



Current issues

Teaching assistants (TAs) are beginning to make a significant and growing contribution to leadership and learning in academies (SSAT, 2010). Although many boroughs and authorities require TAs to have or be working towards a minimum level of qualification, TAs are not required to have education-related qualifications.

The development of the higher level teaching assistant (HLTA) has offered leadership by TAs for TAs. The HLTA is trained against a set of national standards (Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) www.tda.gov.uk), and the leadership of fellow TAs is part of that remit. The TA role is vital to ensuring that a high quality differentiated curriculum is offered to students with learning difficulties. Their role needs to be empowered by the academy structure, not sidelined as has often been the case in the past. Much innovation and creativity around and within the TA role will ensure that personalised learning, which truly meets individual needs, happens for students with learning difficulties.

Working with students with learning difficulties on a one-to-one basis requires specialist knowledge to support the student's learning and the teacher's delivery of a personalised curriculum. Since the move towards inclusive education, many of these students are entering academies, inevitably leading to a rise in the number of TAs employed and issues of how to manage the TA workforce effectively.

Organisational response

Management of TAs

TAs should receive termly supervisions to discuss work-related issues. It is important that these supervisions are not completed by the class teacher, but by a teaching assistant manager or SENCO to ensure some impartiality.

You may want to consider moving TAs to work with different classes and students every two years – this will enable consistency of support for the student, and, for TAs, in-depth knowledge. Moving on after two years enables transfer of the TAs' skills and enhances their own professional learning.

What TAs bring to their role

TAs can contribute to the academy's day-to-day functioning and structure. Many TAs want to be involved in processes, decisions, planning and problem-solving. Their self-esteem and confidence in their role can be improved as their thoughts and opinions are heard and valued. You may want to involve TAs in annual reviews, focus meetings, lesson planning, etc, on a voluntary or rotational basis. Experience from TAs' previous employment or hobbies may provide opportunities for extra-curricular clubs (eg ICT, photography, baking).

Training

TAs require information about specific diagnoses and the implications to support students effectively. They, as well as teachers, need to extend their knowledge and perspective. If the academy's training budget cannot stretch to formal continuing

professional development (CPD) for all teaching assistants, some less expensive alternatives are: informal sessions with the SENCO, opportunities to shadow a more experienced TA and providing resources on specific conditions and appropriate teaching strategies.

Practice implications

TAs can offer the teacher valuable insights and perspectives on individual students and wider practice. To enable an enriching, collaborative partnership between the TA and class teacher, the duties and expectations of TAs need to be made explicit. TAs should at the very least have access to lesson plans, lesson objectives and learning targets for the individual student (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2005). Teachers may want to include a section in their planning, perhaps typed in a different colour for easy reference, suggesting how TAs can support learning. This needs to be available to TAs in class and before the lesson – preferably the day before and ideally with an opportunity for prior discussion with the teacher. This allows TAs to give thought to their role within the lesson and to work creatively within the student's core objectives.

Research suggests that exclusive, one-to-one TA support of a student is not effective. It limits opportunities for the student to work independently alongside the teacher and their peers and may limit progress through learned helplessness (DfES, 2005). While maintaining a discreet focus on the funded student, TAs also can benefit the class more widely.

Future considerations

To maximise TA contribution to the academy, the senior leadership team may consider specialism training and leadership for TAs in addition to TA levels. Perhaps a TA could lead on communication or a specific disability? The SSAT has recently introduced lead practitioner accreditation for TAs. Specialist TAs, by sharing their skills, can motivate and enhance others' professional development and demonstrate and circulate current findings to colleagues in their specialism area. Some academies have involved TAs in class and academy-based action research projects, again extending the TAs' skills and empowering them.