

# Developing pedagogy with Teaching Assistants

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## **Abstract**

Susie Bailey was a teacher in a special school for children with severe learning difficulties (SLD) and profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) when she led a project to address the professional development needs of Teaching Assistants in her school.

The children at my school (age 3 to post-16) have mental and physical disabilities, which hugely affect their ability to learn. Most of them are heavily reliant on adults for their learning and day-to-day care. For this reason there is a high ratio of staff to students and for every teacher there are three Teaching Assistants (TAs).

## **The context of my development work**

In our context it falls to the TAs to do a lot of the hands-on 'teaching' which is not problematic in itself, but a discussion with teaching staff concluded that it can be difficult to ensure that lessons are being carried out in the way they have planned. Many of the TAs did not seem to share our ideas about learning and teaching. We thought that this was because the majority of our TAs have had no training in pedagogy. They seemed to want students to achieve their objectives perfectly which sometimes led to completing learning tasks for them. This makes it difficult for students to develop their skills and understanding and for teachers to be able to assess students' learning. Understandably, TAs build very strong relationships with students and have detailed knowledge of them, which teachers depend upon, but there tends to be a focus on 'care' as opposed to a 'learning' which can be problematic. I felt strongly that although care is important, the main emphasis in my classroom should be on learning. The emphasis of my development work was therefore to improve the effectiveness of the Teaching Assistants at my school which necessitated an exploration of their roles and professional identities.

In my school the format of a lesson is not dissimilar to that in a mainstream context. There will be starter activities involving the whole class, followed by individual or small group work, concluding with a plenary. Due to the nature of our students, they require, if not one to one, then at least one to two 'teaching' especially during the individual or group work part of the lesson. Hence our TAs play a vital part in the learning of our students.

The Plowden Report in the 1960s recommended the 'provision of aides' in the classroom (DfES, 1967) and the government introduced the single job title of 'Teaching Assistant' in an attempt to avoid the confusion arising from the existence of 48 different job titles for classroom support staff (Smith, Whitby and Sharp, 2004). I think the title 'Learning Support Assistant' is more helpful, a view that is borne out by others (Cowan, 2005; Farrell, Balshaw and Polat, 2000). Most of the research on TAs highlights the positive impact they have on students' learning. Their roles have developed from the 'washing paint pots' stereotype to active involvement in the learning process (Smith, Kenner and Barton-Hide, 1999; Mencap, 1999; Rose, 2000). An Ofsted inspection of our school reported the good work of skilled TAs (Ofsted, 2008), yet, as a team of teachers, we felt that our TAs often lacked pedagogical skills and understanding.

The problem was manifest in the recording of students' work. Our TAs are expected to complete documentation at the end of each lesson for each student they have worked with. This serves both as a record of what has been done and as a formative assessment tool for the teacher. It was not uncommon for TAs to write comments such as 'Charlie enjoyed this lesson' which says nothing about what he has learnt and what he might be able to learn next. Sometimes TAs did not focus on the learning objective set by the teacher.

Teachers have a role to play in the professional development of TAs, especially through modelling. We needed to consider and reflect on the role of the teacher in their communication with the TAs and the modelling of good practice as well as the provision of training.

### **Professional development for TAs**

Research indicates that, although TAs are generally invited to whole-school training sessions, less than half regularly attend (Smith, Whitby and Sharp, 2004). The TAs at my school are paid hourly and only for the hours of the teaching day. Due to the structure of the school day, TAs usually have a 45 minute lunch break, although the

calculation of their pay assumes a break of only 30 minutes. We could therefore accumulate the additional 15 minutes per day and ask TAs to stay after school on Mondays for an extra hour and 15 minutes. I planned to use this time slot to provide training sessions and, if necessary, conduct interviews.

The content of training for TAs varies and is often not directly linked to teaching and learning. Research indicates that 'First Aid' tends to be the dominant topic (70%) with topics like 'assessment and recording' getting scant attention (8%) (Smith *et al.*, 2004). Teaching and learning does not feature at all. Is it not essential that TAs have a basic knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning and pedagogy? Nearly all the TAs at my school had attended both internal and external training on various topics such as 'Understanding Visual Impairment' and 'Physical Intervention'. They generally reported finding such training sessions useful to some degree, but not in terms of their 'teaching' abilities in the classroom. Indeed, the vast majority of training our TAs receive is very topic-specific. For example, all our TAs are trained in basic sign language. This of course aids their communication with some of our students but does not necessarily help them build more specific teaching skills.

After careful consideration I planned a project in which I would work with TAs from my class (11-12 year olds) and TAs from a primary class (8-9 year olds). I chose to work collaboratively with a colleague and to liaise with the Deputy Headteacher. This had potential benefits in that we would be sharing and supporting each other in the work of the project, thus sharing any risk-taking involved (Hargreaves, 1992). I anticipated that we would need to have some discrete training sessions, but most of the professional development for TAs would probably occur in the flow of classroom practice through teachers such as myself modelling the desired practices. This has already proved to be successful in my school and has been noted to be an effective leadership tool by others (Hall and George, 1999; Watkinson, 2003).

### **Introducing the project**

I shared my project plan with my primary colleague and discussed with her what was involved. The project was then introduced to the TAs from the two classes at a Monday night staff meeting in early September. I explained that I wanted to interview them to find out what they thought about their role and to explore their professional

development needs. I would then design a professional development programme that would meet those needs and we would evaluate it.

All but one of the TAs agreed to take part in the project. The one exception was someone who was fearful of the idea of being interviewed or being observed; she saw it as a 'test'. Perhaps this was because her only experience of being observed was by the Headteacher as part of a performance management process. On reflection it may have been better to avoid the word 'interview' when introducing the project.

Time pressure was an obstacle even at that early stage; the content of the Monday night staff meetings was already mapped out for that academic year. There were only three meetings available to work with the TAs in the Autumn term and this would normally be used to make resources and discuss students' current needs. I was forced to conduct the interviews in the 15 minute 'tea break' between teaching and the after school sessions. The unwillingness of some TAs to be involved in the project during anything but their paid hours was frustrating if understandable. TAs are paid hourly and, for many, salaries do not reflect the level of responsibility (Lee, 2002; Lee and Mawson, 1998; Farrell *et al.*, 1999; Watkinson, 1999; Smith *et al.*, 2004). Our TAs said they wanted to learn and improve their skills but felt their role was not sufficiently valued.

### **Exploring TAs' needs and knowledge**

By late October I had conducted all the interviews with the TAs. I used a semi-structured interview technique and a digital recorder because I thought this might put the TAs at ease. Some TAs were still cautious with their responses even though I made clear that data would be used in an ethical and sensitive way. On reflection, I felt that the TAs generally looked on these initial interviews as 'tests' rather than part of a learning process. This I think is partly due to the style of their annual appraisals with the Headteacher over the last two years, in which many TAs reported finding it like a job interview.

All of the TAs shared the view that their main role was to 'support or assist the teacher'. Practically this meant tasks such as laminating symbols. Only two out of the six TAs interviewed talked about supporting the students, but even then they used words such as 'support' or 'care'. The word 'learning' did not feature at all in their comments. Of course the fact that I was a teacher asking the

question was likely to have influenced their response. Their view of the teacher's role also seemed limited to practical activities such as planning lessons and scheduling staff breaks. Again, there was no mention of learning. In relation to their professional development needs, TAs requested training on specific practical tasks such as using the computer to print pictures and symbols. Only one person wanted help to improve her 'teaching skills' in spite of the fact that they had all said that they had received very little or no training on how to 'teach' students and follow lesson plans and learning objectives given by the teacher. This was puzzling.

Following these interviews I undertook some informal observations. What emerged from this was that the TA might be working with a student on a specific activity without fully understanding how that activity linked to the learning objective. This meant that often the activity was not focused in the right direction and what was recorded as achievement was unrelated to the learning objective. To address this I introduced 'I can' cards for each student. Prior to each lesson I attached an individual learning objective to the top of each card in symbol form and starting with the phrase 'I can'. This meant that not only was I communicating the learning objective to the students but also to the TAs and they would be able to refer back to them when writing the student's record. I found this to be very successful in improving the focus on the learning objective.

### **Classroom activities: work or learning?**

I shared what I learned from the interviews and observations with the TAs, my primary colleague and the Deputy Headteacher. The discussion centred on their role in supporting students' learning. It seemed significant to me that the word most commonly used to refer to students' activity in the classroom was 'work' rather than 'learning'. It was clear to us that we had to focus our professional development programme on learning objectives and thought it might help also to enable TAs to become more familiar with 'P levels' which are the prescribed assessment statements we use to assess students' achievement.

It was decided that we would run two half-hour training sessions, one on introducing P levels and the other on lesson plans and learning objectives. Each training session involved the teacher working through a sample lesson plan and giving examples from recent lessons. TAs were then encouraged to ask questions and discuss the

documents as a group before designing a short activity to suit a learning objective or identifying the level of achievement evident.

At the end of the first session we asked the TAs if they had found it useful. There was a general consensus that sessions were useful, but it was difficult to elicit any detailed feedback. One useful comment made the following morning was noted in my journal.

*Lucy said she found the session had made her think and focus more on what the learning objective was for the child she was working with and not on the activity. Therefore she felt she now had a bit more confidence to adapt and extend an activity to enhance the set learning objective.*

(Journal, November 2008)

I asked Lucy why she had not communicated her feelings about the session when immediately invited to. She explained that she did not have the confidence to express her opinion immediately after the session, as it meant doing so in front of her colleagues. She felt that she would have appeared 'too keen' or even a 'teacher's pet' if she had shared her enthusiasm and interest in the session. I eventually came to understand that there was a culture which demanded that you do only the job you are paid for and not take on, or show interest in roles that were considered to be predominantly the teachers'. However, we noticed that our sessions were beginning to make some inroads into this. For example, one TA had commented that she had learnt how complex assessment of our students could be, and now appreciated why teachers were given specific time to plan and prepare.

We continued to observe practice in the classrooms and I chose to conduct interviews with the TAs as a group. This was partly due to time pressure, but mainly because I wanted to see if it would increase some of the TAs' confidence to elaborate on their responses compared to those given during the individual interviews. There were mostly positive responses about the first training sessions. They had given them a better understanding of either P levels or learning objectives. There was evident disagreement: two of the TAs said that they now felt they understood all they needed to know about learning objectives and that they would not benefit from further training on this topic, whereas Lucy challenged this by saying that this was only 'the tip of the iceberg'. Others quickly disagreed with Lucy, arguing that it was only teachers who needed to know more about such topics. This felt like a backward step.

## **Students' perspectives**

I thought that it would be appropriate to involve some of the students at this point of the project. I was optimistic following the successful participation of some of our students in a previous 'student participation' project (MacBeath, Frost, Frost and Pedder, 2008). I had been impressed with how the students involved in the project had expressed themselves and were able to communicate their opinion to others, despite their disabilities. I selected two of the most able students from my class and interviewed them informally about their learning after they had worked with a TA, on a specific learning objective. I used a mixture of verbal and symbol-prompted questions about what they had been learning about that lesson. I tried this on several occasions but with very limited success. The lack of time was one problem but it was also very difficult for the students to express what they had been learning about and even more difficult to say how TAs had helped. One issue that was abundantly clear was that the students were unfamiliar with the word 'learning'. Sometimes, after encouragement from myself, they would demonstrate to me what they had learnt by repeating the activity.

I felt that to include the students in a more valid way in the project would require additional skills and techniques and fundamentally, more time than was available and therefore was beyond the scope of this project. Their small involvement did, however, highlight a key aspect of the work of the TAs; how they communicated the learning objective to the students with whom they had worked.

## **Putting myself in their shoes**

When our school was hit by a viral infection, more than half the staff and students were unable to attend for a period of two weeks. In order to keep the school running safely we closed each class for one day and redeployed staff to other classes to cover for their sick colleagues. I was redeployed to the Foundation Stage class (3-4 year olds) in the role of TA where I found that one of the TAs had been asked to take on the role of the teacher. She was apologetic and said she found it strange even though she had many years' experience of working as a TA and had experience of leading a class (including other TAs). I assured her that the arrangement made good sense because of her experience and knowledge of the class. This experience proved to be invaluable; it gave me a great deal of insight into what it was like to be a TA at my school. I had been aware that the TAs with whom I work tend to see me as a role model, but I did

not realise just how much. Watkinson (2003) cites case study evidence to support this idea and adds that also it is often the informal 'fleeting' conversation that unwittingly adds to TA's knowledge and understanding. I also realised how difficult it was for TAs to find the time to read lesson plans and other documents since all the time was spent with the students.

Shortly after this experience I took the opportunity to repeat it in the context of my own classroom. I stayed to work as a TA during a session for which I normally had non-contact time outside the classroom while one of my TA's, Lucy, planned and led the lesson. I asked Lucy to regard me as a fellow TA rather than as a teacher. At the start of the lesson Lucy sought my approval and permission as she introduced the lesson and directed the other staff. I reminded her that she was leading and was the 'teacher' for the lesson and she soon settled into her own natural teaching style without my direct support. I found it surprising just how specific I needed Lucy's instructions to be in order to understand how the students were to complete the task. This was despite the fact that I was working with students I knew well and with my teaching knowledge and experience.

### **Building the dialogue**

For the second series of professional development sessions we selected the topic of 'number skills' which is taught every day in both classes. The sessions took on the same format as the first sessions, with the teacher explaining the lesson plan and the learning objectives. The TAs were invited to discuss in pairs the learning objective for a specific student and how they would proceed to carry out the planned activity to support that objective. They were then encouraged to discuss how they would communicate the learning objective to the students and keep them focussed on achieving that objective. The pairs were then asked to share their conversations with the whole group and suggest and discuss alternative activities.

The second series of training sessions lasted just under half an hour. The other teacher and I had deliberately chosen to keep the sessions shorter than before, in order to allow time for questions. We wanted to create an opportunity for the TAs not only to ask questions about the training sessions but also to hold a professional discussion. After the first training sessions many of the TAs had not wanted to comment or ask questions. I was pleased to note that this was not the

case after the second training sessions. Nearly all the TAs had appeared to have more confidence in discussion.

Following these sessions I conducted further group interviews and here again found a noticeable difference in the level of willingness and confidence to contribute compared to the first group interview. I noticed a significant difference in not only the volume of responses but also in the language the TAs used; words such as 'learning objective' and 'achievement' were used. One TA even used the words 'success criteria' to help explain her point. We had not introduced this term but the TAs had begun to develop their understanding through informal conversations. A study on the impact of school-based learning by Swann and Loxley (1998) confirms the importance of increased confidence in the use of 'technical vocabulary' amongst TAs and that, with this new vocabulary, TAs found it easier to talk to teachers and others about education.

### **Evaluating our achievement**

At the end of the project, the other teacher, Deputy Headteacher and myself met to evaluate the impact of the project as a whole on the teaching and learning in our classrooms. We agreed that there was a significant difference in the way in which our TAs worked. They now communicated learning objectives with students at the beginning of the activity. They nearly always referred to the learning objective when giving both verbal and written feedback, and, since the training on P levels, some TAs regularly discussed the students' progress towards the next level. TAs were now more realistic and accurate with their feedback on students' achievements during lessons, and no longer over-prompted students in order for them to achieve the learning objective. We agreed that the TAs now had a more helpful understanding of learning and increased confidence to question the students' achievement without regarding any lack of achievement as their fault.

A meeting immediately before school on a Friday morning is now solely dedicated for TAs to raise and discuss any issues they have, and for the teacher to share information on forthcoming lessons. Although this meeting technically takes place during unpaid time for the TAs, they are encouraged to attend through the relaxed and informal breakfast club style. Since I started to hold these meetings, the number of TAs attending has increased, as they have realised how beneficial the information gained is to helping them fulfil their

role. The other issues highlighted by this project, such as the need for clearer job descriptions, requires collaboration with the management of the school and further research to present possible solutions.

The technique of formal training sessions however, did not have the most significant impact on the development of the TAs teaching skills. The project itself initiated a number of informal professional conversations about learning, between teachers and TAs. I think it was a combination of such conversations and modelling by teachers that had the most significant impact on the development of the TAs' teaching skills.

All of the TAs involved in the project reported that they had learnt from the experience, saying that it has had a positive impact of their work. The other teacher involved reported that she too had learnt from the experience of being involved in the project. She felt she had improved her working relationship with her TAs. We both felt that the TAs' effectiveness in the classroom has improved. Therefore, the learning experiences and opportunities for our students' have improved.

The role of TAs and their professionalism, emerged as a key question during the course of the project. It had led to discussion about TAs' knowledge requirements, their understanding and how comparable it was to a teacher's. This shift in focus, from TAs' training needs to their roles and professionalism, reflects the changes in my learning and understanding during the project.

This project has been an immense learning experience for me. I have gained skills and experience in leadership and working collaboratively with colleagues. During the course of the project, I have been able to experience situations from the perspective of a TA at my school. I feel I have learnt the most by working through the challenges presented to me along the way.

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