assumed to include all relevant publications, but it does reflect general themes in published research. Of the reports cited, three quarters are by the team who authored the DISS report (Blatchford *et al.*, 2012) highlighting advances in research into some aspects of TAs.

Type of reference	Total (n=81 TA specific)	Peer reviewed?	Dates covered
Research reports	8%	No	2004 - 2015
Government documents	8%	No	2002 - 2008
Books	14%	No	1999 - 2016
Journals	68%	Yes	1997 - 2015
Other	2%	No	2016

Figure 1: Table showing published research referenced in a literature review on TAs' management of behaviour

Government publications, or 'grey documents', which often lack references to published, peer reviewed research also made up a relatively small percentage of references cited. The 'other' two percent reference, it could be argued should be categorised as a government publication, as it corresponds to the 'Professional Standards for teaching assistants' which was released in 2016. It were originally commissioned by the DfE under the coalition government. However, five months after the 'expert group' submitted the standards, the government withdrew from the project, with school's minister Nick Gibb stating that the government's refusal to publish the standards provided school's freedom in the way they deployed TAs (Scott, 2015). This supports points raised by Blatchford *et al*, (2016) concerning how surprisingly 'quiet' and 'hands-off' government policy directly affecting TAs has been, actively transferring responsibility from Whitehall to schools. This autonomy has not always been reflected in other government policies for example on behaviour, where particularly in the run up to the general election, but not uniquely, a flurry of publications were released (Ofsted, 2014a, 2014b; DfE, 2014a; 2014b, 2015; DfE and Nick Gibb MP, 2014; DfE and The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, 2014; DfE and The Rt. Hon Nicky Morgan, 2015; DfE, 2015, 2016).

Books, which are not peer reviewed, made up the next category. Of this, almost a third were written by Blatchford's team using data from the DISS report, (Blatchford *et al.*, 2012; Russell *et al.*, 2013; Blatchford *et al.*, 2016) which was the largest and most comprehensive piece of research on

TAs to date. The research had a significant sample of respondents and methods of data collection (700 pupil and 100 TA observations, 17,800 survey responses, 470 interviews) and can therefore be judged to be empirical and large scale. It was funded by the then DCSF, with the authors acknowledging the 'professional way the research was managed'. In contrast, research in another book (Galton & MacBeath, 2008), was funded by the National Union of Teachers (NUT), which was the only teaching union not to sign the 'Workload agreement' (DfES, 2003), and therefore, not to lend their support to TAs' increased pedagogical role. It is possible as a result of the union's strong and unique position, that some bias may be present within the edited research. Compared to the explicit methodology and sample sizes clearly stated in Blatchford *et al's* (2012) research, that reported by Galton and MacBeath (2008), with 'around sixty' respondents including 'four or five' TAs, is less transparent.

The remaining sixty eight percent of references were peer reviewed journal articles. Although this signals high quality research it may also be indicative of small-scale research projects. As Giangreco *et al.*, (2010) found in the survey they undertook only seven of the thirty two articles reported 'outcomes' for a total of twenty six students. This raises issues inherent within small scale research about generalizability to the wider a population.

Thirteen years ago Howes (2003) suggested that research had been focussed too narrowly, and had not considered the broader support for 'soft-skills' TAs offered, including their role in managing behaviour. This continues to be the case with calls to address 'key deficiencies in this body of research' (Rubie-Davies, Blatchford, Webster, Koutsoubou, & Bassett, 2010; Giangreco *et al.*, 2010; Graves, 2013). Sharples *et al.* (2015) described research into TAs' impact on 'soft' non-academic development as 'thin', suggesting evidence was rooted in 'impressionistic data' rather than empirical research. This shows that there is a need for long-term, large-scale independently funded research investigating TAs' role in managing behaviour.

Although much rhetoric surrounded the push for, and unprecedented increase in TA numbers, there was a paucity of specific guidance on how TAs and teachers should work together.

Commenting on the introduction of the Code of Practice in 1994, Bowers (1997) stated that despite the many detailed recommendations, 'it is quite silent about the ways in which additional adults...should work'. Others (Rose, 2000; Marr, Turner, Swann and Hancock, 2001; Cremin *et al.*, 2003; Cremin, Thomas and Vicett, 2005; Mackenzie, 2011) concurred that the relationship between adults working together in the classroom was indeed 'complex', and that there had been little consideration about the ways TA support worked, with a 'more empirical' consideration required. Twenty years after the first SEN Code of Practice, the 2014 update still remains silent on TAs' role (Blatchford *et al.*, 2016), typifying the 'hands-off' government approach on TA specific guidance.

The lack of guidance is significant when research (Thomas, 1992; Tucker, 2009; Devecchi & Rouse, 2010; Mackenzie, 2011; Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015; Radford *et al.*, 2015) shows collaboration as pivotal to a successful teacher: TA working relationship. Research (Devecchi, Dettori, Doveston, Sedgwick, & Jament, 2011) suggested that, although acknowledged as an 'important' aspect of both the TA role, 'collaboration' was also one of the most 'challenging'. It can be seen therefore that understanding how TAs and teachers can collaborate to manage behaviour, and some evidence-based examples of how this can be achieved are necessary.

Research (DfEE, 1997; O'Brien & Garner, 2002; Smith, Whitby & Sharp, 2004; Groom & Rose, 2005; Gerschel, 2005; Tucker, 2009; Symes & Humphrey, 2011; Sharples *et al.*, 2015) showed a 'mismatch' between the level of training TAs received and their increasingly demanding role. The DfEE (1997) cautioned that many TAs had 'little or no training for the work they do' and Ofsted (2008) conceded that 'weaknesses remained' in training and deployment. The same point was highlighted later (Webster *et al.*, 2011; Sharples *et al.*, 2015) with concerns continuing to be raised about the level of training TAs had. Without training Galton and MacBeath (2008) found TAs resorted to using 'common sense and family experience', with one respondent suggesting that she had 'drawn on her experience as a mum' to plug the gaps in training. This is particularly apposite when behaviour management was identified by TAs as a training need (Butt & Lowe, 2011; Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015). Moves to improve training were made, specifically with the introduction of

national professional standards for HLTAs (DfES, 2006), yet uptake for the training was low (Burgess & Mayes, 2009). This was compounded by the withdrawal of funding for some HLTA programmes (Burgess & Mayes, 2009; Graves 2013). For those without HLTA status, there was a paucity of training as well as issues in accessing what was available (Galton & MacBeath, 2008). Graves (2013) stated that the 'lack of a national pay and career structure' had resulted in 'ad-hoc' training actively hampering TAs' progression.

The paucity of training is also reflected in TAs levels of 'preparedness'. Blatchford *et al.*, (2011) found that three quarters of teachers questioned had no formal time to plan and talk over sessions with TAs, which resulted in 'brief and ad hoc' discussions. This supported earlier research (Marr *et al.*, 2001) which found similar issues, but also reported that where joint planning and feedback took place only one in five TAs were paid for the additional time. Gerschel's (2005) research showed that the 'lack of prior notice' and necessity to 'interpret teaching in the lesson' was a source of frequent complaints from TAs. Similarly, Webster *et al.* (2012) reported that two thirds of teachers (n=12) and three quarters of TAs (n=12) rated preparation and feedback time as 'less effective', reiterating reliance on TAs 'goodwill'. These themes also recurred in Sharples *et al.*'s (2015) research with TAs stating they often 'went into lessons blind', and that communication, as previously stated, often relied on TAs generosity meeting during unpaid hours.

Conflict

The continued transformation of the TA role has not happened overnight nor without controversy. Research (O'Brien & Garner, 2002; Dixon, 2003; Vincett *et al.*, 2005; Blatchford *et al.*, 2007; Hammersley-Fletcher & Adnett, 2009) questioned the benefits of TAs' role expansion and whether drives to increase their numbers were 'simply for the benefit of the system', despite the espoused potential benefits in regards to behaviour management (DfEE, 1997; DfE, 2001; HMI, 2002; DfES, 2003; DfES, 2003a; Blatchford *et al.*, 2004; Symes & Humphrey, 2011). Graves (2011) suggested that self-sacrifice' was required by TAs and that 'goodwill' and 'dedication' were at risk of being

'exploited'. This was not a unique to the UK with Giangreco (2010) questioning the lack of evidential basis or a 'theoretically defensible foundation' for TA 'utilisation' in the US.

A key issue in contextualising TAs' responsibility for managing behaviour is the conflict over a shared understanding of what constitutes their role, beyond the agreed 'multifaceted' nature of it (Moran & Abbott, 2002; Smith *et al.*, 2004; Kerry 2005; Collins & Simco, 2006; Fraser & Meadows, 2008; Graves 2013). Graves (2013) cautioned the role was defined only in the negative, that TAs 'are not teachers', which obscures 'what exactly the nascent role is'. Sharples *et al.* (2015) called for schools to 'rigorously define' the TA role, however, others (Tucker, 2009; Hancock, Hall, Cable, and Eyres, 2010; Graves 2013) supported Thomas' prior (1992) assertion that the cultural norms, particularly of primary schools, did not support 'clear role definition'. Devecchi *et al.* (2011) viewed the 'fluidity' that exists in the definition of the TA role as both a blessing and a curse, with TAs 'inhabiting a professional liminal space', the confines of which were both necessarily and positively 'marked by fluid and contentious personal boundaries'. Nevertheless, it can be seen that without agreement on what the TA role actually is, conflict is almost inevitable.

The intractable issue of role definition highlights the necessity for teachers and TAs to take time to discuss these issues and clarify expectations between themselves. Quicke (2003) found that teachers were able to develop TAs' 'autonomy', through a process of 'inclusion' and 'empowerment'. Hammersley-Fletcher and Qualter's (2009) later research came to similar conclusions and found that how teachers 'choose to see themselves' dictated the relationships they formed with TAs. They found that teachers either viewed themselves as the only ones who could meet pupils needs by 'controlling' aspects such as planning and delivery compared to those who took a more 'expanded view of professionalism'. Findings from Webster *et al.* (2012) supported Rose's (2000) views and demonstrated that when teachers were given the 'opportunity to reflect' is allowed them to forge a 'meaningful understanding of the TA role', as well as how they influenced the effectiveness of the role, either positively or negatively. This was supported by Cockcroft and

Atkinson's (2015) who found 'approachability' in teachers 'contributed to how effective they (TAs) could be'.

Research (Thomas, 1992; Rose, 2000; Moran & Abbott, 2002; Mansaray, 2006; Devecchi & Rouse, 2010; Hancock, *et al.*, 2010; Butt & Lowe, 2011; Webster *et al.*, 2012) has also highlighted little uniform understanding of teacher: TA role boundaries. Collins and Simco (2006) found although TAs were able to clearly demarcate their roles and responsibilities from those of the teacher, neither children nor parents took account of these differences. This may be as a result of, as Hancock *et al.* (2010) noted TAs 'boundary crossing', with them 'moving in and out of their own and teachers' roles'. This reflected Mansaray's (2006) observations of TAs' liminal role and boundary crossing between being 'teacher and not teacher', of 'occupying the role of teacher' yet the necessity to be 'ready to vacate this role'. He proposed this 'implied an ambiguous relationship to authority and [the] discipline' TAs were able to exert.

Differences in the ways teachers and TAs fulfil 'boundary crossing' roles, such as managing behaviour' are also a source conflict. Butt and Lowe (2011) found that although TAs wanted more training in managing behaviour, the teachers in their interviews (n=22) were clear that this was their, not the TAs', 'role or responsibility'. This contrasts with children and parents who, along with TAs saw part of their role as managing behaviour (Tucker, 2009; Butt & Lowe, 2011). However, research (Rubie-Davies *et al.*, 2010) using transcripts of lessons (n=130) highlighted the key differences in the way teachers and TAs manage behaviour, with sixty incidents of TAs managing behaviour reactively compared to only ten managing behaviour preventatively. This correlates to preventative strategies to manage behaviour by eleven teachers in contrast to four TAs. This is a significant issue when proactive approaches can reduce the likelihood of problems and are more effective than reactive approaches (Lewis, 1999; Watkins & Wagner, 2000). Research (Rubie-Davies *et al.*, 2010; Webster *et al.*, 2011) suggested TAs 'reactive role' may result from a lack of time with the teachers to prepare

(Rose, 2000; Marr *et al.*, 2001; Gerschel, 2005; Blatchford *et al.*, 2011 Webster *et al.*, 2012; Sharples *et al.*, 2015), which, as discussed, is an ongoing problem.

Nonetheless, as a consequence of the introduction of planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time many schools chose to extend their use of TAs, particularly HLTAs. This effectively increased the time TAs spent 'teaching' (Blatchford *et al.*, 2012), overlooking Ofsted's (2004) first note of caution about TAs' increasingly direct pedagogical role, which it suggested, required investigation. TAs also described themselves as 'carers' as opposed to 'pedagogues', being honest about 'their lack of requisite expertise' as well as expressing 'anxiety' about 'teaching' (Galton & MacBeath, 2008). Nonetheless, research (Blatchford *et al.*, 2007) showed TAs 'direct pedagogical role' outweighed time spent helping either the teacher or the school. Evidence from research (Webster *et al.*, 2012; Webster, 2014) highlighted the continuing beliefs of schools and parents that TAs were 'hardwired' to support SEN children, showing the 'entrenched' nature of school's attitudes towards TAs.

The requirement for collaboration with TAs was seen by some as threatening teachers' need for independence. Thomas (1992) suggested there was a degree of territoriality and secrecy in the way teachers worked which often precluded TAs, confirmed by his view that collaborating in the teacher's own domain, the classroom, was not 'natural'. This was later supported by Tucker (2009) who highlighted the possibility for 'conflict' and 'mistrust' between teachers and TAs due to the necessity for TAs to 'create their own clearly identifiable space' within the classroom. Hammersley-Fletcher and Qualter (2009) also found teacher's own personal sense of 'direct responsibility' for pupils resulted in 'difficulty in sharing' in the classroom. It was suggested that teachers who 'retained control' and were unwilling to 'share responsibility' for children's with TAs, did so because they had 'come into teaching to teach' and viewed TAs' increasingly pedagogical role as an 'erosion' of their own. Yet some changes were welcomed, with suggestions that being a TA was now a 'profession' rather than a 'second class citizen' (Galton & MacBeath, 2008). The evolving role also shifted away

from the perception that a TA was someone who only 'staples something to a board for eight hours a day' (Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015) into something increasingly 'interesting and professional'.

TA deployment in school is another site of conflict. Deployment can be seen to influence TAs' ability to manage behaviour, as the way in which they are deployed dictates which members of staff they work with and therefore, who they are able to learn from. It was highlighted by Graves (2011) that despite being 'highly valued' by participants in her study, this method of informal learning lacked the acknowledgement necessary for 'professional conversations' and reflections with colleagues to take place. TAs instead described their observations, and therefore opportunities to learn from teachers as 'clandestine' and surreptitious', which did not help TAs to move from 'habitual' to 'informed' practice (Graves, 2011).

However, specific training is not necessarily the answer to these issues. Despite research (Marr et al., 2001) which showed 'nearly all' (n=275) TAs were interested in training, almost half had difficulty attending courses, either as a result of other commitments or lack of availability. This was supported by Webster *et al.*, (2011) who also found a lack of satisfaction with the training opportunities available for TAs. The impact of any training received was additionally mediated by in-school factors such as 'attitudes' and 'support' from the SLT (Tucker, 2009), resulting in further issues. The type of training available to TAs, specifically HLTAs who are likely to have whole class responsibilities and therefore greater responsibility for managing behaviour, is also a site of conflict and tension. It was proposed (Edmond & Price, 2009; Graves, 2013) that basing the HLTA standards on competence indicators rather than any form of 'higher education' made the assumption that all the necessary training could be gained 'on the job'. This was opposed to professional development for others in the 'children's workforce'. The dichotomy between 'occupational' and 'professional training', which as Ofsted (2008) noted varied considerably in effectiveness, with 'induction, training and appraisal' being 'unsatisfactory' in half of the schools they visited, has implications for teacher: TA relationships. It was suggested (Edmond & Price, 2009) that the difference in TA and teacher

status is highlighted, rather than ameliorated by this 'professionalisation' of the TA role which 'precludes inter-professional dialogue and joint decision making'. Edmond and Price (2009) also suggested that imprecise notions of 'professional status' as opposed to academic qualifications had a negative impact on any 'clear progression' in training, which Graves's (2013) later research supported.

Gerschel's (2005) research described TAs' deployment as 'complex and ill-defined'. Although schools aimed to place TAs with specific classes this often did not work and led to 'fragmentation', which was seen as particularly damaging as it prevented teachers and TAs developing a 'close working partnership' (HMI, 2002). Gerschel (2005) cautioned that without stable deployment TAs suffered 'internal exclusion', for example by regularly working with withdrawal groups outside the classroom. This was exemplified by one respondent in Mackenzie's (2011) research who described her TA role as 'isolating', with the peripatetic nature of her deployment leaving her unable to 'build relationships with staff'. Whittaker and Kikabhai (2008) also cautioned that TAs could 'end up in an educational cul-de-sac' where both they and the children they worked with were 'equally devalued and disengaged from the ordinary life of the school'. Rose (2000) stated that TAs' deployment with a single teacher could enhance 'effective collaborative procedures for classroom management'. However, twelve years later the absence of clear TA role definition continued to result in 'variation' and 'inconsistent' deployment (Webster *et al.*, 2012).

Conclusion

It can be seen from the literature considered that there are a myriad of factors which impact on how TAs' efficacy in behaviour. The ongoing evolution of the TA role, a change from, as Bach, Kessler and Heron (2006) suggested, 'ancillary' support to 'curriculum' delivery has impacted on expectations of TAs in relation to managing behaviour, which government publications (DfE, 2001;

DfES, 2003; DfES, 2006; DfE, 2010, 2013, 2015, 2016) have formalised. However, the continuing evolution of the role, as discussed, has resulted in a lack of a shared, clear and cohesive understanding of TAs. Quicke (2003) suggested that rather than a clarification of roles uncertainty had increased, with TAs 'left in an ambiguous position with no clear boundaries'. Later research (Blatchford *et al.*, 2007) also found a lack of clarity on roles and the degree of 'autonomy' TAs should experience, confusion over the terms; 'teaching', 'support' and 'supervision', as well as 'ambiguity over responsibilities' and fundamental issues concerning 'role creep' and 'professional identity'. This can be seen in the most recent government publication (DfE, 2016) where it was stated that all staff 'such as teaching assistants' have the 'power to discipline', but with the caveat of 'unless the head teacher says otherwise' which appears to provide less, rather than more, clarity. Blatchford *et al.* (2013) cautioned that much of the expansion of TA's role had happened 'with little debate, public discussion or research' and that despite the significant pedagogical work TAs now routinely undertake it was a 'black box', 'the lid of which is rarely, if ever, lifted'. It can be seen from this review of literature considering how TAs manage behaviour that this is an area which is defined by dichotomies and conflict. Ongoing research is therefore needed to examine the nature of this conflictual modelling of TAs and behaviour in practice.

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