





## New partnerships for learning: Teachers and teaching assistants working together in schools the way forward

<sup>1</sup>Alfie Henry  and <sup>2</sup>William Noah 

<sup>12</sup>Department of Education, School of Education, Roehampton University.

Corresponding author's e-mail: [henryalfie@gmail.com](mailto:henryalfie@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

This paper describes a three-year research partnership between Roehampton University in London and VT Four S Ltd, providers of school support services in Surrey, a county in the south east of England. The project, named 'New Partnerships for Learning' (NPfL), was centered on the delivery of a professional development programme to equip teachers with the skills needed to work in partnership with teaching assistants. The research aimed to explore the opinions of teachers as to the personal skills, attributes and training required to enhance a changing professional relationship. It posed the question: 'What are the issues to address in enabling teachers to work in effective partnership with teaching assistants?' The findings include the different experiences of teachers working with teaching assistants across the primary and secondary phases. It reports on variable training opportunities; variations in needs, aspirations, roles and responsibilities of teaching assistants; unevenness of resourcing and remuneration; and tensions between leadership and partnership practice

### Background

Over the past 20 years educational policy-making in England has been characterized by increasing levels of political involvement. The official discourse on education moved inexorably from one of consultation with schools, to direct government intervention and legislation. During this period government began to introduce market mechanisms intended to create efficiency. For education this culminated in a range of reforms implemented by the Labour party at the turn of the century to modernize the teaching profession. This included reviewing the training, development and support of teachers and providing a professional career pathway for all support staff, that is adults other than teachers working in schools (DfES 2002).

Problems of teacher recruitment and retention, likely to impact on the ability of the profession to implement these reforms, were highlighted by Parliamentary Select Committees (House of Commons Education and Employment Committee 1997). A range of factors were identified by research commissioned to investigate these issues (Pricewaterhouse Cooper 2001). Amongst these were:

- teachers leaving the profession because of workload;
- non-teaching activities taking over 30% of a teacher's working week;
- poor work/life balance;

- 45% of teachers due to retire in less than 15 years' time;
- 30% of teachers leaving in their first five years;
- significant teacher shortages in a number of key subjects;
- limited development and professional support for adults other than teachers.

UK Government legislation (DfES 2002, 2003) focused on remodeling the workforce as a solution to the problems; its key objective being to transform the working practice of teachers. This would be effected by removing administrative tasks such as invigilating exams, managing pupil data and photocopying. Schools were to recruit more support staff such as teaching assistants, who are adults other than teachers engaged in supporting the teaching and learning of pupils in schools. Government envisaged an improvement in their training, qualifications and career progression; and the development of higher-level roles for them. To this end a new framework for the teacher–support staff relationship would be introduced and head teachers and governors would be supported in managing the changes and deploying the teaching assistants effectively.

### ***New Partnerships for Learning (NPFL)***

Funding from the European Social Fund matched by Surrey County Council, a local government body administering the county of Surrey in the south east of England, enabled a joint research and development project to be commissioned. Key partners were VT Four S, providers of school support services to Surrey Local Education Authority, part of the County Council; a research team from Roehampton University in London; and senior educational professionals from across Surrey. The project entitled 'New Partnerships for Learning' had two strands. The first focused on the delivery of a professional development programme designed to develop teacher skills in working productively with teaching assistants in the classroom. It combined theory, investigations into issues at their school, interpersonal skills development and sharing good practice. This programme was developed from the findings of research exploring effective practice conducted by members of the research team. In order to answer the question, 'What are the issues to address in enabling teachers to work in effective partnership with teaching assistants?' the second strand of the research used data from the development programme. This explored the opinions of teachers as to the skills and attributes required to enhance an effective professional relationship with teaching assistants, their own training needs and issues arising from the changing nature of the relationship.

### **Literature Review**

Literature was investigated in order to design the development programme. It focused on identifying a consensus of opinion as to the intended role of the teaching assistant and the implications for both them and teachers. A second review was carried out in 2006; this sought to add more recent research findings.

Initial concern was expressed that the agenda for remodeling the workforce focused on reducing teacher bureaucracy rather than recognizing the professionalism of teaching assistants and other adults in schools (Jackson and Bedford 2005). This was also found in Butt and Lance (2005) who believed that the potential contribution of teaching assistants was being hindered by preconceptions about their abilities and hierarchical patterns of employment in teaching.

Ambiguity in both the definition of the future role for teaching assistants and the term 'partnership' was identified in government legislation (Quicke 2003); additionally there were no

exemplars of successful partnerships (Watkinson 2004). Debate concerning the way in which the partnership should be constructed suggested that it should be one of 'mentor and learner' (Edmond 2003, 122). Defining terms was found to be further complicated by the considerable difference in the way primary and special schools used their teaching assistants compared to secondary schools (Ofsted, 2005). In many secondary schools, teaching assistants were part of a special needs department and were predominantly employed to support the needs of children with learning difficulties. Therefore few class teachers had planned how to use the additional support other than following the guidance of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO), who was responsible for the deployment of teaching assistants. Secondary schools also used their teaching assistants outside the classroom, in areas of pastoral support such as behaviour management, punctuality and attendance. This issue of unclear definition was seen as problematic because roles could be misunderstood (Garner 2002). Government vision of 'the relationship between teachers and support staff ... as one of leadership and management' was more frequently found than those which focused on the partnership aspects of adults working together in the learning environment (Howes 2003, 148). Clarification of role boundaries by management and employees was seen by Wall (2001) in Edmond (2003) as an essential component in enabling school effectiveness. Additionally, the pay differential between teachers and teaching assistants was seen as being so unequal as to be an uneasy basis for any partnership and likely to lead to demarcation according to qualification (Parker and Townsend 2005).

Professional development issues were also identified as likely to impact on the potential for a working partnership. Watkinson (2004) identified that most professional development courses for teachers focused on training in subject knowledge. Neither pedagogy nor management skills for teachers to work with other adults in a learning situation were included, nor was it part of initial teacher training. This situation was further exacerbated by the relative newness of the recognition of the teaching assistant role in school. Training opportunities for them were very varied (Bubb and Earley 2006) and pedagogical routes related only to National Vocational Qualifications and further education certificates. Diplomas offered by Higher Education Institutions were not included nor was funding available for postgraduate qualifications even though some teaching assistants are highly qualified, having transferred from other graduate professions (Jackson and Bedford 2005). Similarly, training courses were not cited in the DfES paper *Developing the Role of School Support Staff* (DfES 2004). The introduction of the Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) status from 2003, awarded to teaching assistants attaining approved government standards, was intended to give them more responsibility and lead to improved performance. This again carried limited training opportunities and, indeed, research indicated that although greater numbers had gained HLTA status, roles were difficult to define, the impact on teaching had not been assessed and financial rewards were inconsistent across the country (Parker and Townsend 2005).

The need for further research into how effective partnership could be created was emphasised by Muijs (2003), who was critical of the claim that using teaching assistants would decrease pupil-adult ratios and lead to an improvement in teaching and learning. He identified that although a reduction in class size could be seen to have positive effects, these were only limited. However, where teaching assistants had undertaken specific training, support was beneficial. Additionally, for Watkinson (2004), teaching could be seen as multi-layered so many tasks could be undertaken by appropriately trained, qualified and registered teaching assistants.

Addressing personal and social issues was found to be fundamental to the success of potential partnership. Teachers were fearful that the changing relationship between them and teaching assistants might be a threat to their professional integrity. This is because it might be

perceived that teaching was so easy that anyone could do it with some practice, or that government was implying that teachers were no longer capable of fulfilling a teaching role unaided (Muijs 2003). Indeed, research indicated that all employees, including teachers, found it difficult to abdicate responsibility even if a substitute was well qualified, because it may be perceived as a weakness on their part (Watkinson 2004). The presence of another, possibly more mature and experienced, adult in the classroom was very daunting, particularly for those who were newly qualified (Revell 2002). Additionally, research identified that career intentions of teaching assistants were very varied; therefore a teacher would need to be clear about teaching assistants' aspirations before any attempts to change the relationship between them were made (General Teaching Council Scotland 2003).

A key problem identified when considering the potential for change in the professional partnership was insufficient non-contact time for teachers and teaching assistants to plan together, to consider strategies and to evaluate their success (Dixon 2003). It was identified as common practice for essential communication to take place at times when the teaching assistant was not being paid (Butt and Lance 2005). In this respect working with a teaching assistant was also found to add to the teacher's load in terms of managing their work.

Given that the formation of a new partnership for learning implied change, it was noted that because each situation is unique, knowledge of generic issues is key to successful change. The five-step process advocated by the UK government advisers on remodelling the workforce involved creating a change team; which they describe as a 'diagonal slice of the whole school workforce' (NRT 2004, 11). This was intended to give a 'voice' to those previously excluded from participation and was to be seen as a democratic model. An examination of the role of school leadership in the process of change raises the question as to whether it can be defined in terms derived from non-educational settings (Rayner and Gunter 2005). On the one hand is the authoritarian head, on the other the head shares decision-making; both retain the notion of 'expert' (Grace 1995). Research indicated that where schools had adopted the idea of effective team working grounded in the notion of inclusive partnership and distributed leadership, they were able to interpret what was valuable, superfluous or damaging in current roles (Butt and Lance 2005). Additionally, schools had to be knowledgeable of potential resistance to change which might be grounded in fears of uncertainty, loss of control, inconvenience, loss of status and loss of confidence. In this respect genuine interactions could only be effected if all are involved in an open process of change (Hammersley-Fletcher and Lowe 2005). The New Partnerships for Learning team sought to address these issues in their research.

## **Materials and Methods**

Empirical research was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative methods, and took the form of questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and the analysis of respondents' projects from the development programme. With the exception of the focus groups, the teachers undertaking the NPfL programme formed the research sample. Eighty-four participants were issued with a questionnaire during their first training session. There were 81 returns, giving a 96% response rate. From this group there were 18 self-selected participants representing all school phases who agreed to be interviewed. There were 31 staff from 16 schools who formed the five focus groups.

The questionnaire aimed to gather information on the current organisational policies and practices in using teaching assistants in Surrey schools. It consisted of open-ended questions and covered details of the participant and their school; the role of teaching assistants within it; their analysis of their personal training and development needs; their perception of the training and

development needs of their teaching assistants; and an analysis of their school's organisational policies and practices.

The purpose of the interviews was to follow up issues that were indicated on the questionnaires and gather more in-depth, qualitative information. The interviews focused on two key areas: seeking the participant's opinion on the extent to which teachers and teaching assistants work in partnership in their own school; and a discussion of the participant's school-based project. The answers were recorded by the interviewer on a data capture form and then corroborated by the interviewee. Interviewers came from interested members of the research group and briefing and training sessions were held to ensure consistency. In addition, the research drew on a detailed analysis of the projects undertaken by the delegates in their schools.

Focus group discussions were conducted. Interestingly, these groups included six teaching assistants. The purpose of the focus groups was to probe issues arising from the findings to date and to triangulate the findings by gaining the perspectives of staff who had not participated in the development programme.

Finally, participants were expected to carry out a short investigation into a relevant teacher/teaching assistant issue in their school between day two and day three of the NPfL programme. The intention of the activity was to give them an opportunity to put into practice in their school something they had learned on the programme or something that had already been identified as significant in their School Improvement Plan. The investigation was an integral part of the development programme, with participants presenting their findings to other group members on day three. The details of 45 projects from delegates on programmes between March 2005 and March 2006 were made available to the researchers.

Of the 81 participants who completed the questionnaires, 43% worked as Special Educational Needs Coordinators, their predominance perhaps being explained by the original role of teaching assistants in supporting children with special educational needs. The majority of teachers (86%) had a primary school background, with only 5% coming from secondary and 9% from special schools, which cater solely for pupils whose needs cannot be met in mainstream schools. The sample was representative of all ages and experience from newly qualified to those with 40 years' experience. No particular age group or length of experience was dominant, and the senior management of schools was represented by two headteachers and 12 deputy heads. No respondent had received training in working with other adults in the classroom as part of their initial teacher training.

This methodology acknowledges that, as is often the case when conducting funded research, data gathering methods have been constrained by the overall project design. In this case, an investigation into the effective models for teachers and teaching assistants to work in partnership should have obtained data from both members of the partnership at all stages of the research. However, teaching assistants were not included by funders of the development programme from which much of the data were drawn. Additionally, it would have been difficult for the research team to obtain access to the teaching assistants scattered across a large education authority without major disruption or cost.

## **Statement of results**

### ***Performance management***

When questionnaire respondents were asked if teaching assistants were given the opportunity to participate in the school's performance management scheme, 73% replied positively, and of those a small number reported that their teaching assistants had an abridged

scheme. Fifteen percent stated that teaching assistants did not participate, and 12% of the respondents did not know. A total of 65% of the respondents had a role in the performance management of teaching assistants.

Interestingly, when this issue was discussed by the focus groups, respondents were concerned about the difficulty in measuring teaching assistants' performance in order to identify effective performance management strategies. They conceded, however, that it might be possible to measure a teacher's performance against the criteria of pupil progress, personal development, the School Improvement Plan and their involvement in professional training. They were, however, of the opinion that it was not possible to use the same criteria for teaching assistants.

### ***Training issues***

The second theme related to professional training and development, and most responses focused on issues surrounding Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) status. Respondents identified a commitment to providing training for teachers and teaching assistants, both individually and together, as well as whole school training as being an example of good practice. When respondents were questioned about the number of teaching assistants applying for HLTA status, 47% of them said none were applying.

Focus groups discussed the question 'What are the current perceptions of Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) status in your school?' Responses indicated that there was significant confusion in terms of skills required, knowledge attained, potential levels of responsibility and role in the school structure. Some confusion about the difference between HLTA status and an NVQ qualification was also apparent. A very wide range of views was represented. Some stated that it would make no difference, whereas a more cynical view was that the HLTA status was a means of obtaining 'cheap' teachers, because one role of the HLTA is to cover for teaching staff absence. However, a total of 55% of the respondents stated that their teaching assistants were not used to provide such cover. Some stated that gaining the status was a positive move because it would give opportunities to qualify as a teacher, increased remuneration, satisfaction, and responsibility. Others indicated there was a view that people who had not been trained as teachers would deliver inferior teaching. An additional concern of the focus groups was that schools would not be able to pay the increased salary for Higher Level Teaching Assistants. Others were concerned that, in their opinion, schools would not have sufficient HLTA roles for them to fill.

### ***Skills for working in partnership***

The teachers were asked what personal skills and attributes they and their teaching assistants needed for the relationship to work well. Figure 1 shows the results from the teachers' perspective about their teaching colleagues and Figure 2 indicates the teachers' views of skills required by teaching assistants. With open-ended questions it was difficult to distinguish between categories such as 'communication' and 'listening', although it was seen as generally less important for teaching assistants to have communication skills. It can be seen that there is similarity in the need for 'respect', 'trust' and 'organisational skills'. One area of difference was that of 'flexibility', which was seen as an important attribute for teaching assistants by 17% of respondents, but only important for teachers by 9%.

Two main themes emerged in respect of the skills and personal attributes common for both teachers and teaching assistants. First, there was an overwhelming majority (95%) who made comments related to relationships needed for team working; second, half of all respondents commented on the need for communication skills.

In this respect, a few identified that communication in school could be supported by teaching assistants having access to whole staff briefings and meetings, policies, and pigeon holes in the staffroom. In respect to respondents' views of skills required by teachers, comments overwhelmingly focused on aspects of their professional role. A number of skills were identified such as effective delegation and enabling autonomy in others, and the ability to reward and celebrate success. Other skills concerned effective organisation and management, such as the need for comprehensive planning and preparation and good time management. Respondents highlighted the view that the teacher has responsibility for all the pupils, therefore teaching assistants should not be expected to have sole charge of those they are working with. This is often the case for those working with pupils with special educational needs.



Figure 1. What skills and/or personal attributes do teachers need to enhance an effective working relationship with teaching assistants?



Figure 2. What skills and/or personal attributes do teaching assistants need to enhance an effective working relationship with teachers?

In contrast, when identifying attributes required by teaching assistants, there was considerably greater emphasis on personal characteristics such as the ability to take initiative and be proactive, punctuality, open-mindedness and conscientiousness. Achievement of 'a certain level of education', a good standard of writing and subject knowledge were identified as prerequisite. Skills identified included the ability to plan, manage time and manage behaviour. They also included aspects of the professional role such as being alert and sensitive to the needs of the teacher, particularly with respect to the role and development needs of those who were newly qualified.

Respondents identified examples of good practice. These included teaching assistants being involved in briefing and training sessions and team meetings, and in some cases being paid for doing so. One instance cited a conference, led by educational psychologists, organised for teaching assistants, who then reported back to teaching staff. Other examples of good practice were teaching assistants being given the opportunity to visit parallel classes or schools.

The focus groups were asked to discuss the partnerships between teachers and teaching assistants in their schools, identifying what worked well and where change was needed. From the discussions it could be seen that there was a considerable variety of practice and this difference was particularly marked between the primary and secondary phases. These ranged from a close working partnership through to teaching assistants going into classes not having been given any indication of the sort of support that was needed.

### ***Inhibitors to change***

In terms of major inhibitors to change outside of the school, funding issues were seen to be significant by the largest number of teachers (43%), although parental concerns also featured highly (35%), a typical comment being, 'Parents want their children to have professional teachers'. Lack of pay structures for teaching assistants (TAs) was cited by 21%, a comment being, 'If the pay structure was there, TAs would be the single most important agent for progression'. The English government's workforce remodelling agenda (6%) and lack of training for teaching assistants (6%) were also mentioned. Interestingly, 4% of respondents suggested that teaching assistants had too many commitments outside work for the role to be feasible. The trade unions, press, Ofsted (the official inspection body for schools) and governors were each mentioned by one respondent.

The most significant theme identified was resources, with the greatest need being time for liaison and planning. This was mentioned by most of the respondents, who focused in particular on the need to have protected time set aside. Other resource issues included enhanced pay for teaching assistants, money for performance management and an increase in numbers of teaching assistants throughout the school. A few respondents mentioned the need for additional physical space outside the classroom for storage and a meeting place.

Another theme identified the culture of social inclusion and team working within the school. This was seen as important by over half of the interviewees. Here, again, there were comments relating to the need for mutual respect and ensuring that teaching assistants are treated as full members of the school and have access to all facilities.

The adaptability, enthusiasm and willingness of teaching assistants to undertake training and development were noted. However, respondents were concerned that poor definition of teaching assistant roles and teaching assistants not being resourced to cover attendance at meetings after school were likely to become problematic. Respondents wanted to see the provision of regular, planned and paid meeting time for teachers and teaching assistants, as well as specific training programmes for the latter. These issues were clearly identified when respondents to the questionnaire were asked to state key recommendations they would make to their headteacher or Chair of Governors to enhance the way teachers and teaching assistants work together. These are shown in Table 1. (Some respondents identified more than one recommendation.)

### ***Change management***

Eighty-one percent of respondents said that the role of teaching assistant had changed in their school over the past two years, giving rise to a number of concerns. I think TAs/teachers



work well together but the change intended, where TAs teach, is a real problem. It undermines teachers, puts pressure on TAs and possibly lowers standards.

Table 1. Key recommendations to enhance the way teachers and teaching assistants work together.

Paid time in school hours for planning and liaison	50%
Funded enhanced pay scale for teaching assistants	15%
Shared training opportunities	13%
More clearly defined roles for teaching assistants	13%
Performance management for teaching assistants	10%
Better communication to work as partners	10%
Cultural change in the school to value the role of teaching assistants	8%
Teaching assistants should retain current role	4%

We have discussed ways of providing PPA [Planning, Preparation and Assessment] time for teachers. TAs do not want to teach and teachers don't want their jobs undermined. Concern was also expressed that teaching assistants were increasingly used to support children with special educational needs. In some cases they were developing an expertise which was superior to that of the teacher.

Respondents saw this as the school colluding in a process of de-skilling and devaluing teachers. This was particularly so in the secondary phase, where teaching assistants were also taking on a range of pastoral roles. Teachers saw this as potentially problematic in respect of their career progression and succession planning. Respondents were questioned on their perceptions of internal (to the school) and external barriers to change. The most significant response was personal resistance to workforce reform, cited by 47% of all respondents, with a further 6% attributing the resistance specifically to the headteacher.

There are real personality clashes and 'old school' staff are resistant to change. There's an issue about resistance and a fear of change for some staff. Currently most teachers would be positive towards this. Using a four-point scale (1 5 not at all, 2 5 to some extent, 3 5 quite a lot, 4 5 a great deal), respondents were asked to consider the extent to which their school was prepared for the changing role of the teaching assistant. The results were then mean averaged and there was considerable variation in responses of interviewees. The response to the question, 'To what extent do you feel the supportive school conditions ... are currently in place in your school?' was 2.42. Respondents were asked 'How high a priority is this [development of the teacher-teaching assistant partnership] for the school over the next year, in the context of everything else that is happening?'. They gave a more positive rating of 3.04, while responding to the question 'To what extent are you confident that the plans or recommendations will be implemented?' by giving a rating of 3.25.

With regard to the investigations undertaken by teachers during their attendance at the professional development programme, some investigated issues surrounding a problem and others were a more classical form of action research. They all sought to offer solutions to real and concrete issues, and reflected to some extent the stage of remodelling of the respondent's school and their understanding of the process. The investigations fell into one of seven themes:

- Deployment and roles of teaching assistants [13 projects]
- Cover/PPA time [five projects]
- Communication between teaching assistants and class teachers [seven projects]
- Raising the profile of teaching assistants in school [three projects]

- Induction/training [10 projects]
- Performance management [three projects]
- Classroom issues [four projects]

### **Analysis and discussion**

The research posed the question, 'What are the issues to address in enabling teachers to work in effective partnership with teaching assistants?'. The researchers do not claim that the findings from this self-selected group of teachers who attended the NPfL development programme are representative of teachers as a whole, but the views of this particular group are interesting as they are, in the main, committed to developing real partnerships in the classroom. To some extent this addresses the concerns raised by Watkinson (2004) that there are no exemplars of what a successful partnership looked like.

Few teachers identified leadership skills as important in the questionnaire, but the interviews, held after completion of the NPfL training, identified this as a more critical issue, with respondents focusing on the need for delegation skills to enable autonomy and the importance of performance management. In tension with this, a culture of team working and social inclusion within the school was seen as important for partnerships to flourish, and this was seen as an outcome of effective communication systems that were inclusive for all members of staff, a topic investigated by a number of NPfL participants for their school-based project.

It is clear from the literature (Wall 2001; Quicke 2003; Watkinson 2004) that there is uncertainty about the new roles and responsibilities of teaching assistants and the potential for the role to be misunderstood (Garner 2002). Although publication of the Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) standards (TTA 2004) has made the role of HLTAs clearer, our findings show that there was still confusion about the role, its status and establishment in the respondents' schools. It is also clear that the aspirations of teaching assistants vary. Quicke (2003), The General Teaching Council Scotland (2003), and our findings, indicated that it is important to avoid simplifications about the career intentions of this heterogeneous group.

Ofsted (2005) stated that the reform agenda would be undermined unless teachers have the necessary skills and adaptability to direct effectively the work of teaching assistants, and this is supported by Howes (2003) who characterises the relationship of teachers with their assistants as one of leadership and management. Many of our questionnaire respondents stated they had a role in the performance management of teaching assistants and 73% said their school included teaching assistants in their scheme. However, the focus group findings indicated difficulties in identifying criteria to measure the performance of teaching assistants and the complexities of linking this to classroom practice. It would seem that a partnership may be better served by a true professional dialogue and, in this case, all teaching assistants would need to be included.

In accord with the review of literature, none of the teachers involved in the NPfL development programme had received training in working with other adults in the classroom as part of their initial teacher training. A wide range of skills were identified as important by questionnaire respondents and these could form the basis of initial teacher training and continuing professional development programmes. The importance of a commitment to providing training for teachers and teaching assistants, both as individuals but also together, was a key theme from the findings, and several of the projects covered induction and ongoing training issues in the participants' schools. NPfL offered a range of skills such as active listening, mentoring, delegation and negotiating to develop teachers in working with their teaching assistants. In this respect Wilson (2005) found delegates attending the first four courses were overwhelmingly positive about improvements in their ability to manage and supervise other adults.

It is clear from the work of Muijs (2003) that there is no automatic link between the increase in the adult–pupil ratio and an improvement in teaching and learning. Very few of the NPfL delegates saw it as important to choose to investigate issues in the classroom as part of their school-based project. This is an area that undoubtedly needs further investigation and is recognised as such by Ofsted (2005).

Literature suggests that teachers may be fearful that their changing relationships with teaching assistants might be a threat to their professional integrity (Muijs 2003), and that relinquishing responsibility may be perceived as a weakness (Watkinson 2004). Revell (2002) indicated this might be particularly the case for newly qualified teachers, who may find the presence of a more experienced adult in the classroom daunting. This view was reinforced by the focus groups where, particularly in the secondary phase, respondents saw the school as colluding in the process of deskilling and devaluing the role of the teacher.

The research found changes in teaching assistants' responsibilities, and in particular their increasing use as cover for teaching staff absence. They identified the importance of understanding the role of both partners in the relationship as being essential. Respondents also stated that the most significant barrier to change in their school was personal resistance from their colleagues to workforce reform and, in some cases, resistance from their headteacher. Respondents also cited parental concerns about the use of teaching assistants to replace qualified teachers as being a barrier. Interestingly, this was not found in the literature reviewed. A number of teachers in the focus groups were particularly critical of the use of teaching assistants to provide cover, seeing it as a means of providing 'cheap teachers'. Anxieties about loss of professional integrity and implied incompetence echoed those reported in Quicke (2003), Muijs (2003), and Watkinson (2004).

There is clearly a difference in the way primary and secondary schools use their teaching assistants (Ofsted 2005) and this finding is supported by the predominance of delegates attending the NPfL programme coming from primary schools, primary SENCOs and primary special schools. Focus groups reinforced the findings that there were marked differences between the primary and secondary phases.

Our findings reinforced Dixon's (2003) assertion that a key issue was the resourcing of non-contact time for teachers and their teaching assistants to plan together, with a significant number of questionnaire respondents and interviewees stating that their key recommendation would be paid time in school hours for planning and liaison. Several of the questionnaire respondents stated that a funded enhanced pay scale for teaching assistants was a key recommendation they would make to their headteacher or governing body. This reinforced the literature review's finding that the pay differential between teachers and their teaching assistants made partnership difficult (Moyle and Suschitzky 1997; Parker and Townsend 2005).

## **Conclusion**

Ofsted (2002) states that the full benefit of the workforce reform agenda might not be delivered if the work between teachers and teaching assistants is not researched. This paper is, in part, a response to that call. A key issue arising from this research involves the development of training programmes with the importance of incorporating information on workforce remodelling and skills with working with teaching assistants into all programmes of initial teacher training; the need for joint training of teachers and their teaching assistants to develop team working skills and the need to share good practice from primary and special schools across into the secondary sector. Significant issues surround the roles and responsibilities of teaching assistants, and directly related to these are issues of pay. The varied needs and aspirations of

teaching assistants also emerge, and none of these issues can be seen in isolation from the tensions around whether the relationship between teacher and teaching assistant is a hierarchical one or a genuine partnership between two equal adults in the classroom.

The authors see three main areas where further research is needed. The first is to identify the extent to which standards of pupil achievement and the quality of teaching and learning have been enhanced by the new partnerships of teachers and teaching assistants; the second to examine parental and pupil perceptions of the role of HLTAs; and the third to listen to the voices of the teaching assistants and to understand their views of this complex and changing partnership.

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