Making a difference 'beyond the broom cupboard': can specialist-trained Teaching Assistants help develop inclusive practice in the wider context of their schools?

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Introduction

In June 2009, the government advisor Sir Jim Rose produced his influential report 'Identifying and Teaching Children and Young People with Dyslexia and Literacy Difficulties' (usually just known as 'The Rose Report').

Principle amongst the report's recommendations, was the need for a significant improvement in 'access to specialist expertise' for schools and their staff. Sir Jim cited the government's own model for such provision, originally set out in the document '*Removing the Barriers to Achievement'*:

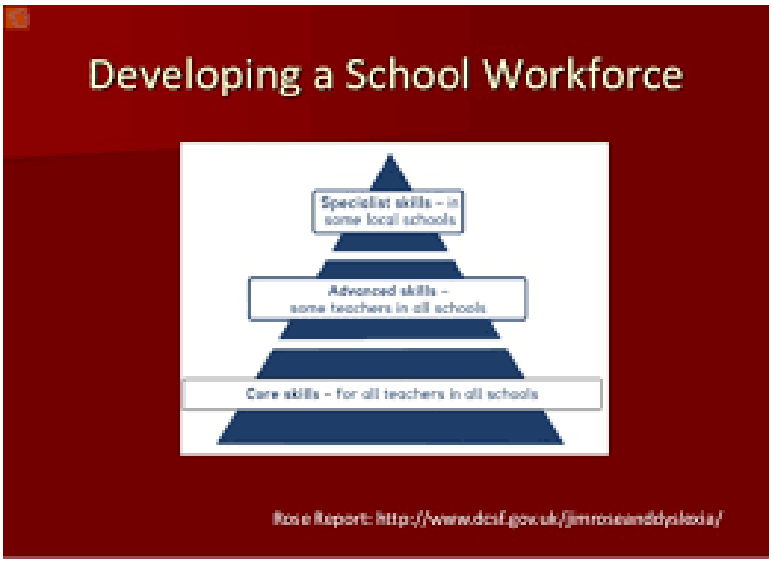

Figure 1: Removing the Barriers to Achievement: developing school workforce SEN skills.

As the diagram suggests, Rose envisaged an ideal situation where *all* teachers in *all* schools would have the skills to include pupils with dyslexia in their lessons, that *all* schools would have one or more teachers who had advanced skills to design, teach and evaluate appropriate literacy interventions and that schools should have (perhaps shared) access to specialist qualified dyslexia teachers who could develop tailored interventions for those pupils struggling the most and who may have identified dyslexia.

The trouble was (and still is) that advanced and specialist teachers are relatively expensive to employ and, for many schools this might be beyond their staffing budget. Moreover, it had not escaped the notice of meant head teachers that, for the cost of employing an Advanced-skills or Specialist-qualified teacher, the could employ two teaching assistants (TAs) and the reality is that in many schools it is TAs who are delivering literacy interventions for children and young people who are struggling with these difficulties.

Peter Farrell and his colleagues' research findings suggest that, with the right training and support, TAs are very capable in delivering structured literacy interventions, but of course the key words here are *training* and *support*. So SENCos and school leadership teams need to consider, first of all, what training opportunities have been (or could be) made available to TAs and what the arrangements are for support and mentoring for them whilst carrying out these interventions. A number of specialist training courses are now available for teaching assistants in such support, ranging from short courses to longer, formal accredited and university-based courses, perhaps up to a year in duration and more and more TAs are accessing such training opportunities. However, whilst this training might well have an impact upon the progress of individual pupils' literacy skills, what of the wider monitoring and training support that Rose wished to see available in schools? To what extent might the impact of specialist training permeate the school beyond the small classroom (or sometimes the school nurse's room or even the broom cupboard!) where these specialist interventions were being carried out?

The 'Beyond The Broom Cupboard' Project

This was a question that intrigued me and my colleague Dr Kath Kelly. We not only wanted to find out not only how wide the impact of TA specialist training had been but what contextual factors in the TAs' schools had acted as 'enablers' or 'blockers' of such impact.

So we set out to interview 23 TAs (primary and secondary practitioners) who had undertaken a nine-month long dyslexia teaching certificate in two Local Authorities (LAs) in the North of England. The courses were at quite a high academic level (the equivalent of third year undergraduate) One of them was validated by our university and accredited by the British Dyslexia Association the other was an identically structured course (also involving a supervised teaching practice) but without the other academic assignments. Both courses were delivered at LA teachers' centres by dyslexia-qualified LA staff who led the training input over the first six months of the course then subsequently supervised the TAs' teaching practice and mentored them through the process. Once again, our advice to schools would be to choose such training course carefully to match the academic abilities and ambitions of their staff and to check on the ongoing mentoring support offered.

What the Specialist TAs told us

First of all we asked the TAs about their experiences of the specialist training course itself and its impact upon their own thing and professional practice.

The overwhelming majority of TAs had found the courses enjoyable and interesting, though they acknowledge how academically demanding the course had been. It had been a 'steep learning curve' but with good tutor support they had developed their confidence and sense of professionalism. However, a few had suggested that the intervals between training sessions (weekly) might have been longer for them to have time to absorb the new learning. Perhaps this is a useful consideration both for course providers and for those choosing a course.

In terms of impact upon their attitudes and perceptions, many TAs expressed how they had developed more patience and empathy with children with dyslexia. *"I didn't realise just how hard they have work"* said one. Many had developed a better understanding of how presenting poor pupil behaviour might well be an expression of frustration.

In terms of their own practice, the majority of TAs expressed pleasure and pride in their increased skill levels in assessment planning teaching and evaluating pupil progress

and also in their grasp of the dyslexia-friendly, multisensory, teaching methodology'. As one TA put it, *"Now I understand not just how it work but why it works!"*

But what of the wider impact in the school of having a specialist-trained TA on the staff? Here Kath Kelly and I were impressed by what we discovered.

Recognition of their specialist skills and knowledge meant that many TAs now reported being seen b as a 'go to' person by other teacher and TA colleagues. Some reported having been asked to plan and lead whole-school staff INSET, which they had successfully undertaken. Others noted their role in training for new staff and one had been tasked with producing an induction booklet on dyslexia for newly-appointed colleagues. Many reported being asked to give input to their school's dyslexia policy document.

In terms of wider changes to the TAs' schools' thinking and practice, many TAs explained that, at last, because they were recognised as a specialist member of teaching staff, that the SENCo was using them to help develop a school provision map for literacy support based upon their assessment data and that their own caseload was better targeted towards the children most in need of intensive support many TAs reported now having their own classroom or teaching area.

A number of TAs also reported an increased participation in liaison with parents of children with dyslexic-type difficulties, explaining the content of their literacy support programmes and discussing how parents could help support these at home. They noted that this also had the effect of opening up a dialogue with parents about their child's difficulties and their learning needs and preferences, with such useful information being relayed to colleagues.

Many TAs reported increased awareness and better understanding of dyslexia amongst colleagues as a result of discussion with them and subsequently more positive attitudes to pupils with dyslexia. They noted how they were exchanging ideas with staff on topics such as differentiation of teaching and appropriate resources. A few TAs reported that their schools had now decided to apply for the British Dyslexia Association 'Dyslexia-friendly kitemark'.

So what were the 'enablers' and 'blockers' in terms of contextual factors enhancing or limiting the wider impact of the impact of the specialist training for the TAs in our sample?

In terms of 'enablers', TAS were fairly united in reporting some key factors.

Firstly, they noted the importance of their teaching timetables being 'ring-fenced' so that they would not be pulled away from their specialist teaching sessions in order to provide cover.

Secondly, that they were given preparation time during the school day

Thirdly, that they were given autonomy in deciding the different levels of support needed by different children on their caseload, so that, for example, some children were making good progress with two support sessions per week whilst others needed three sessions.

Fourthly, that they were given adequate budget to buy the teaching resources needed to deliver their literacy programmes and that funding was also made available for appropriate resources in mainstream classrooms.

Fifthly that, in secondary schools, the dyslexia-trained TA could work in close liaison with the English Department, who could involve them in joint planning of dyslexia-frendly lessons for mainstream English classes.

Sixthly, that specialist TAs were able to keep regular liaison with Local Authority advisory staff for ongoing support and mentoring. Many TAs reported that, though their SENCos were good facilitators, they did not have the expertise of LA advisory staff, so these links were vital.

Finally, some TAs reported that their schools were happy to offer further training opportunities for them, acknowledging the principle of continuing professional development as not just being a 'one off' but a career-long enterprise.

The 'blockers', where reported were, understandably, in many respects the converse of the enabling factors, although we were pleased to note that these were reported by a minority of our sample.

So insufficient access to the children who needed specialist teaching was noted, as was being pulled off specialist teaching to cover for staff absences; lack of resourcing for teaching or an appropriate accommodation to do the teaching sessions.

Some reported insufficient time and opportunities to pass on skills and knowledge to colleagues, which in turn led to reported frustration at some colleagues' lack of dyslexia awareness, which meant some teaching continued to inappropriate for dyslexic learners (this was largely reported by secondary TAs).

One issue that was reported, especially by primary TAs, was a lack of awareness by mainstream class teachers of the content of the specialist literacy intervention being followed by pupils. As a result of this there were missed opportunities for the learning which had taken place in these literacy sessions to be reinforced in mainstream lessons and transferred across the curriculum. Some TAs suggested that that this was because they were perceived as teaching a 'specialist' programme that only a 'specialist' could deliver and which was in essence therefor 'different' from mainstream literacy teaching. This I have characterised as 'the paradox of the expert'. On the one hand staff see the specialist TA as a fund of ideas and support but on the other hand, perceived as 'expert', she is occupied with teaching that is 'too specialised' for teachers who see themselves as 'unqualified' in such matters and therefore will 'leave the specialist to it.

Lessons from the project for school practice

So what lessons can we learn for schools from the reported experiences of the specialist-trained TAs?

Well, firstly, whilst the sample of TAs that we interviewed had trained in dyslexia support, the emerging themes that are outlined below are applicable, Kath Kelly and I would argue, are probably applicable to any type of specialist training for staff.

- There are issues of the suitability of a training course in terms of its structure, duration, contact time, intensity and level that need to be considered in conjunction with potential staff trainees. This also applies if your school itself is organising the training. Furthermore, you need to consider the time that trainees may need for study and possibly assignment writing linked to such training. Has the school allowed for this in organising staff workload?
- Can your school help facilitate professional networking for the trainees? This might be allowing them to attend professional network meetings during and after the training course, or this might be facilitated through online networks. This has the advantage of allowing TAs to access LA or peer support for their practice.
- In a secondary setting, how can you facilitate closer links between the specialist trained teacher and mainstream subject departments? Might each department have a 'link' person or can a collaborative partnership project be set up (e.g. developing dyslexia-friendly Science teaching based upon a particular topic)?
- In a primary setting, can your school encourage better mainstream teachers' understanding of the content and methodology of a specialist teaching programme to avoid 'the paradox of the expert'? Can regular liaison between specialist teachers/ TAs and their mainstream colleagues help support reinforcement of new pupil learning 'beyond the broom-cupboard?
- How can your school develop the specialist TA as a schoolwide resource, either through giving them a role in training, policy development, mentoring other TAs and so on. It can also be important, however, to avoid the 'paradox of the expert' trap to facilitate this is such a way as staff are encouraged to approach developing their practice in the area of 'specialism' in a spirit of joint enquiry and problem-solving, where the sharing of good practice is a two-way street, as many 'mainstream' colleagues of have a fund of experience and good practice to share.

With increased pressure upon local government funding and the reduction in LA support services, now more than ever is it vital for schools to be developing their own staff's skills in inclusive educational practice. We believe that, handled well and with an eye for identifying and maximising contextual enabling factors, schools can facilitate specialist-trained TAs to make a difference to cultures policies and practice 'beyond the broom-cupboard' !