Paint pot washers or pedagogues? Is gender an issue for Teaching Assistants?

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After teaching in mainstream primary schools for almost 18 years, **Emma Clarke** now teaches on a primary PGCE course. Her interests include research methodologies, approaches to managing behaviour, and challenging behaviour in primary schools. Her PhD thesis considered the tensions experienced by teaching assistants in mainstream primary schools when managing behaviour. She has presented her research nationally and internationally, as well as publishing both in books and peer-reviewed journals.

This paper considers the evolution of the teaching assistant (TA) role in English primary schools, from the once pejorative description of them as paint pot washers to current conceptualisations of them as pedagogues. How the TA role has evolved and the issues associated with the changes to their deployment in mainstream primary schools will be discussed. Questions will be raised in relation to the type of research undertaken on TAs and whether the overwhelmingly female population of English TAs has influenced the studies conducted. The paper will conclude by sharing the methodology and findings from a recently conducted feminist research project investigating TAs' perceptions of their role.

Keywords: Teaching Assistants; Feminist research; Feminism; maternal.

Introduction

This paper considers the role of the Teaching Assistant (TA) in English primary schools and the challenges they face in fulfilling and understanding their developing role. TAs' roles have changed dramatically and continue to evolve in primary schools both in

England (Blatchford, Russell and Webster, 2012) and internationally (Giangreco, 2010; Trent, 2014). Differences between current and previous conceptualisations of the TA role are considerable. Some historic descriptions of the role as 'a bit of money for housewives' (Smith, Whitby and Sharp, 2004) are now largely unrecognisable, with TAs currently defined as both para-professionals and pedagogues.

The workforce of TAs in English schools is almost all female and the percentage of women working as TAs in primary schools continues to rise (n=167,600) from 92% in 2014 (DfE, 2014) to 95% in 2017 (DfE, 2017). The average TA is suggested by research (Bach, Kessler and Heron, 2006; Blatchford, Russell, Bassett, Brown and Martin, 2007; DfE, 2014; HMI, 2002; Quicke, 2003; Smith, Whitby and Sharp, 2004) to be aged between forty one and fifty, to have a lower level of formal education than teachers (the typical school leaving age of the population was sixteen) and have family responsibilities. Barkham (2008) suggested that lower wages and family commitments associated the TA role with that of 'motherhood'. Watson, Bayliss and Pratchett (2013) noted how TAs in their research labelled themselves as 'mums' first, and TAs second as a strategy to 'add value to their role'.

In English primary schools although TAs can be deployed to fulfill a wide range of tasks, their pedagogical roles have continued to increase and now outweigh any other aspect of their deployment (Blatchford *et al,.* 2007; Trent, 2014). This direct teaching occurs most frequently with individuals or groups of children with special educational needs and disabilites (SEND) including those with behavioural difficulties (Groom and Rose, 2005; Ofsted, 2008; Sharples, Webster and Blatchford, 2015; UNISON, 2013). Mackenzie (2011) noted how the 'caring' aspect of TAs' role, often associated with being

female, resulted in the perception that largely female population of TAs were ‘more suited’ to working with children who had behaviour issues. This supported Ofsted's (2008) contention that TAs’ ‘range of experiences’ may be specificlly beneficial to ‘engage successfully with disafected students’.

Including, and in addition to the direct teaching TAs undertake, there is agreement in much research about the multifaceted nature of their work in primary schools (Collins and Simco, 2006; Fraser and Meadows, 2008; Kerry, 2005; Mistry, Burton and Brundrett, 2004; Smith, Whitby and Sharp, 2004). Smith, Whitby and Sharp (2004) identified forty eight different job titles under the umbrella term of ‘TA’ in their research. Kerry (2005) found eleven different categorisations of the TA role, whilst less than those in Smith, Whitby and Sharp’s (2004) research, the range goes some way towards illuminating the broad spectrum of TAs’ work. The labels identified ranged from ‘dogsbody’ to ‘mobile paraprofessional’ (Kerry, 2005). One of labels - ‘factotum’ – was revelatory in terms of the different characteristics that it was suggested defined TAs, including;

> …team player, ear lender, comforter, negotiator, inspirer, story-teller, nurturer. (Kerry, 2005, p.378)

The stereotypically female attributes of ‘caring’, ‘nurturing’ and ‘people skills’ TAs are expected to draw on to fulfil their polyvalent roles can be problematic, with gender stereotyping of the TA role cited in a range of research (Barkham, 2008; Butt and Lowe, 2011; Dunne, Goddard and Woolhouse, 2008; Fraser and Meadows, 2008; Graves, 2011, 2013; Ofsted, 2008; Mackenzie, 2011; Watson, Bayliss and Pratchett, 2013). These characteristics of the TA role which are often considered as pertaining to women and specifically to mothers, were recurring themes in TA research and were viewed as indicative of the ‘mothering identity’ ‘intrinsic’ to TAs (Barkham, 2008; Bland and

Sleightholme, 2012; Galton and MacBeath, 2008; Kerry, 2005; Mackenzie, 2011; Watson, Bayliss and Pratchett, 2013). Understanding TAs' role as motherly signals issues related to 'status' and 'power' (Devecchi, Dettori, Doveston, Sedgwick and Jament, 2011; Mansaray, 2006) and Graves (2013) argued that 'maternal' connotations made TAs' work 'invisible' and 'peripheral'.

Due to the range of roles they undertake, TAs' contribution to schools can be difficult to definitively pinpoint in wider educational discourses which focus on 'value for money' (Houssart and Croucher, 2013; Roffey-Barentsen and Watt, 2014; Sharples, Webster and Blatchford, 2015). This imprecision in what TAs' role encompasses aside from their contribution to children's academic performance, and the current focus in schools on 'performativity' as opposed to 'care' (Graves, 2013, p.266) compounds difficulties quantifying and recognising TAs' work;

> The contribution of support staff in terms of emotional labour and caring work, which is an integral part of the socialisation of children…needs to be acknowledged as, within the present discourse, it is often disregarded, devalued and dispatched to the periphery of educational experience. (Graves, 2013, p.266)

Despite a shift in the roles and expectations of TAs, the semantics associated with them remain, as O'Brien and Garner (2002) suggested, a 'language of domination, manipulation and exclusion'. Armstrong (2008) also cited a 'marginalisation' that existed both in schools and in research, with 'devaluing or instrumental' language used to describe TAs' work. More recently Lehane's (2016) meta-analysis demonstrated that this was still largely the case and is exemplifies in research on TAs' efficacy in supporting children's academic attainment. Suggestions that TAs were not 'value for money' was

challenged by Roffey-Barentsen and Watt (2014) who stated rather, that TAs were '*undervalued* for the money they represent'.

Existing TA Research

Despite exploration of TAs work and role in schools increasing since the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) report (Blatchford, Russell and Webster 2012), there remains a gap in research which specifically focuses on TAs' voice and perspective as has been called for both recently and historically (Ball, 1987; Gilbert, Warhurst, Nickson, Hurrell and Commander, 2012; Lehane, 2016; Trent, 2014; Watson, Bayliss and Pratchett, 2013).

Prior to the landmark DISS publication (Blatchford, Russell and Webster, 2012), which was the largest piece of research conducted into TAs worldwide, there was a paucity of exploration of TAs' work in general. Research into TAs' efficacy at improving educational standards and their deployment has increased, particularly since the seminal DISS findings (Blatchford, Russell and Webster, 2013; 2016; Cockroft and Atkinson, 2015; Graves, 2013; Radford, Bosanquet, Webster and Blatchford, 2015; Sharples, Webster and Blatchford, 2015; Webster, 2014). However, in the main exploration of TAs' work has been relatively 'small scale', lacking in empirical research and mainly focused on 'describing at the classroom level' what TAs do (Cremin, Thomas and Vincett, 2003; Devecchi, 2005).

Despite an increasing consideration of TAs' efficacy at supporting children academically, issues remain within the body of research that exists (Alborz, Pearson,

Farrell and Howes, 2009; Blatchford, Russell and Webster, 2007; 2012; 2013; 2016; Cockroft and Atkinson, 2015; DfES, 2003; Graves, 2013; Hammersley-Fletcher and Adnett, 2009; Hammersley-Fletcher and Qualter , 2009; HMI, 2002; Radford *et al*., 2015; Sharples, Webster and Blatchford, 2015; Webster, 2014; Webster, Blatchford, Bassett, Brown and Russell, 2011). Blatchford, Russell and Webster (2013) cautioned that the expansion of TAs' numbers and roles in schools had happened 'with little debate or public discussion or research' and that despite the significant pedagogical work TAs routinely undertook, it was a 'black box', 'the lid of which is rarely, if ever, lifted'. Giangreco, Suter and Doyle (2010) suggested that the studies on TAs did 'little to help answer questions' specifically related to 'appropriateness' or 'effectiveness'. Giangreco, Suter and Doyle (2010) collated research into what in the United States (US) are termed 'paraprofessionals', equating to the English TA role. Their survey of thirty-two studies showed that seventy-eight percent were descriptive. It was suggested that the minority of research which was 'experimental' showed such variation in 'dependent and independent variables, patterns in the research are not apparent'. Parallels between the English and US contexts were drawn suggesting that 'few answers exist related to questions about the effectiveness of paraprofessionals' due to the 'limited available research base' (Giangreco, Suter and Doyle, 2010; Giangreco, 2013).

As noted, the research on TAs has focused in the main, on their influence on attainment and often failed to take into account other aspects of learning. Previously, Howes (2003) suggested that research into TAs was focussed too narrowly and had not considered their broader support for 'soft' or non-academic skills. Sharples, Webster and Blatchford (2015) described research into TAs' impact on 'soft' non-academic development as 'thin', suggesting that evidence was rooted in 'impressionistic data'

rather than empirical research. This continues to be the case with calls to address 'key deficiencies in this body of research' (Clarke and Visser 2016; 2016a; Giangreco, Suter, and Doyle, 2010; Graves, 2013; Rubie-Davies, Blatchford, Webster, Koutsoubou and Bassett, 2010).

An overview of the research considered as part of the review of literature is shown in Table one.

Table 1. Table showing published research referenced in the literature review

Type of reference	Total (n=81)	Peer reviewed	Dates covered
Research reports	7%	No	2004 - 2015
Government documents	8%	No	2002 - 2008
Books and book chapters	10%	No	1999 - 2016
Journals	74%	Yes	1997 - 2016

It can be seen that research reports made up one of the smallest categories and that of the reports cited, three quarters were by the team who authored the DISS report (Blatchford, Russell and Webster, 2012). Although this highlights advances in research into measurable aspects of TAs' role in providing academic support, it is also indicative of the small number of researchers active in this area. Government publications, or 'grey documents', which often lack reference to published, peer reviewed research also made up a relatively small percentage of the literature reviewed. This supports the point raised by Blatchford, Russell and Webster (2016) concerning how unusually 'quiet' and 'hands-off' government policy that directly affects TAs has been.

Books, which may not be peer reviewed, made up the second largest category of literature in the review. Of this, almost a third were written by Blatchford's team using data from the DISS report again indicating a small number of researchers active in this area. The largest category of literature by far comprised peer reviewed journal articles.

Although this signals high quality research, it may also be indicative of small-scale projects. As Giangreco, Suter and Doyle (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 the issue often inherent within small-scale research, about the generalisability of findings to a wider a population.

Despite that fact that there is approaching a gender balance in the authors publishing in the field of TA research, with 45% (n=47, total 199) of authors in the papers cited being female (45% single female authors and 45% female authors in joint publications [n=43, total n=95]) this is not mirrored the research that has had the most impact on policy and practice in England. Much of the research from female authors has been published in peer-reviewed journals and is relatively small-scale. The largest piece of research into TAs to date and indeed worldwide, the DISS report, the findings of which have been the basis for much additional research, does not reflect the gender balance in the wider field of TA research. Of the thirteen key papers and guidance reports based on the data collected in the DISS research and including the principle researcher Peter Blatchford, only 17% (n=7, total 44 author citations) of the authors were women, in comparison to 62% (n=8, total =13) of the publications authored solely by male teams.

This gender imbalance in the teams researching TAs could be considered to be problematic. The male majority of researchers in this field may limit or inhibit the important influence of women's 'double consciousness' - their ability to concurrently be aware of issues within their own lives and also;

> '…the lives of the dominant group (men). Often women's daily lives and labor [sic] are invisible to the dominant group (men). (Brooks, 2007, p.63)

This concept of 'double consciousness' may enable female researchers to see what male researchers, the dominant group, may miss in relation to the 'women's work' and motherly inferences inherent in TAs' role (Ball, 1987; Barkham, 2008; Galton and MacBeath, 2008; Gilbert *et al*., 2012; Kerry, 2005; Lehane, 2016; Mackenzie, 2011; Trent, 2014; Watson, Bayliss and Pratchett. 2013). Graves (2011; 2013) argued that these maternal connotations made TAs' work 'invisible' and 'peripheral'.

The methodologies used to research TAs in some projects could be argued to have been 'androcentric' and 'malestream' (Kohli and Burbules, 2013, p.36) due to their focus on gaining objective and concrete data. Kohli and Burbules (2013, p.36) defined malestream philosophies as those that were '…liable to oppressive use'. Alldred and Gillies (2012, p.45) argued that 'women's subjectivities come to be defined through masculinist knowledge structures' and this is exemplified in the research undertaken for the DISS report which did not include TAs' perceptions or their views in any way. Criticism was expressed (Houssart and Croucher, 2013; Roffey-Barentsen and Watt, 2014) suggesting that the focus on 'measurable outcomes' of the 'large-scale work commissioned by government departments' into TAs continued to neglect TAs' voice and perspective.

> These accounts are largely framed within a policy and managerial discourse which pays minimal attention to TAs' experiences as reflected in their findings and arguments. (Houssart and Croucher 2013, p.428)

The funding of the DISS report by the DfE highlighted the view of feminist researchers' that no research could be objective or value neutral as it was always undertaken 'in the interest of a particular people or groups' (Finlay, 2002; Kohli and Burbules, 2013). Blatchford, Russell and Webster (2012) justified their exclusion of TAs'

voice suggesting that their aim was to 'build a dialogue' not with TAs, but about them 'with staff with decision making responsibilities'. Roffey-Barentsen and Watt (2014) countered that if the 'importance of voice' was acknowledged for teachers then the same recognition should be afforded to TAs, not least as they accounted for one third of the primary workforce, yet they continued to be 'quiet' and 'un-heard'.

It could be argued that without including TAs when researching their work for a government body - despite an understanding (either implicit or explicit) that the findings would be likely to inform policy and, in likelihood the future role of the TA - would be repressive. Oakley (2000, p.303) stated that;

> 'Quantitative' methods need to enshrine a greater respect for the perspectives of the people who contribute the data.

This exclusion of TAs' voice within the DISS research highlights the feminist question of ''whose truth' counts?' (Alldred and Gillies, 2012, p.46). The assumption appears that within the largest piece of research conducted worldwide into TAs that they were unable to contribute to the body of 'truth'. This could also be seen to support claims about the 'marginalisation' of TAs, both in schools and in research (Armstrong, 2008; Lehane, 2016; Mackenzie, 2011; O'Brien and Garner, 2002; Scraton, 2004). This view of the research undertaken is also at odds with feminist philosophies of valuing women's experiences and, as Kohli and Burbules (2013, p.36) suggested, a desire to 'highlight the overlooked experiences and practices of women' enabling their movement from 'subject' to 'knower and agent'. This also allies with feminist research perspectives which advocate a movement towards the 'democratisation of the research relationship' in relation to collaboration and emancipation (Burr, 2003; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Oakley, 2000; Letherby, 2003; Punch and Oancea, 2014; Usher, 1996).

The research project

This focus of this paper emerged from my own research centring on English primary school TAs' perceptions of their role in managing children's behaviour in the classroom. The research was qualitative, feminist and methodologically pragmatic involving two separate groups of participating TAs, as detailed in Table two.

Table 2. Table comparing and contrasting samples of participants in research

	Sample 1	Sample 2
Common features	All employed within the school where research undertake	All undertaking a university course
Sampling	Purposive/case sampled	Purposive/opportunistic
Data collected	Investigative	Supporting
Data collection methods	Document analysis	None
	Questionnaire (n=13)	Questionnaire (n=17)
	Focus group (n=11)	None
	Interviews (n=4)	None

Whilst undertaking the research and specifically the literature review, it became apparent that very little of the existing research foregrounded the voice of the TA or focused on their perspectives. Indeed, despite significant increases in their numbers over recent years TAs, as noted, have had very little opportunity to inform research from their perspective (see Downing, Ryndak and Clark [2000] and Roffey-Barentsen and Watt [2014] as exceptions). This underrepresentation may in part be due to the roots of the TA role, from the deprecating view of TAs as a 'mum's army' of 'paint pot washers' (Bach, Kessler and Heron, 2006) which has moved largely to the more conversant, yet still contested description of TAs as 'paraprofessionals' and pedagogues (Blatchford *et al*., 2007; Kerry, 2005; Webster *et al*., 2011). Despite this shift in attitudes it has been argued that an anachronistic 'marginalisation' and 'feminised' perspective persists in research on TAs (Armstrong, 2008; Ball, 1987; Gilbert *et al.*, 2012; Graves, 2013; Lehane, 2016; O'Brien and Garner, 2002; Watson, Bayliss, and Pratchett, 2013).

Undertaking research on TAs with this awareness in mind focused the methodological perspectives and data collection methods employed with an overarching feminist perspective. How this influenced the way in which my study developed will now be discussed.

Employing a feminist research model

In relation to the concerns discussed in the body of research that exists, it was essential not to simply replicate the prevailing research norms in relation to TAs but to begin my own research endeavour from a specifically feminist perspective. Concomitant to those Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) noted, Kohli and Burbules (2013, p.44) defined the aims of feminist research as;

> …the means to gather more complete evidence, to warrant more inclusive, more accurate, more accountable descriptions and explanations of the world…

As a result, an 'eclectic' pragmatic research paradigm (Sandelowski, 2000). This 'multimethodological' (Nielsen, 1990) view of research was supported by Atkinson, Delamont and Hammersley (2003) who stated that 'British' studies used a range of qualitative methods which 'draw their inspiration from feminism' as opposed to a specific 'discipline or method'.

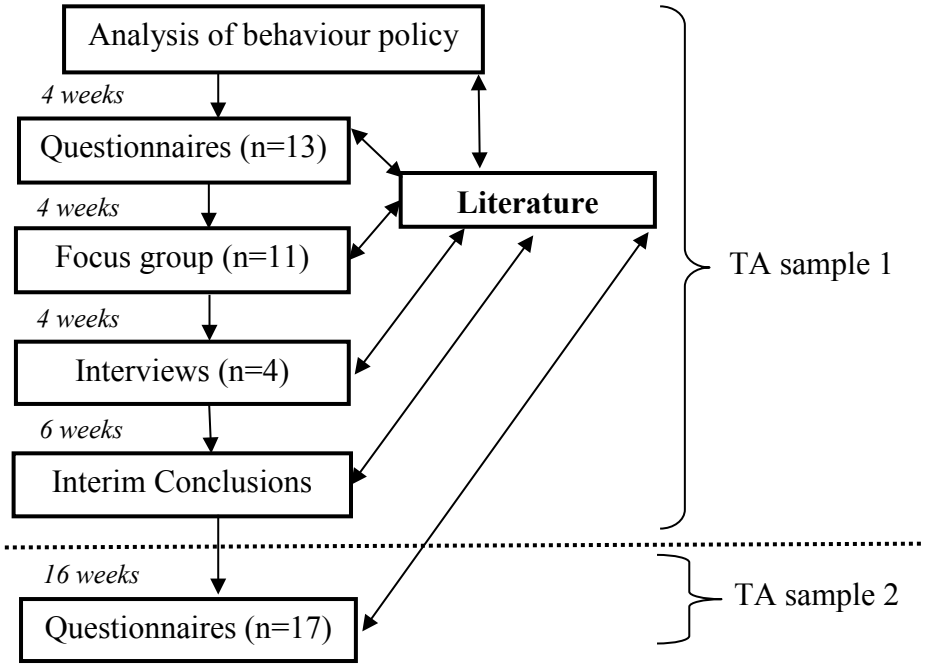
In line with feminist views, the 'messiness' (Letherby, 2003) of the research process was recognised, and views of 'pure, uncontaminated' methods of knowledge collection were questioned. This linked to feminist criticisms of research where the 'relevance of the researcher's self is completely removed' (Letherby, 2003). Rather;

> …the mythology of 'hygienic' research with its accompanying mystification of the researcher and the researched as objective instruments of data production is replaced… (Oakley 1981, p.58)

This mirrored a key tenet within the pragmatic paradigm where the researcher's own influence was not seen as an aspect for concern (Cherryholmes, 1992; Teddlie, 2005). Issues of definitions were also considered in line with Nielsen (1990) questioning how the term 'disinterested researcher' was defined, and whether it was even possible. This related to the feminist perspective where the separation of researcher and researched in the 'Cartesian sense' was not a prerequisite to generating 'knowledge', but rather the researcher's personal experience was seen as an 'asset' (Usher, 1996).

The research undertaken consciously attempted to adopt a position that did not 'add' women in 'but begins from their perspective' (Letherby, 2003). Feminist research perspectives have been described as paying particular attention to the 'personal lives, grounded in individual experience' (Birch, Miller, Mauthner and Jessop, 2008). The research also acknowledged that 'social processes are affected by sexual divisions' (Letherby, 2003) and aimed to be 'contextual, inclusive, experiential, involved and socially relevant' (Nielsen, 1990). This was achieved by the use of a range of qualitative methods which focused particularly on the participant voice, enabling the TAs involved to discuss their different interpretations and 'truths', both collectively and individually. These methods included initially analysing a behaviour policy and then using questionnaires, a focus group and individual interviews to collect data from my participants. Figure one details a timeline of how data was collected for this research including which groups participated in which methods of data collection.

Figure 1. Figure showing timeline of data collection with the two groups of participants



Participants in sample one were employed in the same school and some were close working colleagues. As a result, the established, friendly and professional relationships that existed between the participants in sample one and myself and the disclosure of my own views as part of the interviews and focus group fostered an informal, collaborative ethos. This aimed to reduce the hierarchical relationships existing within the research process and was allied to the purposes of feminist research which focus on non-exploitative relationships, viewing emotion as both necessary and a possible source of understanding (Birch *et al,.* 2008; Kohli and Burbules, 2013; Letherby, 2003).

Although there was still the possibility that power relations may have affected the research process and that the existing relationships may have encouraged the TAs to say what they felt was the right thing, the multiple and group nature of aspects of the data collection employed (specifically the focus group) redressed this to some extent. Focus

groups were also argued to provide ‘a valuable methodological tool’ in feminist research due to their ability to explore issues which are both relevant and pertinent to the ‘person-in-context’ (Wilkinson, 1998). Research suggested that through group activities such as focus groups, in line with feminist views, importance was placed on respondents by using ‘*their* frameworks for understanding the world’ by reducing ‘artificiality’ (Kidd and Parshall, 2000; Kitzinger, 1994; Wilkinson, 1998).

Focus groups have also been described as ‘delicate and complex’, with the ‘personality, social identity and interpersonal skills’ of the researcher influencing the data collected (Sim, 1998; Thomas, 2017). This change in dynamic was brought about partly through the group nature of the process, but also due to a shift in the traditional hierarchical power relations between the researcher and the subject (Kitzinger, 1994; Wilkinson, 1998). Within focus groups the researcher and participant fulfilled a partnership role, thus increasing the empowerment of the participant and enjoyment of the process, in line with the feminist methodology (Kidd and Parshall, 2000; Kitzinger, 1994; Thomas, 2017). Others (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Sim, 1998) have also highlighted the necessity of the researcher clarifying that their role was to ‘learn’ from the group, warning that approaching with an ‘impression of expertise’ would be ‘inimical to disclosure from the participants’ and therefore focus dialogue between group members rather than themselves and the group.

The research adhered to several key principles that marked it as feminist, rather than simply feminine. It reconsidered the traditional positivist commitment to ‘truth, objectivity and neutrality’, was ‘interdisciplinary’ and the researcher was closely involved with those researched in sample one (Burr, 2003; Cohen, Manion and Morrison,

2011). The study also considered existing power relations and their influence on the research process, and aimed to reduce these as much as possible. This was fulfilled through a focus on collaboration, and the reduction of exploitation through a renegotiation of the 'subject/object' relationship (Oakley, 1981) though the aim of maintaining participants' involvement as much as possible in the research process (Cresswell, 2014).

Discussion of research findings

The key findings from my own research were unanticipated. The review of literature I had undertaken had suggested a range of generic tensions TAs experienced in fulfilling their various roles in school. Although no specific research had been conducted on TAs' perceptions of their role in managing behaviour, I had assumed the broad issues highlighted by existing research would be mirrored in the findings of this research, which they were. However, one specific theme was mentioned by participants in this research, specifically those in group one, which appeared to be almost entirely absent from existing published research. The constraints highlighted by TAs in my own research in relation to managing behaviour and the broader tensions noted in existing published research are compared and contrasted as shown in Table three.

Table 3. Table showing similarities and differences in tensions identified in this and existing research

Emerging themes from literature review as generic constraining factors for TAs	Emerging themes from data analysis as constraining factors for TAs' management of behaviour
Role clarity	Role creep, role definition
Training	Experience and mothering
Power	'Know your place', undermining the teacher, support from Senior Leadership Team

Whole school approaches	Communication, consistency
Deployment	Deployment, knowing and relationships with children
Social practices	Experience, deployment, relationships with teachers
Teacher/TA relationship	Relationship with teachers, helping and supporting the teacher

Within the themes participants in my research identified, the theme of 'know your place' was not illustrated in existing research and was only reported in one other study (Watson, Bayliss and Pratchett, 2013) where it was proposed that;

> …knowing one's place communicates a shared understanding among educationalists of status and position and captures the everyday realities of TLSA's [TAs'] professional lives. (p.110)

Whether this concept was not noted in other research was due to the atypical nature of the theme, or due to methodological factors in existing research is difficult to ascertain decisively. TAs my research also referred more frequently to concerns relating to undermining teachers than had occurred in the research considered in the literature review.

In my research, all participating TAs were conscious of the boundary that they felt existed between the teacher and themselves and was most commonly expressed as the need to 'know your place'. Although initially this term sounded pejorative, responses demonstrated this was not the case, rather it was delineating the essential difference between the teachers' and TAs' roles as TAs perceived it. One of the participating TAs shared concerns that any actions taken might be perceived as 'overriding' the teacher, making them feel 'inadequate' and 'bad' as a result. She contended that she did not want to damage teachers' self-perception and 'wouldn't want to put anybody in that position'. One respondent suggested that the dynamics of relationships with different teachers resulted in her feeling that in some classrooms she had 'a place', which was 'to do what

the teacher says'. With other teachers a participant stated they 'rub along together' and her 'opinion is valued and experience is valued'. This sense of 'value' was demonstrated through support for the decisions she made, where the teacher 'would back me up regardless' although, she noted that 'the teacher is the teacher'. This may have alluded to the power dynamics present in relationships between teachers and TAs, even where TAs felt teachers respected their contributions.

Watson, Bayliss, and Pratchett (2013) argued that 'knowing your place' was the necessary result of staff's engagement in 'positioning processes' suggesting, similarly to others, that TAs' title alone defined their role as a supporting or 'assisting' one (Graves, 2013; Harris and Aprile, 2015; Roffey-Barentsen and Watt, 2014; Trent, 2014). The concept of 'know your place' therefore, carried with it an assumption that TAs' 'place' was implicit through understood 'rules and duties' (Watson, Bayliss, and Pratchett, 2013), yet this did not appear to be the case with the participants in my research. Despite referring to the need to 'know your place', the TAs were in the difficult position of not 'knowing their place', due to the 'implicit', 'unspoken' and variable expectations of them which they were required to 'infer'. It can be suggested that without an understanding of 'place' in relation to teachers' role, and without an understanding of their boundaries and expectations, TAs' agency was constrained. Giddens's understanding of power and agency through structuration theory (Giddens, 1984, p.176) noted;

> Power relations are often most profoundly embedded in modes of conduct which are taken for granted by those who follow them, most especially in routinized behaviour, which is only diffusely motivated.

It could be suggested that managing behaviour which, Groom and Rose (2005)

described as ‘implicit’ in TAs’ daily deployment through keeping children on task and ‘supporting classroom rules’ was a ‘routine’ and ‘taken for granted’ responsibility. Therefore, it may follow that the ‘power relations’ Giddens (1984) cited were deeply embedded in the exchanges, and that TAs were both positioned and possibly positioned themselves with less power and status than that of the teacher. This can also be suggested to support Barkham’s (2008) assertion that TAs consciously forfeited their own position and power, ‘privileging that of the learner *and* the teacher’.

TAs have been suggested to operate in a ‘liminal’ zone where their ‘working identities’ require ‘negotiation’ with ‘teachers, parents, children and the SLT’, resulting in them ‘straddling the boundary status of teacher and not teacher’ (Mansaray, 2006). The resultant ‘fuzzy’ (Mansaray, 2006) and fluid boundaries between the teachers’ and TAs' role, or what has been termed ‘role creep’ (Blatchford *et al.,* 2007) has made clearly defining TAs’ role as distinct from teachers challenging. Stoll and Seashore Louis (2007) proposed that legislation, such as the workforce remodelling agenda (DfES, 2003; 2003a) actually increased power relations between TAs and teachers, believing that ‘distinctive hierarchies’ were ‘highlighted. This reflects beliefs that TAs were ‘structurally weaker’ than teachers being ‘devoid of status and power’ in schools (Devecchi *et al.,* 2011; Mansaray, 2006).

Research (Eyres, Cable, Hancock, and Turner, 2004; Fraser and Meadows, 2008) also found that children, even if they had trouble articulating it, were aware of differences in status and power between the teacher and other adults - who they viewed as ‘‘just’ assistants’. In Bland and Sleightholme's (2012) later research these differences were still evident with children noting not TAs’ pedagogical role, but that they were required to

'fetch coffee and biscuits for the teacher' as well as 'keep an eye on them [the teacher] all the time'. In addition, Watson Bayliss and Pratchett (2013) suggested that the US term 'papa-professional', which has been adopted in some English schools and in literature, alluded to TAs as 'not professional' and implied a lack of status, as '*be-coming* or *not-quite* professional';

> Part of the claim to being powerful is that professions have a distinct body of knowledge that others are excluded from, so to be a para-professional surely delimits the knowledge, and power an occupational group can claim. (p.107)

Conclusion

To conclude, when considering the evolution of TAs' role from 'paint pot washers' to 'pedagogues' has increased their responsibilities in a range of different areas. Some changes were welcomed, with suggestions that being a TA was now a 'profession' rather than a 'second class citizen' (Barkham, 2008; Devecchi *et al.*, 2011; Galton and MacBeath, 2008). The evolving TA role was inceasingly described as 'interesting and professional', shifting away from the perception of the TA as someone who only 'staples something to a board for eight hours a day' (Cockroft and Atkinson, 2015).

Yet, conflict is also inherent in this 'pivotal' role being placed on those whose pay, training and career path were seen as limited (O'Brien and Garner, 2002). Graves (2011) concurred, suggesting that the TA role required 'self-sacrifice', but that their 'goodwill' and 'dedication' were at risk of being 'exploited'. Much research has questioned the benefits of TAs' continuing role expansion and whether drives to increase the numbers of TAs were 'simply for the benefit of the system' (Bland and Sleightholme, 2012; Hammersley-Fletcher and Adnett, 2009; O'Brien and Garner, 2002; Wilkinson, 2005). Blatchford *et al*. (2007) proposed that TAs were essentially left to 'fill the gap' which had

been formed by government drives, new curriculum initiatives and teachers' increasing workload. This situation was not unique to England, but also resonated with emerging research highlighting issues in Canada, Australia, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Malta, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Hong Kong (Butt and Lowe, 2011; Cajkler and Tennant, 2009; Giangreco, 2013; Trent, 2014). It has been argued that placing TAs as 'peripheral' to teaching and emphasising their 'soft' skills may exacerbate issues in both their status and power in the classroom (Blatchford *et al*., 2007; 2013; Graves, 2013; Mansaray, 2006).

Mackenzie (2011) and Lehane (2016) found that 'poor status' was a generic and recurring issue for all TAs in their research. Participants in their research had described themselves as 'outsiders' (a term also used by a TA in this research) and 'lesser' in the school hierarchy, as being 'at the bottom of the ladder' and even as 'a dumping ground' (Lehane, 2016; Mackenzie, 2011). Watson *et al*. (2013) found that descriptions even extended to the term 'pond life' to describe the 'worst experiences' of TAs in the hierarchical arrangement. This resonated with TAs in my research, who in their responses noted a perception that both children and teachers viewed the TAs' role as 'below' that of the teacher and as 'different'. One TA simply stated that teachers had 'the upper hand…the authority'.

This paper has also highlighted the nature of research that has been undertaken in consideration of the TA role, and has shared specific tensions within large scale research about the represention of TAs voice'. It has questioned whether issues of power, and consideration a of Roberts's (1981) view and that the world we inhabit is 'unequal and hierarchical' may have broadened the range of findings that have been reported in research

on TAs' role and work in schools. Within my own research and that reported on in this paper, considerations of power were apposite following my own feminist epistemology, where there was an assumption as Letherby (2003) noted, of hierarchies and inequalities operating. It could be suggested that employing a feminist lens - which as Usher (1996) stated values 'inclusiveness more than orthodoxy' and 'can be infiltrated into all disciplines' - may illuminate and inform policy surrounding TAs in a more inclusive and purposeful manner. This could, as O'Brien and Garner (2002, p.3) proposed provide an opportunity for TAs to become;

> …partners in a meaningful, formative enterprise rather than having a walk-on part in an educational drama (or in some regrettable cases being employed simply to paint the scenery).

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