

**Teaching Assistants' Conditions of
Employment and Workload: Reliance
upon Goodwill and Ad Hoc Systems of
Preparation Time**

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Abstract

This paper draws upon research with a group of work-based students studying for a Foundation Degree in Educational Support. It highlights levels of goodwill evident within their day to day planning and preparation and the ad hoc nature of opportunities for teachers and teaching assistants to work together for planning and feedback purposes. This paper will demonstrate evidence that the high workload experienced by teachers may now be experienced by some teaching assistants. Main findings presented are that as teaching assistants' roles have become more pedagogically focussed, opportunities to plan and prepare with teachers have become essential to their role. However, time for teachers and teaching assistants to plan and prepare together is not a priority. Many teaching assistants increasingly spend their own time planning and preparing to be able to practise effectively. Some evidence here suggests this is expected rather than voluntary and has become part of the 'culture' of the teaching assistant profession. Further research is needed to explore this.

Keywords

Teaching assistant professionalism; goodwill; ad hoc planning; effective practice; cultural expectations; conditions of employment.

Introduction

The profession of teaching assistant (TA) has developed in terms of workload and complexity since the expansion of the wider workforce (Department for Education and Skills) (DFES 2002a; 2002b; 2003). This paper explores some of the findings from The Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) Study 2003-2008 (Blatchford et al. 2009a) which concluded that whilst TAs had eased the stress and workload of teachers, in terms of academic progress for pupils: '...there were no positive effects of TA support for any year group' (Russell et al., 2013:1). Findings presented here will highlight the increasing amount of time that some TAs expend outside of their contracts to negotiate time to plan and prepare with teachers. Links will be made to guidance from the Education Endowment Fund (Sharples et al., 2014) which stress the need for teachers and TAs to have structured time to plan and prepare together.

History of the Emerging Professional Identity of the Wider Workforce.

The term TA is often used to encompass those supporting teaching and learning, with the more generic title of 'support staff' to include those outside of this remit such as: midday supervisory assistants (MDSAs) or secretary and administration staff. The term teaching assistant (TA or TAs) is used here in the same way as Blatchford et al. (2012a:4):

In line with common usage, we use the term 'teaching assistant' to cover equivalent classroom based paraprofessional roles, such as 'learning support assistant', 'special needs assistant' and 'classroom assistant'. We also include 'higher level teaching assistants' in this definition.

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Higher level teaching assistant (HLTA) is a status awarded to support staff upon meeting national HLTA standards. It arose from the reforms of the National Workforce Agreement (DFES, 2003).

Since 1997 there has been a large increase in school wider workforce numbers with TAs alone more than trebling in numbers: 'to about 190,000' in maintained schools in England (Russell, Webster and Blatchford, 2013:10). In 2002, the government set in force a major reform of the educational workforce (DFES, 2002a; 2002b; 2003). Part of this reform focused upon expansion and training of school support staff who were to be:

recognised for their contribution to raising standards and have more opportunities to take on wider and deeper roles in support of teaching and learning, supported by the right training and new career paths (DFES, 2002a:4).

In 2003 a National Agreement (DFES, 2003) was developed which introduced the role of HLTA and left much ambiguity over the qualifications, role, remuneration, support, and training of education support staff.

Teachers and TAs Working in a Collaborative Way.

The consultation for reforming the school workforce stated that:

Teachers are not always allowed to focus on what is most important – teaching. Teachers on average are being expected to spend some 20% of their time on non-teaching tasks that other adults could do just as well instead

(DFES 2002a: 5).

Additional school support staff were to be recruited:

New types of school support staff will take on more demanding roles in the classroom, for which appropriate training will be developed and provided

(ibid.: 7).

Under what was described as 'fuller pupil contact time' (ibid:22) it was recognised that some teaching activities could be delegated to more highly qualified TAs, such as routine marking, developing resources, and leading some aspects of classes. This would be a: 'team approach...within a system of supervision by a teacher' (ibid: 23). Guidance over the role of TAs and the kinds of deployment, preparation and practice within these roles remained ambiguous within the resultant National Agreement (DFES 2003). The National Union of Teachers (NUT) 'refused to sign the workload agreement because of its concerns about labour substitution' (Stevenson 2007:242).

Combined with changes to the parameters of who can teach within Academies and Free Schools there is rising concern about the division of labour within schools between qualified and unqualified teachers. The National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) is the largest teachers' union in the UK and it surveyed nearly 2,300 teachers. It found that: '97% of unqualified staff hired by schools teach lessons', 'nearly three quarters (74%) of unqualified staff are required to plan and prepare lessons', and 'over two thirds (69%) have responsibility for assessing and monitoring pupils' progress' (NASUWT 2014: 1).

Criticism of the Wider Workforce: Research and Media Impact.

The DISS Study 2003-2008 (Blatchford et al., 2009a) concluded that whilst TAs had eased the stress and workload of teachers, in terms of academic progress for pupils: 'there were no positive effects of TA support for any year group' (Russell et al., 2013:1). This was a damaging finding – not least to the morale of TAs but also to the perception of their professional status and their claims to improved conditions of employment.

Media depictions of this further emphasised negative views of the effectiveness of TAs (Marley & Bloom, 2009; Friedburg, 2009) highlighting to the public: 'the more support pupils received, the less progress they made' (Friedburg, 2009:2). Some of these articles did look more deeply into the research findings to demonstrate that:

This is not the fault of TAs. Policymakers and school staff need to rethink the way TAs are used in classrooms and prepared for the tasks that teachers give them. This will help maximise their huge potential to help teachers and pupils

(ibid.:2).

Further reforms to arise since these findings have had effects upon TAs' conditions of employment, particularly the quashing of the School Support Staff Negotiating Body (SSSNB) (Gove, 2010) which was set up to protect working conditions for support staff.

The DISS study research team clarify that:

It is not individual TAs who are at fault, but systemic, structural factors within which TAs operate and over which they have little or no control.

(Blatchford et al., 2012a:6).

The impact of structural factors upon TA effectiveness is reported widely (Alborz et al. 2009; Russell et al. 2013; Sharples et al. 2014, Radford et al., 2015). Guidance arising as a result of DISS from the Education Endowment Fund (EEF) (Sharples et al., 2014) continues to demonstrate that TAs are often inadequately prepared for their roles and that this is related to structural factors outside of their control.

The DISS study encompassed three main components: TA preparedness, deployment and practice and found that:

1. Many support staff worked extra hours outside of their contracts and that there was a decrease in being paid for this extra work over the strands of the research.
2. The majority of teachers had no allocated time with support staff for planning or feedback.

(Blatchford et al., 2009b:1-2).

Working unpaid hours outside of contract is despite long standing and unchanged guidance which compares TAs' and teachers' role expectations:

Unlike teachers, working time for support staff is based on an individual contract within the national framework, which needs to cover all expectations for managed time. This means that staff should be paid for all hours worked whether in or outside the pupils' day. National Joint Council for Local Government Services (NJC, 2003:3).

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The Effective Deployment of Teaching Assistants Project (EDTA) (2010-11) (Blatchford et al. 2012a) responded to these results and worked with 40 teachers and TAs in ten schools over a school year (2010-11) to assess more effective strategies in working with TAs.

Similarly there was often a lack of opportunity for teacher and TA communication and where this did occur it was more often as a result of goodwill:

Nearly all TAs indicated that they voluntarily worked additional hours for which they were not paid. In the majority of cases, TAs did this in order to create communication time with the teacher

(Blatchford et al., 2012b:19).

The EEF guidance (Sharples et al., 2014:9) continues to draw attention to a lack of preparation:

Many TAs report feeling underprepared for the tasks they are given. They 'went into lessons blind' and had to 'tune in' to the teacher's delivery in order to pick up vital subject and pedagogical knowledge, tasks and instructions.

Method, Ethics and Analysis

This research is conducted through a predominantly open questionnaire with 20 year one and two Foundation Degree Education Support (FDES) students in a post-92 UK university. Post-92 university is a term given to former polytechnics or colleges of higher education granted university status through the UK Further and Higher Education Act 1992. Foundation degrees (FDs) were developed from 2000 as two year stand-alone programmes of study with the option of 'topping up' to a third year honours degree.

When conducting previous research (Bovill 2012; 2013) with similar cohorts, professional issues and conflicts began to come to light. A recurring theme was a reported range of experiences from the students regarding conditions of employment. As a result of developing hunches (Rapley, 2011) I developed a questionnaire to further investigate this. The questionnaire had a section of closed questions regarding participant role and remuneration. The remainder of the questionnaire asked 14 open questions related to the extra hours that participants worked, what they did in these extra hours and whether they were paid. Planning and preparation expectations of participants, and whether they had time with teachers for this was also explored.

Students had previously consented in a written format to the various parts of this ongoing research and so further consent was sought verbally from students to continue with this questionnaire keeping in mind the university's ethical principles (BERA, 2011). It was made clear verbally and in a written statement accompanying the questionnaires that students may opt out of the study simply by not filling the questionnaire in.

32 out of a potential 42 questionnaires were returned. 20 were utilised for this study after omitting those respondents who were in a voluntary role or working in the early years or post-compulsory sector or an education related role other than schools. This is in line with the DISS research and EDTA study which focussed upon primary and secondary schools only.

Analysis was thematic searching for data that supported or discounted the use of goodwill and the ad hoc nature of opportunities for TAs and teachers to meet for planning and feedback purposes.

Demographic Characteristics and Working Conditions of Participants.

Of the 20 participants 5 were HLTAs and 15 TAs. 12 were employed part-time, 8 full-time. 10 were on temporary contracts, 9 permanent, and 1 did not know their contract status. 11 participants had been in their current role for upwards of three years, 2 at two years and 7 for one year or less. There did not seem to be a correlation between length of service and contract type as some students with longer service remained on temporary contracts and some with short service permanent contracts.

Analysis of the Data.

The analysis here will consider two main areas:

1. *Reliance upon TA goodwill*

Do TAs in this study work extra hours outside of their contract?

Is extra work voluntary or required?

2. *Ad hoc systems of planning for pedagogical support roles*

Are TAs' roles pedagogically focussed?

What are the opportunities for planning and feedback between teachers and TAs?

Reliance upon TA goodwill: Do TAs in the Study Work Extra Hours Outside of their Contract?

The DISS study found:

That the overall percentage of staff working more hours than specified in their contract increased from a half (51%) at Wave 1 to over two thirds at Wave 2 and 3 (69% and 71%)

(Blatchford et al. 2009a: 99).

Responses from the small scale study here demonstrate a high proportion of TAs reporting to work more hours than they were contracted for. When asked: 'do you work extra hours outside of your contract', 19 participants replied that they did. 12 participants provided responses which explicitly or implicitly implied that they worked extra hours every day. Explicit responses which clarify participants worked extra hours every day can be seen in responses such as:

Yes, at least an hour per day

(year one questionnaire response).

Yes anytime between thirty minutes to one hour everyday

(year two questionnaire response).

More implicit replies also evidence this as in the case of the following year two questionnaire response who replied that she did work extra hours outside of her contract. In response to: 'what do you do in the extra hours that you work' she replied:

Discuss what's happening that day and help set up class. Plan, prepare for groups or lessons, assess pupils' progress, discuss pupil progress with teachers, run a gardening club, help out other staff, look after pupils whose parents haven't picked them up on time.

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She further contributed that she was not paid for any extra hours worked and that though she was a qualified HLTA she was not employed as one and therefore not paid on the appropriate scale for this.

Another year two questionnaire respondent explicitly clarifies working extra hours each day:

I moved to intervention and had an incredible impact on 5A*- C grades and they kept me in that role. I worked at home daily after school from 8pm to 11pm looking for resources for the students to enable me to teach them. I received no assistance from teachers.

To further highlight the impact of this, it is useful to begin to look at how this impacts upon the length of a working week for some TAs. A year one respondent cited that the extra hours she works amount to: 'about 5 hours per week'. This respondent is contracted for 35 hours per week, so this represents a 14% longer working week on average for a salary of £18,500 per annum.

Another who did not specify their salary stated working extra hours for: 'at least 1 hour per day' (year one questionnaire response) on a 28 hour 5 day week, representing at least a 17% longer working week.

The participant previously considered, who clarified that she works 'at home daily after school from 8pm-11pm' (year two questionnaire respondent) works 25 contracted hours per week for a salary of £10750 per annum. These extra 15 hours per week represents a 60% longer working week than contracted.

Reliance upon TA Goodwill: Is extra work voluntary or required?

DISS findings make it difficult to fully understand whether extra work was required or voluntary:

It is appreciated that it may be difficult sometimes to distinguish between the two, for example, because obligation may feel like requirement for some staff under some circumstances

(Blatchford et al. 2009: 99).

My study demonstrates similar ambiguities between what might be considered a voluntary choice or a required aspect of the role. I asked the question: 'why do you work these extra hours?' and 19 of the 20 respondents filled out this section. Prominent themes were:

- 1.Lack of time
- 2.Improve student performance
- 3.More effectively prepare
- 4.Improve own performance
- 5.Help out in terms of school trips
- 6.Watching children before and after school.

It was difficult to choose from the range of responses to demonstrate the deep sense of commitment felt from the TAs in this study as the themes were so varied. I chose from those most commonly cited that seemed to be indicating something to do with responsibility, time, or effective practice.

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Year one responses:

Because it is our responsibility to ensure the paper work is done
To provide children with my best teaching skills
There is not enough time in the day
To prepare for intervention groups I take, to help and assist the teacher, to know what levels the children are at

Year two responses are similar:

To enable me to perform well during the lesson
To help out both school and students
I want the students to achieve the best possible grades

A response from a year two student encapsulates a trend within this research that, for many TAs, working extra hours has become an individual and structural expectation of their role or 'part of the culture':

It is impossible to fulfil my role within the timetabled hours. There is also a culture of staying beyond your allotted hours. There are no opportunities within the timetable to feedback and plan collaboratively with other staff. Sometimes teachers are so demoralised by their workload, I try to help them out.

I asked a further question about expectation and payment for extra work in the questionnaire: 'are you expected to do any planning for your role and do you get sufficient paid time to do this?' - 18 of the 20 respondents replied to this. 12 clearly responded that they were expected to plan. This would suggest a requirement to work extra hours rather than voluntary choice or obligation. Of this 12, 1 reported that they were paid for this extra planning, and 1 respondent reported sometimes being paid.

In analysing the questionnaires from my study it has been problematic in trying to determine whether extra work is voluntary or required and who was paid for what. Sometimes this is because of ambiguities in or misunderstanding of the questions. At others it is because TAs can be seen to work a range of contract types, be paid different rates for different parts of their working week, be paid for some extra time but not for others, be required or volunteer to work extra hours, or feel obligated or committed to do so. I would tentatively claim that this gives grounds to consider that this confusion contributes to increasing levels of goodwill upon which schools have come to rely.

Ad hoc systems of planning for pedagogical support roles: Are TAs' Roles Pedagogically Focussed?

Some information in responses above already identifies a pedagogic focus to extra hours that TAs work. In my study I asked the question: 'what do you do in the extra hours worked? All respondents replied to this question. 7 replies were in line with non-pedagogic roles. 13 of the responses were very clearly pedagogic roles, such as: marking, running intervention groups, revision sessions, preparation or planning. Some TAs spend time after school carrying out responsibilities that might be associated more traditionally with a teaching role.

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Year one responses:

I write reports, plan work and prepare for the next day
Preparation for interventions with children that I am responsible for
helping teach with preparation of resources

Year two responses:

Planning, sorting resources, in meetings
Marking and preparation for intervention groups

These replies begin to display a blurring of lines between the role of a teacher and the role of a TA with one respondent saying:

In our school we have often been told that if someone walks into the classroom they should not be able to tell who is the teacher and who is the TA (year one questionnaire response).

Ad Hoc Systems of Planning for Pedagogical Support Roles: What are the opportunities for planning and feedback between teachers and TAs?

This part of the analysis will only explore the 13 participants who can clearly be seen to have pedagogically focussed roles.

I asked the question: 'Do you get time with the classroom teacher to be part of the lesson planning? Just 1 of the 13 respondents stated that they had both allocated and paid time for planning and feedback with a teacher. 5 of the 13 respondents clearly stated that 'no' they got no allocated or ad hoc time with the teacher.

7 respondents indicated that though they had no allocated time, they managed to manoeuvre some form of ad hoc time for planning with the teacher:

A short amount of time that I make time for at the start and end of my day – but never paid for and frowned upon if I don't come in the extra hours
(Year one respondent).

This links into the response previously from a year two participant who discussed the development of 'a culture of staying beyond your allotted hours'.

Further replies continue to clarify the ad hoc nature of this and the goodwill arrangements used to afford meeting time between TAs and teachers.

Year one and two responses:

Yes at end of school day but not paid
No allocated time but they do discuss with me at break and lunch times
Yes after school if they need help, but unpaid

The previous year one respondent who stated that there should be no discernible difference between teacher and TA in the classroom answered that 'yes' she did get time with the classroom teacher: 'but it is not compulsory and only if the teacher does the planning at school which is not always the case'. So, this respondent has stated that she should be working in a way perceived as similar to the teaching staff but she is not a qualified teacher and she has no allocated time to develop skills to assist in this way, instead time is grabbed for this on an ad hoc basis.

Conclusions and recommendations.

This study has demonstrated evidence that some TAs now routinely work unpaid hours outside of their contract and that this 'goodwill' is becoming a 'cultural expectation'. It also found that the routine extra hours worked can amount to a considerable percentage increase in a TA's working week. It is difficult to discern whether this extra work is voluntary or expected. It seems that it has become increasingly necessary for many TAs so they keep up with the changing professional demands of their pedagogically focussed role. Whilst some TAs can be seen to manoeuvre ad hoc time with teachers for preparation, planning and feedback, this is not structured or allocated for the majority of TAs in the study into their working day. There is also some evidence here of a blurring of lines between the role traditionally given to teachers regarding areas such as preparation, planning and marking after school or at home.

Russell et al. (2013) suggest adopting a 'year zero' approach to recruitment and deployment of TAs, they discuss this to mean 'resetting the clock' (ibid.: 57). Radford et al. (2015:9) draw attention to school management who:

Need to take important decisions about the qualifications and job descriptions of support staff. If they are to fulfil both the pedagogical and non-pedagogical aspects of the roles...managers should have the highest expectations at the recruitment stage.

Alborz et al., 2009, Russell et al., 2013, Sharples et al. 2014, Radford et al., 2015 and Sharples et al., 2016 demonstrate that with effective preparation, and clearer guidance there is a greater tendency for TA support to show more positive impact upon student progress.

Some key recommendations from my research adopting a 'year zero' approach are:

1. New TA posts advertised with essential and desired criteria which *accurately* and *realistically* reflect the demands of the role.
2. Clear selection criteria for new TA posts which clarify necessary qualifications/skills/experience/level of teaching required for different types of TA support role.
3. Clarity and transparency on how pedagogical TA support roles will be scaffolded and supported by qualified teaching staff.
4. Prioritisation of allocated and paid time for teachers and TAs to plan, prepare and review.
5. A cultural shift which recognises that with support and time many TAs are able to offer valuable input to planning, preparing and preparation.
6. Changes to TAs' working hours requiring an extension to TAs' contracted working days potentially at the start and end of the day to accommodate points 4 and 5.
7. Regular review process where contracts are renegotiated when changes to TA roles are evident.
8. Ending temporary contracts where it can be evidenced that a long standing post is needed.

9. Re-instatement of a regulatory body for TAs to monitor contracts, pay and conditions of employment.
10. Clear and transparent CPD (Continuing Professional Development) pathways for TAs.
11. Pay and remuneration scales which are clear and transparent and reflect the extra skill, workload and potential stress associated with TA support at more senior levels.

The DISS and the EDTA findings concur that whilst there are pockets of good practice with regard to leading change, that all too often this is delegated to middle leaders which can lead to 'piecemeal' change (Blatchford et al. 2013: 4). This is particularly so when it comes to conditions of employment such as amendments to contracts or to hours of work (ibid.). The EEF (Sharples et al. 2014: 20) note that:

Finding extra time within schools is, of course, never easy. Nevertheless, without adequate out-of-class liaison it is difficult for teachers and TAs to work in (a) complimentary way.

I argue that a more co-ordinated, research based, policy led change is necessary to overhaul the present confusion that exists regarding, recruitment, training, skill level, conditions of employment, practice, preparation and deployment of TAs. Currently this is largely left to the individual preference of schools and impacted by a range of areas such as: school ethos, cultural practices, status differences between staff, leadership styles, and budgets. The DISS study found that TAs had eased the stress and workload of teachers and this finding is reported in the EEF guidance (Sharples et al. 2014). My research finds evidence of transference of some of this stress and workload onto less well paid TAs. Further research is needed to more fully understand the impact of this upon TAs and those they support. Further research is also needed to learn from those schools who are forming new collaborative ways of working between teachers and TAs so that this practice may be replicated.

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