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## **Is a good Teaching Assistant one who ‘know their place’?**

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## **Is a good Teaching Assistant one who ‘knows their place’?**

Teaching Assistants’ (TAs’) roles in mainstream English primary schools continue to evolve. Research suggest that TAs play a vital role in managing behaviour and can have benefits for both teachers and children in relation to supporting positive behaviour in the classroom. However, there is a lack of clarity as to what constitutes TAs’ role, particularly when their pedagogical contribution outweighs any other form of support provided to schools. With a lack of clarity in what constitutes the teachers’ and the TAs’ role, TAs’ responsibilities for managing behaviour are opaque. As a result, opportunities for TAs to manage behaviour can be reduced due to their concerns over undermining teachers. The research this paper draws on found TAs were often passive observers in relation to behaviour management as they did not understand how their role correlated to that of teachers’. The concept of what TAs in this research described as ‘knowing their place’ in relation to managing behaviour will be introduced and discussed. Strategies to support TAs in ‘knowing their place’ in a positive, as opposed to pejorative way in managing behaviour will be considered through a range of different approaches to their direct work with children and teachers. The paper then concludes with some ‘next steps’ for schools to consider in supporting TAs to affirmatively find their ‘place’ in managing behaviour.

Keywords: word; teaching assistants (TAs), behaviour, role definition, role creep, relationships, consistency.

### **Introduction**

This paper considers teaching assistants (TAs) in English mainstream primary schools and their role in managing behaviour and introduces the idea of TAs’ ‘place’. This includes TAs’ self-described need to ‘know their place’ and broader views of how they could be best deployed, or ‘placed’ in mainstream primary schools to support the management of behaviour. It proposes some specific deployment strategies and reflects on the strengths and limitations of these in relation to the management of behaviour.

Despite a growing body of research into TAs both nationally and internationally, how TAs manage behaviour in mainstream schools has been given comparatively little attention. The published literature to date has concentrated principally on TAs' efficacy at improving classroom standards, particularly associated with the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) study (Blatchford, Russell and Webster, 2012) which was the basis for numerous influential publications (Blatchford, Russell, Bassett, Brown and Martin, 2007; 2009; Blatchford, Russell and Webster, 2016; Webster, Blatchford, Bassett, Brown and Russell, 2011). As a result, most of the existing literature on TAs pertains to their role in supporting children academically and it is rare to find research which includes TAs' role in managing behaviour - none has been found where this is an explicit focus. This historic deficit has yet to be address, despite calls for further research into how TAs support pupil's 'soft skills' such as behaviour (Howes, 2003; Rubie-Davies, Blatchford, Webster, Koutsoubou and Bassett, 2010; Sharples, Webster and Blatchford, 2015; Clarke and Visser, 2016).

The paucity of specific research on how TAs manage behaviour is problematic considering that TAs often assume these responsibilities, and that expectations for TAs managing behaviour have been stated explicitly in government publications (Downing, Ryndak and Clark, 2000; DfES, 2002; 2003; 2006; Ofsted, 2004; Mistry, Burton and Brundrett, 2004; Kerry, 2005; Groom and Rose, 2005; Galton and McBeath, 2008; DfE, 2013; 2016). The shortage of specific and empirical investigation in this key area demonstrates a lack of research informed good practice concerning TAs management of behaviour. This is despite behaviour in schools remaining a high profile issue, with successive governments concerned about falling standards of behaviour, and the creation of a 'Behaviour Czar' by the DfE with the aim of supporting teachers (Ofsted, 2014a;

2014b; DfE, 2014a; 2014b; 2015; DfE and The Rt Hon Nicky Morgan, 2015; Bennett, 2017). Why research has not addressed TAs' ability to support the management of behaviour is surprising, given that a key finding from Blatchford et al. (2009) was that 'teachers were less likely to deal with negative behaviour' from pupils when TAs were present.

There is, as a result, a lack of research informed guidance for schools offering strategies to support TAs in developing their role in managing behaviour, or for schools seeking to review how TAs are used - specifically in relation to managing behaviour. This paper, drawing on the findings from a doctoral research project, aims to offer a number of possible 'next steps' for consideration to support schools and TAs in developing a clear and positive sense of the TAs 'place' in relation to managing behaviour.

## **Context**

Despite suggestions that TAs play a 'pivotal role' in managing behaviour (Groom and Rose, 2005), understanding how they do this is challenging due to the imprecision on the parameters of their involvement. The UK government frames managing behaviour as an expectation of the TA role (DfES, 2001; 2003; 2003a; 2006; HMI, 2002, Morris, 2002) making it clear that all staff, including 'teaching assistants', have the 'power to discipline' (DfE, 2013). However, more recently this was amended with the caveat of 'unless the head teacher says otherwise' (DfE, 2016). These variations in expectations of TAs' responsibilities, as well as the myriad of ways in which they work and are deployed in mainstream schools continues to compound the challenges of unequivocally understanding their role in managing behaviour. It has been suggested that the absence of a clear definition of TAs' role results 'inconsistent', 'complex and ill-defined' deployment in schools (Gerschel, 2005; Blatchford et al., 2012). UNISON (2013)

described TAs' deployment as 'something of a lottery', suggesting that there was 'no blueprint'. Despite highlighting the 'widely reported' deployment of 'teachers and TAs as teams' in their survey, UNISON (2013) did not comment on the success of this, instead continuing to note the need for 'good practice examples'.

In England many TAs continue to work supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) including those with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) difficulties (Groom and Rose, 2005; Ofsted, 2008). Sharples et al. (2015) found that TAs were the main 'educator' for the most needy pupils and Webster (2014) reported that teaching responsibilities for children with a statement of SEND, in the main, fell to TAs. Giangreco (2013) argued that TAs had become 'almost exclusively *the way*' to support children with SEND, opposed to '*a way*'. Blatchford et al. (2007) showed that for their TA sample (n=658) in Key Stage Two (age 7–11) approximately half of all TAs were deployed 'specifically to support at least one named pupil who has SEN of some kind'. In addition, the DfE (2012) highlighted links between pupils identified as having SEND and 'higher levels of self-reported or observed misbehaviour' with significantly higher rates of both fixed term (9x more likely) and permanent (8x more likely) exclusions. This suggests that the majority of TAs support children with some form of challenging behaviour, reinforcing Blatchford et al's. (2007) assertion that TAs has essentially been left to 'fill the gap' formed by issues associated with behaviour.

Lewis's (1999) previous research noted tensions for schools between inclusion and 'maintaining order', a specific issue for TAs' whose work with identified children often supports inclusion and therefore, straddles this boundary (Blatchford et al., 2012; 2016; Butt and Lowe, 2011; Lehane, 2016; Mansaray, 2006; Radford, Bosanquet,

Webster, Blatchford and Rubie-Davies, 2013; Webster, 2014). Even when TAs are not specifically deployed to support a child or group of children with behaviour, the generic roles they fulfil - even when not explicitly associated with managing behaviour - encompass many aspects of it.

Implicit in this role is the support for promoting classroom rules, reminding pupils of expectations, dealing with conflict and keeping individual pupils on task. (Groom and Rose, 2005, 25)

Mansaray's (2006) contention that TAs provided invaluable 'support for behaviour issues' acting as 'extra eyes and ears' with a 'surveillance function implicitly assumed' by TAs and teachers, was also supported by others (Blatchford et al., 2012; Neill, 2002; Sharples et al., 2015). Despite this 'implicit' function in managing behaviour, what TAs' definitive role in managing behaviour is, or could be, has been left largely unexplored regardless of teachers reports that working with TAs improved classroom management (Blatchford et al., 2012; Neill, 2002; Sharples et al., 2015). This appears to be a significant and missed opportunity to maximise the positive impact TAs can have on children's 'motivation, social skills and behaviour' (Blatchford et al., 2012; Rubie-Davies et al., 2015; Webster, Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, Martin and Russell, 2010).

The issues outlined are not unique to the English context, but resonate with broader research in Canada, Australia, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Malta, Northern Ireland, Scotland, the United States and Hong Kong (Butt and Lowe, 2011; Cajkler and Tennant, 2009; Giangreco, 2010; 2013; Rose and Forlin, 2010; Trent, 2014). By focusing on the unplanned, rather than specific and strategic deployment of TAs with children whose behaviour challenges, this paper aims to begin to make a small step towards addressing the concerns highlighted in this discussion.

## Research project

The doctoral research this paper draws from, begins to address the paucity of published evidence of TAs’ impact on behaviour. It sought to understand and to elicit TAs’ own voice and perspective on their role in managing behaviour following Houssart and Croucher's (2013) call for ‘a more collaborative approach’ to the deployment of TAs ‘than those advocated by the government and the leading experts’. For a more detailed consideration of the approaches taken than can be achieved in this paper see Clarke and Visser (2018) and Clarke (2019).

## Methodology

The research involving two discrete groups of TAs, was pragmatic and feminist in orientation (see Clarke, 2019). The first group (sample 1) were purposively sampled from the same mainstream English primary school, were all female and largely fitted what research describes as the ‘typical’ TA. Figure one shows the characteristics of TAs in sample one compared with those from literature.

Research suggests the average TA is... (HMI, 2002; Quicke, 2003; Smith <i>et al.</i> , 2004; Bach, Kessler and Heron, 2006; Blatchford <i>et al.</i> , 2007; DfE, 2014c)	Data (from sample 1) from 13 TAs suggests...
Largely female (92%)	All female (100%)
41 – 50 years old	21 – 30 = 8%
	31 – 40 = 8%
	<b>41 – 50 = 46%</b>
	51+ = 38%
9 or more years’ experience	0 – 4 yrs. = 23%
	5 – 9 yrs. = 31%



	<b>10+ yrs. = 46%</b>
Family commitments	All mothers

*Figure 1: Table comparing features of TAs in sample 1 with those from research*

Data collection for TAs in sample one included questionnaires with a range of open and closed questions (n=13 TAs), a focus group (n=11) and individual interviews (n=4). A document analysis of the school’s behaviour policy was also carried out. The second group, (sample 2, n=17) were purposively and opportunistically sampled. This group were all enrolled in a degree course at an English higher education institute but were all employed in different schools, providing an opportunity to gather a range of data from different schools. This group were also largely female (male n=2) and had many similarities with participants in sample 1. Data collection for this second group was a modified iteration of the questionnaire disseminated to TAs in the first sample.

Questions in the first round of data collection (the questionnaire) focused on gathering contextual information such as age, length of employment in the school, additional roles and so on. It then asked respondents about training they received in managing behaviour, their involvement with, and understanding of their school’s behaviour policy as well as their own and others’ perceptions TAs’ role in managing behaviour. The focus group and interview questions (for participants in sample 1) furthered these initial responses considering whose responsibility managing behaviour was, what factors accounted for variations in the ways they managed behaviour and how the strategies they deployed matched the whole-school behaviour policy. For a more detailed consideration of data collection methods see Clarke (2019).

## Key findings

Although, as discussed previously, there is a significant gap in research specifically considering TAs role in managing behaviour, there is a range of research considering broader tensions for TAs. After reviewing the literature and the data collected from TAs in sample 1 and 2, key emerging themes from each were considered alongside each other. Figure two shows these themes.

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

*Figure 2: Key themes emerging from the literature review and data analysis.*

Figure three shows how frequently participants referred to these, as well as how many sources they were referred to in (from: questionnaire, focus group, interview).

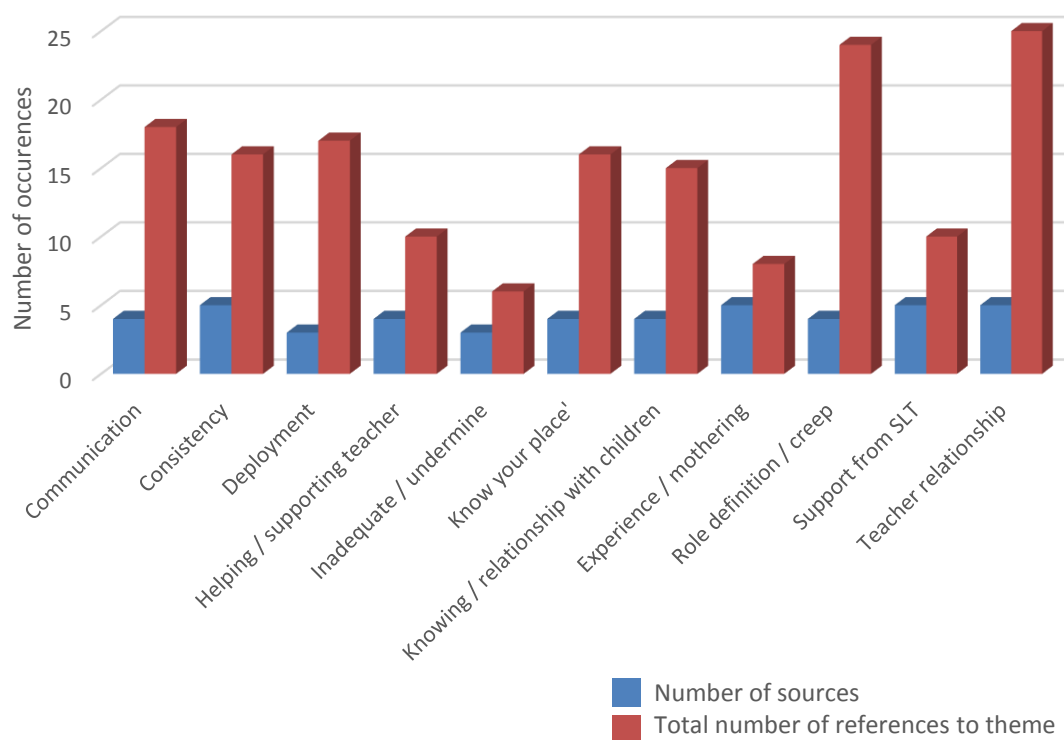


Figure 3: Graph to show themes emerging from data collection.

Analysis of the data collected highlighted the vital role participants’ believed they had in managing behaviour as well as illustrating some areas of tension. Document analysis and TAs responses, from both sample one and two in the questionnaires, and sample one in the focus group and interviews, identified factors that the TAs perceived as enabling and constraining when managing behaviour. TAs discussed their understanding of the teacher/TA boundaries in relation to managing behaviour and considered their perceptions of the relationship between TAs, teaching staff, and their school’s behaviour policy. One of the main findings appears to be the myriad of conflicts that exist for TAs when managing behaviour. This supported Watson et al’s. (2013) call for ‘a framework for understanding the multiplicities’ TAs experienced and was reiterated

in much research recognising the polyvalent nature of the work TAs undertake (Moran and Abbott, 2002; Smith et al., 2004; Kerry, 2005; Collins and Simco, 2006; Mansaray, 2006; Fraser and Meadows, 2008; Watson, Bayliss and Pratchett, 2013; Clarke and Visser, 2016; Clarke, 2019)

Like Watson et al's. (2013) findings, this research showed a key concept was participants need to, as they described, 'know your place' in relation to managing behaviour. This theme had not been detailed by wider research into generic tensions TAs face and could be suggested to be specifically linked to perceptions on managing behaviour. This concept of place was described by one participant in this research as;

...sometimes it's about knowing your place, if that's the right thing to say (.) there is a line that you don't want to cross which I think affects how you deal with things...

She expressed concerns that her actions in managing behaviour would be perceived as 'overriding' the teacher, making them feel 'inadequate' and 'bad'. She contended that she did not want to damage teachers' self-perception and 'wouldn't want to put anybody in that position'. This was associated with an acknowledged obligation for TAs to 'remember who you are' and therefore, to 'know your place'. TAs' reference in this research to a need for them to 'know their place' was defined by Watson et al. (2013, 110) as;

...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.

In the focus group discussion the theme of 'role creep' or challenges in understanding their role was the most commonly referred to theme, with difficulties in teacher relationships and expectations and communication being the second and third

most common themes, in the focus group as well as in the individual interviews. This reflects Burke's (2004) findings highlighting the importance of sharing 'definitions and meanings of role and group categories' amongst colleagues and research identifying tensions resulting from role creep, or a lack of clear definition and identified role boundaries for TAs work in general (including, but not only; Blatchford et al., 2016; Devecchi and Rouse, 2010; Harris and Aprile, 2015; Kerry, 2005; Mansaray, 2006; Rose, 2000).

Whilst the TAs in this research saw their role in managing behaviour as 'vital' they highlighted difficulties in understanding their 'place' or role, specifically in relation to managing behaviour, which led to feelings of 'awkwardness' and 'discomfort'. This was associated with reduced opportunities to engage in discussions with teachers, with one TA noting she could not 'recall a single conversation ever' about her role in managing behaviour. The lack of explicit dialogue on their role in managing behaviour in lessons, with groups or individuals, was mediated by TAs' own 'experience'. Participants described how they were 'left to get on with' behaviour management using a combination of 'common sense', and 'summing up the situation', supporting Tucker's (2009) view that TAs' roles were 'self-determined'. TAs' relationships with class teachers were highlighted in the interviews, with all respondents suggesting that they worked differently with different teachers, mediated by the relationship they had with them. All responses noted variation in teachers' expectations of TAs' management of behaviour in the classroom, with one participant noting that with a teacher she knew well she would feel comfortable taking a more active role;

Someone I've not worked with before I'd find it quite tricky (.) so with them I'd perhaps take a back seat and just try and wait for a while, until I knew what was going on. I wouldn't just jump in. So I don't do the same with all

teachers (.) it depends how familiar I am with how the teacher runs their classroom.

This reflected TAs' responses when asked how their responsibility in the classroom was agreed, which included through 'inference' and 'assumption'. It appeared that TAs used their familiarity with the teacher and the way that they ran their classroom to gain an understanding of the expectations of them when managing behaviour.

Watson et al. (2013) indicated that 'place' was implicit through understood 'rules and duties'. However TAs in this research were in the difficult position of *not* 'knowing their place'. This was due to the 'implicit', 'unspoken' and variable expectations of their behaviour management from a range of teachers, which they were required to 'infer'. It can be suggested that without an understanding of 'place' in managing behaviour in relation to the teachers' role, and without an understanding of the boundaries and expectations in managing behaviour, TAs are constrained.

Empowering TAs and giving them a positive understanding of their 'place' in, and contribution to managing behaviour is essential for them to fulfil what these participants saw as their 'vital' role. This paper will now draw further on this study, as well as published research to consider the ways TAs are commonly deployed in schools and how this affects their understanding – both positively and negatively – of their 'place' in managing behaviour.

### **Deploying TAs peripatetically**

This form of deployment, where TAs are work across classes and key stages, appears to be the most challenging in relation to developing an understanding of 'place'

in managing behaviour. HMI (2002) noted that although schools tried to place TAs with specific classes this often did not work in practice, with the ‘fragmentation’ that occurred instead being particularly damaging as it prevented teachers and TAs developing a ‘close working partnership’. Roffey-Barentsen and Watt’s (2014) findings showed that a peripatetic behaviour support assistant reported her status as ‘very low’. Despite this detrimental impact on status, Blatchford et al. (2007) found that a third (total number=658) of the TAs in their research were deployed to ‘provide general support for all pupils’, suggesting that these TAs were deployed to work with a range of teachers and classes. This reflects the way TAs who participated in this research were deployed, frequently, and for some daily, working with a range of teachers and children across key stages. A participant commented that;

I find it tricky because when you move from different classes, even though we’ve got a behaviour policy, I do think that teachers in different year groups tend to do their own thing, which again harps back to if we all worked in the same class all the time you would be more involved...you know exactly how that teacher deals with it.

Another TA argued that they were expected to ‘support’ pupils yet due to their deployment often did not have ‘a lot of insight’ into their behaviour. Their fragmented deployment made it challenging to ‘to bond and connect with that child’ which TAs felt was necessary to manage behaviour. This contrasted with the a TA who supported two specific children;

‘I’m settled, I’ve got two children to look after, I know what their needs are and how to do (.) and if they’re having an off day I know what to do.’

Visser and Cole (2003) suggested that teachers had neither the time nor training for pastoral work, and that the responsibility fell instead to TAs, supported by the data collected in this research. However, the TAs who participated proposed that their deployment in the school - where they worked daily with a number of different teachers and classes, or groups of children, constrained them in fulfilling this pastoral role. This

contrasted with the proposed advantages of prolonged deployment with one class which included getting to know the children that in turn, supported what TAs saw as the pastoral side of their role and managing behaviour. One TA commented that in relation to her current deployment;

If you're moved continuously, class to class all day long, every single day you don't have a chance to become any sort of pastoral (.) you don't get to know the children well enough.

The findings of this research suggest that stable, as opposed to peripatetic or fragmented deployment is required. This facilitates TAs' work with children as it allows them to build relationships with children, enabling them to contextualise children's behaviour and understand of the patterns of learning and behaviour across a school day, week, term or even year. One participant stated that her fragmented deployment positioned her simply as an 'observer' and left her unable to 'intervene' or manage any behaviour. This was due to what she described as having a 'lack of insight' into children's behaviours, that caused difficulties in 'being on their level'. TAs in this research also suggested that if they knew children well, they were able to 'go the extra mile' to support them, regardless of whether it was 'within your role', a theme also noted by TAs in Watson et al's. (2013) research. The necessity to build relationships to manage behaviour is also a recurring theme in other research (Collins and Simco, 2006; Hajdukova, Hornby, and Cushman 2014; Houssart and Croucher, 2013; Lehane, 2016; Lewis 2001; Mistry et al., 2004; Stoll and Seashore Louis, 2007; Way, 2011; Whittaker and Kikabhai, 2008).

### **Deploying TAs to work with one class**

As TA's in this research recommended, Rose (2000) also noted that although it was 'unlikely that a single model of classroom support' would be applicable, it would be



‘logical’ to deploy TAs with specific teachers. This would enable relationships to be built and to develop the ‘flexible practice’ that is, as discussed, particularly challenging when TAs are deployed peripatetically. Rose (2000) stated that TAs’ deployment with a single teacher enhanced ‘effective collaborative procedures for classroom management’. This resonated with other earlier research (Collins and Simco, 2006; Stoll and Seashore Louis, 2007) on the importance of ‘continuity’ in TAs’ work with children, particularly when managing behaviour. This was reiterated by participants in this research:

I find it tricky because when you move from different classes, I do think that teachers in different year groups tend to do their own thing, which again harps back to if we all worked in the same class all the time you would be more involved...you know exactly how that teacher deals with it.

Lehane’s (2016) findings also suggested that this consistent deployment not only supported TAs’ work with children, but also the development of their relationships with teachers who, a participant asserted, they needed to learn ‘to handle as much as you know how to handle the kids’.

Consistent deployment with one or two teachers would enable a ‘joint understanding about aims and purposes’ with clarity about ‘joint approaches to managing behaviour’ (Balshaw and Farrell, 2002). This reinforced Groom’s (2006) suggestion that effective deployment was dependent on ‘team management and support’ and positive ‘partnership with teachers’, a facet of which was ‘clearly outlined roles and expectations’. Stable deployment to enable the formation of ‘joint understanding’ and ‘approaches’ could also be suggested to support TAs’ agency in managing behaviour. Lehane’s (2016) research echoed this, with TAs in her study acknowledging that ‘communication and collaboration’ were contingent on ‘rapport and relationships’ between teachers and TAs, with a participant in this research noting;

I think it is easier for the teacher, I think it's easier for the TA it is easier for the pupils because they get consistency (.) standards of behaviour are better because they get the same people and they know exactly what they're doing. I think you're more likely to crackdown on things quickly because you know how they normally behave (.)

Stable and consistent deployment provides the opportunity for TAs to build relationships with children which participants in this research highlighted as essential when managing behaviour. Roffey-Barentsen and Watt (2014) found in their study that TAs were often expected to act to 'remedy immediate situations', particularly linked to behaviour, and act as an 'Elastoplast'. This was noted in questionnaire responses, where one TA stated that her role in managing behaviour was to 'deal with incidents as they occur'. An understanding of the child or children and the context of their behaviour, over more than simply the lesson the TA is in, is required to make appropriate and supportive 'immediate' judgements when managing behaviour.

It was argued that actively flexible, rather than consistent deployment of TAs was advantageous, with Rose (2000) suggesting TAs should have a 'roving brief' in their work in schools. Consistent TA deployment has been criticised, with some research suggesting that TAs working regularly with the same groups or individuals resulted in 'dependency' and a 'denial of opportunities' for children (Blatchford et al., 2012; Rose, 2000. Whittaker and Kikabhai (2008) suggested that due to TAs' ability to form different relationships with children compared to teachers, TAs may understand children's behaviour better than the teacher. Others (Quicke, 2003; Roffey-Barentsen and Watt, 2014; Stoll and Seashore Louis, 2007) concurred, stating that where TAs were deployed with a single class, they 'often had a deeper knowledge of the pupils' than the class teacher. Teacher participants in Wilson and Bedford's (2008) study argued that schools were 'colluding' in 'de-skilling

and devaluing teachers' by deploying TAs to support children with SEND, as they developed 'expertise' with that child which was 'superior' to the teacher's.

As well as a suggested negative impact on the teacher, deploying TAs to work with specific classes has also been suggested to constrain TAs' ability to manage behaviour. This is due to the autonomy TAs may have with children or groups they work with, where some teachers have effectively 'handed over responsibility' for these groups to the TA (Quicke, 2003). This was supported by participants in this research, where one TA stated she felt that due to the independence she had been afforded she was required to make key judgements about children, suggesting that she had become 'responsible' for their education. It was acknowledged by other TAs in the focus group that 'it isn't really your job' and that children's wellbeing and welfare was 'in your hands'. This highlights the inherent conflict of placing the 'pivotal' role of providing support for children with challenging behaviour on those whose pay, training and career path were seen as limited (O'Brien and Garner, 2002).

The updated 2014 SEND Code of Practice highlighted 'teachers' accountability for children with SEND, but was silent on TAs' role (Blatchford et al., 2016), interpreted by Webster (2014) as a 'coded warning' about TAs working with children with SEND. Norwich and Eaton (2015) argued that the reclassification of SEND (DfE/DoH, 2015) did nothing to improve the 'ambiguity' inherent in the previous terms, an issue particularly in multi-agency working. This mirrors challenges for TAs in their own form of 'multi-agency working' with parents, children, teachers and SENCOs, as well as 'ambiguities' in their 'place', or role in managing behaviour. Watson et al. (2013) defined TAs' role as being the 'cultural and interpersonal glue between teachers, children, and

families, illustrating the difficulties transforming the multifaceted, complex, and context dependent roles TAs fulfil, particularly when managing behaviour, into a definitive list. It could be suggested then that without a flexible, or 'roving' approach to TAs' deployment the roles they are able to, or need to fulfil in relation to managing behaviour could be constrained.

### **Deploying TAs to work 1:1**

Stable deployment where TAs worked with specific children was seen by participants in this study as advantageous. The ability to develop a deep understanding of children and to 'know what makes them tick' was highlighted as an important factor by participants. TAs in this research suggested that stable deployment allowed them opportunities 'to bond and connect with children' something TAs felt was necessary to manage behaviour. One TA described the relationships and knowledge of the children she had developed over time working 1:1 suggesting, 'I'm not saying I'm brilliant but you just get to know those kids'. This 'understanding' of children that TAs developed, was not always suggested to be achieved by the class teacher (Lehane, 2016; Whittaker and Kikabhai, 2008; Wilson and Bedford, 2008). A participant noted in comparison to her work 1:1;

...the teachers can sometimes press the wrong buttons to be honest, and you can see the effect it has on the child (.) but as a teaching assistant (.) I would never be able to say (.)

Despite these advantages, working 1:1 with children, or a specified children TAs risked being trapped in what has been termed 'internal exclusion' by regularly being deployed to work with groups or individuals outside the classroom (Mackenzie 2011). As Bowers (1997) proposed, working with individuals and groups with SEND had the

potential to cause ‘out-group denigration’ leading to ‘polarising group identities’ – for both children and TAs. This reinforced Mackenzie's (2011) research where a TA had described her role as ‘isolating’ due to the peripatetic nature of her deployment, stating that as a result, she was unable to ‘build relationships with staff’. Whittaker and Kikabhai (2008) also signalled 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’. A participant in this research stated when children worked with her in groups they were isolated from the rest of the class which made them ‘fearful’ about returning, something she found both ‘frustrating’ and ‘upsetting’.

It could be suggested that when TAs were deployed to work 1:1 with children they developed ‘comprehensive’ and ‘expert’ ‘knowledge and skills’ in relation to the child and their behaviour (van der Heijden, Geldens, Beijaard and Popeijus, 2015). However, rather than empowering TAs, this knowledge often led to frustration as relationships with teachers and available time to communicate limited opportunities to pass on this knowledge.

## Conclusion

The findings from this research highlight the importance of consistency for TAs as a key factor in enhancing their ability to manage behaviour and enabling them to find their ‘place’. Figure four illustrates some of the possible factors to improve TAs’ agency in managing behaviour.

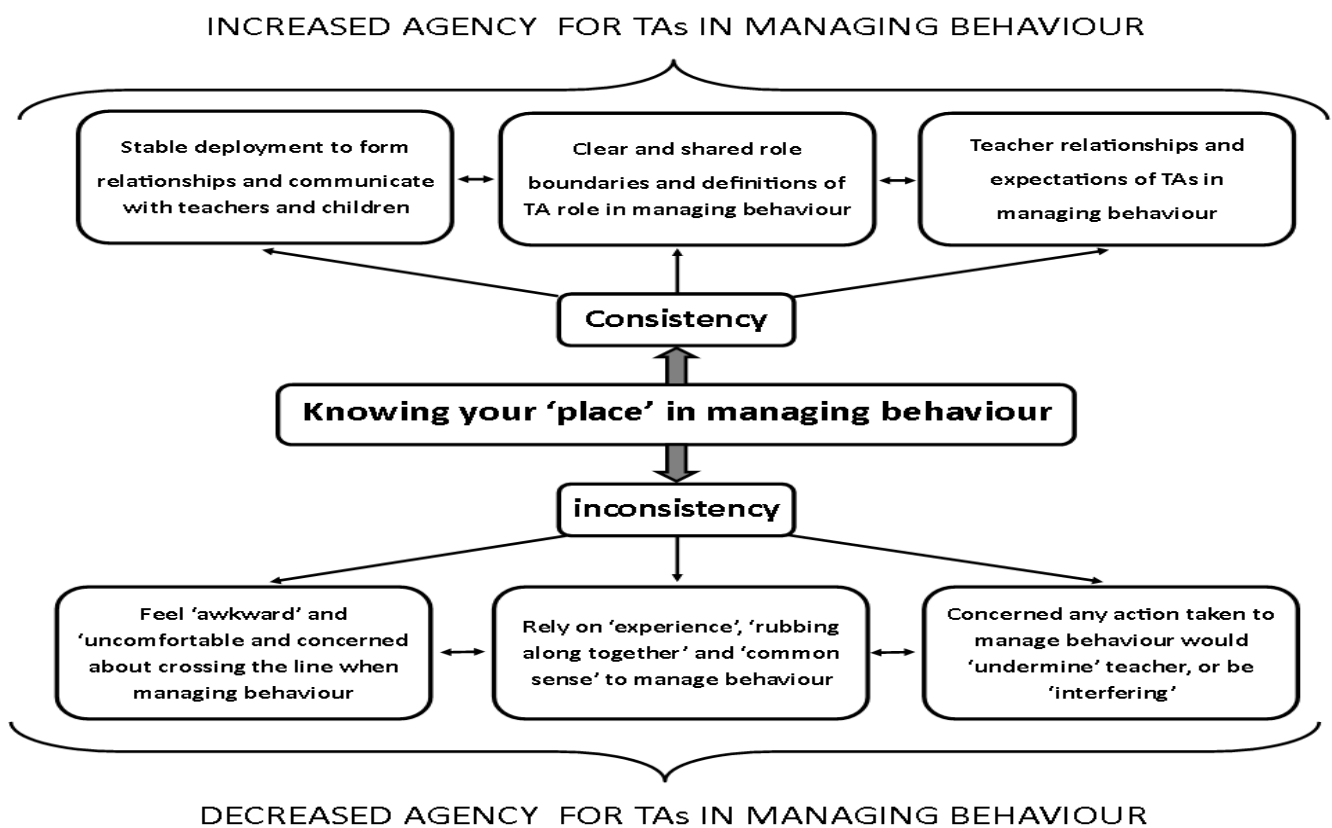


Figure 4: Diagram to show possible factors to improve TAs’ agency in managing behaviour

The figure shows that without some form of consistency, TAs in this research were left as passive observers who were too ‘uncomfortable’ to step in and manage behaviour due to fears over undermining teachers. The reluctance TAs expressed to overtly manage behaviour in the classroom and to remain ‘under the radar’ may be explained by the difficulty participants noted in understanding their ‘place’- specifically in the teacher’s classroom. TAs’ uncertainty about what actions were acceptable when

managing behaviour and which would be interpreted by the teacher as ‘undermining’, constrained their agency. This resulted in their passivity in managing behaviour, that saw TAs ‘sitting back’ rather than taking an active role or ‘helping and supporting the teacher’, leading to TAs feeling ‘frustrated’ and ‘helpless’.

It could be suggested that by offering TAs the stability to form relationships with teachers, children, or both, or by developing a clear understanding of what the TA role is in managing behaviour, TAs can positively find their ‘place’. Once this understanding of ‘place’ has been developed, the support TAs are able to offer both children and teachers can be developed. TAs can feel empowered to manage behaviour and communicate their knowledge with teachers once they know ‘their place’ and can successfully contextualise the contributions they make within the broader picture of not only 1:1, group or class support, but in making a positive whole-school difference to behaviour.

Sharples et al. (2015) stated that TA deployment should be seen as part of the overall ‘drive for whole-school improvement’, with decisions on deployment being where ‘all other decisions about TAs flowed from’. This paper proposes that by deploying TAs to ensure consistency, in either role expectations or relationships, TAs can find their ‘place’ - and that a good TA is therefore, one who ‘knows their place’.

### **Next steps**

The findings from this research project, as discussed, resonated with some of the key themes in existing literature. This proposes that there may be transfer between the findings of this research and TAs working in mainstream schools, suggesting that the tentative recommendations made here may suit a range of different contexts. The authors

suggest the following steps (in relation to figure 4) be considered by schools to support the development of consistency and therefore the important understanding of ‘place’ for TAs.

**Stable deployment** – TAs in this research highlighted stability as an essential factor to support them in managing behaviour. This can be achieved in two different ways, either by deploying the TA to work with a teacher or small group of teachers or with key groups of children. Participants in this research cited the importance of developing relationships in order to manage behaviour, either with the teacher they were working with or with the children. This knowledge of the other(s) supported TAs knowing what was expected of them and as a result their ‘place’, or the sort of behaviours that were usual for the children they were working with. This understanding of those they worked closely with positively impacted on TAs’ agency and as a result their ability and confidence in managing behaviour. Although research has suggested a range of tensions that exist within this model of deployment, an awareness of these coupled with opportunities for teachers, TAs and children to develop close working relationships and engage in continued professional dialogue could effectively mitigate them.

**Clear and shared role** – in order to support TAs, teachers and children in understanding which tasks fall inside and outside TAs role, explicit references are required in school policies. A whole-school behaviour policy using the term ‘staff’ should ensure it is clear which adults constitute staff, i.e. just teachers, teachers and TAs, teachers, TAs and midday supervisors and so on. If teachers and TAs are expected to play different roles in enacting the behaviour policy this should be made unequivocal. If a hierarchy or rewards and sanctions are used, are there any that TAs are excluded from



leading, if this is the case, is this clear to all parties? Role clarity can also be provided for TAs and shared with the teachers they work with through clear job descriptions. This could also be done more informally by providing time for teachers and TAs to talk together.

**Teacher relationships** – TAs' understanding of their role in relation to the teachers' in managing behaviour can be supported through, as suggested above, clarity in whole school policies – specifically the behaviour policy. Making TAs' job descriptions clear and sharing the key roles detailed within these with teaching staff may also support clear expectations of TAs' role when working with teachers in the classroom. TAs in this research were reluctant to engage in any form of behaviour management within the teacher's classroom, compared to when working outside if, for example, with groups of children or individuals. Whilst clarity in job descriptions and behaviour policies would have supported the participants in this research, the key change they proposed to support them in understanding their role in managing behaviour was clear communication with those they worked closely with, in the main, the class teacher(s).

Following this, the authors suggest one of the most important steps schools could take in supporting TAs to manage behaviour would be to arrange time for TAs and teachers to meet and discuss roles in the classroom. This would enable TAs to know what teachers expected of them, particularly what was seen as supportive and helpful for the class teacher in relation to managing behaviour, which was a key focus for participants in this research. If time was set aside (at the start of the academic year, as part of an INSET day which TAs were paid to attend, or a series of meetings where teachers and TAs could be released together, or at some other mutually convenient period) for teachers

and TAs to talk specifically about each other's' role in managing behaviour many, if not all of the issues participants in this research highlighted could be resolved.

Participants in this research expressed significant concerns which stopped them actively managing behaviour in the teacher's classroom. These included uncertainty over 'where the line was' in relation to their role in managing behaviour, resulting in feeling 'awkward' and 'uncomfortable' and not managing behaviour. Participants also reported concerns about undermining teachers if they took an active role in managing behaviour in their classrooms. TAs in this research relied on 'experience' and 'common sense' to judge their role in managing behaviour as opposed to anything clearly agreed or defined. Time for teachers and TAs to clarify what they expected of the other and how they could offer mutual support in relation to managing behaviour could address the above concerns, support the development of TAs' agency and as a result their self-described vital role in managing behaviour. The authors suggest that if TAs were supported in actively understanding their 'place' in managing behaviour children, teachers and TAs themselves would benefit.

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