**Verifying personal attributes which enable Teaching Assistants to function in their day-to-day tasks. A quasi literary investigation**

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this quasi literary investigation was to identify personal attributes of teaching assistants or teachers’ aides which enable them to function in their day-to-day tasks thus contributing to filling a literary gap. Specifically the investigation shows the following personal attributes are essential traits which enable them to function in their day-to-day tasks: Ability to positively relate or interact with students and teachers; Disposed to teamwork; Disposed to sharing knowledge/teaching; Willingness to accept and respond appropriately to instructions; A caring disposition; Flexibility and Critical reflection, so as to learn.

**Key words:** teaching assistants, teachers’ aide, personal attributes, primary schools,

England, traits.

**Introduction**

There is a recent increase in the number of teaching assistants (TAs) in primary and secondary schools in London, England and elsewhere (Clayton, 1993; Butt & Lance, 2009; Trent, 2014). Stephenson and Carter (2014) highlighted the fact that between 1996 and 2011, TAs employed in schools have steadily increased from 16% to 23% in countries such as Australia. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2004) report that 133,400 teaching assistants are presently employed across the phases in English schools. This number is expected to grow steadily.

Research with this group of teachers focusses primarily on their roles and duties (Gao & Shum, 2010; Webster, Blatchford , Bassett , Brown , Martin & Russell, 2011; Devecchi , Dettori , Doveston, Sedgwick, & Jament, 2012; Butt & Lowe, 2012), deployment or use (Watkinson 2002; McVittie 2005; Farrell , Alborz , Howes & Pearson 2012; Webster, Blatchford & Russell 2012), training needs and training provisions (Swann & Loxley 1998;Burgess & Mayes 2007; Wilson & Bedford 2008), and the nature of their interaction and relationship with teachers, parents and students (Wilson & Bedford 2008; Bedford, Jackson & Wilson 2008). However, what is missing from the body of research work are those which focus exclusively on identifying and verifying personal attributes which enable TAs to function in their day-to-day tasks.

**Rationale for the Investigation**

There are two reasons why this study is important. First, as hinted in the forgoing discussion, it is important because it contributes to filling a literary gap. Searches of databases such as ERIC, JSTOR, British Education Index (BEI) and the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER) returned no documents which specifically focus on the personal attributes of teaching assistants or teachers’ aides which enable them to function in their day-to-day tasks.

Second, the results of the investigation could be a useful teaching resource for lecturers engaged in the education and training of TAs, because it highlights personal attributes which enable TAs to function in their day-to-day tasks.

**Literature search and investigative method**

An investigation of the literature to reveal personal attributes necessary for the functioning of TAs indicated the subject was broached in a number of papers. However, to substantiate the literary findings and add a practical element to this otherwise theoretical exercise, seven friends and colleagues who worked in a primary school in London, England were consulted, more specifically 2 male and 2 female teachers, and 3 female teaching assistants. Through various face-to-face encounters they were asked in an informal way a broad question: ‘What makes an excellent teaching assistant?’ Responses were noted. This broad question resulted in a variety of responses used to substantiate the literary findings as displayed later in this paper. Throughout the paper, the following abbreviations are used to indicate various participants: T1- 4 to represent teachers and TA 1-3 for teaching assistants. The participants were assured of anonymity within the investigation.

**Personal attributes which enable TAs to function in their day-to-day tasks.**

The results of the quasi literary investigation revealed that there are a number of personal attributes which enable TAs to function in their day-to-day tasks.

These are:

1. Ability to positively relate or interact with students and teachers (Groom, 2005)
2. Disposed to teamwork participation – a team player (Groom, 2005)
3. Disposed to sharing knowledge/teaching (Rubie-Davies, Blatchford, Webster, Koutsoubou, Bassett, 2010)
4. Willingness to accept and respond appropriately to instructions.
5. A caring disposition – nurturing, patient and fair (Groom, 2005)
6. Flexibility (Tutty & Hocking 2004)
7. Critical reflection, so as to learn (Woodward & Peart, 2005; Groom, 2005)

These descriptors were used as a template to guide this section of the paper and they are presented in order of seeming importance, based on how frequently they are mentioned or implied in the literature. Each attribute could be the subject of a number of studies and warrants extended discussion. However, given the focus and intention of this paper only a succinct review can be accommodated.

**1. Ability to positively relate to or interact with students and teachers**

In 95% (n=47) of the studies consulted for this paper, the personal attribute that is most frequently and explicitly or implicitly stated is a TA’s ability to positively relate to, or interact with students and teachers (Rubie-Davies, Blatchford, Webster, Koutsoubou, Bassett, 2010; Bedford et al., 2008). Next to the ability to willingly accept and respond appropriately to instructions, this attribute was highlighted most frequently by participants (n=5). This is indeed a personal attribute that is central to the success of any TA in his or her role in the classroom for it is required to be in use for 90% of the school day (Harris & Aprile 2015). Relating to, or interacting with students may occur during instructional tasks such as whole class, small group and individual instruction, and non-instructional tasks such as monitoring a class of students during lunch or recess or helping students get ready for the bus (Achilles, Finn, Gerber, & Zaharias, 2000).

The following actions are indicative of a TA’s positively relating to, or interacting with students and teachers: displaying pleasure and enjoyment of students; interacting with students and teachers in a responsive and respectful manner; offering to help the students and the teacher in the classroom—to aid them in achieving academic goals and lesson objectives; helping students to reflect on their thinking and learning skills; knowing and demonstrating knowledge about individual students' backgrounds, interests, emotional strengths and academic levels, and avoid showing irritability or aggravation toward the students and teacher (Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2015).

Regarding knowing and demonstrating knowledge about individual students' T3 highlighted these and used her TA as an example.

*I thought my TA was excellent, going around to the students’ tables to help those students whom he knew needed help. I am new here and don’t know all the students very well so having him was good, since he had been with the students before I came (T3).*

Rimm-Kaufman and Sandilos (2015), also made the point that relating to or interacting with students in ways listed here will aid students in attaining higher levels of achievement and aid teachers to not just achieve lesson objectives, as outlined in the foregoing discussion, but help to facilitate the smooth flow of lessons. This thought was echoed by TA2 who thought being proactive and taking the initiative in helping was critical to ‘being’ an excellent TA, not just carrying out the functions of a TA. The personal attribute of the ability to relate or interact positively with students and teachers can be cultivated by those for whom this may be an underdeveloped area.

**2. Disposed to teamwork**

An examination of job descriptions for posts in many educational environments in the United Kingdom reveals employers’ interest in ascertaining potential employees’ disposition for teamwork. Questions pertaining to this area appear under the heading or subheading of ‘personal qualities’ on job descriptions and/or person specifications. These occurrences help to reinforce the fact that the ability to engage in teamwork is seen as a personal attribute.

While Stephenson and Carter (2014) found the personal attribute of having a disposition for teamwork the most frequently mentioned criterion for the selection of TAs in Australia, it seems it is also very important in other parts of the world, given the fact that—overall—it is the second most frequently cited in the research literature addressing the work of TAs and also features prominently in a list of professional values expected of TAs in England (Woodward & Peart, 2005).

The importance of TAs to ‘naturally’ engage in teamwork and to be comfortable doing so cannot be over emphasized. This is supported by TAs interviewed in the recent study of Gibson, Paatsch, Toe, Wells, & Rawolle (2015), who pointed out the centrality of teamwork to the success of their role. This is important given their increased roles in schools, varied needs of students, and changes in legislation. The ability to work well with the teacher (who has the training and expertise) will aid the teaching assistant in navigating, modifying and adapting to occurrences—inside and outside the classroom—which impact him or her.

Given the nature of TAs work in schools which, in addition to relating to or interacting with students and teachers, also involves collaborating and sharing with teachers and other TAs (Sosinsky & Gilliam 2011), the absence of this personal attribute may render them impotent to function in the role.

**3. Disposed to sharing knowledge/teaching**

Clayton (1993) made the point that the role of TAs has developed to include substantial involvement in students’ learning process. This observation has been subsequently supported by a number of other writers such as Rubie-Davies, et al., (2010), and Butt and Lance (2009) who also point to the increased pedagogical role of TAs. The importance of this personal attribute to the functioning of TAs was identified and elaborated by T1

***‘****For example,**a TA should be able to teach lower ability students, knowing when to not just give them the answers but to know when to let them give you the answers by asking questions’ (T1)*

T2 however raised concerns about the pedagogical qualities of TAs. These were similar to those raised in the literature in regards to TAs increased pedagogical responsibilities. For example, Williams and O’Connor (2012) questioned the extent to which TAs who have been trained in a higher level teaching assistant programme (HLTA) can—through their teaching—improve the quality of students’ learning and meet the appropriate HLTA standards.

Rubie-Davies, et al. (2010) further problematised the issue by suggesting that instructions given by teaching assistants did not seem to have the same qualities as those offered by the regular teacher. For example, TAs seem to ask less challenging questions, closed down student talk, and focussed primarily on completing the assigned task during instructional time. Additionally, teaching assistants are seldom given time to prepare for instruction and have access to few professional development opportunities (Butt and Lowe, 2012). Watkinson (2002) extends the conversation and concern regarding the increased instructional role of the TA by stating that it has far-reaching implications for all involved, ranging from the classroom teacher to budgetary allocations in schools.

The presence and utilisation of this quality of capacity to teach in a TA seems to build their credibility and trust with the teacher. This is reflected in the tone and words of T2's example about his TA who seems to have a well-developed quality within the disposition to share knowledge/teach. He said, with a tone of pride in his voice, *“I can say to my TA, ‘please go over with these students this section of the lesson’ and she is able to do so very well” (T2).*

Fink (2006), states that being a successful teacher is dependent on many things, but critical to the process is an ability to help students grasp new material, information and concepts. The absence of this personal attribute may also result in a TA functioning with considerable discomfort in their role.

**4. Willingness to accept and respond appropriately to instructions.**

In the Gibson, et al (2015) study a participant (TA104) clarified their perspective of the specific role of the teacher to guide a TA claiming;

*It is important for subject teachers to take ownership for all students in the class and for them to instruct aides [teaching assistants] on what they want the child to achieve and work with the aide [teaching assistant] to modify and adapt work to suit (p. 80).*

The explicit idea conveyed by this statement is that it is the teacher’s role to instruct the TA in what goals to pursue. However, the statement implies that for this to be successful, a willingness on the part of the TA to take and act on instructions given is indispensable, if the set goals are to be achieved.

The attribute of awillingness to accept and respond appropriately to instructionswas also the most frequently cited attribute identified by participants in this investigation in response to the question of what makes an excellent TA. ***“****I guess from the teacher’s perspective, someone who will do whatever he/she says” (TA3).*

TA1 highlights the importance of this quality by stating: *“If a teacher asks you to do something you won’t just not do it. I have heard of TAs who when asked to do something would say, ‘it’s not my job’, that just should not happen” (TA1).*

One teacher participant pointed out with much relief that this quality is something he appreciated about his TA when he stated:

*For example with [the name of the TA stated] I will have a group of students and I can say to [the name of the TA stated], ‘please go sit with those students and go over with them certain aspects of the lesson, and she [will] just do it' (T2).*

This personal attribute is so important to the day-to-day functioning of the TA that its absence or underdevelopment seems to have led to a TA’s dismissal. *“I once asked a temporary TA to stoop to talk to the students instead of standing over them, but the person refused, subsequently the TA was asked to leave” (T1).* It could be inferred (but only tentatively, because no data was collected to substantiate this claim) that a disposition for teamwork may also have been either missing or underdeveloped in this TA. While this is speculative, Rimm-Kaufman and Sandilos (2015) however, did make the point that being open and receptive to a teacher’s suggestions or instructions is also connected to the personal attribute of being able to positively relate to or interact with students and the teacher in a classroom. In the case of the dismissed TA, it may be safe to say these particular personal attributes may have been missing or underdeveloped.

Morris (2000) of the United Kingdom’s department for education and skills introduces the idea of management when she states that in addition to being well trained, a well-managed TA contributes tremendously to pupil achievement. Kettenhofen (2008) gives some tips on how to manage or instruct people that are relevant to teachers as managers of TAs. In her list she includes the need for: collaboration in the setting of goals; empathy and compassion when the situation calls for it; honesty, trustworthiness, fairness, respect, modelling the required behaviour and clear communication. Given the centrality of a TA accepting and responding to instructions in day-to-day tasks, the absence of this personal attribute makes success and functioning almost impossible.

**5. A caring disposition**

Gao and Shum (2010) in their study found teaching assistants not only took on the role of helping learners from South Asian backgrounds in Chinese language acquisition, but also acted as cultural mediators for these students now living in Hong Kong. These actions suggest the disposition to care generally, and care and nurture students specifically, should be an inherent characteristic of those who teach. It was clear from the participants in this study that a disposition to care is critical to being an excellent TA. TA3 highlighted this quality and thought the action which best displayed this attribute is taking time to listen to the students. *“I guess from the students’ perspective someone who will listen to them, cares for them” (TA3).* T3 also identified this quality and pointed it out in her TA, *“Care I thought, was displayed by the TA in my class, who willingly went around to each table to help those students who were in need of genuine help without having to be told to do so” (T3).*

It is safe to assume that the absence of this personal attribute in an individual may be an indication that teaching or teacher assistant may not be a suitable career choice, further this could extend to careers of a humanitarian, or client-centred nature such as clergy, nursing or social work. Fink (2005), states that successful teachers are those who care and it is discernable. This means they care about what they teach, their students and about teaching and learning in general. Rogers (1983) continues this trend of thought making the point that the development of students’ creativity, problem-solving abilities and ability to learn the basics is linked to teachers’ ability to care for, empathise and understand their students.

This discussion asserts that if this particular personal attribute is missing, then being a TA may be an inappropriate career choice, and if pursued, such a career may be short-lived.

**6. Flexibility**

Both TAs and parents in the Groom (2005) study highlighted flexibility among other attributes such as patience and understanding as being essential to the day-to-day functioning of a TA. This attribute is highly desirable in TAs’ interaction with students and teachers. Examples of flexibility can be seen in a TA stopping an assigned task to attend to the need of an individual student—especially if the student is a ‘high needs student’ in a regular classroom (Tutty & Hocking 2004)—or a willingness to follow an instruction given by the teacher, even though she or he might not fully agree with the instruction. TA3 highlighted this attribute as important, and gave an example:

‘*I was just settling down to work on a task the teacher gave me to do, and just a few minutes into the tasks she asked me to go to the resource room to attend to another matter which she thought was urgent, I just dropped what I was doing and took on the new task’ (TA3)*

TA1 also identified flexibility as an important quality for a TA and spoke of having to put away her personal feelings and act the part while carrying out a particular task.

*‘This is my least favourite activity, it is quite stressful walking a group of students to the local library. There are safety regulations to follow. The actual process of walking them to the site takes much energy and attention to details at crossing and road intersections. But I have to put my feelings aside and act the part’ (TA1)*

The absence and/or non-utilisation of this personal attribute could result in a strained relationship between a teacher and TA, as was hinted at by T1 in this study.

**7. Critical Reflection, so as to learn**

The ability to reflect is a shared human attribute; therefore, there are only more or less reflective individuals (Posner, 1989) for some engage in the act more than others. The place of reflection in education is now well established and there is an abundance of literature on the subject. There are, however, very few which examine ‘being reflective’ as it relates to TAs and their role. Those that do, suggest that through reflection— coupled with observation, evaluation, and discussion—TAs are able to improve their own practice (Woodward & Peart, 2005).

**Conclusion**

The aim of this literary investigation has been achieved. This work identifies the personal attributes which enable TAs to function in their day-to-day tasks and consequently helps to fill a gap in TA literature. This was achieved through combining a literature review and the reflective responses of selected participants. While all the identified attributes were essential traits, a willingness to accept and respond appropriately to instructions and the ability to positively relate to or interact with students and teachers featured prominently in the literature and responses. These prominently identified attributes make working relations between teachers and TAs much more cordial and may impact positively on students’ learning. This is so because the goals set by the teacher and carried out by the TA will aid students’ achievement, but could be hampered by tension and discord between a teacher and TA. The personal attribute of a disposition to share knowledge/teach was highlighted by only the teachers who participated in this investigation. This is significant—and possibly not surprising—when one considers that the main function of the teacher is to instruct the students, and the role of the TA is to enable teachers to engage fully in this particular function. The increased instructional role engaged in by TAs is also noted; however, the quality of such instruction is brought into question. Finally, participants saw all the personal attributes they highlighted as not just important to the functioning of a TA but thought having and displaying these attributes equate to being an excellent TA.

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