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'Beyond the Broom Cupboard': Teaching Assistants' reflections upon the wider impact of their specialist dyslexia training

Abstract

Whilst the government-commissioned Rose Report (2009) on provision and support for dyslexic learners in England called for the deployment of more specialist dyslexia teachers in mainstream schools, the reality seems to be that the job of teaching literacy to children with dyslexia is falling to teaching assistants (TAs). As a result, specialist training courses for TAs have been developed in England . Using the Coldwell and Simkins (2011) Training Impact Framework. the present study examines TAs participants' perceptions of the impact of two such local authority-based training programmes, not just in terms of the impact upon their individual practice, but also in terms of their perceptions of the wider impact of their status as a trained 'expert' upon their schools' policies, culture and practice. 'Enabling' and 'blocking' factors influencing this wider impact are identified and implications for the deployment of specialist TAs and the design of their training courses are discussed.

Introduction

The last fifteen years has seen a significant increase in the numbers of teaching assistants (TAs) employed in English mainstream schools (DfE, 2015). Alongside this growth in their numbers, has been the development of a much wider range of duties in their roles and responsibilities.

The development of the TA role

Whilst in the early 1990s TAs' roles were often restricted to basic 'ancillary' support for teachers (Balshaw, 1991), this has changed over time, partly the UK government's workforce remodelling initiatives (e.g., DfES, 2002), which saw a notable increase in TAs' teaching responsibilities. However, research on the deployment of teaching assistants in schools (Blatchford et al, 2009) suggested many shortcomings and subsequent research from this group (Webster et al, 2013) was focussed upon five key issues:

- *Which* pupils TAs were supporting
- Teachers' roles relative to TAs
- The time and quality of Teacher and TA liaison
- The nature and quality of TA interaction with pupils
- TAs' subject and pedagogical knowledge

With regard to this last issue, a range of training has been developed, from short induction sessions for those new to the profession (e.g. TDA, 2006), to part-time Foundation degrees, validated by universities, and valued by TAs for their enhanced expertise and status and sometimes the springboard for TAs to go to seek Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) (Morris, 2010).However, some authors suggest that access to training opportunities has been 'patchy' across the sector (Hussart and Croucher, 2013). Moreover, amongst those who have had

more structured and certificated training, whilst increased feelings of confidence and competence have been expressed, subsequence prospects for promotion and increased salaries have been limited (Dunne et al., 2008; Burgess and Shelton Mayes, 2009: Brown and Devecchi, 2013). TAs also reported that often, after their initial training, access to further continuing professional development had 'ground to a halt' (Brown and Devecchi, 2013)

Training TAs in a 'specialist' support role

Whilst many TAs in English schools are primarily occupied in supporting pupils in the mainstream classroom, many others are deployed to deliver structured programmes of support, especially in literacy and numeracy. Farrell et al (2010) have argued that withdrawal from the mainstream classroom for such programmes offers a more supportive learning environment, and found that TAs' teaching can be effective if the programmes are taught as intended ('programme-fidelity) and where TAs have received the appropriate training. Hussart and Croucher (2013), however, found that the provision of such training and support for TAs during the duration of the programme of teaching was 'variable'. They also found that there were often lack of opportunities for TAs to share information with teachers on pupils' progress and that some teachers were themselves limited in their understanding of the programmes. This may be because the individual specialist teaching, as mentioned above, usually takes place outside the main classroom, often in a Learning Support Department, or indeed any small room that is available in the school (what we have nicknamed 'The Broom Cupboard').

This important issue of facilitative or hindering factors in a school's climate was noted in Symes and Humphrey's (2011) study of how TAs support for autistic students, though this was not linked to any measure of the impact of any specialist training.

Bell (2013) interviewed teachers and TAs embarking on specialist training to support dyslexic pupils and noted their desires to develop knowledge of dyslexia and its assessment. However, these data were drawn from respondents just beginning training and there is currently a lack of knowledge about not only the impact the completion of specialist dyslexia training upon TAs' professional expertise and practice and whether they are actually being deployed in the specialist role, but also the wider impact of having such a trained specialist on the staff upon the development of dyslexia-friendly practice at whole-school level. The study reported in this article, therefore, sought to investigate these levels of impact through the following research questions.

RQ1: To what extent has the dyslexia training impacted upon TAs' knowledge, skills and understanding in relation to dyslexic-type difficulties?

RQ2: To what extent are dyslexia-qualified TAs undertaking the range of roles for which they are qualified?

RQ3: To what extent are specialist TAs able to influence wider dyslexia- awareness beyond the level of their own practice?

RQ4: What might the 'enabling' or 'blocking' factors be in influencing their ability to impact   upon their professional context?

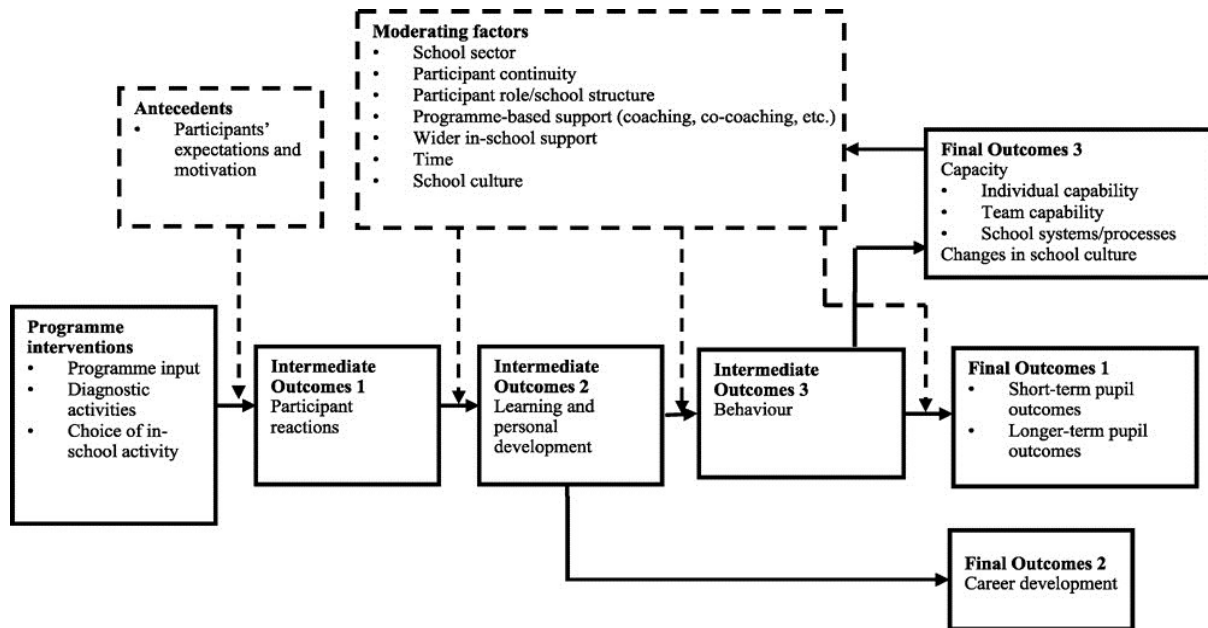**Methodology**

Using a training impact framework

'Level models' have been widely used to evaluate the impact of professional training (e.g. Kirkpatrick, 1994; Guskey, 2000). These aim to measure training impact at the individual, group and organisational levels. Others have used an approach which emphasises the interactive relationship between training and the trainees' working contexts (e.g. Harland and Kinder, 1997; Pearson and Gathercole, 2011), which might be described as an 'ecological' approach (Brofenbrenner, 1979).

The Coldwell and Simkins (2011) framework (see Figure 1) incorporates both level model and ecological elements and its strengths lie, in particular in aiming to tease out the nature of factors which might moderate the extent of training impact. We divided these into positive moderators ('enablers') and negative ones ('blockers'). The strength of this framework, is in emphasising the *dynamic*, *multidirectiona*l interplay of individual and contextual factors *at different levels* of impact.

Figure 1: The Coldwell and Simkins (2011) framework

Antecedents
- Participants' expectations and motivation

Moderating factors
- School sector
- Participant continuity
- Participant role/school structure
- Programme-based support (coaching, co-coaching, etc.)
- Wider in-school support
- Time
- School culture

Final Outcomes 3
Capacity
- Individual capability
- Team capability
- School systems/processes
Changes in school culture

Programme interventions
- Programme input
- Diagnostic activities
- Choice of in-school activity

Intermediate Outcomes 1
Participant reactions

Intermediate Outcomes 2
Learning and personal development

Intermediate Outcomes 3
Behaviour

Final Outcomes 1
- Short-term pupil outcomes
- Longer-term pupil outcomes

Final Outcomes 2
Career development

Participants and method

The study involved TAs from two local authorities (LAs) in the North of England. All had completed a year-long dyslexia training course, paid for by their schools, including theory and practice of teaching. Course participants were all volunteers recruited by their LA advisory team, who had led the training courses. Attendance was subject to their schools' approval and where it had been identified as a training need.

In LA 2, the TAs had completed a university-validated certificate at Level 6 (equivalent of third year undergraduate level), which was accredited by the British Dyslexia Association (BDA). It comprised 20 two-hour taught sessions across two school terms, followed by 20 hours of supervised teaching practice for which a teaching portfolio was submitted.

LA1 had previously run the same course but had moved to self-certification two years earlier due to the academic level of the course assignments, which had caused high TA dropout rates. They were running an identical course (including the same 20-hour supervised teaching practice) but with no assignments. The current study's participants were recruited as a convenience sample (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2013) with the support of the course leaders.

The LA1 group (n=14) comprised 9 primary practitioners, 2 secondary (one of whom was in a special school) and 3 cross-phase practitioners, employed by the LA Specialist Support Service. Six were qualified to degree level, 3 to Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) level and 4 to level 2 or 3.

The LA2 group (n=10) included 7 primary and 3 secondary staff. Two were qualified to degree level, 3 to HLTA level and 5 to level 2 or 3.

All respondents were female, with ages ranging from 23 to 60 years old, with the majority (n=16) in their 40s or 50s. Teaching experience ranged from 2 to 21 years, with the majority (n=13) having 8 or more years' experience. All had additional experience of working with other children with a range of additional needs and many had additional qualifications to do so, including 2 with university-level autism qualifications.

Individual audiotaped semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of the course, lasting usually around 30 minutes. These were transcribed and analysed, in the first instance using the Colwell and Simkins framework, and subsequently re-analysed using cross-case analysis (Miles and Huberman, 2011) to develop emerging themes.

Findings

Findings 1: impact of dyslexia training on the Teaching Assistants' knowledge, skills and understanding of dyslexic-type difficulties.

Expectations of the Dyslexia course (Coldwell and Simkins 'Antecedents')

The Teaching Assistants in both LA's felt that their expectations had been met in terms of developing knowledge and understanding of learners with dyslexia and providing them with a range of practical strategies and techniques. However, none of the TAs in either local authority had expected at the start of the course that it might prepare them for taking on a wider advisory role in school.

Immediate reactions to the Dyslexia course (Coldwell and Simpkins 'Intermediate Outcomes 1')

Reactions to the course were generally positive, with participants feeling that they had learned a lot about how dyslexic people think and learn and what works in supporting them. They were particularly happy to have had opportunities to try out the teaching methodology supported by course tutors, although some found the required reading 'intensive and difficult'. A positive feature of the course was the opportunity for networking and peer support with course colleagues, which they found invaluable. Some felt that they did not know enough before starting the course and so experienced a steep learning curve but they acknowledged the high level of support they had received from tutors and appreciated this. They felt comfortable asking questions '…*there was always time in the sessions to ask questions and the group I was in asked a lot of questions. Nobody felt uncomfortable kind of saying I don't get you, say it again…*' TA1 (LA1). The value of the experience was highlighted by TA6 (LA1) *"I just found it all really useful, and it definitely helped me in my job, my role."* Respondents expressed the view that the course was worth persevering with, that they felt more confident and more professional as a result of completing the course ….and *"more on par with the teachers"* TA5 (LA2).

Impact on the TAs attitudes and professional development (Coldwell and Simkins 'Intermediate Outcomes 2')

In addition to perhaps predictable reports of increased professional confidence, responses from many TAs focussed on seeing the learning from the perspective of someone with dyslexia. *'I didn't appreciate how much harder they had to work than everybody else'* TA6 (LA1). Their developing empathy *'seeing things through dyslexics' eyes'* TA1 (LA1), sympathy and patience were also widely reported. They mentioned how vital it was that other teaching staff were made aware of dyslexic difficulties and *"why kids switch off in lessons"* as well as *"avoidance tactics"* TA1 (LA1). Many felt that they were now more dyslexia aware and realised how dyslexia-unfriendly their schools were. Some also mentioned a new

appreciation of how dyslexia-friendly teaching could actually benefit many other learners with special educational needs (SEN).

Knowledge and skills gained from the dyslexia training (Coldwell and Simkins 'Intermediate Outcomes 2')

A majority of TAs noted a much deeper understanding of the English phonic and orthographic systems and how to teach phonics in a much more structured way. They made explicit reference to using the principles of 'overlearning' and of 'multisensory teaching', with the emphasis on *understanding* these principles; as TA5 (LA1) put it, *"not just understanding how it works but why it works"*. Others noted how they had developed skills adapting materials for dyslexia teaching and personalising the delivery of the teaching programme to different learners' needs. A few expressed better understanding of how working memory difficulties and sequencing difficulties impacted on learning. The effectiveness of the approach was noted by one teaching assistant in particular: *"...it really has worked. She's gone up four levels in her reading this year"* (TA2, LA1).

Findings 2: To what extent are dyslexia-qualified TAs now undertaking the range of roles for which they are qualified?

Changes to professional behaviour (Coldwell and Simkins 'Intermediate Outcomes 3')

All TAs noted changes to their professional behaviour. They had a wider range of informal assessment methods to identify those falling behind and help them to plan individual programmes. They adopted better lesson planning practices, including evaluation of their own teaching and pupil progress. The transfer of dyslexia-friendly principles to the mainstream classroom was also mentioned: *"the course has given me a toolbox...so I can pull things from what I have learned into other things"* TA13 (LA1) as well as the use of alternative recording strategies such as 'computer-based, audio-based and mind-maps' TA8 (LA1). A few explicitly mentioned supporting pupils in developing metacognition by discussing which strategies are effective for them and one TA had taken over the responsibility of planning literacy based individualised learning programmes (ILPs) for dyslexic learners and their class teachers

Importantly, several TAs in LA2 found that their role had clearly widened as a consequence of having a dyslexia qualification (this LA had maintained the British Dyslexia Association accreditation at ALSA level). It now included aspects outside their normal teaching ('beyond the broom cupboard') such as delivering whole school INSET on dyslexia awareness, putting together literature for parents and a programme of training for new members of staff. This had resulted in them becoming a 'go-to' person for dyslexia-related enquiries.

Patterns of dyslexia support (Coldwell and Simkins 'Final Outcomes 3')

In both LAs the majority of teaching assistants were delivering a one hour 1:1 lesson once per week. However, many had started to reflect on the appropriateness of this. A number of TAs felt that they needed to add another session per week for those with severe dyslexia. Caseloads increased following the training, with some TAs supporting up to thirty pupils. Those with the larger caseloads reported changes in practices, individual lessons were shorter (one TA could only give pupils 20 minutes per week) or they delivered group rather than individual lessons (two TA's had groups sizes of up to eight pupils). Only one noted that support varied according to need in terms of frequency and duration (between 45 and 90 minutes per week). Group size made a difference to the type of programme used.

Resources to support specialist teaching ('Coldwell and Simkins Final Outcomes 3')

The majority of TAs reported adequate access to physical resources and that they were able to adapt or make resources based on dyslexia-friendly principles. Some noted how the course had directed them to materials, including appropriate reading schemes, and they had been able to share resources through the course's virtual learning environment (VLE). One of the most common complaints was inadequate preparation time. Whilst some TAs were positive about the time available to produce their own resources, this tended to be in schools that had a BDA or LA 'dyslexia friendly kite-mark' or intended to go for the kite-mark.

Support and guidance for dyslexia teaching (Coldwell and Simpkins 'Final Outcomes 3')

Perhaps unsurprisingly the trained TAs who were part of the local authority (LA 1) advisory team were very satisfied with ongoing professional support, both from managers and peers. Most TAs noted that they could also access LA specialist advisors during the course of visits to their schools. Others noted use of email contact with LA specialists as being a 'lifeline' as there was no one in school to support them. As TA7 (LA1) put it, *"I mean, we do have a SENCO in school ……although she is not really up on the dyslexia side of things."* Some noted access to the VLE as really useful, alongside peer contact through a Facebook group. Only one TA cited her class teacher as the source of guidance and support and one her school's Special Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO); a number mentioned *"lots of goodwill [from management], but no expertise"*. Support for some of these TAs was seen as coming mainly from attending further courses or from reading books. It was suggested by one respondent that it would be useful if the LA could set up a support group for trained TAs so that they could mentor each other.

Findings 3: To what extent are specialist TAs able to influence wider dyslexia awareness beyond the level of their own practice?

Changes to organisational practice (Coldwell and Simkins 'Final Outcomes 3)

The TAs in both LAs had influenced dyslexia awareness in a number of ways. The majority noted a better understanding, at whole-school level, of the need for intensive 1:1 literacy support for pupils and that schools had developed better capacity for identifying those in need of it. Some were now being shadowed by other TAs in order to develop good practice and others reported that they had given direct training to other TAs in the course's pedagogy. Many reported that their schools were using more dyslexia-friendly resources across the piece, such as coloured paper for handouts and worksheets. One TA had developed a booklet for teaching colleagues on dyslexia-friendly classroom practice and another had developed guidelines for alternative spelling methods. In one school all teachers were now making records of the success (or otherwise) of their differentiation strategies and finally, one school had instigated a whole-school daily paired reading half-hour for all pupils. Several TAs mentioned that their schools were now going for the dyslexia friendly kite-mark.

Only one TA noted no changes in organisational practice at all. One other expressed concern that if she left the school, 'all the expertise' would go with her.

Benefits to client groups (pupils and parents) (Coldwell and Simkins 'Final Outcomes 1')

The wider impact of the specialist teaching was mentioned anecdotally by several TAs in relation to classroom behaviours and general pupil progress. Accelerated rates of pupil progress were cited with one pupil gaining two National Curriculum levels in Literacy (approximately four years' progress) and two pupils threes levels, in one year. Many TAs noted increased pupil confidence and self-esteem and that class teachers were now reporting improved pupil attitudes to and engagement with their schoolwork. One TA reported a parent noting her son's accelerated progress. There was generally less reporting of data to do with parents, although some mentioned an increase in parental involvement and greater independence amongst children.

Quality of Liaison between TA and class teacher (Coldwell and Simkins 'Final Outcomes 1 and 3')

There were mixed messages from the TAs over this issue. In LA 2, most agreed that the class teacher knew what kind of work she was doing with the child. This was from giving in-class support in some cases, from showing the work to the class teacher or from computer records and the child's ILP. However, there was little opportunity for class teachers to follow up the work done by the specialist TA in most cases.

This was a major stumbling block for many teaching assistants in LA 1. Most of the primary school TAs felt that their class teachers did not know what they did in individual support sessions and a variety of reasons were offered, including (and primarily) lack of structured liaison time for this. Two TAs felt that the class teachers knew but were unable to reinforce this learning in the mainstream classroom due to lack of time. There was some frustration voiced: *"No; actually it's me asking the class teachers how they [the pupils] are getting on... the follow-up tasks that I were (sic) setting for class weren't getting done: that's been a problem as well"* (TA4). *"No: they know it's a literacy programme, that's all" (TA12).* Similar views were expressed by some secondary TAs who reported little discussion (with the SENCO) and no follow-up. However, those working for the LA advisory support services mentioned that some teachers would put in time to play follow-up games left by the service, although usually when work was followed up, it tended to be by other teaching assistants. Generally, they felt that there was a need for more teacher training in dyslexia.

Findings 4: What might the 'enabling' or 'blocking' factors be in influencing their ability to impact upon their professional context?

'Enablers' (Coldwell and Simkins 'Moderators')

Supportive timetabling was reported by TAS as an important 'enabler' in maximising their impact. These schools had developed intervention timetables, offered 1:1 teaching slots, and protected the TA from being pulled away from other duties, to maintain continuity of support. In a secondary school setting, having a supportive SENCO was a crucial enabler, particularly where they regularly reviewed caseloads with the TA and class teacher, allocated preparation time and purchased additional resources. As reported above, many TAs noted access to LA advisory staff as enabling. Some acknowledged that having a dyslexia-friendly kite-mark and/ or a senior management team that valued their dyslexia qualification helped.

'Blockers' (Coldwell and Simkins 'Moderators')

In LA2, three TAs reported no actual 'blocking' factors at all. Others reported being pulled away from specialist teaching slots to provide cover for other staff as the main blocking factor, although it happened infrequently. Timetabling was an issue for some TA, having to teach dyslexic pupils in the afternoons, when the children were already tired and having to withdraw them from subjects that they enjoyed (e.g. Art, Drama) for 1:1 specialist support. Another 'blocker' was TAs' perceived lack of status within the school. Three TAs felt that some teaching staff refused to acknowledge their advice in discussion of pupils and one of these wondered whether it was her lack of qualified teacher status that was at the root of this. Similarly, some in LA1 felt that their training course was 'under-valued' now that it no longer had BDA accreditation. Many TAs noted the lack of class teacher follow-up of

learning covered in 1:1 sessions as a blocking factor (see also the TA/ Teacher liaison section, above).

Discussion

In investigating the question of the impact of dyslexia training, a number of themes seem to have emerged from our data that serve as important in understanding the phenomenon of developing specialist expertise in a member of staff in a school setting and how such impact can be maximised.

Theme 1: Taking on a major academic CPD commitment

The first theme is that of structure and delivery of a part-time specialist training programme for TAs. It is clear that a large number of the TAs were struggling with the demands of the course and its teaching practice, whilst managing their daily job commitments and it may be that course providers need to consider the delivery of the course over an extended period of three terms rather than the two-term input that featured in the two courses examined. In particular, participants were concerned about the amount of new academic content that they had to assimilate week-on -week. It would be, at the very least, vital that school leadership teams are made aware of the demands of such a course and that they might make allowances in the TA's timetable for this.

The second strand to this theme is the question of the course's qualification level. Both LAs had been teaching this course university-validated at Level 6 (the equivalent of third-year undergraduate level) and were bound by the national accreditation criteria. These academic demands had led to a drop-out rate in LA1 that meant that the course providers there had decided to keep the course structure, but to certify it themselves, in order to ease up on the academic demands of assignment work. This was despite the fact that the course entry requirements were the same in both the LAs and, in the case of the present study, the overall qualification-level profiles of TAs in both LAs were similar. Some LA1 TAs expressed regret that their dyslexia course qualification was not a university-validated and nationally-accredited one. An alternative might be to run the course as a Level 4 qualification. This is an issue for further course providers to consider.

Theme 2: The role of the Local Authority in supporting staff CPD

The second theme relates to the first in that it was clear from the data that, for both groups, the LA had a vital role to play in the delivery of the course, the on-going tutorial support for its duration and a key role in on-going mentoring of TAs teaching literacy to children with dyslexia. It was clear from what the TAs recounted that the expertise for this mentoring was not available to them in their schools, and this prompts the wider consideration of LAs' abilities to continue this mentoring role where support services are being radically cut back in LA spending cuts. Meanwhile, the compulsory training programme for SENCOs in England focusses mainly upon issues of educational leadership and management, having been designed

in the previous decade, when LA specialist support teams were much larger and schools could draw upon their expertise. This is often no longer the case.

This professional networking support, according to the TAs, was not just restricted to the role of LA advisors. The TAs almost unanimously acknowledged the support that they had experienced from peers on the course and it might be argued that the LA should have an important role to play in maintaining such peer support and swapping of ideas and resources, perhaps through use of social media.

Theme 3: 'The paradox of the expert'

In a third, related theme, it emerged that impact for learners would be best enhanced where there was good quality and regular liaison between TAs running the literacy programmes and the relevant class teachers (in primary settings) or the English Department (in secondary settings). This facilitated the reinforcement of the children's new learning in the wider curricular context. So a key lesson for schools, when supporting a TA in undertaking this training is the logistics of supporting such inter-professional communication.

Linked to issue of communication, is the theme of the development of specialist expertise in a member of a school's staff. It is clear from the data that here many TAs were making a much wider impact than merely skilfully teaching individual children in the metaphorical 'broom cupboard'. However, here is where the current authors have identified the phenomenon that we have characterised as the 'paradox of the expert'. During and after training, many TAs were seen as a 'go-to' people for advice for colleagues on dyslexia and many had led training, sharing this expertise, but on the other hand, a few TAs noted that, because of their 'expert' status, they were perceived as teaching in a mysterious, 'specialist' way 'apart' from the mainstream, and for that very reason class teachers might not bother to look to reinforcing their teaching in the mainstream classroom. Furthermore, this also had the effect of teachers routinely referring large numbers of pupils to them before trying to adapt their own teaching to accommodate these learners. The current authors have also experienced this phenomenon in the way that mainstream teachers have perceived specialist teachers working for local authority support services. The effects are possibly stronger as these specialist teachers work between schools rather than within them.

The genealogy of this issue has been be traced by Ball (2013). Applying a Foucauldian analysis, he asks how we arrived at this situation, where the specialist practitioner is perceived as 'expert' and therefore as 'other'. Ball traces the roots of this discourse as having developed since the late nineteenth century. The discourse is of the psychometrically 'measured' and 'classified' child for whom 'remedial education….[has developed as] a particular subfield of pastoral and disciplinary expertise' (2013, p49).. This has provided 'a technical repertoire ...a nexus of power/knowledge and a human science' (p.51): what Ball, citing Rose (1999), terms a '*psy-science':* a science that judges the individual child's performances in 'intelligence' and 'cognitive development' in relation to the 'normal' distribution curve: initially the domain of 'alienists', later renamed 'educational psychologists'. Ball continues, 'we normally look at

special education or inclusive education… as fields for specialists, experts … viewed dimly from the perspective of the mainstream….with their own courses, associations, journals.. [and a set of practices] discussed on specialist websites.' (p.84). As Thomas (2009) notes, reflecting upon the same theme…

> '..the even more unfortunate corollary is that the existence of this kind of supposedly privileged knowledge has persuaded teachers in ordinary schools that … they may not be sufficiently knowledgeable or sufficiently expert to help children who are experiencing difficulty: that they do not have sufficient technical expertise or theoretical knowledge to teach all children' (2009, p. 21).

Findings for the present study seem to confirm that this is, indeed, the case. Despite that fact that, as Lewis and Norwich (2005) point out, there is no fully 'separate' pedagogy for most children with SEN, usually just changes in intensity, pace and levels of over-learning, as TAs undoubtedly are being perceived as 'experts' as a result of their training, it is vital the course providers engage with preparing TAs for this wider role that they will have in their schools and to discuss with trainees how to 'demystify' and share their knowledge and practice.

Implications for schools' policies and practice

A number of lessons for schools can be drawn from the current study, we believe, and it is worth emphasising here that, whilst this particular research focussed upon TAs with specialist training in dyslexia, the lessons can apply to maximising the impact of TAs who have undertaken any sort of specialist training.

Firstly, schools that are considering facilitating specialist training for TAs should consider carefully the appropriateness of the academic level of such training, the pacing of the training, as well as TAs' continued access to professional support and mentoring during and after the course. Secondly, schools need to nurture professional networking opportunities for their specialist TAs, perhaps through LA structures, through school-to-school support clusters, or through the use of social media-based networking. Thirdly, however, to maintain TAs' sense of their professional identities as part of the learning community of the school, it is vital that they are actively involved in within-school networks, for example at primary level, in regular liaison with class teachers and, at secondary level, particularly with the English department, where these extra dimensions of support for developing literacy can be built into the subject pedagogy, but also with other subject departments, to develop dyslexia-friendly practice, perhaps using designated 'link' members of staff. Fourthly , and related to this, is the need to *demystify* the nature of the specialist training and the pedagogy taught in these training programmes and in order to challenge the notion of an arcane 'specialist' approach, which might leave mainstream staff feeling deskilled. Whole- school training sessions and induction for newly-appointed teachers and TAs can play a part in this, to develop confidence and a sense of empowerment in all staff. Fifthly, there is a need for schools to clarify the role of their specialist TA(s). This will involve agreeing and making public the TAs' teaching, liaison and training role within the school, with the aim of developing the whole school capacity to be

inclusive in their culture policies and practice. Finally, the education system as a whole still needs to develop the basic expertise of <u>all</u> teachers in accommodating the needs of the diversity of learners in their classes. Initiatives such as the recent British Dyslexia Association in-service training project for English schools and colleges: 'Teaching for Neurodiversity', as well as the 2016 Carter Report's strong recommendation that SEN expertise forms a core part of initial teacher training point in the right direction, but these will take time to filter through the English education system.

Strengths and limitations of the current study

This was a small-scale study and the TAs' views were gathered in the months following the completion of the course and, arguably, a study conducted after more time had elapsed might have allowed the participants to have developed a clearer reflection of the long-term impact of their training. Nevertheless, we believe that this study shines some light upon the wider impact of specialist training for TAs. The issues arising and the emerging themes are linked to the example of specialist dyslexia training, but we feel that these issues might be generalised to specialist training in other areas of Special Educational Needs. We also feel that this study has offered a voice to teaching assistants: a group whose voice, in our experience, in under-represented.

Conclusions

The present study has suggests that specialist dyslexia training undoubtedly develops TAs' knowledge, skills and understanding of dyslexia and that they are able to carry out their teaching roles more effectively. Schools need to organise themselves to help maximise features that enhance the impact of such training, such as support for this teaching, developing the TAs' wider role in the school and helping colleagues make maximum use of the expertise now available to them and to try to recognise neutralise 'the paradox of the expert' in their settings. The current study has also noted the important role played by the Local Authority in this process and raises concerns about the continuation of their vital support role in the face of recent dwindling budgets and service cuts across England.

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