

An exploration of higher level teaching assistants' (HLTA) perceptions of their training and development in the context of school workforce reform

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Abstract

This paper reports on teaching assistants' perceptions of the Phase 1 Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) training programme, the match to their changing role in classroom support, and suggests resulting issues for the design and delivery of HLTA training programmes. It explores what impact undertaking the training and gaining HLTA professional status has had upon the school activities undertaken by the teaching assistants and their relationships with other members of staff within the school. Finally, it suggests emerging issues for the involvement of staff with HLTA professional status in classrooms in the context of the Schools' Workforce Reform in England.

Key Words: teaching assistants; training; classroom support; continuing professional development

1.0 Introduction

The training and development of school support staff is an essential component of the government's Schools Workforce Reform for England which aims to raise pupil achievement and wellbeing through the training of teaching assistants as Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs) (TTA 2005a). This training was given a major boost through the government funded Phase 1 HLTA training programmes in 2005/6 (TTA 2003a). Currently over 21,000 teaching assistants have achieved HLTA status with the numbers of staff supporting teaching and learning in schools growing from 60,000 in 1997 to 163,000 in 2007 (TDA 2008). Our research reports on 17 teaching assistants working in primary and secondary schools who successfully completed the Phase 1 HLTA training programme. It explores their views on the training and the match to their changing role in classroom support. The methodological approach we adopted is that of evaluative research, which is concerned with the evaluation of social and organisational programmes or interventions (Bryman, 2001). We explore whether the training of the teaching assistants through this HLTA training programme has achieved its goal as well as reporting on the perception of the HLTAs. The research methods utilised are based on questionnaire and in-depth interviews with teaching assistants.

The 17 teaching assistants in the sample were from a cohort of 42 who successfully completed the Teacher and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) (formerly Teacher Training Agency (TTA)) accredited Phase 1 HLTA training programme delivered by The University of Northampton in 2005. This group were self-selected on the basis of submitting completed questionnaires six months after gaining HLTA status. The group comprised ten primary and seven secondary teaching assistants. The most common length of employment as a teaching assistant was between two to five years (52.9%) and five (29.4%) teaching assistants had been in the role for more than eight years. Eleven (64.7%) teaching assistants had GCSE and/or NVQ qualifications, three had A levels (17.6%) and three (17.6%) had undertaken higher education level study.

2.0 Context

The role of teaching assistants has undergone radical change since the emergence of workforce remodelling (DfES 2003a). Groom (2006a) identifies a marked shift in emphasis in the role of the teaching assistant from the development of additional support for including pupils with special educational needs in classrooms. There is now a particular focus on the teaching assistant supporting learning, including key aspects of children's personal and social development. Teaching assistants' tasks have extended from providing individual support for one pupil to encompass work that involves whole class, group and individual work that supports more inclusive approaches to teaching and learning. It has also been recognised that teaching assistants have underutilised skills and talents (DfES 2003b) and that funding should be available to support the development of this potential for providing more effective and planned support and to help schools meet the Every Child Matters agenda (DfES 2003c, DfES 2004). This agenda for improving children's achievement and wellbeing involves changing the behaviour of those who work with children to provide more integrated and responsive services with specialist support embedded. In terms of schools, this means more personalised learning with targeted specialist support so that teachers are freed to concentrate on teaching and an increased understanding and trust between all professionals who work in these environments.

Research in recent years has identified the impact of teaching assistant support on the learning process and recognised the need for training (Farrel et al 1999, Rose 2000, O'Brian and Garner 2001, Balshaw and Farrel 2002, Moran and Abbott 2002,). Teaching assistants are perceived as playing a vital role in supporting children with special educational needs (Groom 2006b). Many teaching assistants are deployed to work specifically with children with social, emotional and behavioural problems and therefore have a key role in ensuring inclusion in primary mainstream classrooms. Groom's research identifies fourteen important areas for teaching assistant input that range from one-to-one, small group and curriculum support to nurture groups and self-esteem programmes. In particular, raising self-esteem and the development of social skills are considered essential elements of the role alongside involvement in curriculum planning and discussion of pupil progress. However, challenges still remain in terms of raising the professional status of teaching assistants and effective training programmes and professional development are essential to promote the role.

In response to the evident training and professional development requirements for teaching assistants, a National Workforce Agreement has been implemented which identifies a new professional status of Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTAs) with a remit to *'make a substantial contribution to the teaching and learning process in schools and raising standards of achievement by pupils'* (ATL et al 2003, para 11). The Agreement gives support staff access to training, development and career opportunities as professionals in their own right (WAMG 2004) and for HLTAs, there are national professional standards derived from the standards for Qualified Teacher Status (TTA 2003b, TTA 2003c, TDA 2007a). The Reform has not been without controversy The National Union of Teachers (NUT) stated:

The Government has removed the entitlement that pupils must be taught by qualified teachers only.

The NUT believes that, today and tomorrow, your child deserves to be taught by a properly trained graduate - a qualified teacher with support from properly paid assistants on permanent contracts.changing role and status for teaching assistants as part of the Schools Workforce

(NUT, 2003, Sept. 30th)

The foundation degree, with its work-based training requirements, has emerged in England as the most popular higher education qualification for teaching assistants (QAA 2003). However, this academic award does not carry a professionally accredited status and, in 2004, the TDA accredited providers to deliver pilot HLTA programmes leading to the HLTA professional status. Subsequently, Phase 1 and Phase 2 HLTA accredited programmes were introduced in 2005 and 2006 respectively.

The framework for the Phase 1 HLTA training programme, specified by the TDA, included the 50 day duration; provider-based, school-based and information and communication technologies (ICT)-based components; and an alignment of training to professional standards. The role of professional standards as a key driver in professional development design is an acknowledged feature of initial teacher training programmes (Whitty and Wilmott 1995; Moon and Shelton Mayes 1995; Shelton Mayes 2001). The requirement of a school-based dimension alongside provider-based training similarly has roots in models of teacher professional development, including learning as knowledge to be acquired and applied in context, situated learning and apprenticeship (Maynard and Furlong 1993; Edwards, 1998; Lave and Wenger 1991; Craft 1996; Blandford 2000; Butcher 2000).

The Phase 1 HLTA training programmes, operated during 2005, were the first training programmes developed specifically to support the development of teaching assistants to demonstrate the HLTA professional standards. This therefore represented a key moment to explore the views of teaching assistants who successfully completed the first HLTA training programme to gain the HLTA professional status and consider emerging issues in relation to the government's strategic plan for Schools' Workforce Reform.

3.0 Results: Teaching assistants' views on the HLTA training programme

The teaching assistants reported favourably on the HLTA training programme (Table 1). Overall 88.2% of the teaching assistants felt the training had supported their professional development needs and had improved their professional knowledge and skills. Of that number, 35.3% of teaching assistants reported a very high level of development. A similar response was noted in the end-of-course candidate evaluations where 100% of the 42 candidates in the

cohort responded that the training had met the intended learning outcomes and 34.7% returned the highest ratings.

Nearly half of all teaching assistants (47.1%) commented on their increased confidence and their greater depth of knowledge and understanding. The ability to present well balanced lessons and understand lesson outcomes were also noted as key improvements. This aligns strongly with the teaching assistants' views on how well the training supported the development of specific HLTA professional standards (see Table 4) in which the highest ranking standards include *'work with individual, groups and whole classes where teacher absent'* and *'understanding aims, content, teaching strategies and intended learning outcomes'*.

The following comments were typical of those reporting a positive impact on confidence and professional understanding

'Advanced understanding of teaching and how children respond to different teaching methods.'

'The training gave me more confidence, made me recognise my strengths and showed me ways to address any weaknesses.'

'Confidence in my ability to encourage children to learn. The responsibility of having children's learning in your hands.'

There is one set of generic HLTA professional standards for teaching assistants (TTA 2003b, TDA 2007a) although there are many varied support roles and responsibilities. In this sample (see Table 5), there were teaching assistants who worked in early years and primary (deemed primary), middle and secondary (deemed secondary) and who covered a broad range of support activities ranging from special educational needs and individual support, literacy and numeracy group support, behavioural support, and whole class support. This use of generic standards mirrors the single set of professional standards for teachers (TTA 2003c, TDA 2007b) in relation to teachers in all phases and subjects. However, unlike initial teacher training where the majority of training is specialised depending on phase and subject, the HLTA training brought together all teaching assistants, what ever their role for a common training programme. Generally, the broad nature of the HLTA programme was valued:

'I really enjoyed the training. I found it really useful and informative and opened my eyes to issues that I had not thought about before'

'It helped me to understand better why some children behave as they do and how to help better in certain circumstances'

However, negative responses, in relation to the overall programme, were given by two of the secondary teaching assistants as they considered the training lacked focus on secondary schools. On further investigation it emerged that both had highly specialised roles in their respective schools and it seems likely that the training in focusing on the HLTA professional standards did not meet their specific needs.

'It was very good for learning about school/educational jargon and procedures. It lacked greatly in focus on secondary and the very different role a cover tutor has opposed to a TA'

The features of the overall training programme that teaching assistants identified as most useful in helping them meet the HLTA professional standards were the tutor/trainer input, including the provision of specialist tutors/trainers, such as those with expertise in behaviour management and special educational needs in relation to specific HLTA standards. Opportunities to discuss with other teaching assistants, the support for planning lessons, special education needs, behaviour management and the clarification of the HLTA standards were also identified as positive features.

'The tutors were very professional. The modules were all very relevant. Working in groups – talking with other TAs was very beneficial. The school based tasks were useful for finding out more about the 'overall picture' – policies, curriculum maps etc.'

'Some of the tutors were willing to 'tailor' some of the sessions to meet the group's needs which was excellent and so helpful.'

35.3% of teaching assistants reported no negative aspects of the training programme. Those aspects of the overall training programme that teaching assistants did not find useful in meeting the HLTA professional standards focused

on the training to develop information and communication technologies (ICT). Again this aligns strongly with teaching assistants' views on how well the training supported specific HLTA standards where *'know how to use ICT for pupils and own benefit'* was ranked bottom (Table 4). The ICT component of the training was reported as being too basic to match the level of teaching assistant expertise. Opportunities for e-learning also received mixed support from teaching assistants.

'I found the two computer days of no help to me. I had already done a number of evening classes in various computer courses and have my ECDL. I felt at times I knew how the programme we were using worked better than the tutor did.'

'Electronic support – home computer for producing work and internet access for research. It would have been much more helpful, however, to have had access to the university student website.'

The support provided by the tutor/trainers and their peer group were rated most highly by the teaching assistants (see Table 2). The support provided by a mentor in the school setting was ranked fourth and teaching assistant comments on the role of school-based staff in this programme were mixed.

'I was very lucky that my class teachers was my mentor and was very supportive. '

'Mentor at school was unaware of the HLTA standards until I went through them with him myself.'

This is not surprising given the relative 'newness' of the HLTA professional standards, status and role. A further issue is that the TDA accredited programme specification for Phase 1 HLTA did not identify mentor support despite the requirement for school-based tasks.

Teaching assistants found the training most useful in supporting the development of the HLTA standards relating to *professional values and knowledge and understanding* (see Table 3). The rank order (see Table 4) identifies two strong responses in relation to the highest (whole class teaching) and the lowest (ICT) ranking responses. The professional standard that teaching assistants report as most usefully supported by training appears to relate to the teaching assistants change in role i.e. taking whole classes (see 6.2 below).

With the exception of some negative responses in relation to overall usefulness of training, discussed above, no major difference of views emerged for secondary and primary teaching assistants undertaking the training.

3.1 Teaching assistants' perspectives on impact of HLTA status

Overall the teaching assistant range of roles and activities had in general become more narrowly focussed since gaining HLTA status, with a major shift in their responsibilities to teaching whole classes. Prior to undertaking HLTA training, only two (11.8%) teaching assistants, both secondary, had reported that their role included teaching classes. After HLTA training, 14 (82.4%) teaching assistants reported teaching whole classes, including cover for absent teachers, taking subject classes and taking classes to allow teachers PPA time (planning, preparation & assessment). For the majority this now formed the major part of their work activity.

Four (23.5%) teaching assistants reported no change in their role or activities following gaining the HLTA status. Major disappointment and frustration was reported where no change had resulted.

'I work in 3 classes – Reception, Y1/2, Y3/4. 4 afternoons per week. I plan, deliver, resource and assess the lessons (under the supervision of the teacher). My mornings remain as before.'

'PPA time equating to 4 afternoons per week. Covering: Year 1 Art and Music. Year 1 / 2 History, DT, Geography. Year 2 Art and Music. Year 3 History, Geography. SEN Programme withdrawal of individual pupils and groups.'

3.2 Teaching assistant perceptions on other staff attitudes

Generally, teaching assistants report that there have been significant changes in the way they are perceived by teachers, headteachers and other teaching assistants within their schools but not by parents or pupils (see Table 6). They report an overall positive impact on teacher and Headteacher attitudes.

'Teachers are more confident in my ability to teach their classes. My opinion is more frequently asked for.'

'The Head teacher speaks on more confidential issues regarding pupils'

'I have much more contact with the Headteacher. I have asked to take on a liaison role between Senior Management Team and Teaching Assistants'

However, they report mixed responses from other teaching assistants, with the majority reporting a negative impact.

'Caused a rift- lot of TAs resent fact I have HLTA status.'

'The response has not been positive at all – It has caused various ructions at the school.'

'They feel that there are several duties that I do that they would not be confident or happy to undertake. Most of them will come to me to discuss problems they are having to ask for advice.'

'Other TAs at my school were not interested in gaining HLTA status and consequently know very little about the role.'

Parents and pupils were generally unaware of any change except for 'teaching classes' where the response has been positive.

Only 47.1% of teaching assistants reported an intention to go on to further professional development. No particular pattern of further professional development emerged for those who were keen to continue with degree completion. Individuals noted the possibility of undertaking a foundation degree and progression to teacher.

4.0 Conclusions

Our research suggests that the teaching assistants who completed the Phase 1 HLTA Training Programme valued the development of a theoretical and reflective underpinning to the range of skills developed through their work-based

experiences. However, there may be a need for greater differentiation in the training in particular, between primary and secondary teaching assistants, in relation to specialist support responsibilities, and in relation to ICT development, where the current expectations of teaching assistant ICT skills are set too low. There is some evidence that e-learning strategies might prove useful for HLTA training although the very positive impact of other teaching assistants and the tutor/trainer role in providing support suggest a 'blended' approach might provide a useful model of training for this group. It is clear that some staff are undertaking the HLTA in the absence of other training for their specific school roles.

The training programme analysed in this study, was highly regarded by the teaching assistants, particularly in terms of developing their knowledge and understanding and the input of the specialist tutor/trainer. The positive responses to the HLTA training programme align with the external evaluations (TTA 2005) and in-course candidate feedback (UN 2005).

Nationally, however, there has been a low take-up of the full training programme by teaching assistants compared to those who seek the shorter assessment-only route. The HLTA training in Phase 1 has also been generic and a model of differentiated training to match personal training requirements in relation to the professional standards would better suit the needs of this group. The government's strategy for the schools' workforce needs to be further extended to cover a variety of school roles and to include the range of specialist teaching assistants roles.

This research demonstrates that, for this group of teaching assistants, gaining HLTA status has narrowed their range of activities with a major shift to teaching whole classes as part of cover or Planning, Preparation and Assessment (PPA) arrangements for teachers, which is only one part of the HLTA professional standards. This shift, if confirmed as the numbers of HLTA staff grow, suggests that the emerging HLTA role is not in balance with the overall range of the HLTA professional standards nor the overall design of the HLTA training programmes. It stands in contrast to the trend reported above where the range of learner support activities undertaken by teaching assistants has rapidly expanded over the past decade, particularly in relation to SEN and inclusion. If the workforce reform agenda is to be achieved and have a real impact upon learning and teaching in schools then there needs to be a further reconceptualisation of the

teaching team to accommodate the enhanced skills and capabilities of those with HLTA status who have undertaken additional professional development. In its present form the new responsibilities undertaken by HLTAs represents a lost opportunity to provide more personalised learning and help schools realise the potential for all children.

Despite the very favourable responses by teaching assistants to this programme, the TDA Phase 2 HLTA programme, currently operating, removed the funded 50-day training programme. The government model retained the HLTA accredited providers of assessment alongside short courses to prepare candidates *for assessment* against the HLTA professional standards. Teaching assistants may be funded by local authorities to undertake locally provided training courses, which may be aligned to the development of the HLTA professional standards. This return to a model of 'pick and mix' short courses may have an advantage for the teaching assistant who wishes to focus only on developing a specific aspects of their work and there has been a welcome development of some courses with a subject specialist focus, for example HLTA secondary mathematics. However, the entitlement to a national HLTA professional training programme that integrated personal development across all the HLTA professional standards has disappeared. The TDA consultation on foundation degrees for the Schools Workforce (TDA 2008) may offer an opportunity to secure the professional standing of teaching assistants if there is a clear link made between foundation degrees and HLTA professional standards. This would finally deliver a concept of training for teaching assistants equivalent to the initial teacher training programme..

Appendix

Table 1 How well did the training programme support teaching assistant professional development needs?

(5 point scale)

Very well		OK		Not well
35.3% (6)	29.4% (5)	23.5% (4)	11.8% (2)	0

Table 2 How useful were the following in helping teaching assistants meet the HLTA professional standards?

(Rank Order 1= most useful)

	Rank Order
TA/Peer support	1
Trainer/tutor support	1
HLTA materials	3
School/mentor support	4
Electronic support	5

Table 3 How well did the training programme support teaching assistants in developing specific areas of the HLTA professional standards?

(Rank Order 1= most useful)

	Rank order
Professional Values	1
Knowledge & Understanding	1
Planning & Expectations	3
Teaching & Learning	4
Monitoring & Assessment	5

Table 4 How well did the training programme support teaching assistants in meeting specific HLTA professional standards? (TTA 2003b)

There are 28 HLTA professional standards. Rank Order (1=Most Useful)

HLTA Prof. Standard	Rank order
Work with individuals, groups and whole classes where teacher absent	1
Use behaviour strategies to contribute to learning environment	2
Understand aims, content, teaching strategies and intended learning outcomes	2
Know legal definition of SEN, familiar with SEN code	4
Contribute to planning and preparation	4
Motivate pupils through teaching activities	6
High expectations of all pupils	6
Know strategies to establish good behaviour	6
Plan their own role in lessons	6
Aware of statutory frameworks	6
Contribute to planning in out-of-school activities	11
Communicate effectively with pupils	11
Understanding of specialist area to support pupils	11
Familiar with school curriculum	11
Promote inclusion of pupils	15
Work collaboratively with colleagues	16
Promote positive values, attitudes, and behaviour	16
Contribute to selection of resources	16
Successful relationships with pupils	19
Respond to equal opportunities issues	20
Monitor pupils response to learning tasks	20
Support pupil evaluation through assessment activities	22
Monitor pupil participation and give feedback to teachers & pupils	22
Know key factors that affect pupil learning	22
Organise and manage safe learning, space and resources	25
Contribute to pupil progress records	26
Liaise with parent and carers	27
Know how to use ICT for pupils and own benefit	28

Table 5. Change in teaching assistant role/responsibilities since gaining HLTA professional status.

	Whole class support	Individual pupil support	SEN support	Subject Specific support	Combination	Other
Before HLTA	41.2% (7)	76.5% (13)	52.9% (9)	29.3% (5)	47.1% (8)	17.6% (3)
After HLTA	64.7% (11)	64.7% (11)	64.7% (11)	58.8% (10)	41.2% (7)	11.8% (2)

Table 6. Has gaining HLTA changed the way teaching assistants are perceived by other?

	Teachers	TAs	Headteacher	Pupils	Parents
Yes	64.7% (11)	52.9% (9)	64.7% (11)	29.4% (5)	23.5% (4)

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