Voices from the classroom

An exploration of the perceptions of teaching assistants.

By

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Abstract

This research gave voice to teaching assistants, exploring their experiences and perceptions, in terms of their backgrounds, roles and responsibilities, experiences whilst studying on an NVQ programme, support from their schools, their aspirations and the progression routes available to them.

A small-scale phenomenological study approach was adopted, aimed to interpret and explain human actions and thought through descriptions, capturing first person accounts. Qualitative data was collected from focus group interviews.

The research found that the main entry route into the role of teaching assistant was that of parent-helper at the school their child(ren) attended. Previous employment was varied, however, previous skills and experience was not drawn upon or utilised by the schools.

Differences in job titles were not reflected by the roles performed by the participants. Support from their schools for undertaking qualifications was limited and participants had little knowledge of progression routes available to them.

The research concluded that there is a need for a transparent career structure, which indicates levels of responsibility. Linked to this should be nationally recognised qualifications, which every member of support staff would have to gain, at the appropriate level for the role they fulfil. Wages should reflect the roles and associated qualifications, bringing about a clearer picture of the job of 'teaching assistant'.

The following published works have drawn upon the research in this thesis:

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Malthouse, R. Kennard, P. and Roffey-Barentsen, J. (2009) *Interactive exercises for the Police Recruit Assessment Process.* Exeter: Learning Matters

Malthouse, R and Roffey-Barentsen, J. (2010) *Interview Exercises for the Police Recruit Assessment Process.* Exeter: Learning Matters

Malthouse, R. and Roffey-Barentsen, J. (2010) *Study Skills for Policing Students*. Exeter: Learning Matters

Malthouse, R. and Roffey-Barentsen, J. (2009) *Written Exercises for the Police Recruit Assessment Process*. Exeter: Learning Matters

Malthouse, R and Roffey-Barentsen, J. (2010) *Verbal and Numerical Reasoning Exercises for the Police Recruit Assessment Process*. Exeter: Learning Matters

Roffey-Barentsen, J. and Malthouse, R. (2009) *Reflective Practice in the Lifelong Learning Sector.* Exeter: Learning Matters

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I am indebted to the participants of the research who contributed so freely and enthusiastically; I am proud to represent their voice.

Finally, my father has been a great inspiration during my years of study, therefore, I dedicate this work to him:

Pa, dit is voor U.

Chapter 1 Introduction to the research

Introduction

This Chapter introduces the research project, outlining my personal motivation and the context for the research. It will discuss the purpose of the research, and introduce the research question. The structure of the thesis will be discussed and individual Chapters will be outlined.

My role within my college is that of Programme Manager, responsible for the BA Honours degree in Education, incorporating three strands: Lifelong Learning, Early Years and Learning Support. I also manage the Foundation Degree in Learning Support, and National Vocational Qualifications, Levels two and three, for Supporting Teaching and Learning in Schools.

Personal motivation for the research and context

Teaching assistants are a key force in the drive to raise standards of teaching and learning in the 21st century classrooms. The development in the roles and responsibilities of teaching assistants over the last 15 years is an area close to my heart. I started my career in education, like many teaching assistants, as a mother helping out in the class of my daughter. Every weekend I took the pencils home for sharpening, assisted with art classes, cleaning paint pots and brushes, and supporting the pupils with reading. I soon realised I enjoyed working with the lower ability or more challenging pupils most. When a position became available I was employed as a (part time) Special Needs Assistant, working with a pupil with a Statement of Special Educational Needs because of his epilepsy. At that time, the

(infant) school employed two classroom assistants to cover six classes (Year 1 and 2), a nursery nurse for the two Reception classes and one Special Needs Assistant, a post shared by a colleague and me. This ensured 'cover' during play-time in the morning and lunch times. I was keen to learn as much as possible, not only about epilepsy but about special needs and challenging behaviour in general. The school informed me of a few half-day training sessions organised by the county, which I could attend only if they took place during the time I was not at school. I also found out, by chance, that there was a one-year City and Guilds course in Supporting Learning, held at a local college, which sounded very interesting. My school was keen and said they would support me; I had to pay for the course myself as there was no funding available and I would have to attend the course on a Saturday as I couldn't be given any time off during the week. However, I would have access to the pupils, and the adjacent Junior school offered me their Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) as a mentor. I thoroughly enjoyed the course, although I found it lacking depth; I wanted more, so I would be able to support the pupils to the best of my ability and knowledge. Then, 'my' statemented pupil moved to a different part of the country which meant my job was at risk. Luckily, the head teacher of the school had been approached by the parents of a girl with Down's syndrome, who normally attended a school for pupils with severe learning difficulties (SLD), to attend a main-stream school for one day a week, to develop her social skills. The head teacher and I went to meet the pupil and the head of the SLD school and it was decided that I would spend some time at the SLD school to establish a rapport with the pupil to make transfer as smooth as possible. The pupil also had a hearing impairment and was used to signing using 'Makaton', therefore, I enrolled on a Makaton course, attending in my 'own' time but which was funded by the SLD

school. Makaton is a sign language which uses signs and symbols to communicate with people, including young children, who have communication and learning difficulties. The visual representation of language aims to increase understanding and makes expressive communication easier (The Makaton Charity, 2010). I finished the City and Guilds course and was a Special Needs Assistant with a relevant qualification. However, this was not reflected in my salary.

My tutor at college asked if I had considered becoming a teacher in the Post Compulsory Sector. I had not, as I thought I was too old and, being Dutch, not familiar with the English education system. However, the progression route was explained to me, I arranged some teaching hours as a volunteer, teaching Basic Skills (English and GCSE Mathematics) at a local college, which was followed by contracted hours. The new responsibilities as a tutor meant I had to leave my job as a Special Needs Assistant, a heartbreaking experience. I felt I let the pupil down, her parents, the school and the SLD school. However, my career in education had only just started. I gained a Certificate in Education, then a BA (Hons, first class) in Education and an MA in Education. Professionally, after teaching Basic Skills, I became tutor of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), I further worked with disaffected Year 10 and 11 students, who attended the college one day a week, and was finally offered a post in Teacher Training. As I was considered 'occupationally competent', my responsibilities included teaching and assessing on the City and Guilds Learning Support course. A full circle……

I am very grateful for the support and opportunities I was given during my time as a Special Needs Assistant. However, I also remember the anger and feelings of

frustration and injustice I experienced as I was the only Assistant who had to pay for course fees, even though the school and pupils would benefit from my learning; I had to attend the course on a Saturday, whilst I had a young family myself; received a low hourly wage, no recognition for qualifications and no prospects either. Furthermore, no job security, especially as my employment was linked to individual statemented pupils. Some teachers were pleased with the extra pair of hands in the class, others more suspicious. After initial refusal, support staff were allowed access to the teachers' staff room and to attend meetings, albeit in our own time. I often wondered why anyone would accept these circumstances and go along with it. Of course I did not want to jeopardise my job, or, as my own children attended the school, make life difficult for them by being awkward. On the positive side, it was a job with tremendous job-satisfaction, where one can really make a difference to an individual pupil or groups of pupils. Coinciding with my career in education there have been a number of government driven developments impacting on the roles and responsibilities of teaching assistants. Teaching assistants form an important part of the everyday running of the classroom. There is a distinction between teaching assistants and Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs), who are allowed to stand in for the teacher and receive a higher level of payment for the time they spend as an HLTA. Progression routes have improved, as there are now Levels 2 and 3 NVQ in Supporting Teaching and Learning in Schools, and Foundation Degrees in Learning Support which can be topped up with a BA in Education for those who consider a teaching career. Furthermore, the government offered funding for courses, through its Train to Gain initiative. It all sounds so much better than when I was a Special Needs Assistant.

Purpose of the research and research question

Situations have changed, but have the assistants? Who are these teaching assistants; what are their backgrounds; why are they doing it; is it a career choice or is it convenient while their own children are at school; do they want to go into teaching? Success rates at the college suggest that not all students enrolled on the NVQ programmes complete the course. Therefore, what barriers are some of the teaching assistants experiencing which prevent them from completing the programme; what support do they need?

Previous research studies on the roles of teaching assistants and their training and development experiences have included large scale surveys, such as the report recently commissioned by the Training and Development Agency for Schools (Teeman *et al*., 2009), and one by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (Blatchford *et al*., 2009). Surveys can reach a large number of respondents, as they usually rely on large scale data gathering from a wide population, to be able to make generalisations. They are descriptive in nature: 'they set out to describe and interpret what is' (Cohen *et al*., 2000: 169). However, I am interested in hearing from the teaching assistants themselves, hearing their voices. Therefore, the purpose of the research was to give teaching assistants a voice, finding out from them what their world is like, giving them the opportunity to express their perceptions and experiences.

However, is 'voice' important? Cohn and Kottkamp (1993) argued that efforts to improve education are doomed to failure if teachers are absent from the dialogue and decision making, stressing that their voices and views must be included.

Teachers, as professionals, should have a voice, thus increasing a sense of ownership of the school (Allen, 2004). Four different types of voice were identified: a voting voice, an advisory voice, a delegated voice, and a dialogical voice (ibid). The voting voice required the least time and commitment of the teacher; the advisory voice required more time but he further found that teachers find it very satisfying when their input is considered in their school's decision-making process. The delegated voice is when a school includes teacher representatives on a leadership team that has the power to make decisions. Finally, the dialogical voice, which requires more collegial interaction and therefore more commitment still of the teachers, allows them to express their opinions, and take responsibility for decision making. The dialogical voice was favoured as it resulted in the most ownership, however, it required the most commitment but offered a realistic opportunity to improve pupils' learning (Allen, 2004). If the importance of voice is recognised for teachers, then can the same be argued for the para-professionals working in schools? Teaching assistants, as para-professionals, make up a significant percentage of the total school workforce. Statistics published by the Department for Education (DfE, 2010) suggested that teaching assistants make up 32 per cent of the total workforce in primary schools (51 percent of the workforce are teachers); 12 per cent of the workforce in secondary schools (62 per cent are teachers); and 47 per cent of the workforce in Special Schools (32 per cent are teachers). Therefore, the voices of teaching assistants should not be ignored. Although the status of teaching assistants may be lower than that of teachers, they have different insights into the education processes and can offer a different perspective to the decision making in schools. Education is a complex arena and a way to unravel that complexity is by listening to all involved: school leaders, teachers, pupils, parents

and support staff. Arguably, for an organisation or institution to operate most effectively and at its best, there is a need to listen to all at all levels. Armstrong (2008:13) argued that 'the work of those in a 'support' role has been marginalised both in schools and in research', leading to inequalities. Furthermore, she pointed out that for inclusive cultures and practices in schools to be developed, all members of the school community need to be valued and to receive recognition (Armstrong, 2008).

The gap in the current literature, addressed in this research, was to offer teaching assistants a platform to voice their ideas and experiences, to reflect on their perspectives on what it is like to be a teaching assistant. The research question, what are the experiences and perceptions of teaching assistants, has been broken down into the following sub-questions:

1. What were their backgrounds: a) why did they become a teaching assistant; b) what was their previous employment?
2. What were their a) job titles, b) roles and responsibilities?
3. How were they supported by their school: a) what type of contract did they have; b) were they supported whilst training, financially and/or given time to attend training?
4. How did they experience the NVQ programme they were enrolled on?
5. What were their a) aspirations and b) what progression routes were available to them to achieve these aspirations?

Chapter 2 reviews the literature pertinent to the employment and deployment of teaching assistants. It provides context for the research, the review focuses on the increase in numbers of teaching assistants employed by primary and secondary schools in England. Next, it discusses job titles and the roles and responsibilities of teaching assistants. Furthermore, the development of formal qualifications and training for teaching assistants to enhance their role in the classroom and raise their status as members of the teaching support staff is considered. This is followed by a review of support for teaching assistants by their schools. Also, the notion of professionalization of teaching assistants is argued. Finally, as the purpose of this research is to give teaching assistants a voice, the use of voice in qualitative research is discussed.

Chapter 3 explains the methodology adopted in this research study. The research conducted was an interpretivist, phenomenological study, describing the world as experienced by the teaching assistants, thereby illuminating some of their issues. One of the principles of phenomenology is to put oneself in the place of the other, as this allows researchers to understand and describe people's subjective experiences (Crotty, 1998). By conducting a phenomenological study it was attempted to capture first-person accounts of the participants' perceptions and experiences, illuminating phenomena, whilst giving the participants a voice. Teaching assistants have a key insight into the processes of educational practice and they are in a position to offer a perspective different to that of a teacher or pupil. They work closely with the children they support, often including the children's peers as well, enabling them to monitor learning activities more directly, thus providing feedback on those activities to the teacher. Teaching assistants are usually easily approachable and are often the first

adult a pupil turns to for questions. Their perspectives, therefore, are important and need to be explored.

Chapter 4 presents and discusses the data collected in the research. Data were collected from focus group interviews. This resulted in in-depth accounts of high validity and quality. Any generalisations made from the research will be with some hesitation. Participants, drawn from two different counties and different Local Education Authorities (LEAs), described similar experiences, however, without a national agreement on the employment and deployment of teaching assistants, it is feasible and likely that these experiences vary to some degree nationally. It is acknowledged, however, that others may be able to relate to the current findings.

Figure 1 Data grid, shows where evidence for the research questions has been taken from.

Research Question	Evidence Collected from Literature	Evidence Collected from Focus Groups
What were their backgrounds		√
What were their: a) job titles b) roles and responsibilities		√
How were they supported at school How did they experience the NVQ programme		√
What were their a) aspirations b) available progression routes	√	√

This research provided rich data which was high in validity. Data analysis followed an interpretative phenomenological approach, as suggested by Giorgi and Giorgi (2008). They argued that interpretative phenomenological analysis is a two-stage interpretation of textual data (the transcripts). First, the participants provided an account of their actual lived experience, thus interpreting these experiences for the researcher. Second, the researcher interpreted the participants' interpretation when analysing the data. They referred to this as a 'double hermeneutic' (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2008:205). When interpreting the data the researcher familiarised herself with the data, identified themes and clustered these, before constructing a summary. The aim was to 'go from a concrete lived situation as an example of something, and clarify what it is an example of, to abstraction of these specific examples' (ibid:44).
The purpose of the research was to give a voice to the teaching assistants, exploring their perceptions, thus complementing the large scale survey reports mentioned above.

Chapter 5 of the thesis presents the issues and implications drawn from the research. It will re-state the purpose of the research and its research questions, discuss the outcomes of the research questions as well as reflect on the methodology and methods of data collection utilised; it considers the next steps and discusses implications of the research.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Introduction

Literature pertinent to the employment and deployment of teaching assistants has been reviewed in sections linked to the research questions. First, providing context for the research, the review focuses on the increase in numbers of teaching assistants employed by primary and secondary schools in England. Next, it discusses job titles and the roles and responsibilities of teaching assistants. Furthermore, the development of formal qualifications and training for teaching assistants to enhance their role in the classroom and raise their status as members of the teaching support staff is considered. This is followed by a review of support for teaching assistants by their schools. Also, the notion of professionalisation of teaching assistants is argued. Finally, as the purpose of this research was to give teaching assistants a voice, the use of voice in qualitative research is discussed.

The rise in numbers of teaching assistants

The picture in mainstream schools has changed since the end of the last century, especially in terms of the number of people employed in support roles in schools, which has risen significantly. Although all categories of support staff in schools have seen a considerable growth in numbers during the last decade, the 'teaching assistants' category has experienced the sharpest increase in numbers from 60,600 Full-time Equivalent (FTE) assistants in 1997 (TDA, 2008) to nearly 160,000 in 2010, with 115,720 employed in maintained primary schools and 41,410 in maintained secondary schools (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010), and

22,000 in Special Schools (DfE, 2010). In many schools, there were similar numbers of teaching assistants and teachers, although on average the ratio of full-time equivalent teachers to full-time equivalent teaching assistants in primary schools was typically between two and three, with a lower ratio in secondary schools and a higher ratio in Special Schools (DfE, 2010). The ratio of pupils to teachers and education support staff in primary schools has steadily fallen from 17.9 in January 1997 to 15.7 in January 2001, further falling to 12.4 in 2007, reaching 12.0 in January 2008 (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008). This trend continued as the latest available figures showed a pupil to adult ratio of 11.4 in primary schools; 10.5 in secondary schools; and 2.0 in Special Schools (DfE, 2010).

Raising standards

Several factors contributed to the impetus for change in numbers of people working in schools (wider workforce). The first factor was the aim to raise standards in schools, as successive Conservative governments in the 1980s and 1990s introduced so called ‘market mechanisms’ (Machin and Vignoles, 2006:3) into the education system. This led to the Education Reform Act (1988), which introduced the National Curriculum, national tests for pupils aged 7, 11 and 14 years, and an inspection regime for schools by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). It was also responsible for the change in the way in which schools were funded and managed, introducing the Local Management of Schools. The policy gave schools greater control over their budgets by allowing Boards of Governors and school principals the autonomy to make decisions on resource allocation and priorities in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools.

These market-oriented reforms aimed to improve the accountability of state funded schools and increase parental choice of school for their children. School funding became more closely linked to student enrolment numbers, giving schools the incentive to attract and admit more students.

Further, the government target to raise standards in education led to the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy in 1998 (DfES, 1998), followed a year later by the National Numeracy Strategy (DfES, 1999). The deployment of additional adult support, a role mainly allocated to teaching assistants, was an integral part of the design of the Numeracy and Literacy Strategies.

In support of these targets, the Government set out its intention to increase substantially the number of trained teaching assistants in primary and secondary schools in its 1998 and 2001 Green Papers (HMI,1998; HMI, 2002). Between 1999 and 2001 funding was made available through Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to recruit an additional 20,000 full-time equivalent teaching assistants for both primary and secondary schools and provide training for them.

School workforce remodelling was a change-management programme designed to implement the changes recommended by the national agreement on Raising Standards and Tackling Workload (DfES, 2003a). The agreement, signed by the government, employers and school workforce unions on 15 January of 2003 (ibid), was introduced to raise standards and to tackle unacceptable levels of workload for teachers. It arose out of the 'Workforce Agreement Monitoring Group' (WAMG) (DfES, 2003a:7), and did not focus solely on teachers but also acknowledged the

vital role played by school support staff, which led directly to the establishment of Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) standards. By meeting these standards, HLTAs will have demonstrated that, under the direction of a qualified teacher, they can teach whole classes as well as small groups of pupils (Parker *et al*., 2009).

The contractual changes for teachers, arising from the WAMG, were introduced in three phases between September 2003 and September 2005. They included the delegation of administrative and clerical tasks, work/life balance clauses, limits to covering for absent colleagues (to 38 hours per year), and guaranteed time for Planning, Preparation and Assessment (PPA). These changes could not be delivered without schools deploying more support staff in extended roles, as a means of releasing the extra time for teachers and reducing their workload. Therefore, following the workforce reform agenda, over 21,000 teaching assistants gained HLTA status (Parker *et al*., 2009).

Inclusion

A further major factor which impacted upon the rise of teaching assistants in schools was the increasing inclusion in mainstream schools of pupils with special educational needs. In fact, the increase in the number of assistants working in schools had paralleled developments of thinking on inclusion and raising standards. Balshaw and Farrell stated that:

> …the rise in the numbers of teaching assistants working in mainstream schools mirrors schools' and LEAs' growing commitment towards inclusion.
>
> (Balshaw and Farrell, 2002:4)

George and Hunt (2003) suggested that the reasons for this increase were twofold: to support the growing numbers of pupils who would have previously been educated in Special Schools; and to accommodate the growth in numbers of pupils formally identified with special educational needs already in mainstream schools. The Warnock Report (1978) identified that up to one in five children at some time during their school career would require some form of special educational provision. Furthermore, in the 1994 Salamanca Statement of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), it was agreed by 92 governments and 25 international organisations that every child had a fundamental right to education and that educational systems and programmes should be designed to take children's diversity into account (UNESCO, 1994). The Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs (DfES, 2001), stated that pupils with learning difficulties who did not require a Statement, should also have their needs formally recognised, met and regularly reviewed in mainstream schools.

To meet these needs, a hierarchy of support was in place. For most pupils, who had been identified as having special educational needs, these needs could be met by arranging additional help or utilising special equipment. This stage was referred to as 'school action' (Graf with Birch, 2009:81). However, should this level of support be insufficient, other specialists, such as educational psychologist or language therapists, were consulted. This second stage of support is referred to as 'school action plus' (Graf with Birch, 2009:81). If these measures are still insufficient, the Local Education Authority (LEA) can be asked by the school, or the parents, for a statutory assessment of special educational needs, which may result in requiring the

LEA to produce a Statement of Special Educational Needs (SSEN). An SSEN was designed to identify individual needs and strategies to meet these needs, including what was required to meet the National Curriculum. It was intended that SSEN documents be reviewed annually to evaluate evidence that any additional pupil support actively addresses the specific educational, social and emotional needs of the pupil. Local authorities carried out an assessment and asked third parties, such as the parents, the school, educational psychologists or anyone else who could advise on the child's needs, to give their views on the child.

The term *inclusion* refers to the extent to which a school or community welcomes all pupils with special educational needs as fully inclusive members of the group and values individuals for the contribution they make. For inclusion to be effective it is expected that all pupils will actively belong to, be welcomed by and participate fully in the life of mainstream schools (Balshaw and Farrell, 2002). The National Curriculum for Schools in England (DfEE, 1999) stated that the curriculum should provide relevant and challenging learning for all children, in accordance with the three principles set out in the statutory inclusion statement: 1. setting suitable learning challenges, 2. responding to pupils' diverse learning needs and 3. to overcome potential barriers to learning and assessment for individuals and groups of pupils. Teaching assistants increasingly provided the additional support required to enable pupils with SEN to flourish in the mainstream classroom.

The Ofsted report '*Reforming and Developing the School Workforce'* (2007) maintained that the impact of the wider workforce had been greatest for pupils with learning difficulties. Developing the specific expertise of teaching assistants in areas such as autism, dyslexia and speech and language difficulties had improved

provision. If pupils on the lower side of the learning spectrum were catered for, what about those on the other side, the gifted and talented children a who had one or more abilities developed to a level significantly ahead of their year group (or with the potential to develop these abilities)? The 2005 White Paper '*Higher Standards: Better Schools for All'* emphasised that a 'tailored education means addressing the needs of the most gifted and talented, just as much as those who are struggling' (DfES, 2005:55), therefore, gifted and talented pupils had a right to an education that was suited to their particular needs and abilities, which meant that they needed to be stretched and challenged in all classes. Schools were advised to 'nominate the most able 10 per cent of every year group to be included on a national register' (Worrall and Steele, 2008:108), and to ensure effective provision for its most able pupils.

It was hoped, and perhaps assumed, that pupils with higher abilities would be able to 'fend for themselves' (Watkinson, 2003:102). However, testing and use of league tables highlighted discrepancies in the higher ability range, suggesting that, through individualised learning support, these children would also benefit from the encouragement and adult support teaching assistants provided, in particular as these children may have emotional and social problems (Watkinson, 2003). It was recognised that teaching assistants could play an essential role in ensuring that these most able pupils were 'adequately challenged in group work situations' (Rose, 2005:44).

However, the Ofsted report (2010) highlighted that few schools utilised the skills of the wider workforce to support gifted and talented pupils. In nearly all the sessions of general support observed during the survey, teaching assistants worked with lower-attaining pupils or those most likely to disrupt the lesson. These were also the pupils

that were likely to be withdrawn from classes for specific intervention programmes. As a result, the lower-attaining pupils spent considerably less time than other pupils being taught by a qualified teacher. It could be queried whether this was an appropriate approach. Arguably, those pupils who needed the most support were the ones that needed to be taught by the most qualified person in the class.

Blatchford *et al*. argued:

> There is something paradoxical about the least qualified staff in schools being left to teach the most educationally needy pupils, and there is a concern over whether this provides the most effective support for the children in most need.
>
> (Blatchford *et al*., 2007:20)

Furthermore, as more teaching assistants were employed to address the principles of inclusion, some pupils with SEN faced isolation, leading to 'a new form of segregation within the mainstream' (Ainscow *et al*., 1999:138), as 'velcro-ing' teaching assistants to pupils becomes a form of within-class segregation (Wedell, 2005:5). Richards and Armstrong (2008:124) further warned that teaching assistants could become barriers to inclusion if they were employed as 'bodyguards' to control the most challenging pupils, such as those with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties. Arguably, if lower attaining pupils benefited from the support provided, then the same might be expected for the talented and gifted ones. However, as mentioned above, 'only two of the schools visited used the wider workforce to provide support and challenge for higher-attaining pupils' (Ofsted, 2010:17). Therefore, for schools to provide a truly inclusive environment, they needed to focus more closely on those with higher level learning needs.

Every Child Matters

In 2003, a young girl called Victoria Climbié, died after being tortured and abused by her great aunt and her aunt's partner. In response, the Government published the Green Paper '*Every Child Matters'* (ECM) (DfES, 2003), which represented the 'biggest change to the organisation of provision for children since the 1944 Education Act' (Coombs and Calvert, 2008:2). The paper proposed changes to policy and legislation in England which would maximise opportunities for children and young people and minimise risks. *The Children Act 2004* (DCFS, 2008b), was the legal underpinning of ECM, detailing the Government's approach to ensuring the well-being of children and young people from birth to age 19. The aim of the ECM programme was to give all children the support they need to:

- Be healthy
- Stay safe
- Enjoy and achieve
- Make a positive contribution
- Achieve economic well-being

(DCFS, 2008b:1)

The ECM agenda was further developed through the publication of the '*Children's Plan'* in December 2007 (DCSF, 2008c). The Children's Plan outlined a ten-year strategy to make England the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up. The Children's Plan aimed to improve educational outcomes for all children, improve children's health, reduce offending rates among young people and eradicate child poverty by 2020, thereby contributing to the achievement of the five ECM outcomes listed above.

The thinking behind ECM was not new for many schools. A combination of high expectations, innovative thinking and taking a broad view in supporting children and young people are said to be common features of highly successful schools (DCSF, 2008b). To achieve the objectives of the ECM agenda, collaboration both between schools and across agencies, was said to be essential, as this would lead to improved outcomes in such areas as pupil behaviour, personalised learning, provision for special educational needs (SEN) and reducing the number of children missing education (DCSF, 2008b).

The publication *2020 Children and Young People's Workforce Strategy* (DCSF, 2008d) articulated the expectation that all who worked with children and young people, in whatever capacity should show themselves to be:

- **ambitious** for every child and young person
- **excellent** in their practice
- **committed** to partnership and integrated working
- **respected** and valued as professionals.

(DCSF, 2008d:6)

Whatever their role, the aim was to ensure that members of the workforce have the skills and knowledge to do the best job they possibly can to help children and young people develop and succeed across all the outcomes which underpin the Every Child Matters agenda.

However, as pointed out by Walton and Goddard (2009), there were some constraints on the ECM implementation. It was recognised that multi-agency integration had yet to be resolved as there were fundamental and entrenched differences in purpose, procedures and culture in each of the participating

professions. To facilitate communication between agencies, the *Common Assessment Framework* (Children's Workforce Development Council, 2009) was introduced. It was a common national database of information for all agencies, so that any information from the police, social services, medical and health services and education was automatically recorded in one file under the name of the child. In schools the named person given the responsibility for accessing and entering information was frequently the Special Educational Needs Coordinator, but it may be that highly qualified teaching assistants (level 4 or undergraduate level) may be given this responsibility (Walton and Goddard, 2009).

Job titles

Government recommendation (DfEE, 2000:4) was that all support staff in schools working with teachers should be designated as 'teaching assistants':

> The term 'teaching assistant' (TA) is the Government's preferred generic term of reference for all those in paid employment in support of teachers in primary, special and secondary schools.
>
> (DfEE, 2000:4)

However, despite this recommendation, non-teaching staff in classrooms may be given a range of titles, such as: teaching assistant, classroom assistant, special needs assistant, learning support assistant, or nursery nurse. Balshaw and Farrell (2002) stated that the name given to assistants seemed to vary from school to school and from LEA to LEA. Indeed, sometimes assistants in the same school, performing similar roles, could have different titles. Consistency in job titles, therefore, appeared to be lacking. This range in titles may have suggested a

hierarchy of assistants: at the top those with the highest status who supported the teacher, involved in the support for delivering the core curriculum subjects (Kay, 2002), followed by those who supported pupil learning in general, and finally, those who supported children with SEN. A hierarchy which was reflected in the payment of assistants, discussed later in this Chapter, but this was not supported by qualifications or experience of those staff involved. Balshaw and Farrell (2002) argued for settling on one name only, a name that conveys the correct message about assistants' work within an inclusive framework. They took the view that the name should reflect that assistants were employed to assist teachers in all areas of education from pre-school to school leaving age. The name should not restrict assistants to work with one group of pupils only, such as singularly working with those pupils who have been identified with SEN.

Since remodelling, the term 'wider workforce' was used to describe 'any person, other than a qualified teacher, who works in or with a school' (Ofsted, 2010:4). The wider workforce of support staff work in many important and often multiple roles and can be categorised into seven groups:

1. TA Equivalent (TA, LSA (SEN pupils), nursery nurse, therapist);
2. Pupil Welfare (Connexions personal advisor, education welfare officer, home-school liaison officer, learning mentor, nurse and welfare assistant);
3. Technical and Specialist Staff (ICT network manager, ICT technician, librarian, science technician and technology technician);
4. Other Pupil Support Staff (bilingual support officer, cover supervisor, escort, exam invigilator, language assistant, midday assistant and midday supervisor);
5. Facilities Staff (cleaner, cook, and other catering staff);

6. Administrative Staff (administrator/clerk, bursar, finance officer, office manager, secretary, attendance officer, data manager, examination officer, and PA to the headteacher);

7. Site Staff (caretaker and premises manager

(Blatchford *et al*., 2006:32; 2009:15)

The use of a generic title indicates that all assistants fulfil an equally important role, which can then evolve into more specialised roles, such as Specialist TA for Behaviour, Autism, Speech and Language, Literacy, Cover Supervisor, or ICT Technician, where the responsibility is much narrower (Parker *et al*., 2009). As will be discussed later in this Chapter, it is important for the professionalisation of teaching assistants to have a single job title. So far, this part of the Chapter has acknowledged the range of titles used to describe the different roles of teaching assistants. However, there was a gap in the literature, as the views on titles from teaching assistants themselves had not yet been sought. The current research provided a platform for teaching assistants to voice these views.

Roles and responsibilities

Teaching assistants are a key force in the drive to raise standards of teaching and learning in 21st century classrooms. The Government emphasised the vital role the teaching assistant can play in supporting the whole process of education, claiming that the quality of teaching was improved by the presence of teaching assistants in the classrooms (HMI 2002). Further studies (Muijs and Reynolds, 2003; Blatchford *et al*., 2007), however, questioned the belief that the presence of teaching assistants had a measurable effect on pupil attainment, although they did confirm that teachers felt supported by their teaching assistants. This support was said to be most marked

when the teaching assistant and the teacher worked in close partnership, or when the teaching assistant followed a tightly prescribed intervention or catch-up programme. However, it was recognised that as the role of teaching assistants shifted more towards providing learning support, the demands of this work competed with the time needed for teaching assistants to provide their traditional practical support for teachers, such as managing and preparing materials. HMI (2002) further pointed out that as teaching assistants spent more time supporting pupils' learning directly and less providing welfare and administrative support, teachers had to do more welfare and administrative work that could be done more appropriately by teaching assistants. In schools where these competing demands were not managed well, 'teachers did not experience the full benefits that support from teaching assistants can provide' (HMI, 2002:5). It could be argued that teachers require training to make the most effective use of their support staff. Although the DfES Induction Training associated with the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies took account of the importance of this training, few teachers have received formal training (HMI 2002). The issue was highlighted more recently, as Blatchford *et al*. (2009:104) reported that about three quarters of teachers had 'never had any training or development to help them work with support staff'. In the cases where training was received, it was mainly as a part of the teacher's Initial Teacher Training (ITT) programme or during their Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) year. Most teachers learnt on the job, which arguably did not always lead to best practice. Therefore, more focused training on how to work most effectively with support staff would be beneficial to all teachers.

Fox (2003) claimed that the role of the teaching assistant would vary from school to school, depending on the organisation and on the individual child, or groups of children, concerned. A number of researchers (Lee and Mawson; 1998; Hancock *et al*.; 2001) have attempted to identify the different roles carried out by teaching assistants. The role can be categorised in different ways but was summarised by Kamen (2008:3) as 'support for the pupil; support for the teacher; support for the curriculum; and support for the school'.

Support for the pupil

According to Lee (2002), support for the pupil was provided in different ways, as teaching assistants may work with individual pupils in class, outside the classroom, small groups of pupils in class or outside the classroom, or with the whole class. As stated before, the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) and National Numeracy Strategy (NNS) had an impact on the roles of teaching assistants, as they were intended to play an important part in implementing these strategies. They also have a key role in the related intervention and catch-up programmes such as Early Literacy Support (ELS), Additional Literacy Support (ALS) and Springboard mathematics (HMI 2002). Further, many more teaching assistants were employed as a direct result of inclusion policies at a national level, employed specifically to support individual children (Blatchford *et al*. 2007; Sage and Wilkie, 2003). However, as explained by Balshaw and Farrell (2002), it was not uncommon for a teaching assistant to be appointed to support a child with autism in a mainstream school, who had never met an autistic child before, who had had no prior training and who may have no further education beyond GCSE/O levels. As reported by the Audit Commission (2002),

many staff felt ill-equipped to meet the wide range of pupils' needs. Especially children with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties can present complex behaviour, including manipulation and sometimes violence, which requires more than 'common sense' to be able to address these needs (Shearman, 2003:75). In their report '*The support staff study: exploring experiences and training and development*', Teeman *et al*. (2009) found that approximately only one in three teaching assistants had received training aimed at 'behaviour management' or 'working with children with SEN' (Teeman *et al*., 2009:70). It can therefore be queried if this offers the most effective support and it is suggested that more role-specific training is required. Training issues will be discussed later in this Chapter.

Support for the teacher

Direct support for the teacher, as identified by Fox (2003), may be provided by teaching assistants in terms of recording information, providing feedback about how a pupil manages work given, helping in setting targets, monitoring and evaluating Individual Education Plans, where individual outcomes and targets are recorded and reviewed. It was recognised that information from teaching assistants provided a knowledgeable insight into the learning needs of individual pupils (Sangster and Overall, 2006). However, more indirect support for teachers, according to Lee (2002), was provided by producing materials, developing differentiated materials for pupils working at different levels, managing resources, and other tasks inside and outside the classroom. To achieve effective support, teaching assistants have to be managed. However, managing people is a skill for which many established teachers have not had training and have had to develop whilst 'on the job' (Sage and Wilkie,

2003: 12). HMI (2002:13) highlighted that schools are still developing strategies for managing teaching assistants; that it is the responsibility of the teacher to manage and organise the work of the teaching assistant. However, as most teaching assistants work part-time and are seldom paid for non-contact time, many schools find difficulty in arranging meetings for teachers and teaching assistants to plan their work together and to discuss pupils' progress. Therefore much depends on the goodwill of staff to meet informally during break time, lunch time, or before or after school (ibid). The recommendation that teachers and teaching assistants should be encouraged to learn together, can only be achieved if time is allocated for teachers and assistants to plan and review systematically, not dependent on chance meetings in the corridor (Farrell *et al*., 1999). This point was further highlighted by Ofsted (2010:9) which found that 'there were still schools where the only briefings that support staff received were during spare moments between lessons or through impromptu conversations in the staff room'.

Support for the curriculum

With respect to supporting the curriculum, as stated by Fox (2003), teaching assistants were expected to develop knowledge of the National Curriculum, enabling them to support the pupils at the appropriate Key Stage. The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, stressed the importance of the 'presence of an additional adult to work with children individually or in groups' (Sage and Wilkie, 2003:14). As a result teaching assistants were timetabled more intensely as they were also expected to continue with all the other tasks they had always done. Catch-up programmes, such as Early Literacy Support (ELS), Additional Literacy Support

(ALS) and Springboard mathematics, went a step further, as these programmes had been written with the intention that they would be delivered by support staff (ibid.). Support in literacy is still high on the agenda, as teaching assistants more recently have been involved in supporting 'Every Child a Reader', an intervention programme launched in September 2008, after a successful three year pilot project, following the Reading Recovery strategy (Every Child a Chance Trust, 2007). Furthermore, as a direct result of the ECM agenda (DfES, 2003), which aimed to achieve economic well-being of children, following the recognition that behaviour and achievement were influenced by personal and social well-being (Walton and Goddard, 2009), Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programmes were introduced in 2004 at primary level. The main aim of SEAL is to develop skills that encourage pupils to understand and manage their emotions. This can be achieved by the incorporation of pastoral work (Crow, 2008), such as pastoral support systems or collaborative group work. The role of teaching assistants evolved to include that of a 'pupil advocate' (Cheminais, 2008:10), in which they support pupils in an emotionally intelligent and trusting learning environment, where the pupils feel safe to express themselves.

Support for the school

Before the national agreement was introduced, support staff tended to work in isolation, adapting to different styles of teaching and working practices as required. Most worked part-time and had little involvement with other staff in the school (Ofsted, 2010). Since then, the supportive role of teaching assistants within the school can be identified as working as part of a team, knowing school procedures,

contributing to reviews, and attending relevant in-service training or staff meetings. As a result of the ECM agenda, school staff were expected to form part of multi-disciplinary teams to monitor the safeguarding of children. Teaching assistants may be part of the team as someone who best knows the pupil (Walton and Goddard, 2009). However, as identified by Sage and Wilkie (2003:15) being part of a whole school team is a two-way transaction: the teaching assistants need support in terms of professional development to carry out their job effectively: schools must have a Planning and Achievement Document (PANDA) which identifies staff developments plans and targets. However, Ofsted (2007) reported that only just over half the schools visited had introduced an appraisal or performance management system for the wider workforce which mirrored that of teachers, with few members of the wider workforce being observed as part of their appraisal or offered feedback. Progress has been slow and in the 2010 report '*Workforce reform in schools: has it made a difference*' (Ofsted 2010), one of the recommendations is still for schools to introduce a comprehensive system for setting performance objectives for all members of the wider workforce, to identify training and development needs, and to encourage members to take the initiative in developing their roles and responsibilities (Ofsted, 2010:7)

In November 2001, the Secretary of State suggested that the work of teaching assistants was expanded to include:

- supervising classes undertaking work set by the teacher
- working with small groups of pupils
- supervising lunchtime activities
- administering tests
- giving pastoral and other administrative support to pupils
- covering for teacher absence

(HMI, 2002:3)

This expansion of their roles raised some issues. The suggestion that teaching assistants might take over some of the teachers' tasks, was met with some anxiety, expressed by teaching unions about the effects this might have on teachers' professionalism (Balshaw and Farrell, 2002). As described by Utley (1996), the government's encouragement of the growth of so-called neo-professions was seen to undermine or even replace existing professionals. It was argued that the growth of neo-professions marginalised the established professions (Utley, 1996). Therefore, instead of being seen as a valuable resource to support teaching and learning in schools, teaching assistants were viewed as a threat to the development of the teaching profession. The teacher unions stressed that teaching assistants should not be seen as replacements for teachers (Lee, 2002), and that children deserve to be taught by a properly trained graduate, a qualified teacher (Burgess and Shelton Mayes, 2009). Hargreaves (2000) firmly warned that teachers must regulate the introduction of more unlicensed and unqualified adults performing educational work in schools:

> …using people less qualified (and costly) than teachers to do complex work that only teachers can uniquely do (eg guidance or pastoral work that involves classroom teaching, curriculum planning, understanding students' learning differences), is something that the profession and public should guard against at all costs if educational quality is to be protected.
>
> (Hargreaves, 2000:170)

Despite these warnings, there was some evidence that showed that on occasions, teaching assistants had covered for absent teachers, as a small proportion of teachers allowed teaching assistants to work on their own, usually for an hour or less, most commonly when the teacher was called away from the class, either on a planned or unplanned basis (Lee, 2002).

Much has changed. Responsibilities for many tasks, which used to be the sole remit of the teacher, have shifted, with many teaching assistants taking on these tasks, including planning, assessment, and even teaching. As stated by Vincett, Cremin and Thomas (2005):

> Today, TAs are thought of as assistants who teach, and not merely as assistants to the teacher…they should be involved in the broadest range of activity in the classroom…and…fulfil a wide range of tasks that parallel or shadow those of the teacher.
>
> (Vincett, Cremin and Thomas, 2005:32)

Support staff regularly covered for teacher absence in over '80 per cent of primary, secondary and special schools' (Hutchings *et al*., 2009:10). In primary schools this tended to be for shorter absences, such as of a day, or part of a day. However, in secondary schools and special schools assistants could provide cover for longer periods of time, sometimes for up to a whole term. In their evaluation of the introduction and implementation of workforce reform within the context of the national agreement and other initiatives related to workforce deployment, Ofsted (2007) identified that in most primary schools, cover for absent teachers was provided by the teaching assistants who usually worked with the class. This was also the case in special schools, however, in most secondary schools, cover supervisors provided cover across the school (Hutchings *et al*., 2009). Cover supervisors were staff just appointed to cover for absent teachers. They did not teach the subject but supervised the pupils undertaking directed tasks. The reasons for utilising cover staff were twofold. The appointment of support staff to cover lessons provided continuity for the pupils, as headteachers wanted them to be supervised by someone familiar to them, especially an issue in special schools;

furthermore, familiarity with the school and its procedures was also an important aspect to ensure this continuity and consistency (Hutchings *et al*., 2009). However, although these were valid arguments, the use of support staff rather than qualified teachers was also driven by budgetary concerns. For example one primary school calculated that its expenditure on providing cover for teachers who were absent 'had reduced from £12,000 in 2002/03 to £400 in 2007/08' (Ofsted, 2010:14). This had been achieved by using highly skilled support staff. In another example, Ofsted (2007) explained that in the financial year 2001-02, in a secondary school, teachers provided 70 per cent of cover needed. In 2002-03, the school made a commitment that teachers should not be required to cover more than one lesson each week, which meant an increase in cost for supply cover. In the first half of the academic year 2005-06 cover assistants supplied more than half the required cover. As the cost of cover assistants was significantly less than for supply teachers, the system proved to be cost-effective. There was, however, a danger here as it was found that 'some support staff had taken responsibility for classes for longer than intended, taking on responsibility for which they were neither trained nor paid' (Hutchings *et al*., 2009:18).

Being supervised by cover staff rather than being taught by a qualified teacher may have an impact on pupil performance, in particular when the cover is over a length of time. Furthermore, the increase in responsibilities, without being given extra hours to do the work in, has meant that the workload for support assistants has increased significantly. Excessive workloads, combined with working more hours outside the hours they were paid for, may lead to stress, affecting the assistants' work-life balance. It was recognised that 'the workload and stress levels of teaching assistants and administrative staff had increased, and that the workload and stress

levels of teachers had decreased' (Hutchings *et al*. 2009:15). Remodelling the workforce was brought about to restore teachers' work-life balance, which it seemed to have achieved. However, it appeared that the imbalance, combined with increased stress levels, had been passed on to support assistants. Remodelling, therefore, may require another phase, addressing the needs of support assistants.

However, despite their increased workload, teaching assistants felt more valued because of the changes in their work. They felt that they had a positive impact through supporting individual pupils, acting as learning mentors, providing intervention work for groups, and supervising classes (Ofsted, 2007). The most effective support was provided when teaching assistants received high quality training relevant to the needs of pupils and were clear about the purpose of their support and intervention (Ofsted, 2007). Where teaching assistants and teachers carefully planned work together, teaching assistants were often given a high level of responsibility within lessons, and regularly led activities.

Although no one should pretend that teaching assistants are teachers, when they were most successful they showed many of the characteristics of good teaching (HMI, 2002:18): 'an understanding of children and their needs and behaviour; an ability to interact effectively with them to promote learning; and the ability to assess where the pupils are in their learning and what they need to do to make further progress'. Making the most of such abilities should certainly not threaten the professionalism of teachers; rather, it should be encouraged and developed to the full.

By 2010, extra roles and responsibilities were being developed for members of the wider workforce, as every school was required to provide extended provision (Ofsted, 2010). Extended schools (DfES, 2005) 'offer a range of core universal services and out of hours learning activities from 8.00am to 6.00pm to respond to the needs of children, young people and their families' (Parker *et al*., 2009:216). School leaders recognised that breakfast clubs and after-school clubs could support and complement learning in the school, thereby raising standards. These clubs were usually staffed by members of the wider workforce, including teaching assistants (Ofsted, 2010; Cheminais, 2008). A considered advantage of the involvement of teaching assistants in running these clubs was that it provided continuity for the pupils and also for the parents.

Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA)

The HLTA role was introduced as part of the National Agreement (DfES, 2003). Its aim was to reinforce and improve the knowledge, understanding and skills of support staff in schools in England, equipping those who wished to extend their role with the knowledge and skills to enable them to take on additional roles and responsibilities and in so doing raise standards of education in schools and reduce the workloads of teachers (Wilson *et al.,* 2007; Birkett, 2004). Following a wide-ranging consultation with headteachers, teachers, professional bodies, unions, employers and support staff, in 2004 the TDA produced standards for HLTAs (TDA, 2010). These standards were grouped into three headings: *professional values and practice*; *professional knowledge and understanding*; and *professional skills* (ibid) and had been set at a high level to provide assurance to teachers, employers and parents about the

contribution that support staff with HLTA status can make to pupils' learning. However, the standards for HLTA status are generic, despite the many varied support roles and responsibilities HLTAs hold (Burgess and Shelton Mayes, 2009). It was decided that individual headteachers would take responsibility for determining the precise role of each teaching assistant gaining HLTA status, informed by the needs of the school. In the absence of a formal job description for HLTAs, their role tended to vary across schools – this was thought by some educationalists to cause confusion. As pointed out by Birkett (2004), it was expected that:

> Those with HLTA status will be able to take over classes to relieve teachers and provide them with guaranteed planning, preparation and assessment time, and to reduce the time they need to spend covering for absent colleagues.
>
> (Birkett, 2004:7)

However, although most schools employed one or two members of staff with HLTA status, just over half of these schools had developed a specific role for HLTAs. Furthermore, only one third of those with HLTA status worked exclusively as an HLTA, either on a full-time or part-time basis, while a further third reported working in split roles, with most of those being paid different rates for HLTA and non-HLTA duties (Wilson *et al*., 2007).

In general, the range of roles and responsibilities of teaching assistants was more narrowly focused since they gained HLTA status, with a major shift in their responsibilities to teaching whole classes, to allow teachers PPA time (planning, preparation and assessment) (Burgess and Shelton Mayes, 2009). Wilson *et al*. (2007), on the other hand however, noted that many felt their role had remained the same, as they had been working at HLTA level already. The boundaries of roles and

responsibilities between teaching assistants and HLTAs appeared unclear; therefore, some teaching assistants may be reluctant to undertake the extra training. Despite this, following the workforce reform agenda, over 21,000 teaching assistants gained HLTA status (Parker *et al*., 2009).

Teaching assistants could not self-select to undertake the training required for HLTA status but needed the agreement of their headteacher in supporting their application. Trainees were expected to hold a qualification in English/literacy and mathematics/numeracy equivalent to at least level 2 of the NQF (TDA, 2010). Although the development of the HLTA role, provided career structure and further opportunity for teaching assistants who wished to develop their careers (Birkett, 2004), progressing to HLTA status from teaching assistant has been problematic for some. Some teaching assistants were unable to train for HLTA status because 'they do not have the necessary mathematics qualifications, others find it difficult to enrol on a programme, while those with an NVQ level 3 do not always feel encouraged to seek HLTA accreditation' (ibid.:33). However, despite these considerations, 'eight per cent of support staff had achieved, were registered for, or were working towards HLTA status' (Teeman *et al*., 2009:23). This figure was slightly lower than that for those assistants who had achieved, were registered for, or were working towards an NVQ, as will be discussed later in this Chapter. Further research is recommended to identify what percentage of teaching assistants completed both the NVQ qualification and HLTA status, and in which order, and also in the reasons for undertaking either training, as these reasons may encourage others to take up training.

Local Government employers and the Department for Education and Skills were 'anxious to raise the skill and knowledge level of teaching assistants' (HMI, 2002:2) and viewed qualifications as a potential progression route to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) for those who wanted to pursue this career path and possessed the relevant educational qualifications. Lee (2002) acknowledged the recognised routes for teaching assistants to work towards QTS, although their availability varied, and suggested further research was needed to ascertain how feasible and appropriate it was for teaching assistants to acquire QTS, especially if they were taking a workplace-based route. According to Watkinson (2003), only between 10 and 20 per cent of teaching assistants actually considered to become qualified teachers. In primary schools this figure increased to 22 per cent, however, in secondary schools it was nearly 40 per cent (Hutchings *et al*. 2009). This high percentage suggested that secondary school assistants may have a higher level of previous qualifications than their primary colleagues, which was supported by the findings of Hutchings *et al*. (2009):

> Half the support staff who ever took responsibility for whole classes in secondary schools said that they were qualified to Level 4 or above, twice as many as in primary and special schools.
>
> (Hutchings *et al*. 2009:4)

Qualifications and Training

Nationally recognised qualifications

Despite the important role teaching assistants performed, fulfilling a wide range of tasks, including supporting the most challenging or vulnerable pupils, there were no

national requirements for support staff to hold a qualification (Ofsted, 2010). However, although not mandatory, there were a range of nationally recognised vocational qualifications available for teaching assistants to study. Nationally recognised qualifications are part of the National Qualification Framework (NQF) and are linked to National Occupational Standards (Employers' Organisation for Local Government, 2002). The national occupational standards (NOS) for teaching assistants were approved in April 2001 and qualifications based on these standards started to be accredited to the framework in summer 2002. National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) had been developed at Levels 1, 2 3 and 4, identifying possible competencies to achieve for teaching assistants. In general, NVQs reflect the needs, linked to the national standards, of the workplace for which they were designed. They are usually assessed in the workplace as NVQ candidates demonstrate their competence in the work they are doing. They are therefore described as 'competence-based qualifications' (Dakers,1996:2). The introduction of NVQs saw a 'shift from a system that was largely defined in terms of its input, to one defined by its output' (Jessup, 1990:19). Whereas academic qualifications were awarded through the acquisition of a body of knowledge, assessed by for instance an examining board, vocational qualifications were awarded because the candidate had achieved the outcomes necessary for carrying out their occupation. As explained by Parfect (2009), assessment of NVQs was different from traditional subject assessment, as there were no examinations. Students determined themselves which competency they were ready to be assessed on and also decided on when they would like to complete the assessment. Assessment of NVQs was therefore flexible and student-centred. It allowed students to be self-directing, self-motivated and autonomous, responsible for their own learning and progress.

However, the reality was different. Rather than exploring learning opportunities, students and sometimes tutors, were solely interested in how they could meet the standards in the quickest possible way, resulting in statements such as '*tell me what I need to do/know to be able to tick a particular standard*' (Parfect, 2009:6). This could lead to a mechanical approach whereby students could achieve success without having to consider wider implications and knowledge (ibid.).

Candidates did not need any formal qualifications to start working towards an NVQ; the level of undertaken NVQ depended on what level best corresponded with the job role and responsibilities. For teaching assistants, the NVQ level 2 was designed to be applicable to those who may be new entrants to the occupation and/or whose responsibilities at work are limited in range. The level 3 was designed to be applicable to experienced teaching assistants and/or whose role called for competence across a varied range of responsibilities (Employers' Organisation, 2002). These two qualifications formed the basic qualification structure for teaching assistants (Fox, 2003).

In June 2007 the standards were reviewed to incorporate the wider support staff (TDA, 2007). The underpinning values and principles for the new national occupational standards for supporting and learning in schools included:

- Provide support for learning activities
- Support children's development
- Help to keep children safe
- Contribute to positive relationships
- Provide effective support for your colleagues
- Support literacy and numeracy activities
- Support the use of information and communication technology for teaching and learning
- Use information and communication technology to support pupils' learning

- Observe and report on pupil performance
- Provide displays
- Plan, deliver and evaluate teaching and learning activities under the direction of a teacher
- Contribute to the planning and evaluation of teaching and learning activities
- Support teaching and learning in a curriculum area
- Observe and promote pupil performance and development
- Prepare and maintain the learning environment
- Contribute to maintaining pupil records
- Monitor and maintain curriculum resources

(TDA, 2007:1)

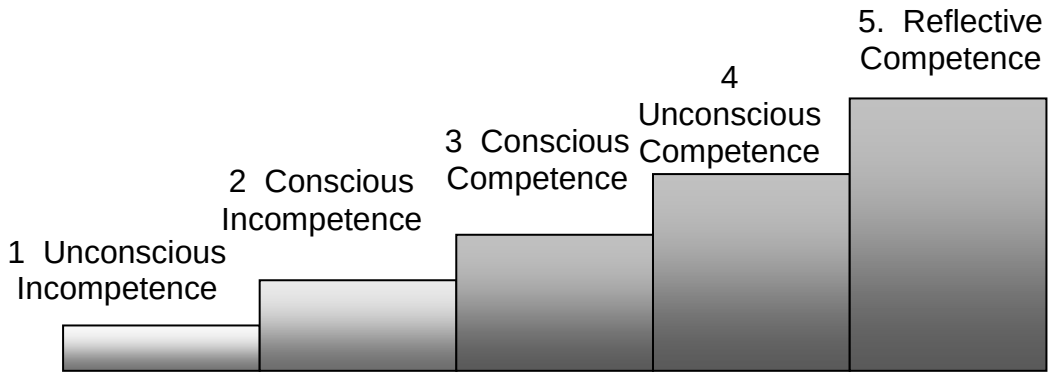
To illustrate the new standards, a sample unit is enclosed in Appendix 1. However, knowledge and understanding of these National Occupational Standards in schools was found to be limited. Ofsted (2010) reported that in only ten per cent of the schools visited, those involved in the induction, training and management of the performance of the wider workforce, had secure knowledge and understanding of the national occupational standards and the career development framework. Ofsted reported that this lack of understanding 'delays the development of the wider workforce as a coherent, fully trained professional body' (Ofsted, 2010:6). It was therefore recommended that accessible information and guidance is offered to help the wider school workforce to gain this knowledge and understanding.

As identified by the Employers' Organisation (2002), many teaching assistants would have achieved other qualifications before or since coming in to post. Some of these may be accredited to the national qualifications framework (NQF). However, many vocational qualifications, such as the 'Specialist Teacher Assistant (STA)' pre-date the development of the national qualifications framework and are not included on the framework. Awards developed by awarding bodies such as OCR, Edexcel, City and

Guilds and the ‘Council for Awards in Children’s Care and Education’ (CACHE) had been accredited (Employers’ Organisation, 2004).

Furthermore, the completion of an NVQ may have had an emancipatory and empowering effect, as teaching assistants became aware of the skills and knowledge they already possessed. An analogy was drawn to Herzberg’s four steps of competence (Malthouse and Roffey-Barentsen, 2009), a model which was adapted to include a fifth step (Malthouse and Roffey-Barentsen, 2010:16): that of ‘Reflective Competence’.

Figure 2 Levels of competence, from unconscious incompetence to reflective competence



Step 1 Unconscious incompetence. This step relates to someone who has maybe not engaged in academic study, or is unaware of a particular skill; they are unconscious of what they do not know.

Step 2 Conscious incompetence. As soon as this person engages with study or that skill, they realise that there are areas of knowledge or competence they do not (yet) have access to.

Step 3 Conscious competence. After further study or practising the skill, they now know that they know.

Step 4 Unconscious competence. In this step, the person has engaged with the knowledge or skill to such an extent that they do not have to think about it; it has become an automatic skill or subsumed knowledge. They have reached the step of being unconsciously competent.

Step 5 Reflective Competence. This is the position where the person makes a conscious effort to review their knowledge and skills. Thinking is evaluative and reflective.

To illustrate, before teaching assistants were employed as teaching assistants, they may have been unconsciously incompetent, they did not know what skills they did not have; however, on commencing their post, they would probably quickly become aware of the skills they had to acquire to be able to carry out their role successfully; in other words, they were consciously incompetent. Studying for an NVQ may also make learners aware of the skills they already had, tasks they were able to perform without having to think about the skills they would need: they were unconsciously competent. Completion of an NVQ encouraged learners to reflect on their skills, thus reaching step 5 of the model.

Balshaw and Farrell (2002:13) identified that teaching assistants themselves feel strongly about the need for a basic entry requirement, otherwise ‘anyone can enter

the profession'. This lack of entry requirements may devalue how the (para)profession is perceived. HMI (2002) pointed out that although headteachers still occasionally appoint teaching assistants informally from among parent helpers or lunch time supervisors, most were moving towards the use of formal selection procedures, with criteria that reflect the growing professionalism of teaching assistants. Increasingly, therefore, new teaching assistants were required by schools or Local Education Authorities to have appropriate formal qualifications (HMI, 2002). However, only about a tenth of support staff had achieved, were registered for, or were working towards an NVQ for teaching assistants (Teeman *et al*., 2009:23).

It had been recognised that gaining a nationally recognised qualification was good for self-esteem and confidence, as well as enhanced the ability to do a good job, all of which contributed to job satisfaction, staff retention and raising standards in schools (the Employers' Organisation, 2002). The empowering nature of appropriated skills and knowledge, which could lead to a state of emancipation or liberation, was divided into five incremental positions (Belenky *et al*.,1986). They varied from feelings of apparent worthlessness to empowerment:

- Silence (women experience themselves as mindless and voiceless and subject to the whims of external authority)
- Received knowledge (women view themselves as receiving , or reproducing knowledge, from external Authorities, but unable to create their own knowledge)
- Subjective knowledge (women view truth and knowledge as 'personal, private and subjectively known and intuited')
- Procedural knowledge (women are 'invested in learning and applying objective procedures for obtaining and communicating knowledge')
- Constructed knowledge (women perceive all knowledge as contextual, consider themselves to be creators of knowledge and value both subjective and objective strategies for knowing

(Belenky *et al*.,1986: 15)

The above example observed an epistemic process whereby women who were once silent, were later able to find a voice by virtue of their acquired knowledge.

To enable teaching assistants to travel this journey, perhaps more emphasis should be placed upon the gaining of qualifications such as the NVQs.

Training

One of the greatest challenges faced by schools leaders has been to provide support staff with relevant induction and training (Ofsted, 2007). Teaching assistants come to the post from a wide range of previous employment, or had not been working at all (Teeman *et al*., 2009). Their backgrounds ranged from former dinner/midday supervisors or parent volunteers who wanted more involvement in classroom life, to people considering a career in teaching and who were exploring this by way of working as a teaching assistant (Fox, 2003). Almost all of them were women, mothers of young children who wished to combine working part-time with raising a family (HMI, 2002). In the past, many teaching assistants had no formal qualifications but had become qualified by virtue of long experience (HMI, 2002). Although teaching assistants now hold more general academic qualifications, with over '80 per cent holding a qualification in English and 75 per cent holding a mathematics qualification, only half of support staff reported that their highest qualification was obtained at Level 1 or 2' (Teeman *et al*., 2009:23). The overall profile of staff, though, has not changed significantly, as found by the Teeman study (2009), illustrated by Figure 3.

Figure 3 Support staff category by gender, age and ethnicity, adapted from Teeman *et al*. (2009:12)

Support Staff category	**Gender %**		**Age %**			**Ethnicity %**	
	Male	**Female**	**18 -34**	**35 -54**	**55**	**White**	**Min Ethnic**
Pupil Support	8	92	16	66	18	95	4
Learning Support	5	95	20	68	12	94	6
Teaching Assistants	6	94	18	71	11	95	5

The wide variation in background experience suggests a clear need for training, especially since the role has become more educational, with assistants being much more involved in pupils' learning. However, uniformity of training is lacking, mainly because of the diverse nature of the many roles teaching assistants are called on to play, which makes meeting these requirements by a single source a challenge (Dew-Hughes, Brayton and Blandford, 1998).

The perceived lack of relevant training may be a concern because, as argued by Fox (2003), parents need to know that their children are supported by people who know what they are doing and schools need to be sure and the children who need assistance are given informed and confident support from fully trained assistants. Fox (2002) claimed that although most assistants began work with no specific training either about the role or about the special needs of pupils they might meet, most were given some in-service training once they had started employment. This

training was mostly carried out by the teachers, in an informal way, although some teachers were also involved in training in a formalised setting such as in-service training (INSET) days (Blatchford *et al*., 2009). However, not only had they not always received training to work with teaching assistants, as stated earlier in this Chapter, but only a 'third of teachers who were line managers of support staff had received training or development to help them with this role' (Blatchford *et al*., 2009:13), which may not always result in best practice. A further concern was the targeting of the training. It appeared that:

> Although the training teaching assistants undertake is often related to the school's needs, for example SEN support or intervention programmes, it is seldom based on any systematic identification of teaching assistants' own needs.
>
> (HMI 2002:15)

This was further supported by Lee (2002) who noted that although teaching assistants were glad to participate in training opportunities, they found that the content, language or style of delivery did not always take account of their needs. Teaching assistants themselves, as noted by Balshaw and Farrell (2002), identified the requirement for a coordinated and nationally recognised pattern for training, linked to career progression. The Employers' Organisation for local government (2002) pointed out that ensuring teaching assistants have access to relevant training and qualifications will help LEAs and schools to maintain high quality support for teaching and learning in the classroom. It also demonstrates to teachers, parents and the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), as well as teaching assistants themselves, that teaching assistants are recognised and supported as valued members of the school staff team. The existing gap between identified development needs and training continued to be a concern, as only about

50 per cent of schools had introduced an appraisal or performance management system for the wider workforce which mirrored that for teachers (Ofsted, 2007). Furthermore, teaching assistants were often unsure of who their line-manager was, with some reporting to several different people. Very few teaching assistants were observed as part of their appraisal, or were offered feedback (Ofsted, 2007). Arguably, opportunities were missed by the schools: teaching assistants came from a range of backgrounds but their skills and development needs were not identified, therefore, they may not have been deployed in the most effective way, realising the full potential of these staff. Ofsted (2007:7) cynically warned that although the principles of *raising standards and tackling workload* had been agreed, most schools 'put the emphasis on 'tackling the workload' rather than on 'raising standards'', as workforce reform had freed a substantial amount of time for leaders, managers and teachers (Ofsted, 2010). It was therefore recommended, to ensure the most effective deployment of their staff, that schools should not only provide relevant induction and training for their teaching assistants and wider support staff, but should also manage their performance and offer professional and career development opportunities, linked to the school self evaluation and improvement planning (Ofsted, 2007), as only this will ensure raising standards.

In most schools, career development for teaching assistants focused on those who wished to undertake training for higher level teaching assistant status (Ofsted, 2007; Teeman *et al*., 2009). However, headteachers and support staff were not certain about whether to classify the preparation for the HLTA assessment as training, as HLTA is not a qualification but a status (Hutchings *et al*., 2009).

Support for teaching assistants

According to Fox (2003:84), 'the happiest assistants are those who are valued by their colleagues in school and who are clear about their roles and responsibilities'. Further, if teaching assistants were seen to be an integral part of the school staff and were treated as professionals, they were likely to respond accordingly (Lee, 2002). If, on the other hand, they are excluded from the teachers' staff room, from relevant meetings and from everyday channels of communication, they are unlikely to feel valued (Lee, 2002). A survey by Lee and Mawson (1998) identified that when asked for aspects of the job they were least satisfied with, 30 per cent of the teaching assistants gave reasons related to pay and conditions, 16 per cent cited 'lack of information' and 15 per cent referred to feeling undervalued or a lack of recognition of their contribution. To feel well-supported Fox (2003:73) suggested the school should consider the following:

- a clear job description,
- a permanent contract,
- adequate conditions of service
- career development opportunities

(Fox, 2003:73)

Since then, some improvements to the working conditions of teaching assistants appear to have been achieved, as in a recent study support staff were generally positive about their level of job satisfaction, about how much they felt appreciated by their school, their contracts and conditions of employment. (Blatchford *et al*., 2009). The majority of support staff were provided with a job description (Blatchford *et al*., 2009; Teeman *et al*., 2009) and in the most effective schools, all staff had a clear understanding of their own roles and those of others (Ofsted, 2010). A further improvement has been the type of contract for teaching assistants. Many were

employed on temporary or term-time only contracts, often employed to support children both with and without a Statement of Special Educational Needs (SSEN). Their employment depended on the number of such children on the school register at any one time, as it was often linked to the SSEN of an individual pupil. Fox (2003) explained that many teaching assistants were not paid if the child they supported was absent, and that they could lose their employment at short notice if the pupil progressed well, moved on, or if their support was no longer justifiable in terms of local criteria and policies. Recent research though, claimed that over 80 per cent of teaching assistants had a permanent contract (Blatchford *et al*., 2009; Teeman *et al*., 2009). Previously, teaching assistants could be anxious about the uncertainty of their employment; anxiety which is minimised by the new contractual arrangements. However, few teaching assistants were contracted to work 52 weeks per year, as most had a contract for 38 weeks per year only (ibid). Blatchford *et al*. (2009) reported that one in five support staff worked full time or more than 35 hours per week, whereas Teeman *et al*. (2009) suggested this number was nearly half of all support staff. Regardless of their contract, the majority of teaching assistants were still expected to work extra hours, outside their contract, without being paid. There was often an expectation that support staff should attend briefings and staff training and contribute to teachers' planning, but few schools provided time for these (Ofsted, 2010). This issue was identified earlier in 2002, as HMI (2002) observed that teaching assistants were seldom paid for non-contact time; and as most teaching assistants worked part-time, schools found difficulty in arranging meetings for teachers and teaching assistants. Therefore, teaching assistants found it difficult to contribute to planning and preparation. As a result, if teaching assistants were unable to be present at staff meetings or assemblies, they could miss vital

information or other insights into school issues and events (Lee, 2002). HMI (2002) pointed out that much depended on the goodwill of teachers and teaching assistants in meeting informally for planning and discussion during break times, at lunch time and after school. This was still evident in 2010, as there were schools where the only briefings that support staff received were during spare moments between lessons or through impromptu conversations in the staff room (Ofsted, 2010). Teaching assistants used to attend both teacher meetings and other school events in their own time, on a voluntary basis, because of wanting to carry out their job as effectively as possible (Lee, 2002). Some support staff in 2010 appeared more assertive, as their attitudes differed greatly, ranging from those who were willing to work beyond their contractual hours and develop their careers to those who were very reluctant to extend their commitment or take on any additional responsibilities (Ofsted, 2010). It was recommended that structural changes in the workforce needed to be supported by a regular framework of meetings during which support staff could contribute to planning and provide feedback on pupils' progress (Ofsted, 2010).

Pay scales

Lee (2002) pointed out that pay scales for teaching assistants were low. Although payment has increased since then, nearly half the support staff were dissatisfied with their pay (Blatchford *et al*., 2009). Staff wages were affected by the characteristics of staff, the 'disadvantage' effect (Blatchford *et al*., 2009:103), where higher wages are paid in schools with a higher percentage of SEN pupils or pupils eligible for free school meals, or the area where the school is located, or its size, with larger schools paying higher. The average hourly pay for an 'HLTA was £11.90,

for a teaching assistant £9.70, while an LSA, working with pupils with SEN earns £9.41' (Blatchford *et al*., 2009:114). Support staff were unclear about how their levels of pay or conditions of service related to others doing the same role or how they fitted into the national picture. This confusion resulted largely because some schools created their own roles; guidance on pay levels varied between different local authorities and few schools referred to the levels identified in the national occupational standards (Ofsted, 2010). Fox (2003) suggested that it would be helpful to have guidelines for LEAs which enabled ways of providing security of tenure for teaching assistants, with teaching assistants employed on a permanent basis linked to an incremental salary scale which reflects training, experience and special responsibilities. July 2009 saw the establishment of the School Support Staff Negotiating Body (SSSNB) (TDA, 2009). The body was responsible for setting up and implementing a framework within which it would negotiate all matters relating to the remuneration, duties and working time of support staff in all maintained schools in England, thus ensuring consistency. However, Ofsted (2010) recommended for clearer guidance on appropriate levels of pay and conditions for the increasingly diverse roles that have been introduced as a result of workforce reform.

Despite the issues regarding the gap between received training and training needs, as discussed earlier in this Chapter, Teeman *et al*. (2009) found that most staff felt supported by their school in terms of meeting their training and development needs, although Blatchford *et al*. (2009) reported that support staff were less satisfied. The majority of staff (75 per cent) had received 'some training or professional development relating to their current role within the last twelve months, mainly by attending in-house training' (Teeman *et al*., 2009:69).

Funding for other training and development of support staff was often considered a barrier as local authority funding did not provide funding for staff cover, or did not always fund support staff training. Therefore, schools found it difficult to 'pay for staff to train outside of their contracted hours' (Teeman *et al*., 2009:130). Furthermore, schools found it challenging to release staff to undertake training, especially when a number of staff needed the same training. Cover for these members of staff was either not available or difficult to organise. As a result, training that takes place within the member of staff's contracted hours was reported as a barrier by nearly three quarters of school leaders, whereas training taking place outside the contracted hours was perceived to be less of a barrier (ibid.:133).

As discussed earlier in this Chapter, teaching assistants were often unsure who their line-manager was. Line managers were usually the head-teacher or a senior member of the teaching staff, occasionally a senior member of the support staff. Most support staff had access to performance review processes ('83 per cent' according to Teeman *et al*., 2009:46) or annual appraisals ('about '50 per cent' according to Blatchford *et al*., 2009:42).

However, despite these reassuring findings, one of Ofsted's (2010) recommendations remained for schools to:

> introduce a comprehensive system for setting performance objectives for all members of the wider workforce; identify training and development needs; review progress against targets; and encourage them to take the initiative in developing their roles and responsibilities
>
> (Ofsted, 2010:7)

Professionalism and teaching assistants

The considerable degree of responsibility and skills expected of teaching assistants has led to them being referred to as the 'new professional' in the classroom (Parker *et al*., 2009:19). Professionalism can be defined in a number of ways, including simply being paid to do a job: 'it represents a kind of work that people do for a living' (Freidson, 1994:150). Further, it implies subject knowledge and a degree of responsibility (Roffey-Barentsen and Malthouse, 2009). They continued that 'professionalism results as a consequence of setting high standards, by maintaining appropriate specialist knowledge, and by shared values' (ibid.:15). Freidson (2001:17) defined professionalism as a 'set of institutions which permit the members of an occupation to make a living while controlling their own work', in other words, being self-regulatory. Three component parts of professionalism can therefore be identified as professional knowledge, autonomy and responsibility (Robson, 2006). Law and medicine were traditionally classed as professions, however, teaching, along with nursing and social work was regarded as a semi-profession (Etzioni, 1969). Semi-professions have in common that their training is shorter, their status is less, their body of knowledge and autonomy are less than the professions. Arguably, in 2001, with the setting up of the General Teaching Council for England, teaching became a 'fully-fledged profession' (Drake *et al*., 2004:122). Before then, Hargreaves (2000:153) introduced four 'ages' of professionalism in teaching:

> Pre-professional age
> Autonomous professional age
> Collegial professional age
> Post-professional or post modern age
>
> (Hargreaves, 2000:153)

These ages are linked to teaching but can a similar pattern be recognised for teaching assistants? In the pre-professional age, teaching was a matter of common sense, new teachers learned from established ones through 'practical apprenticeship' (Hargreaves, 2000:156), by watching others do it. Little training was required to become a teacher. This is how teaching assistants operated and learned before the introduction of the National Occupational Standards (Employers' Organisation for Local Government, 2002), they observed good practice as demonstrated by teachers and other teaching assistants, and applied that to their own practice. The second age, from the 1960s onwards, saw the status and standing of teachers improved, the words 'professional' and 'autonomy' became increasingly inseparable (Hargreaves, 2000:158), training to become a teacher was lengthened, with all teachers being graduates, and the knowledge base became more academic, thus teacher status was enhanced. This is the where the drive to professionalise the role of teaching assistants breaks down. Although, as mentioned above, Occupational Standards were established, which led to the introduction of National Vocational Qualifications for teaching assistants and support workers, it is not compulsory for teaching assistants to gain these qualifications, therefore their status cannot be considered as professional. The drive to enhance the academic body of knowledge of schools support workers by the introduction of Foundation Degrees in Learning Support, may contribute to the professional practice of individual teaching assistants but not to the notion of teaching assistants as professionals. Uptake of these qualifications is by individuals, usually to enhance their own career paths or prospects (mainly by those whose ambition it is to become a teacher), not as natural progression within a profession. Compulsory training and becoming qualified with a nationally recognised qualification, either pre-service or

work-based when first employed, would be a significant step towards a more professional status for teaching assistants. A further element of professionalism is that of autonomy. By the mid to late 1980s, individual teacher autonomy was becoming unsustainable, the role of the teacher had expanded to embrace 'consultation, collaborative planning and other kinds of joint work with colleagues' (Hargreaves, 2000:162). Although teaching assistants cannot reach a level of autonomy similar to that of teachers, since the incorporation of the Every Child Matters agenda, they do work with multi agencies in a collaborative manner. Finally, in the post-professional or post modern age, national economies had become less autonomous; nations and their policies were market orientated and competitive economically; and the communication revolution had made information available globally. Market principles meant that schools had to be more economically efficient and were set in competition against one another for 'clients' (Hargreaves, 2000:168). The results have been centralised curricula and testing regimes that have trimmed back autonomy of teachers by performance management (through targets, standards, trails of monitoring and accountability). Hargreaves (2000:169) argued that teachers were 'subjected to the micro-management of ever tightening regulations and control that are the very antithesis of any kind of professionalism'.

The recent introduction of 'Free Schools' is an interesting development, which sees the return of autonomy to teachers (DfE, 2010). The Secretary of State for Education, the Rt Hon Michael Gove has outlined the process for allowing teachers, charities and parents to set up new schools – Free Schools – in response to parental demand. Free Schools are independent, all-ability state-funded schools, run by teachers not bureaucrats or politicians and are accountable to parents. Other

freedoms include setting their own pay and conditions for staff, freedom from following the National Curriculum and the ability to change the lengths of their terms and school days. All Free Schools will be accountable like other state schools via inspections and tests. Further research is required to investigate how Free Schools deploy teaching assistants. As highlighted by Hargreaves (2000:168), teachers are a school's 'most expensive budget item', therefore, Free Schools may utilise more teaching assistants than other state schools.

Participants' voice in research

Traditional scientific, positivist research limited the role and autonomy of its participants, denying them ownership of the research process, results and outcomes, thus positioning the participant as the less powerful to the researcher (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). More recently, challenging this positioning, more equitable relationships between researcher and researched, which recognise the validity of the voice of the researched, have been established. Furthermore, there has been a particular interest in the representation of voices of research participants whose voices are often not heard, such as the young, the old, ethnic minority groups, and vulnerable people (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007). Sometimes there could be political and economic reasons for this interest, as these groups can be viewed as consumers or users of certain provisions; for instance children can be seen consumers of educational provision (Tangen, 2008).

As pointed out by Jackson and Mazzei (2009), the use of voice has been privileged in qualitative research because it has been assumed that the voice speaks the truth,

reflecting meaning and experience. Access to this experience, therefore, is 'gained through talk' (Kitzinger, 2004:128). However, it must be taken into consideration that retrospective accounts can be unreliable, as there may be discrepancies or variance with the facts. Kitzinger (2004:128) argued that 'experience is never raw but embedded in a social web of interpretation and re-interpretation'. Therefore, although it is not suggested that participants deliberately tell lies, they present the experience as they remember it at the time of being asked about it. Accounts of the same experience can therefore vary; several factors, such as the mood and circumstances of the participant, personality of the researcher, the purpose of the research, and perhaps other participants, may affect the presentation and re-telling of the experience. Furthermore, there has been an emphasis on permitting readers to hear the exact words of the informers (Guba and Lincoln, 2005). However, letting third parties hear participant voices, presenting their exact words as if they are transparent, does not take into account the shaping of those exact words and the privileging in the decision making by the researcher, or the ways in which that participant's voice is portrayed and represented. There are therefore ethical issues surrounding the interpretation, making sense from data derived from the voices of others. Furthermore, the presentation of exact words only does not ensure equitability between researcher and researched and therefore ethical issues of power also need to be considered. The aim of the current study was to give teaching assistants a voice. Although teaching assistants are maybe not considered to be a marginalised group in a sense of inequality or vulnerability, and they are not viewed as consumers, it was felt important to allow them to speak for themselves. Previous research has consisted of mainly large surveys, reporting on roles, responsibilities and training, which were not conducive to voices being heard. Moreover, the current

research presented participants' exact words, to allow it a sense of authenticity. Experiences and perspectives were recorded, analysed and presented. However, this was not a fully equitable study, as there were power issues, which will be discussed in the next Chapter.

Criticism on the 'conventional' qualitative researcher, as noted by Sapsford and Abbott (1996:338), includes the near-total autonomy the researcher has in determining what is important in the situation and what needs researching. By giving the teaching assistants a voice and an opportunity to include what they considered to be important, this research had elements of collaboration. However, interpretations were made by the researcher; therefore researcher bias will be considered in the next Chapter. Listening to women's voices and validating their experiences is seen as central to feminist enquiry (Kitzinger, 2004). The emergence of women's voice in the academic world, gave women the opportunity to 'examine and dispel beliefs suggesting sexual polarities in intelligence and personality characteristics' (Belenky *et al*.,1986:7).

However, although all participants in this research were women, the focus of the research was on the perceptions and experiences of teaching assistants, which could have included men, adopting a phenomenological approach rather than a feminist one to enquiry.

Chapter summary

The government's drive to raise standards through workforce reform, an emphasis on inclusive schools and the ECM agenda, led to an increase in the number of teaching assistants employed by schools. The impact has been greatest for pupils with learning difficulties, as teaching assistants were mainly involved in intervention and catch-up programmes. However, the literature suggested that they have not been widely utilised to support gifted and talented pupils.

The title 'teaching assistant', as preferred by the government, was not the only title used in schools; others included Learning Support Assistant or Special Needs Assistants. Arguably, the title of the assistant reflects the role and responsibilities, however, boundaries between those roles and responsibilities are not always clear, leading to confusion. Although teachers felt supported by their assistants, their presence may not have a measurable effect on pupil attainment. Furthermore, teachers were not always trained in how to work most effectively with support staff. The role of the teaching assistant generally included support for the pupil; support for the teacher; support for the curriculum; and support for the school. Implementation of the ECM agenda (DfES, 2003), saw the role of teaching assistants evolving to include that of a pupil advocate, offering support to pupils in an emotionally intelligent and trusting learning environment, where the pupils feel safe to express themselves.

Responsibilities for many tasks, which used to be the sole remit of the teacher, have shifted, with many teaching assistants taking on these tasks, including planning, assessment, and even teaching. The HLTA role was introduced as part of the National Agreement (DfES, 2003). In general, the range of roles and responsibilities of teaching assistants was more narrowly focused since they gained HLTA status, with a major shift in their responsibilities to teaching whole classes, to allow teachers PPA time.

Although there are no national requirements for support staff to have a qualification, there are a range of nationally recognised vocational qualifications available to them. However, only about a tenth of support staff had achieved, were registered for, or were working towards an NVQ for teaching assistants. Nationally recognised are linked to National Occupational Standards. Since June 2007, the standards were reviewed to incorporate the wider support staff. However, knowledge and understanding of these National Occupational Standards was found to be limited. Therefore, accessible information and guidance should be offered to help the wider school workforce to gain this knowledge and understanding. One of the greatest challenges faced by schools leaders has been to provide support staff with relevant induction and training. Most training was in-service, on the job training once the teaching assistants had started employment. This training was mostly carried out by the teachers, in an informal way, although some teachers were also involved in training in a formalised setting such as in-service training (INSET) days. However, only a third of teachers who were line managers of support staff had received training or development to help them with this role. A further concern was the

targeting of the training. To ensure the most effective deployment of their staff, schools should not only provide relevant induction and training for their teaching assistants and wider support staff, but should also manage their performance and offer professional and career development opportunities, linked to the school self evaluation and improvement planning, as only this will ensure raising standards.

Support staff were generally positive about their level of job satisfaction, in terms of how much they felt appreciated by their school, by their contracts, and conditions of employment. The majority of support staff were provided with a job description, and benefited from a permanent contract. However, most teaching assistants were expected to work extra hours, outside their contract, without being paid. Teaching assistants were often expected to attend briefings and staff training and contribute to teachers' planning, but few schools provided time for these. Therefore, structural changes in the workforce needed to be supported by a regular framework of meetings during which support staff could contribute to planning and provide feedback on pupils' progress.

Nearly half the support staff were dissatisfied with their level of pay. They were unclear about how their levels of pay or conditions of service related to others doing the same role or how they fitted into the national picture. The School Support Staff Negotiating Body (SSSNB) is responsible for setting up and implementing a framework within which it will negotiate all matters relating to the remuneration, duties and working time of support staff in all maintained schools in England, thus ensuring consistency. However, clearer guidance on appropriate levels of pay and

conditions for the increasingly diverse roles that have been introduced as a result of workforce reform, is required.

Most staff felt supported by their school in terms of meeting their training and development needs. However, funding for training and development of support staff was often considered a barrier as local authorities did not always fund support staff training and did not provide funding for staff cover. Therefore, schools found it challenging to release staff to undertake training. Teaching assistants were often unsure who their line-manager was. However, most support staff had access to performance review processes or annual appraisals.

The professional status of teaching assistants appeared to follow a similar pattern to that of teachers, starting with an apprentice style training, followed by an increase in the body of knowledge and required qualifications. Autonomy for teachers increased, then decreased and may now be on the increase again through the introduction of Free Schools. Teaching assistants, although not autonomous, do work with other agencies and colleagues and their numbers may increase as Free Schools become established. Self-regulation through a professional body for teaching assistants is not mentioned by the government and seems unlikely, as the government proposed to abolish the General Teaching Council for England (GTC, 2010). Therefore, the role of teaching assistant cannot be classified as a profession; however, teaching assistants can claim to be working as professionals.

The issues and debates indentified in the review of the literature highlighted that most teaching assistants work with the more challenging pupils while offering limited

support to gifted and talented pupils. The roles and responsibilities of those with different titles appear to be unclear, which can lead to confusion, especially as remuneration is depending on the role. Overall, teaching assistants got job satisfaction, as they had job descriptions and permanent contract, but they were less satisfied with their training opportunities and pay. The review of the literature largely depended on large surveys, conducted in waves or over a period of time. Furthermore, they discussed support staff, rather than focusing on teaching assistants only. Therefore, results from these findings were diluted by incorporating the view of support staff other than teaching assistants. The purpose of this research project was to find out from teaching assistants themselves, allowing them to voice their perceptions and experiences.

Chapter 3 Research Methodology

Introduction

This Chapter presents the methodology and methods used in this research project, discussing the underpinning paradigm and assumptions. Further sections deal with the group, or sample studied; strategies for data collection and analysis; bias; validity, reliability; and ethical considerations.

Research methodology and underpinning paradigm

The purpose of this study has been to explore the voice of teaching assistants in terms of their backgrounds, perceptions of roles and responsibilities, experiences of the NVQ programme, aspirations and progression routes. The positivist paradigm, which is the belief that objective accounts of the world can be given with the aim to develop universal laws (Punch, 2009) or an absolute truth, was not considered appropriate. Interpretive research, on the other hand, is useful for describing and answering questions about participants and contexts, researching perspectives of participants (Gay and Airasian, 2003). The emphasis is on 'Verstehen' (understanding), a term attributed to Weber (Crotty, 1998). The interpretive researcher accepts that the observer makes a difference to the observed and that reality is a human construct (Wellington, 2000), therefore research conducted within the interpretive paradigm cannot be separated from the values of the researcher (Mertens, 1998). Interpretivism, which concentrates on the meanings people bring to situations, is likely to be associated with qualitative methods (Punch, 2009) of data collection. Qualitative researchers attempt to make sense of, or interpret,

phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Punch, 2009), studying these in their natural settings. As argued by Hartas (2010:19) 'studies with a qualitative methodology engage with inductive reasoning, with theory emerging from the data', which can also be referred to as 'data-driven reasoning' (ibid). Inductive methods are exploratory, seeking to build accounts of what is going on from the data collected. The main criticism of inductive reasoning is Popper's (1935) observation that while one disproving example will falsify a theory, no amount of confirming examples will ever fully verify it. However, qualitative researchers tend to see human cultures as meaningful constructions in which each element is dependent for its meaning upon other elements, therefore, it is not considered possible to tease out singular elements as isolated facts that can be tested against each other (David and Sutton, 2011).

In this research, qualitative data highlighted the teaching assistants' own words, meanings and reality (Punch, 2009). It allowed them to describe their own situations, from their own perspective, thus giving them a voice.

A phenomenological approach

The design frequently found in human and social research is the phenomenological study (Creswell, 1994). The term 'phenomenology', in philosophy, was referred to as early as 1765 and also in the work of Kant (Moustakas, 1994) and the scientific writings of Mach, the philosophical positivist (Spiegelberg and Schuhmann, 1994). However, phenomenology as a movement is commonly attributed to the mathematician Husserl (1859-1938). Husserl strived to discover the meanings and essences of knowledge, his maxim was: 'Zu den Sachen' (Spiegelberg, 1975:15),

translated as '(back) to the things themselves' (Moustakas 1994:26; Crotty, 1998:78; Cohen *et al*., 2000:24). To achieve this, it was crucial to return to the self to discover the nature and meaning of objects as they appeared in their essence, that is, as they 'present themselves immediately to us as conscious human beings' (Crotty, 1998:78). Any prejudgements and understandings have to be bracketed in order to experience the phenomena first hand. Husserl referred to this as 'epoché', in which the 'everyday understandings, judgements and knowings are set aside…' (Moustakas, 1994:33). Thus, phenomena are experienced as they are, before they are interpreted and meaning is attributed to them. Each experience is considered in its singularity, in and for itself. As summarised by Moustakas:

> Phenomenology is the first method of knowledge because it begins with 'things themselves'; it attempts to eliminate everything that represents a prejudgment, setting aside pre-suppositions, and reaching a transcendental state of freshness and openness, a readiness to see in an unfettered way, not threatened by the customs, beliefs and prejudices of normal science, by the habits of the natural world or by knowledge based on unreflected every day experience.
>
> (Moustakas, 1994:41)

Husserl referred to objects in a natural-scientific sense, arguing that predicates ascribed to them such as beauty, perfection or practical suitability, are not considered as they 'do not concern the natural scientist' (Husserl, 1989:4). Phenomenology in its early phase, therefore, was in search of objects of experience rather than of descriptions of that experience, and, as such, had an objective element to it. Further, as it called into question what was usually taken for granted, questioning current meanings attributed to phenomena, it grounded a critical methodology (Crotty, 1998). The sociologist Schutz (1899-1959) applied Husserl's philosophical phenomenological ideas to the social sciences (Bryman, 2008; Holstein and Gubrium, 1994). His focus was on understanding the world of every

day life, the experiential world every person takes for granted, as it is produced and experienced by the people who live it (Schutz, 1964). Human consciousness is constituted, as meaning of the experience is attributed retrospectively by looking back, and reflecting on, what has been going on. Subjectivity is therefore paramount. Every individual interprets an experience according to their 'stock of knowledge' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1994: 263), composed of common sense constructs and social categories. These stocks of knowledge make it possible to understand other people, as they also seem to be acquainted with these general constructs and categories. This is because through concepts derived from experience of everyday life, the every day world is classified and organised (Cohen *et al*., 2000). Typification is at the 'origin of consciousness' (Schutz and Schutz, 1975: xv); they make it possible to recognise objects and occurrences as of being a particular type. The vehicle for transmitting typifications, and meaning, is language. Phenomenology of social life is concerned with the relation between language and the objects of experience. The main task of language is to describe reality (Holstein and Gubrium, 1994). In summary, Schutz's social phenomenology aimed for a social science that would interpret and explain human actions and thought through descriptions.

Schutz, and other existential phenomenologists such as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, were sceptical of the extent to which values and preconceptions can be set aside, as described by Husserl in his bracketing and epoché. In existential phenomenology, existence is bound up with the world we live in and therefore, it is impossible to step outside it to see things completely objectively. As a result, existential phenomenologists are less concerned with

essences and more focused on describing and interpreting aspects of people's 'life-world' or Lebenswelt (King and Horrocks, 2010:176). Following on from this, modern Anglo-American phenomenology examines 'human experiences through the detailed descriptions of the people being studied' (Creswell, 1994:12), describing the meaning of the lived experiences for these people about a phenomenon (Cresswelll, 1998). As argued by Crotty (1998), this is in contrast with Husserl's more objective and critical phenomenology:

> what has emerged here under the rubric' of 'phenomenology' is a quite single-minded effort to identify, understand, describe and maintain the subjective experiences of the respondents. It is self-professedly *subjectivist* in approach (in the sense of being in search of people's subjective experience) and expressly *uncritical*. (italics in original text)
>
> (Crotty, 1998:83)

The great 'phenomenological principle' (Crotty, 1998:83) is to put oneself in the place of the other, as this allows researchers to understand and describe people's subjective experiences. Or, as explained by Bogdan and Taylor (1975:13-14) '…In order to grasp the meaning of a person's behaviour, the phenomenologist attempts to see things from that person's point of view'. The change in perspective was maybe to some extent brought about by discrepancies or ambiguities in the translations of the original texts. Spiegelberg (1975:17) argued that 'most English translations of the classical texts seriously interfere with an adequate understanding of the originals'. Whilst this may be the case, Crotty (1998) explained it was more as a result of the slow uptake of phenomenology in North America, where pragmatism in philosophy, symbolic interactionism in sociology, and humanistic psychology were

well established. Thus, the principles of phenomenology were modified and adapted to fit with current methods of enquiry and thinking.

To summarise, qualitative research approaches rely heavily on rich, verbal, qualitative, interpretive descriptions and strive to capture the human meanings of social life as it is lived, experienced, and understood by the research participants.

The group studied

The non-probability sampling utilised in the current study is referred to as 'purposive sampling' (Punch, 2009:162), sometimes called judgemental or selective sampling. The researcher targeted this particular group, in the full knowledge that it does not represent the wider population. The group studied, or the sample, was a group of teaching assistants studying at a college for further education in Surrey, where the researcher was employed as a programme manager of the Education Studies department, and, in that capacity, responsible for the internal verification of the programme. The reason for selecting this location was to gain non-problematic access to the participants. As noted previously, this may have had an impact on issues with regard to validity of data and ethical considerations, which will be discussed later in this Chapter. All teaching assistants were white females, in the age bracket 30 to 55 years of age, and were employed in primary, secondary, schools for children with learning difficulties, or schools for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties. They had between three to eight years experience as a teaching assistant and were enrolled on a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ), level three, for Teaching Assistants, with City and Guilds as its awarding body. The

NVQ classes took place once a fortnight (alternating between the two groups) on a Wednesday morning at a Secondary Comprehensive School in the community. Running the programmes in the community, at a school, rather than at the college, was a condition of the local county council who employed a private company to recruit the students and to organise training for them. The link between the college and the Secondary Comprehensive School was a well established one, with the college providing the training, including the tutors, assessors, resources and quality processes, and the school providing the venue. In Surrey, this was a unique arrangement. Other providers of NVQ programmes for teaching assistants utilised assessors only to observe the teaching assistants or 'candidates' in their place of work without offering further teaching or classes that covered theory on teaching and learning or education in general, whilst some offered evening classes for teaching assistants to attend in their own time. The group studied included two cohorts of students at different phases of the programme. One cohort consisted of six students who were in their fourth and final term; the other cohort consisted of eight students who were in their first term of the programme. The teaching assistants formally attended classes and lectures (26 in total), such as on child development, catering for children with special educational needs or planning of sessions, which meant they were required to be released by the school that employed them. The sessions were taught by one tutor from the college; however, candidates were assessed in their place of work by either the tutor or by the head of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) at the Secondary Comprehensive School, where the lessons took place. There were fourteen teaching assistants enrolled on the NVQ programme in total and although all initially agreed to participate in the research, only eleven did.

Figure 4 Profile of the participants

Name	Age range	Type of School	Job Title	Years employed	Previous employment	Aspirations
Anne	35-54	SLD	TA	3	Office	Teacher
Brenda	55+	SEN	SNA	8	Publican	
Claire	35-54	Prim/Sec/Short Stay schools (former PRU)	Behaviour Support Assistant	3	Hairdresser	
Debbie	35-54	Primary	LSA	5	Admin officer Dept of Social Security	
Emma	18-34	Primary	LSA	3	Beauty Therapist	
Fiona	35-54	Primary	LSA	3	FE	
Gina	35-54	Primary	LSA	8	Supermarket checkout, hospital housekeeper	
Helen	35-54	Secondary	LSA	4	Secretary	
Irene	35-54	Secondary	Maths TA	4	PA	
Katherine	18-34	Primary	TA	3.5	Sales Assistant	Teacher
Laura	35-54	Primary (Infant)	LSA	6	Housing Benefit Officer	HLTA

Similar data were collected in a survey conducted by Blatchford *et al*. (2009:12), who found that most support staff were 'female, aged 36 and over, with almost all classifying themselves as being of white ethnic background'. Further research (survey) carried out by the Teeman *et al*. (2009), found that 87 per cent of

participants were female, with four per cent of the participants of ethnic minority background. Data from the Office of National Statistics (2001) suggested that 7.9 per cent of the population in England belong to ethnic minority groups, while ten per cent of the working age population fall into that category. Therefore it may be suggested that male staff and staff from ethnic minority groups were under-represented in the surveys referred to earlier as well as in this study.

It may be recommended to the college to review how it can widen participation on these programmes, and further, local schools who employ the assistants and select them for the programme, should perhaps take these statistics into account, better representing the community as a whole.

Methods of data collection

In qualitative research, a range of techniques to collect data can be utilised, such as observation, interviews, discourse and conversation analysis, analysis of texts and documents, or a combination thereof in a multi-method approach. The current phenomenological study focused on the voices of the teaching assistants themselves, requiring depth and richness of data, to be able to answer the research questions: what are the perceptions of teaching assistants, their backgrounds, roles and responsibilities, experiences of the NVQ programme, aspirations and progression routes. The method of collecting data selected was interviews, in the form of focus groups. Interviews allow '… participants to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view' (Cohen *et al*., 2000: 267). These interpretations were what this study aimed to explore, getting to the essence of the phenomenon of being a

teaching assistant. The advantages of interviews are that people are more easily engaged in an interview than, for instance, in completing a questionnaire. Secondly, the interviewer can clarify questions and probe answers, providing more in-depth information than would be available in written form. Anderson (1998) argued that it is this opportunity for in-depth probing that makes the interview so attractive when dealing with informed respondents. However, being able to probe and prompt requires for the interviewer to prepare themselves to be able to 'think on their feet' (Mason, 2002:67), especially in unstructured or semi structured interviews. This has to be done quickly, effectively, coherently and in ways which are consistent with the research questions. A qualitative interviewer has to be ready to make on-the-spot decisions about the content and sequence of the interview as it progresses, and to keep the interview running smoothly (Mason, 2002). One type of interview considered was one to one semi structured interviews, giving some structure but still allowing the participants to express themselves. Further, this would ensure that the participants were given the same topics or questions to talk about or respond to. Conducting interviews needs careful consideration. Cohen *et al.* (2000) further observed that, as the researcher is the research instrument, the effective interviewer is not only knowledgeable about the subject matter but is also an expert in interaction and communication. The interviewer will need to establish an appropriate atmosphere such that the participant can feel secure to talk freely. They further warned that it is crucial to keep uppermost in ones mind the fact that the interview is a 'social, inter personal encounter, not merely a data collection exercise' (Cohen *et al.*, 2000:279). The interviewer also needs to consider that, as pointed out by Freebody (2003), the kinds of statements that people make in interviews cannot always be taken as a reliable for the observation of that phenomenon or event, as

interviewees modify their responses to make them coherent within the specific context of the interview. This is not because people tend to mislead interviewers, but rather because phenomena and events do not relate directly, finally and comprehensively to one fixed account (Freebody, 2003). A particular problem with the current research was that the interviewer was closely related to the NVQ programme and institution, which may have affected participants' responses, as they may only have disclosed what they feel was safe, especially in a one to one situation. Koshy (2010) warned that one to one interviews are time consuming. Furthermore, when arranging interviews, Bell (1999) advised that people who agree to be interviewed deserve some consideration, adding that the researcher will need to fit in with the participants' plans. Taking this into account, conducting one to one interviews, convenient to the teaching assistants, meant they had to take place during the taught sessions of the NVQ programme. The following alternatives were considered: to conduct the interviews before or after the session. However, it was considered inappropriate to ask the teaching assistants to invest any more of their own time, and furthermore, they had other commitments. A second alternative was to conduct the interviews during lesson time, by withdrawing teaching assistants one by one from the lesson. However, this was considered too disruptive, as well as leaving and entering the classroom, participants would have to catch up on what was discussed in their absence. Meeting the participants at their school, to conduct the interview was a further alternative. This was deemed too difficult to organise as schools would have to ensure availability of the teaching assistant, allowing them time to attend the interview. Finally, arranging the interviews in the evening was considered. However, this was considered obtrusive and interfering with the teaching assistants' private lives. A less obtrusive way would be conducting the

interviews by telephone. However, this type of interview would be more appropriate for structured interviews, as there would be limited opportunity for interaction. Probing and prompting questions can still be asked but as non-verbal communication is non-existent, opportunities may be missed. This type of interview can invite participants' opinions but lacks the depth and richness, associated with face to face interviews.

Two major features of well-collected qualitative data are that they focus on 'naturally occurring, ordinary events in natural settings', thus describing real life; and their 'richness and holism', emphasising people's 'lived experience' (Miles and Huberman, 1994:10). Data collected in this research met those standards as they described real life in its natural setting and also the teaching assistants' lived experience.

To summarise, although one-to-one interviews appeared an appropriate method of data collection for this study, arranging them with the participants at a time and location convenient to them, was difficult. As time for this study was limited, due to the nearing completion date of the NVQ programme, and therefore availability of the teaching assistants, focus group interviews were conducted instead.

Triangulation

Triangulation entails using more than one method or source of data in a study (Bryman, 2008). Its purpose is to instil greater confidence in the findings of the research and is usually associated with quantitative research. However,

triangulation, or the use of multiple methods, can also take place within the qualitative paradigm, as for instance ethnographic researchers follow up their observations with interviews. Flick (2002:229) considered it to be a 'strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any enquiry'. In the current research, although some evidence was collected from the literature (see Figure 2), the main source of data was the focus group interviews. As the study was phenomenological in approach, interpreting the perceptions of the teaching assistants, it was considered inappropriate to interview other members of the school staff, such as teachers, as this would not contribute to the essence of the perceptions. Documentary data, in the form of the portfolios of evidence collated by the teaching assistants, were not considered appropriate as they focused on the performance criteria as set out in the NVQ. However, on reflection, some data could have been gathered with regard to 'roles and responsibilities', as evidenced in the portfolios.

Focus group interviews

Krueger and Casey (2000) pointed out that a focus group is a special type of group in terms of purpose, size, composition and procedures. The purpose is to listen and gather information. The focus group method adds to the focused interview the element of interaction within groups as an area of interest; it is more focused than a group interview and participants are able to bring to the fore issues in relation to a topic that they deem to be important and significant (Bryman, 2008). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2008) focus groups are efficient in the sense that they generate large quantities of material from people in a relatively short time, which was of

relevance in this research as one cohort of students was nearing completion of the programme. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) continued that focus groups are a better way to understand how people feel or think. The participants were selected because they had certain salient characteristics in common that related to the topic of the focus group. There needed to be a willingness to explore statements and ideas in terms of individuals' own experiences and personal histories. It was the role of the researcher to create a comfortable, permissive environment in the focus group that encouraged participants to share perceptions and points of view, without pressuring participants to vote or reach consensus. This required mutual respect for opinions, culture and experiences. Furthermore, because of their synergistic potentials, which means a wider bank of data emerges through the group interaction, focus groups often produce data that are seldom produced through individual interviewing and observation, and that can result in especially powerful interpretive insights (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). Phenomenological group interviews allow for meanings to be determined at a level beyond that of one-to-one interviews, as polyphonic accounts allow for more elaboration (Frey and Fontana,1993).

Bloor *et al*. (2001) discussed the advantages of using pre-existing groups, rather than strangers, as attendance at a group may seem to be less daunting to the individual participants if the group consists of people of whom they have prior knowledge. The focus group approach further offers the opportunity of allowing people to probe each other's reasons for holding a view (Bryman, 2008), this allows for the researcher to become a facilitator, making the research process more democratic, providing participants with more ownership over it.

The focus group interviews in this research were semi-structured, as there were some pre-determined topics for discussion (Appendix 4), to function as a guide and also to keep the participants focused. The topics were piloted in a small group of three teaching assistants, former students, who had already completed the NVQ programme, to ensure the topics were unambiguous and valid. Following some modification to clarify the topics, they were shared and discussed with the participants before the interviews took place, firstly to make the research more collaborative, but also to ensure its validity.

The focus group interviews were scheduled to take place during the last hour of a taught session on each of the NVQ programmes. Times and dates were discussed and agreed with the tutor on the programme, to cause the least disruption. To inform the teaching assistants of the project, and to establish some familiarity with the group, the researcher visited both groups, during the session before the scheduled interviews. During these visits participant information sheets (Appendix 2), including suggested topics for the interviews, were distributed. The teaching assistants were invited to suggest additional topics they considered relevant. The time between this introduction to the research and the focus group discussions, allowed teaching assistants time to reflect on the topics for the interview and relate them to their own experiences. Reflecting on and evaluating their experiences served to focus their thoughts (Roffey-Barentsen and Malthouse, 2009), in preparation for the interviews. The extra time also allowed them to consider their participation and make an informed decision. The location of the interviews was the classroom used for the sessions. The rationale was that participants would be in their natural setting, in an environment familiar to them. The classroom was most appropriate with comfortable

seating positioned around a small coffee table. The room further benefited from coffee and tea making facilities, contributing to a relaxed ambience. All members of each cohort (six students in the first cohort who were in their fourth term, and eight students in the second cohort who were in their first term), had been invited to participate. However, two teaching assistants from the first cohort, who were employed by the same school, could not be released from their school on the day of the interview. This meant there were four participants in the first focus group interview. One teaching assistant from the second cohort opted not to participate. Therefore, the second focus group consisted of seven participants. As stated by Bryman (2008), non-attendance is one of the limitations of focus group interviews. The typical group size of a focus group is eight to ten participants with smaller groups recommended if the participants are highly emotionally involved in the topic(s) under discussion and are likely to have a lot to say, or if the topics are controversial or complex (Morgan, 1998). However, Clough and Nutbrown (2007) recommended a group size of between four and seven participants, which is large enough to be considered a group, and therefore benefiting from the associated advantages, but small enough for everyone to have a voice. The topics of focus group interviews were not controversial, however, participants were emotionally involved, feeling strongly about areas such as salary and feeling valued in their roles. Following the request to participate, they expressed excitement that someone was taking an interest in their points of view and experiences. All participants in each of the focus groups knew each other from the NVQ classes, whilst some were also work-colleagues. Being colleagues may have had an impact on the participants' contributions to the discussions as they may have felt their opinion could be forwarded to other parties at the school. However, the participants confirmed that

they all had good working relationships with each other and felt safe to contribute to discussions, furthermore, confidentiality was established, which will be discussed later in this Chapter. The focus group interviews were scheduled to take one hour only (the last hour of the session). This meant the focus groups would not impact on the lesson too much, however, the discussions could not exceed the finishing time of the lesson, as some of the participants had other commitments, having to return to their school as soon as possible to carry out lunch time supervision duties. In the event of insufficient collection of data during the focus group interviews, it was agreed that participants could be contacted by telephone. This, however, did not occur, as all topics were discussed.

To record the focus group interviews, taking notes, or asking an independent person to do so, was rejected. Note-taking while listening and facilitating the discussions would be too complex a procedure, resulting in missing participants' contributions. To have another person present was considered too intrusive to the participants, as they may feel inhibited to talk freely. Therefore, the discussions were recorded on tape, with the consent of the participants. During the interviews the recorder was placed centrally on the coffee table. At first, participants felt awkward, as the recorder made a soft noise. To relax the participants and start the interviews they were asked to confirm their name and consent for their participation and tell a bit about themselves, such as the type of school they were employed by and how long they had been a teaching assistant. Identifying themselves made it easier to recognise voices during the transcription process. However, to ensure anonymity, in the report pseudonyms were used. The discussion schedule (Appendix 4) displaying the topics was also placed on the table and used to remind participants of the

subject for discussion, initially, by pointing at it, to start discussions, later on to guide participants back to the subject. After their initial awareness of the recorder, participants got involved in the discussions and forgot about being recorded. Unfortunately, by using a tape recorder, there is data loss as the recording filters out important contextual factors, such as visual and non-verbal aspects of the discussions (Cohen *et al*, 2000).

Data preparation: transcribing the data

During the transcription, data from the recorded interviews was inevitably lost. Firstly, as described above, non-verbal communication, such as nodding of the head, smiling, frowning, and so on, were omitted. Secondly, recognising the voices of the participants on the tape was on occasion challenging. At the start of each of the focus group interviews the participants had introduced themselves, using their real name, however, during the transcription process pseudonyms were allocated to each participant, to ensure anonymity. As participants were seated around the coffee table, according to their own choice, the first participant in the first focus group to introduce herself was given the pseudonym '**A**nne', the second '**B**renda', etcetera. The final participant in the second focus group was '**L**aura'. Further complexities on the tapes included more than one participant speaking at the same time, and the formation of small sub-groups, discussing a different topic to the main discussion, either by lingering on a previous topic or by talking about something different. Therefore, some parts of the discussion were impossible to attribute to anyone particular participant; other parts difficult to hear. To ensure all possible data was transcribed, a third person, unrelated to the research project, unfamiliar to the

participants and with no vested interest, was employed to verify that the transcriptions were accurate. Finally, the transcripts from each of the groups were distributed to the relevant participants to verify their content, giving participants who had contributed the opportunity to not only confirm their comments but also that they had meant to say this.

Data analysis

In research, it is important to be able to justify how a conclusion is drawn from the data collected.. Methods for data analysis, therefore, need to be systematic, disciplined, transparent and described (Punch, 2009). Computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) was considered but rejected, as these programmes aid database management with tools for handling and asking questions of texts but do not do the analysis (Bernard and Ryan, 2010). Evans (2009) pointed out that a benefit of analysing transcripts manually is that the researcher maintains a sense of overall control, enabling to view the data globally. To retain an overall view of the data allows the researcher to 'hold on to the original version of events' (Evans, 2009:133) In the current research the procedures as set out by Hycner (1985) for phenomenologically analysing interview data were followed, including: transcription; bracketing; listening to the tapes and reading the transcripts to gain a sense of the whole; crystallisation of what the participants have said, retaining their literal words; clustering and determining themes from clusters; checking for accuracy with the participants; contextualisation of themes; and finally a summary which describes the world of the participants, as experienced by them.

As stated by Bernard and Ryan (2010), analysis starts before data are collected, as choices are made in what is to be researched. By showing the participants topics for the discussion, on the sheet of paper on the coffee table, they were not given the total freedom to talk about anything they chose, thus possibly eliminating other possible topics for discussion.

A characteristic of a phenomenological approach to research is horizontalisation, which meant that the organization and analysis of data began with regarding every statement relevant to the topics of discussion as having equal value. Langdridge (2007:19) warned against the temptation of 'inventing hierarchies of meaning' and suggested that all detail is treated with equal value. To be able to this, the concept of epoché had to be applied, where the researcher suspended own ideas and assumptions, referred to by Hycner (1985) as bracketing and phenomenological reduction. The first step was open coding, which meant 'going through the transcripts, labelling bits of it that correspond to the codes previously identified' (Evans, 2009:133). To reduce data, themes were identified by giving all comments pertaining to the same category the same colour, using a colour coding system, before being clustered. For instance, all comments with regard to 'roles and responsibilities' were coloured red, then, all red comments were clustered. The main themes were pre-determined, as they coincided with the list of topics for discussion on the sheet of paper, used in the focus group interviews. Topics, however, were not always completed sequentially as comments made later in the discussion could refer to topics discussed earlier. A criticism of the coding approach and 'plucking chunks of text' out of the context in which they appeared (Bryman 2008:553), thereby fragmenting and de-contextualising what has been said. Some

comments made by the participants were said in a sarcastic, or tongue in cheek, manner. This needs to be identified and recognised as such, as incorrect coding affects the interpretation of the data. Themes were analysed by looking for number of occurrences, including where participants had only said they agreed with a statement made by someone else. Further, similarities and differences within the themes were noted. The next step in the analysis was making speculative inferences, to posit some explanations for situations, or even some causes. To validate the analysis of the data, a 'critical friend' and colleague, was asked to verify that statements made could be derived from the data by reading the transcripts. It is important for the researcher to present a 'faithful' interpretation of what is heard, which has the characteristics of honesty and integrity (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007:95). Furthermore, this study has assumed that the participants were 'trustworthy', as they had the opportunity to express their views and perceptions in a safe environment.

On reflection, it was anticipated that the participants viewed their participation in the focus groups as separate from the usual lessons, as the researcher was not directly involved with the day-to-day running of the NVQ programme. However, the distinction between the research project and the session became blurred, with participants referring to specific elements of the NVQ programme, on occasion asking the researcher for clarification on the performance indicators and scopes rather than staying focused on the intended discussion. Any reference in the transcripts to specific questions from the participants regarding the NVQ programme was coded but not included in the discussion of the findings.

To summarise, this phenomenological study attempted to capture first person accounts of the participants' perceptions and experiences, illuminating phenomena, whilst giving the participants a voice.

The findings have been discussed, in a logical order, in Chapter 4, starting the teaching assistants' story with their backgrounds, how and why they became a teaching assistant, any previous employment; their job titles, roles and responsibilities; support from their schools; their experiences whilst on the NVQ programme; and finally, their aspirations for the future and progression routes available.

Researcher bias

Bias can been described as a judgement that inhibits the researcher to make impartial judgements (Lichtman, 2010), which affects the validity of the research. It is therefore important that researchers are aware of their own values, preferences, and so on, when conducting research, arguably in particular when it was the own institution that was being examined. Creswell (1998:115) advised against studying your own 'backyard', such as your own institution, as this might compromise the value of the data: individuals might withhold information, slant information toward what they want the researcher to hear, or provide politically risky information for an inside investigator. There are also advantages, though, such as convenience, access and consent, relevance and insider knowledge and understanding. As highlighted by Punch (2009:45) the central theme in the discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of researching your own students / class / college, is that of 'positionality' of the researcher. Positionality cannot be avoided, as all

researchers come from some position; there is no such thing as a 'position-free-project' (Punch, 2009:45). Furthermore, each position is subject to its own strengths and weaknesses: researching your own backyard means greater understanding but less objectivity, while researching as an outsider might bring more objective but arguably less understanding. Lichtman (2010:16) noted that:

> Most qualitative researchers acknowledge the dilemma of trying to be objective or unbiased. In fact many qualitative researchers acknowledge that the elusive objectivity often sought in scientific research is inappropriate in the qualitative research arena
>
> (Lichtman, 2010:16)

Stronger than accepting that there is no such thing as a 'position-free-project', Clough and Nutbrown (2007) argued that the research and researcher are inseparable; that the identity of the researcher is a driving force in the research focus. They continued that as all research involves, as its basis, an interaction, or relationship between the researcher and the researched, the presence of the researcher is required. Furthermore, the researcher's voice no longer provides an 'authoritarian monologue but contributes to the dialogue' (ibid:80). The researcher acknowledged that, as a former Special Needs Assistant herself, and Programme Manager and Internal Verifier of the NVQ programme whilst conducting the research project, decisions made during the process were subjective. Sources of bias included the characteristics of the researcher, her attitudes, opinions and expectations, a tendency to see the respondents in her own image, and a tendency to seek answers that support her preconceived notions, based on her own experiences and values (Cohen *et al.*, 2000). As recommended in a phenomenological study, to minimise researcher bias, her own knowledge, experiences and presuppositions were bracketed, in order to understand those of the participants. The suspension of assumptions was strived for, in an attempt to

see the phenomena presented afresh. However, these assumptions and values may subconsciously have affected the research, as non-verbal communication and body language used during the data collection stage, may not have been objective. Furthermore, the halo effect had to be considered. This is where the 'researcher's knowledge of the participant, or of other data about the participant, exerts an influence on subsequent judgements' (Cohen *et al.*, 2000:116). Due to her role as Programme Manager and Internal Verifier the researcher had prior knowledge (documentary only) of the participants. By being aware of the halo effect, it was attempted to bracket assumptions with regard to researcher expectations of participants. Researcher bias was further evident in the selected areas for research. To minimise this, the validity of individual topics was discussed with the researcher's supervisor at the time, members of the pilot group, and the participants themselves. Throughout this research project, the researcher has adopted a reflexive stance. Reflexivity can be described as the extent to which 'social researchers are reflective about the implications of their methods, values, biases, and decisions for the knowledge of the social world they generate' (Bryman, 2008:682). From selecting the research paradigm to interpreting findings, the researcher has been aware of her values and presence, and the implications of these on the study. It has been attempted to demonstrate this awareness, by acknowledging these biases, as total bracketing, and suspension of values, assumptions and ideas, cannot be achieved.

Respondent bias

A further source of bias to be considered was respondent bias. When asking questions, there is a possibility that the respondents misunderstand what has been asked. Further, their responses can be misinterpreted by the researcher. In the current research, opportunities for misunderstanding were limited. Due to the nature of the method of data collection, focus group interviews, any misinterpretations they may have occurred, were immediately clarified by the researcher and other members of the group. Similarly, the researcher could ask the participants to explain in more detail what they meant, in case of ambiguous language or meaning. However, respondent bias was most evident as some participants expressed themselves more, or more strongly, in the focus group interviews, thereby shaping or skewing the data. The focus groups were small enough to allow everyone a voice, and discussions were carefully facilitated, however, some voices could be more dominant than others, which may have an impact on the validity of the research.

When a group is dominated by one, or a few, of the participants, group cultures may emerge that could interfere with individual expression. 'Groupthink' is a possible outcome (Fontana and Frey, 2008:128). Therefore, results from focus group interviews cannot be generalised.

Although participants' personalities, motivation and mood at the time of the focus groups may have affected their participation in the discussions, some of this may be attributed to 'reactivity', also known as the 'Hawthorne effect' (Cohen *et al.*, 2000:156), which refers to the effect of the qualitative researcher's presence on the participants. People observed may be 'putting on a show' or 'maintaining a front' for the observer (Boulton and Hammersley, 1996:282). As discussed in 'ethical

considerations', later in this Chapter, the researcher, as Programme Manager and Internal Verifier of the NVQ programme, undoubtedly affected the interview, with some participants potentially trying to impress. On the other hand, however, the researcher's in-depth knowledge and experience may have given the participants confidence in being understood. As discussed earlier in the Chapter, in qualitative research, the presence of the researcher cannot be eliminated, but rather, is part of the research.

Validity and reliability

Research is considered valid if the design of the research provides credible conclusions: 'whether the evidence which the research offers can bear the weight of the interpretation that is put on it' (Sapsford and Jupp, 1996:1). In quantitative studies, notions such as accuracy, generalisability and replication of the study are considered important. In qualitative research, however, there has been some discussion concerning the relevance of these notions (Bryman, 2008). Creswell (1998), while recommending qualitative researchers strongly consider how they plan to substantiate the accuracy of their accounts, concluded that it is impossible to reach a consensus. Alternatives to reliability and validity are the concepts of trustworthiness and authenticity, illuminating the ethic of respect for truth (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Creswell, 1994; Bryman, 2008). Throughout this study, the researcher has endeavoured to address issues of validity. Firstly, the focus group interviews were arranged to take place during the final hour of a taught session attended by the participants, in their usual classroom; therefore, in the natural setting. A major feature of well-collected qualitative data is that they focus on

‘naturally occurring, ordinary events in natural settings’, thus describing real life; and also, their ‘richness and holism’, emphasising people’s ‘lived experience’ (Miles and Huberman, 1994:10). Next, the topics for discussion in the focus group interviews were piloted in a small group of three teaching assistants, former students, who had completed the NVQ programme. They made some suggestions to fine-tune the topics. To ensure data on the tapes was transcribed to the fullest possible, despite the on occasion poor quality of the tape recording, an independent, third party was invited to listen to the tapes, confirming parts of the transcripts which had been challenging to allocate to individual participants. Further, during a taught session after the focus group interviews took place, respondent validation was sought, as participants were asked if they agreed the transcripts were an accurate representation of the interviews. Participants agreed that the transcripts for each of the focus group interviews were accurate, confirming that both content and the way in which the contributions were meant, were accurately recorded. Finally, throughout the research project, advice was sought from supervisors and also from a colleague and critical friend, with whom interpretation of the data was discussed. In terms of ‘trustworthiness’ and ‘authenticity’, this study has assumed that the participants could be trusted to tell their truth, as they perceived it. The participants were authentic and genuine, thrilled that their voices were heard. Consequential validity refers to the consequences of the research and the responsibility of the researcher in relation to this (Stake, 1995). As a consequence of this study, the NVQ programme for teaching assistants at the college will need to be revised and alternative modes of study considered, such as evening classes or assessment (in the workplace) only. The research was topical, as teaching assistants play an

increasingly important part in education, with further recommendations made in the final Chapter. Therefore, consequential validity was achieved.

Reliability is synonymous with 'consistency and replicability over time, over instruments and over a group of respondents' (Cohen *et al.*, 2000:117). However, in qualitative research it is impossible to freeze a social setting and the circumstances, replicating it (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982), with a view to generalise from it. The intent of qualitative research is not to generalise findings, but to form a unique interpretation of events (Merriam, 1988). Research accounts represent a 'sophisticated but temporary consensus of views about what is considered to be true' (Klenke, 2008:39). Generalisability is tested by the readers of the research as they recognise elements of the research in their own experiences (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Stake (1995:86) referred to this as 'naturalistic generalizations'. The current research did not attempt to achieve reliability in the positivist meaning, however, readers may be able to relate to it, as findings and interpretations are recognised.

Alternative criteria for evaluating qualitative research

Janesick (2000:390) queried the 'constant obsession with the trinity of validity, reliability and generalizability' and advised that it would 'probably be wise for the qualitative researcher to avoid being overly preoccupied with method' (ibid.). She argued that 'qualitative research depends on the presentation of descriptive data, so that the researcher leads the reader to an understanding of the meaning of the

experience under study' (ibid). The terms validity and reliability may need to be replaced by more relevant measurements of quality. Maxwell (1992) supported this argument by suggesting that within the qualitative domain the term validity could be exchanged for that of understanding, 'it is the meaning that subjects give to data and inferences drawn from that data that are important' (Cohen *et al*., 2000:106). Rather than viewing the research in terms of its validity and reliability, it was suggested that criteria for assessing qualitative study were to include trustworthiness and authenticity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Guba and Lincoln, 2005). An advantage of the human instrument as the primary mode of collecting information is that it processes data as soon as they become available, with opportunities for clarification, correction and amplification (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). However, it trustworthiness may be queried. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985:194) 'the trustworthiness of the human instrument is assessable in much the same way as any other instrument'. They argued that the notion of trustworthiness, in more conventional research, consists of four criteria: 'truth value (truth of the findings), applicability, consistency and neutrality' (ibid:290). In naturalistic research, however, these criteria are more open-ended; they cannot be labelled as unassailable, which is in contrast to conventional research. They emphasised therefore that natural inquiry 'cannot compel; at best it can persuade' (ibid:329). Trustworthiness can be tested in terms of its credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Holloway, 1997; Greene, 2000). Credibility corresponds to internal validity: are the researcher's findings compatible with the perceptions of the participants in the study. Credibility can be achieved through triangulation or 'member check' (Holloway, 1997:161). Transferability, in correspondence with external validity, aims for peers and readers to obtain a clear picture. This is achieved by the use of 'thick

description' as data is described in detail and in context (ibid). Dependability measures the consistency and accuracy of the research and is in parallel with reliability. As argued earlier, this is difficult to establish within qualitative research. At best there is an inquiry audit trail, recording the process in detail. Confirmability relates to the objectivity of the researcher. The findings need to be the result of the research and not an outcome of the biases and subjectivity of the researcher (Holloway, 1997). Although in qualitative research it is futile to attempt to achieve objectivity, the researcher should be reflexive and be able to demonstrate that the data can be traced to their origins. This can be achieved by the audit trail, mentioned above. Trustworthiness in the current research was strived for in terms of credibility, as the data gathered in the form of transcripts of the focus group interviews, was checked for accuracy by the participants. Therefore, the findings were compatible with the perceptions of the teaching assistants under study. Thick descriptions ensure that the readers have a clear picture of the data in context, thus achieving transferability, making the context recognisable and relatable to. Criteria of dependability and confirmability were arguable less robust. When given the same topics for discussion on a different occasion or in different circumstances, participants of the focus groups may have had different discussions. This means that the data collected might have been similar but would not have been exactly the same. Throughout the research the researcher was aware of her own biases and values, keeping a reflexive diary to record these.

Authenticity of research can be achieved if the strategies used for conducting the research are appropriate for the true reporting of the participants' ideas (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

As explained by Bryman (2008:379) authenticity constitutes of the following elements:

> Fairness: Does the research fairly represent different viewpoints among members of a social setting?
>
> Ontological authenticity: Does the research help members to arrive at a better understanding of their social milieu?
>
> Educative authenticity: Does the research help members to appreciate better the perspectives of other members of their social setting?
>
> Catalytic authenticity: Has the research acted as an impetus to members to engage in action to change their circumstances?
>
> Tactical authenticity: Has the research empowered members to take the steps necessary for engaging in action?
>
> (Bryman, 2008:379)

The current research was authentic in all five areas, allowing for different viewpoints to be heard. Although, as discussed previously, the notion of group think cannot be ruled out, the focus groups were sufficiently small in numbers to allow for each individual tp contribute to the discussions. The research has provided the participants with a better understanding of their situation, brought about by reflection on their own practice and context, as well as by the discussions with others. This, in its turn, informed and empowered them to make decisions with regard to their professional progress and future.

Ethical considerations

The British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines (2004) clearly stated that participants have the right to be informed about the aims and purposes of the research, and to give their informed consent before participating. Volunteers must participate without coercion (Anderson, 1998) and must be allowed to withdraw from any stage of the research, or ask for their contributions to be omitted. Further,

participants need to feel assured that if they express personal feelings or reveal some aspect of their personal life during the data collection process that such information will be treated as confidential and that the identity of the participant will remain anonymous (Anderson, 1998; Denscombe, 2007). Taking this into consideration, the identities of the participants or their place of work, were not disclosed: pseudonyms were used to refer to individual participants and the names of the schools where the participants were employed were not identified. Permission for the research was sought from the college and from the tutor of the NVQ programme. Participant information sheets (Appendix 2) and consent forms (Appendix 3) were distributed to the participants prior to the focus group interviews. Consent for recording the interviews was sought and further confirmed at the beginning of each tape recording. It was agreed that the audio tapes containing the focus group interviews, would be destroyed after completion of the research project. All transcripts were anonymised and any notes linking participants' real names to their pseudonyms were destroyed. The researcher used her personal laptop computer only to write the report, which was locked when not in use. There was, however, one area for concern, which was one of power. The researcher was Programme Manager and Internal Verifier for the NVQ programme. This needed careful consideration as it was felt that the teaching assistants may feel obliged to participate. An Internal Verifier verifies assessment decisions made by the tutor or assessor of the teaching assistants' portfolios of evidence, submitted as their summative assessment. Teaching assistants may have feared an impact on the verification of their final portfolio of evidence, if they refused to participate, or, on the other hand, expect a positive impact by agreeing. To address this fear, and potential expectations, the researcher explained the research and its purpose, also

highlighting the role of an Internal Verifier, emphasising that there would be no correlation between participation or non-participation to the focus group interviews and summative assessment. It was stressed that participation was voluntary and that contributions could be withdrawn at any stage of the process. The research project was approved of by Brunel University's ethics committee.

Chapter summary

This Chapter has presented the methodology and methods used in this research project. It has justified that the most appropriate methodology to explore teaching assistants' perceptions and experiences was an interpretive one in the form of a phenomenological study. It explained reasons for giving participants a voice in research and using their own words but also highlighted the ethical issues surrounding the interpretation of other people's words, making sense of data derived from the voices of others. Next, the group studied was described, which consisted of two cohorts of teaching assistants, fourteen in total, enrolled on an NVQ programme at a college for further education in Surrey. The selected strategy for data collection was focus group interviews, as these provide rich and in-depth data, further benefiting from the synergism of group interaction. Groupthink, however, could not be ruled out, although the focus groups were carefully facilitated, allowing each participant to contribute. The transcription of the focus groups was on occasion challenging due to the poor sound quality of the audio tape, and with more participants talking at once. Therefore, during this process data was lost. In line with a phenomenological approach to enquiry, data was analysed through epoché and data reduction. Themes were identified, which will be discussed in the next Chapter.

The issue of bias (researcher and respondent) was discussed, concluding that bias cannot, and arguably should not, be omitted from qualitative research. Awareness of bias, however, should be made explicit, demonstrating researcher reflexivity. Finally, validity, reliability and ethical considerations were discussed. The researcher has endeavoured to increase the validity of the study by employing a range of strategies, such as piloting the topics for the focus group interviews, respondent validation and the support of and advice from supervisors and a critical friend. However, the notions of trustworthiness and authenticity were considered to be more appropriate for qualitative research. Ethical issues, such as participants' informed consent were sought, and a concern with regard to power explained.

Chapter 4 Presentation and Discussion of the Research Data

Introduction

The data, data analysis and discussion are presented together in this chapter. This format has been chosen, rather than separate chapters, because of the nature of the qualitative research and the unsuitability to produce numerical data, represented by graphs or charts. Further, the topics of discussion from the focus group interviews were listed prior to the analysis. The selection of this format was employed to act as a reminder to the reader linking the original topics to the analysis. The data and analysis are woven together and discussed as each topic and the discussion thereof is considered. Each topic listed and the analysis of discussions is offered linking the topic to the relevant literature. Before embarking on the data presentation and analysis it was pertinent to be reminded of Denscombe's (2007) observation that, 'the phenomenologist's task, in the first instance is not to interpret the experiences of those concerned, not to analyse them or repackage them in any form. The task is to present the experiences in a way that is *faithful to the original'* (Denscombe, 2007:78).

To recapulate, the research question, what are the experiences and perceptions of teaching assistants, has been broken down into the following sub-questions:

1. What were their backgrounds: why did they become a teaching assistant; what was their previous employment?
2. What were their job titles, roles and responsibilities?
3. How were they supported by their school: what type of contract did they have; were they supported whilst training, financially and/or given time to attend training?
4. How did they experience the NVQ programme, including barriers to learning?
5. What were their aspirations and what progression routes were available to them to achieve these aspirations?

Reasons for becoming a teaching assistant

All participants said that they had become a teaching assistant because they had children themselves and the school hours, and holidays, suited them and their family life: *'it fitted in with family needs'*. Debbie's nephew had learning difficulties and as she '*had enjoyed working with him,* (she) *decided* (she) *would like to work with children on a more permanent basis, when her children started school'*. Most teaching assistants, however, had no previous experience and started as a parent-helper in the class of their child, and found that they '*enjoyed helping children'*, before applying for a post, as illustrated by one participant (Appendix 5):

Emma: I think initially..... because I had young children it fits school hours....I actually really enjoy helping children to then actually go and get paid for it is even better.

The experience was described by a participant as:

> Laura: Quite scary, staff knowing me as a mum and helper

The finding was in line with research carried out by Barkham (2008), who found that the teaching assistants in her study had all been voluntary parent helpers at some point in their careers. Working at the school where your children attend can create some tension. Gina described an instance where her son was reprimanded by a class teacher in her (Gina's) presence, causing her to feel embarrassed. Brenda had a similar experience as she overheard members of the teaching staff discussing her son, who had been sent to the head-teacher for a minor misdemeanour in class. She found it difficult not to react and to get involved, trying to find out what had happened exactly. Instead, she wanted to remain professional and impartial, and not a 'mum'. She managed to do this by pretending her son was just another child in the school. Although it was clearly considered convenient to work in the school where your children attend, especially with regards to holidays and term times, it was considered probably better not to work in the same class as your own children.

> Fiona: I think it's a bit funny working in the same class where your child is, you see too much and to be honest, I find it difficult not to keep an eye on my little boy all the time. I know he can be a bit boisterous but I don't want him to make a fool of himself. Or, hmm…of me really, in front of the teacher and all that, it's embarrassing, especially if they then talk about it in the staffroom; makes me feel bad and inadequate.
> Gina: Haha, you'll be on the list for parenting classes next; it's cringing!

The participants discussed their embarrassment when their children 'misbehaved', however, it would also be interesting to get a child's perspective on what it is like if your mother works in your classroom. Do children regard their mother as someone on their side, finding support and reassurance in her presence, or do they lose some

of their independence, as their mother will know everything they do (good or bad) or achieve (good or bad), and do they feel under pressure to be 'good' so as not to embarrass their mother. The mothers in this research project tried to stay objective but by doing this, could they actually be less supportive to their own children as they are to other pupils, because they do not want to create the impression that they are advantaging their own children? Further research on this is recommended. There was no evidence from the current research to suggest that schools tried to avoid (or not) placing teaching assistants in the class of their own child or children.

> Fiona: I've asked not to be in my boy's class but they don't listen; you just get put where you're needed. I suppose it will all get too complex if we do or don't want to work in certain groups, bit difficult to organise, and we are all professionals, but it is difficult sometimes, and I'd rather not work with him.

Teaching assistants' previous employment

Previous employment of the participants was considered to establish whether this could be an indicator for the types of people who opted to become a teaching assistant and also if this influenced their perceptions.

Before becoming a teaching assistant, the participants held a range of positions. Anne worked in an office immediately prior to becoming a teaching assistant, but had had jobs as a cleaner, website promoter, pizza delivery driver and waitress. Laura worked as a Housing Benefit Officer with the local council, Claire was a hairdresser, Emma a beauty therapist and Gina had worked at the checkout of a supermarket and as a hospital housekeeper. Other employment included Personal Assistant, publican, and sales assistant in a shoe shop, a position still held to date

on a part-time basis (weekends). Only one participant, Fiona, had an educational background. She had worked in a College for Further Education, she did not disclose in what capacity, before helping part-time at the school of her children. When probed as to her reasons for giving up her post to become a teaching assistant in a primary school, she said that her reason was to '*see why adult learners fail'*. Although this seemed an unexpected answer, none of the other participants questioned her further. As the purpose of the focus group was to gather information, not making participants possibly feel uncomfortable, justifying their reasons for becoming a teaching assistant, the response was not queried. This was a disadvantage of conducting focus group interviews; control of the discussions was not entirely with the facilitator and participants may not disclose information freely in front of others. Based on these findings, however, there was only one teaching assistant with experience of working in education, which meant that nearly 90 per cent did not. This was not in line with Teeman *et al*. (2009), who found that two thirds of support staff did not work in education prior to coming to their current role; and those who had been, had carried out similar positions in different schools. However, the focus of the Teeman report was on support staff in their current roles; it did not specify the category 'teaching assistants' within the wider support staff. Therefore, a straight comparison was not possible. Ofsted (2010) emphasised that for schools to be most effective, they must not only provide opportunities for support staff to develop their skills but they must also allow support staff to draw on their current expertise. In the current research there was no evidence to suggest that teaching assistants with specific skills and expertise in their previous employment, were given roles in which they could draw on those skills and expertise. Arguably, this could also include hobbies and other areas of experience, such as art or a sport.

Anne, for instance, who worked in a School for Children with Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD), had been a keen horse-woman, owning her own horses. Furthermore, she had been involved, as a volunteer, in horse-riding for disabled children. However, although some of the pupils at the SLD school had weekly riding lessons, she was never timetabled to support these lessons. Even if, perhaps for insurance reasons, she could not be leading the ponies on these occasions, the children may have benefited from her knowledge and experience. Therefore, to be more effective, schools must identify and utilise these skills and expertise. The advantages are twofold, as the children may benefit from detailed knowledge and the support staff may feel more highly valued. Having previous educational employment was not considered essential by the participants. However, it was recognised that not having experience may be a disadvantage for new applicants to the post.

> Laura: We all have to start somewhere, in a way it's nice if people have previous experience, cos you can share and learn from each other, but on the other hand, if they don't know anything, they can learn as they go and they don't have to unlearn things, as what they did at their previous school may be different from what we do. But it's really difficult now to come in now without any experience. There are more of us now, so heads can take their pick, so they go with the experienced ones.

Job titles, roles and responsibilities

The job titles held by teaching assistants, their roles and responsibilities, were considered, to explore whether differences in these affected the perceptions of the participants.

Job titles

Although the government's preferred generic term for all those who were employed to support teachers in schools, was Teaching Assistant, this was not reflected by the participants' job titles. Schools had developed a wide variety of job titles, particularly for support staff roles. These sometimes 'gave a false impression of the person's actual role' (Hutchings *et al*., 2009:3). Only Anne and Katherine were 'Teaching Assistants'; Irene was a 'Mathematics Teaching Assistant'; Brenda a 'Special Needs Assistant'; Claire a 'Behavioural Support Assistant'; all others were 'Learning Support Assistants'. However, as will be discussed later in this Chapter, their roles and responsibilities did not vary significantly. Balshaw and Farrell (2002), as discussed in Chapter 2, pointed out that different titles can imply that one group with a particular title has a higher status than those with a different title. Furthermore, the only title with an obvious progression route is that of teaching assistant (to Higher Level Teaching Assistant).

Although the current research found that the differences in job titles were not reflected by the participants' job descriptions, which were very similar, focusing on providing support for the teachers, pupils and schools, when 'voice' was discussed, there was some variation. This variation appeared to be caused by the perceived status of assistants. Claire, a Behavioural Support Assistant, who visited schools to support pupils with behavioural issues, sometimes for only one hour, once a week, felt that her status within the schools she visited was very low. She felt that teachers, on occasion, saw her as interfering in their practice. Although she worked with the

most challenging of pupils, she did not always feel supported by the teachers or other teaching assistants. Her voice or views were not usually considered.

> Claire: I feel like an outsider, a pain, not working towards the same goals. I work a lot with travellers' kids but the schools don't even bother to tell me if they're not in, letting me drive to the school for nothing. That's how much they value me. No-one ever asks or tells me anything.

As argued earlier, different job titles may suggest a hierarchy, which can be linked to status. According to the participants, those considered with the highest status were the full-time teaching assistants, often HLTAs or those with an HLTA equivalent role. The lowest status was attributed to part-time Special Needs Assistants, who support one pupil in particular. As was discussed in Chapter 2, the jobs of these assistants were often insecure, and maybe there is a correlation between types of contract of employment (part-time/full-time; permanent/ not permanent) and perceived status of members of the wider workforce. Full-time assistants were considered to have a better view of what was happening in the classroom as well as in the whole school. It was suggested by the participants that communication with these assistants was more frequent and more in-depth, mainly because they are at school at appropriate times. Brenda worked as a part-time Special Needs Assistant, supporting a pupil with Down's syndrome. She worked afternoons only and found it difficult to catch up with what had happened in the morning. Her colleague, who worked mornings only, left notes for Brenda but communication remained limited.

> Brenda: I find it hard enough when I come in to find out what has happened, I don't want to pester the teacher in her lunch break. I don't want to say anything, I know I'm a bit vocal now, but I don't feel I have a right to say anything, I'm only here for a couple of hours. And I wouldn't much anyway, as I don't want to be a trouble-maker, especially as I really want to keep my job.

Listening to the participants in this research, it appears that those with part-time employment do not tend to express their voice in school, as they may feel they do not have an opportunity or because they feel they have no 'right'. Further research, focusing on full-time assistants is recommended to explore if they feel differently about status and voice.

Roles and responsibilities

As has been explained in Chapter two, the role of the teaching assistant can be categorised in different ways but was summarised by Kamen (2008:3) as support for the pupil; support for the teacher; support for the curriculum; and support for the school. These roles, however, could be widely interpreted with 'little consensus regarding the duties teaching assistants were expected to perform' (Anderson and Finney, 2008:73).

In the current research, all participants occasionally worked with individual pupils but mainly with small groups of children, being involved in, for instance, the Literacy and Numeracy hour. Participants were responsible for recording and monitoring assessment tasks and progress, feeding this back to the teacher. Special Needs Assistants were employed to mainly support one pupil, however, so as not to single that pupil out unnecessarily, they worked with small groups of children which included that pupil. As discussed in Chapter two, Velcro-ing assistants to individual pupils might lead to segregation within the classroom, thus going against the principles of inclusion. All participants supported the pupils who were on the lower ability and attainment spectrum, or who displayed challenging behaviour in class (or during break and lunch time). This was in line with the literature discussed in

Chapter two, as it was recognised and challenged that those pupils with potentially the greatest need, were supported by staff with the least qualifications for the role. Higgins *et al*. (2011) suggested that low attaining pupils do less well with a teaching assistant. Therefore, this is an area for concern which needs to be researched in further detail. Gifted and talented pupils, on the other hand, did not receive extra support from the participants in this research. As one participant pointed out:

> Fiona: I don't know of any gifted and talented children, I work with the ones that need a bit extra, not the clever ones.

For a classroom, or a school, to be fully inclusive, all learners need to have their needs met, including the Gifted and Talented ones, and teaching assistants play an important role in helping create a culture within schools 'where exceptional achievement can be celebrated' (Worrall and Steele, 2008:109). It seemed unlikely that there were no Gifted and Talented pupils present in any of the classes and schools the participants worked with, as explained in Chapter 2, the most able 10 per cent of every year group should be considered as 'gifted' (Worrall and Steele, 2008:110). Therefore, it could have been that there was an issue in identifying those pupils, or, even if they had been identified, teaching assistants were not deployed to support those pupils.

In secondary schools, teaching assistants were usually allocated to a specific pupil, and moved with that pupil from lesson to lesson, supporting the pupil by assisting in making notes, often monitoring their behaviour. Helen pointed out that teaching assistants were not necessarily experts in the individual subjects, such as French, German, science or mathematics, yet supported pupils in these subject areas. She found she often copied notes from the whiteboard, especially in science classes,

without really understanding what she was writing, feeling like a pupil herself. She acknowledged that '*it gets better if you have done the same class a couple of times'*, however, she felt a tension between focusing on the lesson to get the right information for the pupil, and focusing on the pupil to monitor behaviour. She further pointed out that some of the pupils she supported had become 'lazy', as they found it easier to let the assistant take control, expecting her to take notes, make sure the pupil was in the right class, and generally being organised.

> Helen: He treats me more like I'm his PA rather than a TA, I feel I'm doing all the running around.

This may have suggested that, with this pupil, there appeared not only to be a dependency on the teaching assistant, maybe as a result of a (learned) helplessness after having received one-to-one support for a substantial period of time, but also a careful manipulation of her presence. Arguably, having the same teaching assistant for support may lead to the establishments of routines, which may have resulted in Helen feeling like a PA. It may have been more appropriate and beneficial to the pupil not have the same teaching assistant every day but different ones for different subjects. Furthermore, the support from a subject specific teaching assistant for each subject, supporting individual pupils, could be advantageous for explaining or recording the content of a lesson. On the other hand, the regular change-overs could hamper continuity and consistency for the pupil, which is of importance especially for those pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties. An alternative arrangement could be to organise the wider workforce into teams, each with a responsibility for a specific area of learning (Ofsted, 2010). In one example it was described how a secondary school had grouped members of the wider support

staff into different ‘directorates’ (Ofsted, 2010:9). One directorate was managed by an HLTA, responsible for providing support in specific subjects; a second directorate was responsible for a team of learning mentors and behaviour support assistants, attached to a particular year-group, working to improve attendance and behaviour in that group; a further directorate oversaw inclusion, managed by a SENCO, with a team of Learning Support Assistants and Special Needs Assistants. Close cooperation and clear communication between the teams could have a positive impact on pupils’ learning and attainment. However, as some pupils may need to draw upon the support of more than one of those teams, they could have more than one assistant working with them which means record keeping needs to be centralised and well organised to avoid duplicity. Furthermore, as pointed out earlier, there could be an impact on continuity. A role most participants fulfilled was to provide cover for absent teachers.

Providing cover for absent teachers

In the current research, providing cover for absent teachers was a contentious issue. Data from the focus groups suggested that covering for a teacher was more frequent in primary schools than secondary schools. Prior to remodelling the workforce in 2003, only a small proportion of teachers allowed teaching assistants to work on their own in the classroom, usually for an hour or less: sixteen per cent of schools reported teaching assistants taking classes as cover for absent teachers, only two per cent said that teaching assistants were required to provide cover on a regular basis (Lee, 2002). As discussed in Chapter two, since 2003, support staff regularly cover for teacher absence in over ‘80 per cent of primary, secondary and special

schools' (Hutchings *et al*., 2009:10). One teaching assistant, Emma, reported that Higher Level Teaching Assistants, who usually supplied the cover in her primary school, were regarded as '*glorified supervisors'*, simply saving the school money that would otherwise be spent on the recruitment of a supply teacher. She stressed the financial benefit for a school by stating that:

> Emma: A supply teacher costs the school a hundred and fifty pounds, I get an extra two pounds.

This finding was in line with the literature, as it was identified that most HLTAs were being paid different rates for HLTA and non-HLTA duties (Wilson *et al*., 2007). However, it was not only HLTAs who took responsibility for whole classes, other support staff also provided cover, working at HLTA level without the status. As argued by Hutchings *et al*. (2009:5):

> Of those [support staff] in primary schools, one third reported that they were paid at a higher rate only for the hours they took whole classes.

Further research is required to establish what these higher rates are. Does it mean that support assistants without HLTA status are paid HLTA rate (because they fulfil an HLTA role for those hours), or is there a separate rate, which is higher than the rate the assistant is paid for day to day duties, recognising the extra responsibilities, but lower than the HLTA rate? Either way, the HLTA role appeared undermined. If, as noted by Wilson *et al*. (2007), many felt that their role had remained the same, as they had been working at HLTA level already, there seemed to be little point in undertaking the training to gain the status.

> Gina: what is the point, we're all doing the job anyway, it's not worth the effort to go through the training.

Participants did not feel that the boundaries between the support roles were clear. It appeared that duties carried out by different types of assistant were very similar. The School Support Staff Negotiating Body, which had timetabled for the new framework to be implemented from April 2010 (Local Government Employers, 2010), was to provide clearer guidance and structure of issues such as job roles and responsibilities and matters of payment.

In secondary schools provision of cover appeared to be different. Irene, said that her school employed 'Cover Assistants'. These were unqualified assistants, and not teachers, who provide cover for any teacher in any subject. They could be covering a year eight history lesson for one hour, followed by a year ten chemistry lesson the next. Assistants were not subject specialists, however, the advantage over outside supply teachers was that they knew the pupils and the pupils knew them, thus providing continuity. Employing these assistants to provide cover for absent teachers may be a cheaper option for the school but do pupils really benefit? They are 'minded' by an assistant but potentially lose out on being taught.

In general, participants were unhappy at the prospect of supervising whole classes and were reluctant to consider whole-class work as part of their role, as this was perceived to be the qualified teacher's responsibility, especially in classes where behaviour of the pupils was challenging.

> Debbie: I don't mind working with small groups, I have my own literacy group who I see every day but I really feel out of my depth with the whole class, especially as

> there are some children I know I cannot control, I wouldn't know how and I don't think it's fair to ask me to do that.

This is contrary to the findings of Hutchings *et al*. (2009:5), who claimed that the majority of support assistants, in all sectors, agreed that they 'enjoyed being responsible for whole classes, and that this was a good use of their skills and experience'. However, more training and development, particularly in behaviour management, was needed for staff taking on these responsibilities.

> Emma: I have been on a training day on behaviour management, but it only covered the basics, looking at praise and sanctions and triggers for bad behaviour. It's a start, and I did enjoy it, but didn't give us strategies to deal with really challenging behaviour, such as an autistic little boy we have in class. I really don't know how to best deal with him. Two of us are going to a Special School next week to talk to them for some ideas.

Emma's account illustrated a more structured approach to training and development is required, as teaching assistants do not feel equipped to teach whole classes.

Planning

Although some teaching assistants were involved with planning on a daily basis, others were rarely involved, as the following comment indicated:

> Irene: I just turn up in the morning and do what I'm asked to do.

As pointed out by Parker *et al*. (2009), teaching assistants may feel frustrated if they do not have advance knowledge of the lesson in which they are supporting, fearing that it makes their contributions less effective. Furthermore, should teaching

assistants just be given the content and learning outcomes for a lesson or should they be involved in the planning?

The majority of participants in this research reported that they were usually given the teacher's plan for the week, although, as in Irene's case, she was not told in advance how the lessons were planned. Debbie, on the other hand, stated that she did the planning for her literacy group herself. Although teaching assistants were usually committed to their role, it can be queried whether they have the insights into children's learning to be able to plan accordingly. As discussed earlier, they were usually involved in assessment and recording of the learning, before feeding this information back to the teacher, but were they trained to make planning decisions, or should this remain the task of the teacher? As discussed in Chapter two, only a minority of teaching assistants were qualified up to NVQ Level 3 standard, which involves providing evidence of planning, therefore, unless teaching assistants received training for planning during INSET days or other training, their level of competence in making planning decisions may be limited. Collaborative teamwork with their teacher, including time for planning and evaluating teaching and learning, would allow teaching assistants the involvement and recognition some of them crave, while keeping the overall responsibility with the teacher. However, collaborative teamwork requires a designated time for such meetings to take place.

Participants reported that lesson planning was often undertaken before or after school, during breaks or at lunch time, which meant having to come in early or staying late. This sometimes meant that teaching assistants had to arrange childcare for their own children.

> Anne: planning meetings at my school are on a Monday after school, which is really awkward.
> Brenda: mine are in the mornings, before school starts, which is even more awkward. What do I do with my own kids, ask them to hang around or get someone else to drop them off? I don't even start work until the afternoon, I won't get paid for it, so I don't bother.

Furthermore, participants were often involved in supervision at break and lunch-times (for some this was a separate job), which made it difficult to meet with their teacher (who also had supervision duties and often had other commitments in break-time). Therefore, planning was sometimes carried out on an opportunistic basis such as accidental meetings in corridors. Barkham (2008:850) explained that the teachers in her study were reluctant to ask teaching assistants to stay outside contracted hours, even for brief meetings or planning events, as teaching assistants had commitments to their own families. Teachers felt they could not ask someone to stay unless the teaching assistants themselves had offered. As identified before, most teaching assistants had children of school age who needed attention after school.
Participants in the current study felt uneasy about attending meetings outside school hours.

> Anne: I feel guilty if my daughter has to go to after school club because I'm still in meetings.

Teaching assistants experienced a tension as their commitment to their role appeared to be in conflict with their parental responsibilities.
Teaching assistants further pointed out that although they provided cover for teachers' PPA, with some responsible for the planning of the time they provided cover for the teacher, they did not get PPA time themselves. This meant that some had to plan sessions outside school hours.

Debbie: I do not get PPA time; I take the planning home and do it in the evenings.

Katherine also stated she planned her sessions at home, either in the evening or early in the morning, as there was no time allocated to do this during school hours. According to Hutchings *et al*. (2009) between a third and half of support staff who took whole classes had time allocated on their timetables for planning. However, it was observed that these allocations were not protected 'and therefore assistants were often unable to take it' (Hutchings *et al*. 2009:5). The time teaching assistants worked outside their paid hours could affect their work-life balance and may contribute to feelings of stress, although this was not brought to the fore by the participants in the current research. There appeared to be a real dilemma: on the one hand teaching assistants wanted to be more involved in planning decisions, and for some this was expected by their school. On the other hand, time for planning meetings did not always take the needs and commitments of the teaching assistants into consideration. As a result, some teaching assistants in this research felt obliged to work outside their contractual hours, whilst others declined to do this, thereby not contributing to planning decisions although they potentially had a clear insight into the progress and further needs of the pupils. A negotiated time, during contractual hours, for teachers and teaching assistants to meet for planning would be of benefit to all; teachers, because they have input from those working closely with the pupils; teaching assistants, as they feel they have some impact on the planning, feeling valued; and pupils, as they benefit from closely tailored planning.

Other responsibilities

Participants reported that they were involved in a range of other responsibilities such as:

- attending and contributing to review meetings
- photocopying
- arranging displays
- driving the school mini-bus
- invigilating during exams
- supervising swimming
- play- and break-time duty
- taking groups of children out on school trips, such as accompanying them to museums and galleries, or even on residential outings such as a week on the Isle of Wight
- talking to parents
- breakfast and after school clubs

This was in line with findings from Ofsted (2010:20) who stated that 'in all the schools visited, members of the wider workforce led a range of extra-curricular and enrichment opportunities'. Moreover, the wider workforce provided support for study skills after school, during lunchtimes and school holidays, as they were involved in the extended school programme. It could be queried whether teaching assistants are trained to perform such tasks. What was meant by 'providing support for study skills'? Did it involve supervising homework tasks, set by the teacher, or did it mean developing skills for study? As support staff themselves may not always feel confident and competent in studying, as will be discussed later in this Chapter, are they the best people to deliver such sessions? Participants in this research felt they provided a safe environment for pupils, before or after school, but this was more on a par with minding the pupils until they were collected, rather than a structured extension or continuation of the school day. At secondary school, one of the participants reported that she was involved in a homework club, but this did not

include the development of study skills as she supervised pupils staying on task, completing their homework.

Attending and contributing to review meetings was considered one of the most important tasks teaching assistants performed. The participants claimed to often have an in-depth knowledge of the pupil, understanding their needs whilst closely monitoring their progress, and therefore felt they had an important contribution to make. However, attendance to such meetings was not always possible as the assistant could not be missed from the classroom, or the meetings took place outside their contracted hours.

> Brenda: There was a review meeting last week but as it was in the morning [works p.m. only], I couldn't go. Normally I try to be there anyway, but I couldn't this time, they never think of when it's convenient for me.
>
> Debbie: We also had a meeting in the morning but because it was during my literacy group time I couldn't attend, even though it was about one of my boys. I really felt I knew more about this boy than anyone else, but that was it, I know my place.

Although the assistants informed others involved, such as teachers and Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), it was felt that opportunities were missed to provide an in-depth view of the pupil's situation. Further, as a result of not always being invited to these meetings, assistants felt their potential contributions were not valued sufficiently. They felt they were in the best position to take part in meetings but that somehow they were not considered 'good enough'. As a consequence, they felt there was some tension; on the one hand they carried out an important role, working closely with some pupils whilst on the other hand their efforts and knowledge of the child were not deemed important enough to allow them time to attend review meetings.

> Debbie: I felt a bit annoyed but also sad. Why couldn't some else do my group on that occasion? I'm good enough to take responsibility for that group, planning the sessions, but when it comes to the formal bits, they almost don't want to know.
>
> Brenda: Remember talking about status earlier? That's when you know you haven't got any. You do your job and it is appreciated by everyone but not officially. It's like a punch in the face.

Schools often form part of a multi-agency service, collaborating with social workers, speech and language therapists, or educational psychologists. Teaching assistants can play an important role in ensuring that the work of these professionals has a positive impact on the pupils (Rose, 2005). It would potentially be beneficial to the teaching assistants, and therefore the pupils, if they were fully integrated in teaching and learning in their schools, allowing them to determine and clarify with the professional what is expected of them and what they are required to record (ibid). The participants claimed they were not always given this opportunity and stated that they would like to be more directly involved with other professionals, but that they were not always considered important enough.

There is a danger that staff who feel under-valued may become de-motivated, therefore, it may be beneficial to schools to take the teaching assistants' availability into consideration as well, when arranging such meetings.

Invigilating tests, such as those for Key Stage 2, were carried out by the participants. Hutchings *et al*. (2009) reported that generally, in primary and middle schools, teaching staff invigilated tests themselves, while in most secondary schools external invigilators were used. Participants occasionally found it difficult to perform this task.

For some children they were allowed to read out a question, or when multiple choice, read out the answers; staying impartial was considered very challenging.

> Brenda: You so want them to do really well, and it's so difficult not to help them or give anything away, just by the intonation of your voice or your body language. It breaks your heart if you see them giving the wrong answer…

Despite these challenges, teaching assistants who knew the pupils well were probably the best people to employ for such duties, as a friendly and familiar face was more likely to have a calming and reassuring effect on the pupils, which may have had a positive impact on their test results. It was deemed necessary to make the tests as 'normal' as possible, with pupils working in classrooms with their normal teachers and support staff (Hutchings *et al*., 2009:418).

The teaching assistants stated they often liaised with parents, they sometimes met before or after school, providing information on the child's progress. Parents found it easier to talk to the teaching assistant, often someone from within their community, rather than making an official appointment to see the teacher. This was recognised by Ofsted (2010):

> Members of the wider workforce were particularly successful in developing links with parents and the wider community because they often had local knowledge or lived in the area. They had developed new ways of listening and responding to the community, especially when communicating with parents who lacked confidence socially or who held negative views of education and were, therefore, reluctant to talk to teachers
>
> (Ofsted, 2010:22)

Teaching assistants, in particular those working mainly with individual pupils with SEN, often had an in-depth knowledge of that child's achievement and progress.

Therefore, they were in a strong position to share this information with the parents (or carers). However, this position could also be a challenging one.

> Laura: You have to be careful. I sometimes feel I'm cornered by a mum; every day she tries to see me for an update, wants to know who he played with, did he behave. My heart sinks when I see her hanging around again, I now try to avoid her. I don't want to get too involved; I'm a bit of an easy target as the teacher is always busy but I don't want that. I don't want to be thought of as her special friend either, her kid is the same as the others to me, no favourites. I feel a bit sorry for the boy as well, imagine your mum being on your back all the time.
>
> Gina: my problem is that one of the mums is sort of a friend of mine anyway, her oldest was in the same playgroup and nursery as mine, we've known each other for years. But I can't talk to her about anything at work, as that would be unprofessional, you can't have a bit of a gossip. Sometimes I know things about the school or teachers but I can't talk about that. It's a funny situation, we are more approachable maybe, a friendly face, but we're also part of the community, more than the teachers, who live away a bit, and that's sometimes awkward. You know things about children and families but you have to keep them to yourself. But sometimes they think you're a bit snooty because you don't want to talk. It's not like that but I wouldn't want other TAs to talk about me or my family to their friends.

It was apparent from the above that matters of confidentiality had to be taken into consideration; the playground or corridor was not always the best place for (unofficial) meetings with parents to occur. Furthermore, although teaching assistants knew the child and their needs well, they may not be the most appropriate person for discussing detailed targets for the child with, as the teacher would be the better qualified person to do this. It was felt by the participants that there was a tendency by some parents to make substantial claims on the teaching assistant's time, especially if ad-hoc meetings took place after school, with some parents expecting daily, detailed progress reports on their child. Therefore, teaching assistants needed to carefully monitor and allocate time to liaise with parents. The participants added that clearer guidance to parents might be beneficial.

Support from schools in terms of contracts and payment, and support whilst undertaking training

Contracts and payment

Participants reported that there was inconsistency with regard to contractual arrangements between schools and also between different assistants employed by the same school. Although recent research suggested that 80 per cent of teaching assistants had a permanent contract (Blatchford *et al*., 2009; Teeman *et al*., 2009), the term permanent needs further defining. None of the participants in the current research had a permanent contract in the sense that it would be for longer than the current academic year. Contracts had to be revised and reissued on an annual basis. Some stated that their contract was permanent, in the sense that it was secure for the academic year and they were paid for 52 weeks. Others had a permanent contract which covered term time only, 38 weeks (fixed term contract), which meant a pro-rata salary. Others still were only paid for the hours in which they had direct contact with the pupils. As discussed in Chapter two, Blatchford *et al*. (2009) reported that one in five support staff worked full time or more than 35 hours per week, whereas Teeman *et al*. (2009) suggested this number was nearly half of all support staff. However, only one participant in the current research worked on a full-time basis. Claire worked as a Behaviour Support Assistant and was not employed by a particular school. Once again, it must be recognised that the surveys referred to above (Blatchford *et al*., 2009 and Teeman *et al*., 2009) considered the wider workforce; support assistants in general, not teaching assistants in particular. Arguably, there could be contractual differences, with some support staff, such as

administration or site personnel, benefiting from permanent, full time contracts. Those assistants employed to support children with a Statement of Special Educational Needs, felt that their jobs were not secure. When children with a statement move on to another school, the assistant may lose her job as payment for the assistant is dependent on money to the school for supporting that child. Nicholas (2001:36) acknowledged that the 'instability of the hours can be a worrying fact'. This certainly was an issue for the participants in the current research. Brenda pointed out that:

> Brenda: I'm a Special Needs Assistant; if she [the pupil] leaves I'm out of a job.

Hancock *et al* (2001) made a similar point in claiming that contracts were subject to the school budget, leading to a lack of job security among teaching assistants. The lack of security was particularly an issue for the participants in this research, as they were enrolled on an NVQ level 3 programme, which ran over 18 months. To be able to complete the qualification, participants had to be employed by a school, allowing them to collect the evidence required to build up their portfolio. As their jobs were not always secure, the participants claimed that they were concerned about being able to complete the programme.

Further, it was felt that contracted hours were not sufficient to carry out the job with expectations that teaching assistants work extra hours (without pay).

> Laura: I always do extra things, finish things off; we all do. They're getting an extra 15 minutes out of me every day for starters. School starts at 8.45 but I'm there from 8.30 or earlier, to get ready and be in the classroom ready for the children.
>
> Helen: Same here, I never finish on time either, as there's always some admin jobs to do. It's a bit different for me as I work in a secondary school, I don't have to tidy up after the lesson, but I still need to write my report, I do that in the staffroom, straight away, to keep on top of it all; can take me upto half an hour though, if I want to talk to a teacher or something.

Participants said they accepted that spending extra time was part of the job and maintained that they were reluctant to refuse to do this as they were worried about being regarded as a trouble-maker, which may affect their employment. This was in line with research carried out by Ofsted (2010). The majority of teaching assistants were still expected to work extra hours, outside their contract, without being paid. There was often an expectation that support staff should attend briefings and staff training and contribute to teachers' planning, but few schools provided time for these (Ofsted, 2010).

The lack of job security and expectations of working outside contractual hours, without payment for these hours, made some teaching assistants consider leaving their posts, as one participant stated:

> Debbie: Frankly, I need more money, but I love this job and I really make a difference, I can't stay though, I will finish this course then look elsewhere.

Others agreed, saying that they would only stay working as teaching assistants while their children were at school, for instance:

> Laura: The cost of living and bills coming in, I'll find a better paid job elsewhere after the children have finished school.

Participants agreed that pay in general for teaching assistants was low. It was argued that increases in payment for teaching assistants should follow that of teachers. Claire volunteered that she earned less than £7.00 per hour, employed as a Behavioural Support Assistant, often working with vulnerable and volatile young

people. This was lower than the average wage for a teaching assistant equivalent post, which was £9.70 per hour, although it was recognised that '42 per cent of teaching assistants earn less than £7.50 per hour' (Blatchford *et al*, 2009:114). It was considered that '*stacking shelves in a supermarket*' would be better paid. Furthermore, participants viewed the low wage as an insult to their professional practice. It was considered that working with children and young people, playing a significant role in their education, was more important than working in a supermarket, not only for the children and young people involved but also for the nation as a whole. The participants in the current research were not alone in their feelings of dissatisfaction, as Hutchings *et al*. (2009) highlighted:

> …significant dissatisfaction amongst support staff in relation to pay and contractual arrangements. A number of interviewees expressed disappointment at the continued use of split and term-time only contracts by schools, and argued that the nature of their work was not reflected in their pay. A few felt exploited and undervalued, generally because they had to undertake significant amounts of unpaid overtime to carry out their assigned roles, and felt that this contribution was not recognised or rewarded.
>
> (Hutchings *et al*., 2009:5)

As stated in Chapter two, Ofsted (2010) recommended for clearer guidance on appropriate levels of pay and conditions for the increasingly diverse roles that have been introduced as a result of workforce reform. It is expected that the School Support Staff Negotiating Body (SSSNB) will set up and implement a framework within which it will negotiate all matters relating to the remuneration, duties and working time of support staff in all maintained schools in England. Failing to do so may result in support staff seeking alternative employment as soon as their family circumstances can accommodate this.

Support whilst undertaking training

The way participants were supported by their school for training and development varied between schools. Although most participants claimed to attend INSET days at their school, other training could only be attended if it took place outside the teaching assistants' normal duties. The payment of fees for specific training and development activities appeared to be inconsistent. Participants reported that few schools paid the fees in full; most participants said they were asked to pay the fees themselves. Further, all the teaching assistants taking part in this research stated that they were not paid for their time when training was carried out outside school hours. Even when training took place during school hours, such as the NVQ programme referred to in this research project, the participants reported that schools applied different regulations. The payment of fees for the NVQ programme the current research participants were enrolled on, was unproblematic, as all but one school claimed funding for the fees from the Train to Gain initiative. However, for participants to attend the sessions, schools had to release the teaching assistants for half a day per fortnight from their usual duties. Not all participants had been released from their overall timetable to do this. Two participants, Emma and Katherine reported that they had to 'make the time up' by doing extra duties during the days between the sessions .

> Emma: I can go but I still have to do my hours, so I work extra lunch time covers to make up for the time I'm away. That's why I'm always in a rush to get back, any time spent here I'll have to make up. It's not fair really when you think about it, the school benefits just as much from me being better but it doesn't show; no extra money and no time to study.
>
> Katherine: Me too, but I would like to become a teacher, so I'll just put up with it. I make up the extra time stretched out over the fortnight so I don't really notice it, the

> main thing is that I'm here and at least it's paid for. Eventually, I want to be a teacher; I just see this as an investment.

As explained earlier, local authorities did not always provide funding for training and development of support staff. Furthermore, they did not provide funding for cover, while staff were undertaking training. The release of staff to undertake training during school hours was therefore too problematic, especially if more than one member of staff needed the same training. The variations in school regulations in relation to allowing staff to undertake training during school hours, created tensions between the participants. Gina, who was paid for contact hours only, was not paid while attending the sessions.

> Gina: Every session I attend costs me, as I'm not at school, so in a way I'm paying for my own course anyway. I think the whole thing is unfair, they talk of a post-code lottery but it is the same for us. I lose out whereas others, no offence, I don't mean it personally, get all their fees and time paid for. I would make up the time if I was offered but they just say you weren't here, so you only did so many hours. It makes me angry that.

Without funding for training and funding for the provision of cover staff while others undertake training, teaching assistants may not be released from their schools. As a result, the college where the current research was conducted saw a decrease in student enrolment on the NVQ programmes (to only six new students). As such low student numbers were not deemed viable for the college, alternative provision, in the form of evening classes, must be considered. This will mean that teaching assistants who are interested in and committed to developing their skills, to the benefit of the schools and pupils they support must do so in their own time. Thus, they may experience more pressure and stress, balancing work, family and also study. How does training and development for support staff compare to Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities for teachers? With an aim to further raise

standards, Ed Balls, secretary of state for Children, Schools and Families, introduced the Masters in Teaching and Learning (DCSF, 2008e). He stated that it was envisaged that funding participation in the programme, including the costs to schools, would be through the TDA (DCSF, 2008e). Funding for teaching assistants, however, through the Train to Gain initiative has been cut (Department for Business Innovations and Skills, 2010), which means that most teaching assistants will have to pay for their fees at full costs themselves. Fees for the NVQ Level 3 qualification vary, depending on the provider, but can be as high as £900.00 plus an exam fee (Farnborough College of Technology, 2010)

Support for teaching assistants at school level can also be offered in the form of an allocated mentor. The role of the mentor was to support the teaching assistant in their role, in the event of them experiencing any situations they felt unable to deal with competently, or to assist with any queries the teaching assistants may have. Mostly, as the participants reported, this role was taken by their class teacher or the school Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO). Although most participants benefited from a mentor, Anne did not. She had asked her class teacher but the school's SENCO found that it should be her role to support Anne. However, as the SENCO did not have time to take on the extra responsibility, Anne did not benefit from the support of a mentor.

> Anne: I knew this was going to happen, my SENCO is really busy; my teacher would have been much better; she is busy too but at least I see her every day. She can give much clearer guidance as she knows what I do in class or we can adapt what I do to meet the performance criteria. So, really, this happens anyway, but unofficially. I feel that makes you dependent on the good nature of your teacher. I don't want to annoy the SENCO by going behind her back but I just see no other option. It would be great to have some time set aside to have meetings with your mentor; it just doesn't happen.

This is an issue which should be addressed by the college delivering the NVQ programme, making it clearer to the schools that teaching assistants are entitled to mentor support for the duration of the NVQ programme. Discussing the NVQ programme and the evidence required to meet the competencies was considered as difficult by the participants, as teachers were very busy and not able to set time aside for such discussions. The issue was most pertinent to those employed by secondary schools, as those assistants did not have one class teacher they worked with. Often, they did not even know who to approach for advice, not having been offered a mentor either, as the following comment shows:

> Irene: I kind of carry on by myself and ask other TAs if I have a chance. It's great coming here, because you can talk to the others and find out how they have done it.

It was found that colleagues who had already gained the qualification were the most likely to help and support. Further, the participants reported that the fortnightly taught sessions were experienced as very helpful as they gave participants the opportunity to support each other. The participants stated that they were not allocated a set amount of (paid) time for gathering specific evidence or for photocopying evidence, such as school documents. Despite the apparent lack of support by schools, success rates for the programme are high (above 80 per cent), as teaching assistants, who attended the programme, were highly motivated to improve their skills and knowledge, enabling them to carry out their roles to the best of their ability, being aware of the importance of their role. It was stated that:

> Brenda: It's not in our nature to give up; that's part of what we do in school, making sure everyone succeeds.

On average, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) reported a 60 per cent national success rate after Train to Gain's first full year of operation, although it was recognised that this figure may not be reliable (Ofsted, 2008). The higher success rate at the researcher's institution could perhaps be explained by the nature of the delivered NVQ programme, which included ample tutor support for the learners. However, more research into a potential correlation between mode of delivery and success rate would be interesting. Although Teeman *et al*. (2009) found that most staff (88 per cent) felt supported by their school in terms of meeting their training and development needs, this figure which was not reflected by the participants in the current research, as they did not feel their schools had been particularly supportive.

> Brenda: Don't get me wrong, I like coming here and the course and things but it's all in my own time; I'm not even allowed to do photocopying for the course, to be honest, I sneak bits in if I do other copying anyway, or sometimes I ask the school secretary to photocopy policies etcetera, she'll do that. But I don't like sneaking around, it should be seen as part of the course and school should help you with that.

Participants' experiences of the NVQ programme

Expectations of the programme

Teeman *et al*. (2009:75) identified that '14 per cent of support staff receive training that leads to a formal qualification, such as a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ)'. Overall, 96 per cent of support staff rated the quality of their most recent training 'very' or 'fairly' good (ibid.:83). The experiences of the participants in the current research were varied. Some expectations were not in line with the reality of an NVQ programme, for example:

Laura*:* I thought the course would be how to become a Teaching Assistant.

Other participants agreed with this statement and felt that: *'we had to learn off our own backs'*.

This demonstrated that the participants' expectations of the programme appeared to be more traditional in nature: when enrolled on a course, the student expected to be taught and learn that subject. This can be recognised, in terms of Belenky's (1986) second position, as listening to the voices of others. In contrast, on an NVQ programme, competences are acknowledged. 'A major feature of an NVQ is the 'outcome' model with its emphasis on defined outcome statements, often referred to as 'standards of competency' (Parfect, 2009:5). The learner needs to provide evidence of their competence, relating it to their practice, rather than learning about a subject. Although this particular programme, delivered by the researcher's institution, was different from other NVQ programmes in that it incorporated some taught elements, such as on child development and supporting pupils with special educational needs, it still did not conform to expectations held by the participants, which was to be taught by the tutors in a conventional manner rather than autonomously collecting evidence to demonstrate competence. Participants in the current research were not familiar with the process of NVQs, giving them the impression they were not learning at all.

> Laura: I was really struggling at first; I thought it was a course where you sit down and listen to the teacher; becoming better at your job by getting more information. But all we do is talk about how we do our jobs and then linking it to the performance criteria. It's different from my school days and I wasn't expecting that. It's good though, I learn from the others, it's really helpful and interesting to talk to TAs from different schools, it gives you a real insight.

This was an issue for the college, as it seemed course information to students could be improved. A clear understanding of the programme's structure and outcomes would diminish anxiety participants experienced. Areas which were identified as particularly challenging by the participants, were the language used in the NVQs and the process of meeting performance criteria.

NVQ language and meeting the performance criteria

The participants stated that the language used in the NVQ handbook was difficult to interpret and understand.

> Brenda: Trying to get your head around is difficult, you doubt your own ability when you don't understand the questions.

Performance criteria within the units, and also between units, were perceived to be repetitive, requiring some cross referencing. Participants did not always recognise this and queried their interpretation of the evidence required, sometimes assuming their interpretations were wrong.

> Claire: Questions are repetitive, cross-referencing, why do we need it, it's frustrating, you're not really sure of yourself, maybe I've answered it all wrong then.

The NVQ programme required candidates to demonstrate competence of a certain skill on more than one occasion, under different circumstances. These different circumstances were referred to as 'scopes'. Participants found meeting the scopes very frustrating as they forced them to construe the circumstances so they could

demonstrate competence, as for some of the scopes natural occurrence was unlikely.

> Claire: It's false, having to look for situations, making it fit.

Participants had started to develop their inner voice (Belenky, 1986), recognising their own authority and questioning others. However, although gathering the evidence had been perceived as frustrating and repetitive, confidence in their performance had grown with participants saying that they had not realised they were competent. They had been able to achieve all the tasks described in the performance criteria, without being fully aware of their competence.

> Brenda: I didn't realise I'm doing it!

This demonstrated that Brenda had reached the step of being 'reflectively competent', whereas before she had been 'unconsciously competent' (Malthouse and Roffey-Barentsen, 2010:16), as discussed in Chapter 2. Brenda had not thought about her skills and knowledge, she had just got on with her job. Now, however, she was aware of her own ability and could reflect on this in an evaluative way. Her experience sounded empowering and emancipatory. Belenky's (1986) fifth position, that of constructed knowledge where voices are integrated, can be recognised.

Although participants experienced the process of accumulating evidence as empowering, participants found the writing of personal statements and essays to demonstrate their knowledge time consuming and frustrating.

> Claire: To be honest, I found it hard-going. I work full-time and spend a lot of time travelling between schools and the office. The children I work with are supposed to be challenging but I find that the easy bit although it can be hard at times when they fight, I even been spat at. When I pick up my little girl, I'm tired. I am a single mum and then want to spent some time with her, making her tea and checking her homework and reading and that. After she has gone to bed, it's time for me, to get my statements written. Half the time I don't even understand what they want, sometimes I feel I have already done it but I'm not too sure about cross-referencing. Best to be sure and write a bit more. I don't want to fail this and have it thrown back at me. I'm not a quitter and the others in the class are really helpful. There is no-one else from my organisation here but some of the others have given me their email addresses so we can help each other between the sessions, that's really good really, but it depends on the people, we're lucky.

An alternative way of gathering the evidence required to meet individual competencies is if an assessor observes the candidate performing the task. The assessor can then 'sign off' that particular performance criterion. The programme the participants were enrolled on incorporated three assessor observations of the candidate in their workplace, each of half an hour to an hour. To take some pressure of the candidates collecting the evidence, participants suggested that assessors the number of assessor observations was increased, as well as their duration.

> Claire: More observations, following us around for a whole day would help to find evidence to meet the performance criteria and scopes. I'd rather have observations than doing the writing.

However, this approach is exactly what can lead to a mechanical approach whereby students can achieve success without having to consider wider implications and knowledge as discussed by Parfect (2009). This way, candidates would not need to engage with the standards and would be likely take a passive stance to their learning. This stance would be in stark contrast to the self-directing, self-motivated and autonomous student who is responsible for their own learning and progress, as encouraged by the NVQ process. Moreover, the carrying out of more and longer observations would have an impact on the college, as the assessors' workload

would increase. This, in its turn, would increase the cost of the programme. To accommodate candidates' preferences, the college could consider employing more assessors, paid at a lower assessor rate, rather than the lecturers it currently employs to carry out these roles. This requires a philosophical debate about education, how programmes are delivered and quality of teaching in general. At the time of this study, the college had rejected the assessor only route, adopted by other providers.

Time for study

Participants found allocating time to write up how the performance criteria were met sometimes problematic. They all had families with young children, as well as their work commitments.

> Laura: Finding the time, when you have children, a life, is difficult, when you come in from school, you have dinner to get ready, then, half eight, I'm tired.

A further issue was access to a computer, as the participants' children also needed to access the computer for homework. Participants tended to put their own needs after those of their children, as illustrated by the following participant:

> Gina: Writing up the notes takes longer than expected, and my kids also need to use the computer, they come first.

Studying during school hours was deemed impossible, furthermore, the participants experienced difficulties in arranging time to discuss their course with their teachers.

Participants felt uncomfortable to ask the teachers to write witness testimonies, as a result they tended to write these themselves and just asked the teacher to sign the statement. Participants were very careful as they did not want to be considered a burden on their teacher, as explained by one participant:

> Brenda: Try to catch people at work is difficult; I don't want to be a pain.

The participants agreed that teachers were very busy and that it was not that they were unwilling to help but that they were restricted in the time they could offer to assist. Furthermore, it was recognised that teachers were not always familiar with the process and language of NVQs or with the gathering of evidence to build a portfolio. As stated in the previous Chapter, Blatchford *et al*. (2009:104) reported that about three quarters of teachers had 'never had any training or development to help them work with support staff'. It can only be assumed that the number teachers who are trained to support 'support staff' in their professional development is lower, which exuberates the problems in communication the participants faced. Therefore, teachers should be trained to support teaching assistants who are undertaking qualifications. When asked how their experience could be improved, the participants asked for time to be allocated during school hours to work on their course. This could be in the form of being allocated time to photocopy items that could be used as evidence, such as school policies or pupils' work, or to seek out and gather other relevant information. Allowing teaching assistants some time for study could be seen as how schools value the fact that their staff are undertaking qualifications. It appears that teaching assistants are not always assertive in voicing their needs; or maybe they are not heard. Working towards a qualification, including NVQs, forms

part of the assistants' CPD. Completion of the qualification would benefit the pupils, teachers and school, the assistants support. As discussed in Chapter two, training provided for teaching assistants is often not linked to their development needs. Arguably, the NVQs do meet these needs, therefore, more support from schools is required to enable teaching assistants to address their CPD needs in an environment in which they not feel to be a burden on those around them. Their study needs to be encouraged as a qualified wider workforce may be instrumental in the government's drive to raise standards.

Location

Finally, the location where the NVQ programme was held had an impact on the experience of the participants. As discussed earlier, classes took place at a secondary school in the community. However, the school was not located centrally in the community from which it attracted students. Therefore some participants would have preferred for the course to be held at the college rather than at the school, as they stated they had found it frustrating to have to drive past the college on their way from home to the school. However, for the participants' schools to be able to access 'Train to Gain' funding for their teaching assistants, the programme had to be work-based, therefore, at a school rather than a college. Hosting the programme at the school covered this criterion. Arguably, students on the programme were disadvantaged as they did not easily have access to the resources available at the college. Although they were enrolled as college students, because all teaching took place off site, they were not familiar with the college's infrastructure,

including the learning resource centre. Furthermore, some students, and participants to this research, were employed by the school; as a result, they were occasionally called away during the session to cover for absent colleagues or during break time, interrupting their attendance. They felt they could not refuse such requests, as once again, they did not want to be awkward.

Aspirations and progression routes

This study observed that career progression routes were not always clear or available.

> Brenda: There is nowhere to go within my school, it doesn't matter what qualifications you have, we're all the same.

It was deemed unfair that within the role of teaching assistant there was no official grading or ranking structure. The comment '*we're all the same'* emphasised that there was only one level of teaching assistant, regardless of any qualifications or experience the teaching assistants had. It could therefore happen that someone who was newly employed, without any qualifications in supporting learning, received the same hourly payment as a teaching assistant who had either been employed by the school for a number of years, or who had relevant qualifications, such as an NVQ level 2 or 3. Participants pointed out that qualifications did not appear to be recognised by the schools, either in the range of responsibilities they carried out or in the payment they received. This was found frustrating and demoralising, as they felt they should be rewarded for gaining qualifications.

> Emma: What's the point of studying hard, it doesn't get you anywhere, why bother? I tell you why we do it, we care, we want to do the best job possible, we want to make a difference.

On the positive side, participants considered the NVQ programme to be highly relevant to their practice and felt it had increased their confidence.

> Anne: I now know I'm doing the right thing, before I just hoped I was getting it right but I was never really sure. Well, you never know, do you? I think everybody should do it.

As stated earlier in this Chapter, a clearer employment and associated pay structure, indicating bands of payment which take qualifications and experience into account might avoid this feeling of '*nowhere to go*'. It will provide teaching assistants with a clear career path, with gaining qualifications as recognised stepping stones towards more responsibility and increased payment. Moreover, appraisals for teaching assistants also need to be considered, as these will identify not only professional development needs but also recommended progression routes. However, as discussed earlier, Ofsted (2007) reported that only just over half the schools visited had introduced an appraisal or performance management system for the wider workforce which mirrored that of teachers. It appears therefore that a significant number of teaching assistants do not benefit from the appraisal process. Again, school leaders and line managers of teaching assistants need to be trained to conduct these appraisals.

The only direct career progression currently available is that of Higher Level Teaching Assistant, which was a route considered by one of the participants.

> Laura: I would like to look into the Higher Level Teaching Assistant status.

Two participants, Fiona and Katherine, had aspirations of becoming a teacher, which is in line with the literature which suggested that only between '10 per cent and 20 per cent of teaching assistants actually want to go on to be teachers' (Watkinson, 2003:135). However, in primary schools this figure increased to 22 per cent, while the number in secondary schools is nearly 40 per cent (Hutchings *et al*. 2009). Both participants were considering enrolling on a Foundation Degree in Learning Support, after completing their NVQ. The Foundation degree can be characterised as a vocationally focused qualification which forms part of more work-based learning pathways, placing emphasis upon the achievement of academic learning outcomes and integration of academic and work-based learning (Beaney, 2006). After completion of the Foundation degree, a one year top-up on a BA (Hons) in Education allows candidates to achieve graduate status, after which they can apply for a place on a Graduate Teacher Programme, leading to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). To encourage a greater uptake on opportunities, the Skills Commission (2010) recommended that the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) should ensure that routes for teaching assistants to progress to higher level teaching assistants and higher level learning are expanded.

Most participants did not know which course to do next or did not want to continue studying. Opportunities for training and development appeared to be an issue. Teeman *et al*. (2009:121) found that although school leaders reported more training and development provision over the last year to meet the identified needs of teaching assistants, 'constraints on financial resources available for staff training had limited the amount of training undertaken by support staff'.

Chapter summary

The outcomes of the research were overall in line with the literature.

Fox (2003) noted that teaching assistants ranged from former lunch-time supervisors or parent volunteers who want more involvement with classroom life, to people considering a career in teaching and who were exploring this by way of working as an assistant. Almost all teaching assistants were women, mothers of young children who wished to combine working part-time with raising a family (HMI, 2002). In this research, all participants were former parent-helpers and mothers of young children. The wide variation in background experience is reflected by the different levels of qualification held by teaching assistants when commencing their employment in a school, however, this experience is not utilised significantly in their deployment. As the role of teaching assistant has become more educational, with assistants more involved in pupils' learning, there is a need for training and development. Teaching assistants themselves wanted a coordinated and nationally recognised pattern for training, linked to career progression (Balshaw and Farrell, 2002). The title given to assistants varied from school to school and from LEA to LEA, even though the term 'teaching assistant' was the government's preferred generic term of reference for all those in paid employment in support of teachers in primary, special and secondary schools (DfEE, 2000:4; Balshaw and Farrell, 2002). With regard to responsibilities, the role of teaching assistants has shifted more towards providing learning support, as teaching assistants now spend more time supporting pupils' learning directly and less providing welfare and administrative support. The role was summarised by Kamen (2008:3) as 'giving support for the pupil, the teacher, the curriculum, and the school'. Providing cover for teachers was initially met with anxiety by teaching

unions, as there were concerns about the effect this might have on teachers' professionalism (Balshaw and Farrell, 2002; Lee, 2002). However, although no one should pretend that teaching assistants are teachers, when they are most successful they show many of the characteristics of good teaching (HMI, 2002:18). Teaching assistants now regularly covered absent teachers or when teachers were doing their PPA. In secondary schools this role was undertaken by especially employed cover assistants. In terms of contracts and payment, pay scales were considered low (Lee, 2002; Blatchford *et al*, 2009:48), and many teaching assistants were employed on temporary or fixed, term-time only contracts. Many teaching assistants may not be paid if the child they support is absent and they may lose their employment at short notice if the pupil progresses well, moves on or if their support is no longer justifiable in terms of local criteria and policies (Fox, 2003; Hancock *et al*, 2001); the instability of the hours can be a worrying fact (Nicholas, 2001:36). Further, as found in this research, teaching assistants were seldom paid for non-contact time (HMI, 2002). This, together with the fact that most teaching assistants worked part-time, meant that schools found difficulty in arranging meetings for teachers and teaching assistants. Therefore, teaching assistants' contributions to planning and preparation was limited; this was reflected by the participants in this study. In terms of support for teaching assistants by their schools, Teeman *et al*. (2009) found that most staff (88 per cent) felt supported by their school in terms of meeting their training and development needs. This figure was not reflected by the participants in the current research, as they felt their schools were not particularly supportive with respect to being released from school to attend the training and being given time to support study. Teeman *et al*. (2009:75) identified that '14 per cent of support staff receive training that leads to a formal qualification, such as a National Vocational

Qualification (NVQ)', with 96 per cent of support staff rating the quality of their most recent training 'very' or 'fairly' good (2009:83). In this research there were some concerns with regard to expectations of the course, as participants expected to be taught in how to become a teaching assistant rather than providing evidence of already being a teaching assistant. However, once they realised they met the national standards and were competent in their roles, their confidence increased. In terms of aspirations and progression routes, only one teaching assistant wanted to become a HLTA, while two considered a teaching career. This was in line with the literature, as between 10 per cent and 20 per cent of teaching assistants actually want to go on to be teachers (Watkinson, 2003:135). To encourage a greater uptake on opportunities, the Skills Commission (2010) recommended that the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) should ensure that routes for teaching assistants to progress to higher level teaching assistants and higher level learning are expanded.

Chapter 5 Issues and Implications

This part of the thesis presents the issues and implications drawn from the research. It will re-state the purpose of the research and its research questions, discuss the outcomes of the research questions as well as reflect on the methodology and methods of data collection utilised; it considers the next steps and discusses implications of the research.

Purpose of the research and the research question

Teaching assistants are a key force in the drive to raise standards of teaching and learning in the 21st century classrooms. The number of people in support roles in schools has risen significantly, with teaching assistants experiencing the sharpest increase in numbers; a number that is still rising. The job profile has grown too, with teaching assistants taking on more and more responsibilities for pupils' learning. A number of reports published by Ofsted and papers in Research Journals discussed the deployment, impact and experiences of teaching assistants. However, whereas those reports were large-scale surveys, this research was a small scale phenomenological study. The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of the teaching assistants themselves, thus giving them a voice; a voice from the classroom which has so far been missing. The use of voice has been privileged in qualitative research because it has been assumed that the voice speaks the truth, reflecting meaning and experience, in particular when the participants' exact words were represented. It is this truth that the current research

tried to seek. The research question: ‘what are the experiences and perceptions of teaching assistants’ was broken down into the following sub-questions:

1. What were their backgrounds:
    a) why did they become a teaching assistant;
    b) what was their previous employment?
2. What were their:
    a) job titles,
    b) roles and responsibilities?
3. How were they supported by their school:
    a) what type of contract did they have;
    b) were they supported whilst training, financially and/or given time to attend training?
4. How did they experience the NVQ programme they were enrolled on?
5. What were their:
    a) aspirations and
    b) what progression routes were available to them to achieve these aspirations?

Outcomes of the research

The outcomes of the research reflect the experiences and perceptions of teaching assistants themselves and are presented following the order of the research questions.

Question 1: what were the entry routes into becoming a teaching assistant and what was their previous employment?

In this research, all participants were women who had started working as a teaching assistant as a volunteer helper. Therefore, there was only one entry route into the role of teaching assistant: that of parent-helper in their children's school. The position was chosen as it was considered convenient, fitting in with family life, as it allowed for participants to be available for their own children after school and during holidays. Previous employment was varied, from working at a supermarket check-out, to publican, hairdresser or PA. The type of previous employment was not a significant factor as there was no evidence to suggest that employees from certain sectors of the workforce were more or less likely to become a teaching assistant. The data suggested that the type of employment held previously did not affect the roles and responsibilities participants were given. It appeared that schools missed out on opportunities to utilise teaching assistants' skills and expertise gained in this previous employment, or in their personal lives. It is recommended that schools deploy staff taking these skills and experiences into account. Furthermore, the participants in this research did not appear to have had a desire to embark on a support-based career. Most participants stated they would seek alternative employment once their children had left school, only one wanted to become an HLTA, and two, now saw being a teaching assistant as a stepping stone towards becoming a teacher. The majority of the current participants completed the NVQ for personal reasons of self-actualisation, not career progression. To attract more career-oriented teaching assistants into the role, the available progression route into teaching should be made more obvious. Those who have left education without

relevant GCSEs or A-Levels but who would like to become a teacher, have this option available to them, through the Level 2, 3 and Foundation Degree programmes, followed by a top-up BA (Hons) degree. Moreover, students who have completed their A-Level qualifications and would like to become a teacher but opt not to go to university could also consider studying for a Foundation degree whilst working in a school as a teaching assistant.

Question 2: what were the job titles, roles and responsibilities of the teaching assistants?

The title 'teaching assistant' was not used for all support staff working within the classroom, with most participants referred to as 'Learning Support Assistants. With the exemption of job descriptions for Special Needs Assistants, other job descriptions were very similar. Special Needs Assistants mainly supported one pupil, usually a pupil with a statement of special educational needs. As well as supporting this pupil individually, they occasionally worked with small groups of pupils which included that pupil. This was to avoid what was referred to as the Velcro-ing effect, which may result in segregation within a classroom, thereby not adhering to the principles of inclusion and inclusive practice. Overall responsibility of the participants was to provide support for the teacher, pupils, curriculum and school. However, it was noted that support staff mainly worked with those pupils who were of a lower ability or displayed challenging behaviour. These pupils thus received less teacher time. It can be questioned whether this is the best strategy to raise standards. Arguably, these pupils needed more time with a qualified teacher. Participants occasionally taught a whole class or provided cover for absent teachers, but they felt this was beyond their responsibility, considering it the teachers' role to teach the

whole class. Although part of the responsibilities included planning, time for this was difficult to arrange with the teachers. Planning often took place opportunistically such as in corridors whilst passing. Often, the participants felt they should come in early or stay after school, which caused tension as their own children needed attention. The literature suggested that as the work-life balance for teachers has been addressed by the remodelling agenda, support staff now experience excess workloads, resulting in higher levels of stress. Arguably therefore, the remodelling agenda needs further developing to address this issue. However, participants in the current research did not refer to feelings of stress in relation to their workload. Participants further carried out a range of tasks, identifying contributing to review meetings with other agencies as one of the most important and satisfying ones. However, despite their in depth knowledge of the pupil, time to attend these meetings was not always available. As a result, participants felt under-valued. To address the issues raised above, teaching assistants should be more fully integrated in teaching and learning in their schools.

Question 3: what support from school did they receive in terms of contracts, payment and support whilst undertaking training?

The lack of permanent contracts contributed to feelings of job-insecurity, especially for those assistants whose employment was dependent on a supporting a pupil with a statement of special educational needs. Payment was considered low, when compared to the minimum wage. Expectations by schools were that the teaching assistants worked in their own time: before or after school and during break-time to liaise with their teacher; or to attend meetings. There were variations between

schools involved in the current research in how they supported their teaching assistants while undertaking the NVQ programme, with some schools releasing staff to attend sessions, others allowing staff to attend but without pay, and some allowing staff to attend but only if they made up for the time spent at a later date. Not one of the schools involved in this research allocated study time for its teaching assistants during school hours, allowing them to catch up with the course work or even to photocopy relevant material, necessary to build up their portfolio of evidence. Further, not all participants benefited from a mentor to support them in their studies. This appeared particularly significant in secondary schools, where participants did not know who, within the school, to address if they needed support.

Good mentoring means that teaching assistants feel supported and know there is someone within the school they can ask for advice when necessary. Without this, teaching assistants may experience feelings of insecurity or ill-prepared for certain situations. Schools did encourage their support staff to be trained but were restricted in how they could support staff who were undertaking training. Moreover, it appeared that teachers themselves required training, not only to utilise their support staff most effectively but also to support those staff who were undertaking qualifications, such as an NVQ. Schools need clearer guidelines, to be provided by the School Support Staff Negotiating Body, on job descriptions which are linked to the roles and responsibilities of the staff involved; these roles should be underpinned by the qualifications held by staff; and furthermore, should be reflected in a pay structure. With regard to supporting training, standardising practice, not only within a local education authority but nationally, would enhance equity. Equity not only for support staff but also for the pupils they support.

Question 4: how did the participants experience the NVQ programme they were enrolled on?

The first barrier the participants encountered was the nature of NVQs. Participants did not value evidence of competence in the same way they would value a more traditional qualification. Further, the language associated with the NVQ programmes was considered unclear and confusing, despite aiming to be very specific and transparent. The issue of language needs to be addressed by the different Awarding Bodies, such as City and Guilds, who were the awarding body for this particular qualification. Time for study at home was limited as the participants had families with young children who needed their attention and sometimes had to wait accessing the computer until their children had finished their homework. This highlighted that teaching assistants often place other people's needs, including those of their children, first. More time allocated for study during school hours would minimise that tension and would further emphasise the value schools place upon gaining qualifications. The location of the programme had not always been helpful as some participants had to drive a significant distance, some passing the college, to attend the taught sessions. Furthermore, it meant they did not have full access to college facilities. The college involved in the current research may have to review its provision of courses for teaching assistants. After the withdrawal of Train-to-Gain funding by the government, the requirement for these course to take place in the community is no longer relevant. Therefore, it should be considered for these courses to take place at the college, which would provide full access to college facilities such as the Learning Resource Centre. Furthermore, schools may feel more supportive of teaching assistants if their training would not affect the teaching

assistants' timetable, for example if courses took place in the evening. This may require a greater commitment of the teaching assistants, as they will need to attend in their own time, which may impact on their family life, however, doing a course independently, although in agreement with the school, may contribute to a greater sense of ownership, control and responsibility, potentially leading to a more assertive approach. The college, on the other hand, could consider wider use of e-learning, to minimise evening attendance.

Question 5: what were their aspirations and what progression routes were available to achieve this

Aspirations and identified progression routes were limited with only three participants having plans for what they wanted to achieve next in terms of study and career progress (one wanted to become a HLTA; two aspired to become teachers). Some participants could not see any advantage in further training as qualifications did not lead to a difference in status. A clearer employment structure may encourage others to engage in further training, especially if there was a link to an increased wage. The government aims to expand routes for teaching assistants to progress to higher level learning, however, current restraints on financial resources appear to be a barrier. It was made explicit by the majority of the participants that they were not interested in continuing to be a teaching assistant for the remainder of their career; most would consider alternative employment after their children had left school. Currently, for some, the post of teaching assistant appears to be considered as a convenient one; an episode between other career choices. It can be concluded that the current participants were not seeking any particular status and that the route to status was

not an obvious one. A clearer structure within the role of teaching assistant, linked to appropriate remuneration, would enhance this status. For instance, some roles and responsibilities may require no qualifications for teaching assistants at all, such as photocopying, or putting up displays. Other roles may require a Level 2 qualification; others still a Level 3 or Level 4, especially those roles which expect a teaching assistant to teach a whole class. Previous experience can be taken into consideration but will need to be supported by relevant CPD (experience of being a teaching assistant for a number of years does not automatically ensure that the teaching assistant is competent teaching whole classes). This structure would ensure transparency; for instance, if teaching assistants are appointed for a Level 2 role, it will be clear to them what they will have to achieve to progress to a Level 3 role. Those teaching assistants who say they are only doing it for the money can either remain in their current role or opt for more money at the next level up from where they are. National recognition of these 'bands' would ensure more consistency and uniformity between schools.

Voice

The main purpose of the research was to give voice to teaching assistants. As discussed, there are currently over 160,000 teaching assistants employed by schools, forming approximately one third of school staff. However, so far, this large group of mainly women has remained 'quiet' and therefore 'un-heard'. In terms of Belenky *et al*. (1986), they have been in a position of silence, accepting their situations without questioning. Belenky's (ibid.) second position, that of received knowledge, was demonstrated as the teaching assistants expected to listen to the voice of others; they expected to 'learn how to become a teaching assistant' by enrolling on a training programme. At this stage they could considered to be, as described by Herzberg's model (Malthouse and Roffey-Barentsen, 2010:16), as 'unconsciously competent',

maybe not realising they were carrying out their jobs to a satisfactory standard already. The teaching assistants started developing their inner voice, recognising themselves as an authority: Belenky's (1986) third position of subjective knowledge. As they collected evidence for their NVQ portfolio, they accepted that there can be multiple sources of knowledge; that they do not have to rely on authority and can be even critical of that authority (Belenky's (ibid.) fourth position). They started to develop their voice, questioning and querying their situations. Belenky's (ibid.) fifth position is that of constructed knowledge, where voices are integrated. It is understood that knowledge is subject to interpretation, dependent on time, experience and context. Participants reached the step of 'reflective competence' (Malthouse and Roffey-Barentsen, 2010:16), where own knowledge and skills are reflected upon and reviewed. The result was emancipatory and for some teaching assistants a liberating experience. It can be argued that although the training programme provided the platform for this journey, it was the reflection, self-evaluation and review that brought about these emancipatory and liberating feelings.

Methodology

The purpose of the research was to give a voice to teaching assistants, exploring their experiences and perceptions in terms of their backgrounds, roles and responsibilities, experiences of the NVQ programme, aspirations and progression routes. The paradigm for this research was interpretive; as the researcher was a former Special Needs Assistant herself, her values would influence the research as they could not be entirely separated. A small-scale phenomenological study approach was adopted, collecting qualitative data from focus group interviews. The groups studied consisted of two cohorts of students on an NVQ programme for Teaching Assistants, at a Further Education College in the South East of England. The delivery of the programme included students attending a taught session once a fortnight, during school hours, with assessments taking place in the work-place. Access to the students was non-problematic as the researcher was Internal Verifier

for the programme and had visited the groups before in that capacity. Although there were advantages to being known to the participants, as helped with the flow of the discussions, there were also some disadvantages. First there were ethical issues, such as would participants feel they could contribute to discussions freely or withdraw from the research without the fear of this affecting their NVQ portfolio, which were verified by the researcher. To overcome these fears, the purpose of the research was explained and it was emphasised that participation or non-participation would not affect the NVQ in any way. A further disadvantage was that some of the participants saw the researcher's presence as an opportunity to ask for clarification with regard to their portfolios, asking very specific questions about their collected evidence. This had to be managed carefully, to avoid being interpreted as dismissive, yet the focus had to be maintained on the discussions. Data from the focus groups were rich and in-depth, covering a range of topics as different participants brought up different items for discussion. A further advantage was that any clarification could be sought if participants were not sure of a meaning, which meant there were no misinterpretations. Also, clarification did not have to come from the researcher but participants could explain to each other what was meant, taking the focus off the researcher and empowering the participants. This led to greater ownership by the participants.

As is the case with discussions in general, whilst all participants were given the opportunity to contribute, a disadvantage was that some participants contributed more than others, potentially leading to 'groupthink'. However, an advantage was that these participants kept the discussions flowing. The purpose of the focus groups was to distil experiences and perceptions from within the group. On reflection, although the focus groups provided answers to the research questions, the choice of

focus groups as a method of data collection may not have been the most appropriate one. Individual, semi-structured interviews would have ensured that all participants had their perceptions and experiences recorded, emphasising 'the individual'.

Discussions were recorded, with consent of the participants, however, the recordings were of poor quality. Transcribing the recorded focus groups was on occasion problematic. Participants spoke at the same time or held whispered mini-discussions between themselves. Laughter and coughing sometimes overpowered the spoken word and voices were hard to recognise. Therefore, on occasion, it was difficult to attribute contributions to specific participants. Although the location of the focus groups had seemed informal and relaxed, and therefore particularly suitable, it contributed to the poor quality of the recordings. On reflection, individual interviews might have been easier to record and analyse, however, the focus groups provided richer data, as different comments sparked other discussions. However, the distinction between the research project and the delivery of the taught sessions became blurred, with participants referring to specific elements of the NVQ programme, on occasion asking the researcher for clarification on the performance indicators and scopes rather than staying focused on the intended discussion. Any reference in the transcripts to specific questions from the participants regarding the NVQ programme were coded but were not included in the discussion of the data.

This highlighted the problems that could arise when carrying out research in one's own institution. However, although the discussions about the taught elements formed a distraction to the main items for discussion, the advantage of having an understanding of the programme and being familiar to the participants possibly

contributed to gaining their trust, enabling them to contribute to discussions more freely.

The research was validated by a critical friend and the research supervisors who guided and offered advice with the phrasing of the research questions. A small pilot focus group was organised to try out the topics for discussion, after which some topics were modified. An independent third party was invited to listen to the recorded tapes to check the transcripts did not miss, or construe, significant information. Transcripts were checked for accuracy by the participants. Although the participants agreed that the transcripts were accurate and that they did say and meant to say what was transcribed, the time allocated was probably too brief, as this was at the end of the lesson which followed the focus groups. Perhaps more data could have been gathered by requesting that participants add (written) comments to the transcripts. However, this opportunity was not utilised. Finally, participants were considered 'trustworthy' in their contributions, as there was no obvious advantage in giving incorrect information, and, as discussed above, misinterpretation was immediately dealt with. Alternatively to the notions of validity and reliability, trustworthiness of the human instrument and authenticity were discussed. It was argued that credibility and transferability could be claimed but dependability and comfirmability were less evident.

As the study was phenomenological in its approach, it aimed to interpret and explain human actions and thought through descriptions, capturing first person accounts. In the analysis of the data, the researcher attempted, as is recommended in a phenomenological study, to minimise researcher bias by bracketing her own

knowledge, experiences and presuppositions, in order to understand those of the participants. However, this may not always have been achieved. Listening to the participants brought to the fore many emotions and feelings, associated with the experience of being a Special Needs Assistant. Although attempts have been made to distinguish between own emotions and feelings, by taking a reflexive stance, and those displayed by the participants, complete epoché cannot be claimed.

The purpose of the research was to give teaching assistants a voice, however, this only pertains to the small group of participants in this research project. Therefore, there is some hesitance to make claims generalising from this study. However, some of the outcomes of the study may be relatable to other teaching assistants.

Contribution to knowledge

The contribution this research has made to the body of knowledge is that it has given teaching assistants an opportunity to have a voice, to clearly state their experiences and perceptions of what it is like to be a teaching assistant.

The following key findings have emerged from the research, areas that the teaching assistants felt most strongly about:

1. The differences in job titles and job descriptions were not reflected by the roles and responsibilities as performed by the participants in this study. Although they held a range of titles, their responsibilities were very similar (apart from the Special Needs Assistants, who were employed to support one child with a statement for special educational needs), mainly to support the pupils of lower ability or who displayed behavioural challenges. Support for gifted and talented children by

teaching assistants was underdeveloped. It is recommended that all support staff have job descriptions that accurately reflect their role within the school, as currently these are confusing and ambiguous.

2. Teaching assistants' previous skills and experience was not drawn upon by the schools, therefore opportunities were missed to offer pupils in-depth, detailed and often unique knowledge in relation to a particular topic. This made teaching assistants feel undervalued and frustrated as they recognised the contributions they could make but were not invited to do so. It would be beneficial to all: school, pupils and teaching assistant, if, on interview for instance, particular strengths and skills were identified and subsequently utilised if appropriate.

3. Participants experienced little support from their schools for undertaking qualifications. Not all were released, without consequence, from their responsibilities to attend training during school hours. Furthermore, they were not allocated time to gather evidence for their NVQ portfolio or to discuss their course with a teacher. Some benefited from a mentor, usually the class teacher or SENCO to support them during the programme. Secondary schools in particular, did not allocate specific mentors to teaching assistants. This could be a training need for school leaders and teachers, as they may not be familiar with NVQ processes. As NVQs are the most common type of qualification undertaken by teaching assistants, it is recommended that school leaders and teachers are made to be familiar with these processes, giving them a greater understanding of what is required of their staff to complete these qualifications. Perhaps INSET days could

be organised by qualification awarding bodies, or the providers of such qualifications, to inform school leaders and teachers.

4. Participants had little knowledge of progression routes available to them. Further to this, they appeared to be lacking ambition, even though they were very committed to the children they supported. Teaching assistants carried out the same jobs, regardless of achieved qualifications. Those with HLTA status did not experience a major change in their roles either. Although some took on more responsibility for whole class teaching, others stated that they had already been doing this anyway.

5. The loudest cry from the participants of the research was for the professionalisation of teaching assistants. The main issue was seen to be the need for a transparent career structure, indicating levels of responsibility. Linked to this structure should be nationally recognised qualifications, which every member of support staff would have to gain, at the appropriate level for the role they fulfil. Salary structures should reflect the roles and associated qualifications, engendering a clearer representation of the job of 'teaching assistant'.

Next steps

As described above, the job of teaching assistant as a para-profession is still in its infancy. With the NVQ programmes, HLTA training and Foundation Degrees in Learning Support, recognised qualifications are available, although not yet compulsory. Further research is required in how perceptions of teaching assistants

might change, after the recommendations of the School Support Negotiating Body are implemented. Moreover, it would be interesting to track backgrounds of teaching assistants to see if, rather than becoming a teaching assistant because it is a job that fits in with family life, it becomes a (main) career choice in itself, also appealing to those who do not have children of a school age. If it does become a (main) career choice it may attract more men, moving further away from the notion of teaching assistants as a 'Mums Army'. Anecdotal evidence from our recruitment to BA (Hons) Education courses suggests that more young men and women are opting to become teaching assistants – as a preparation for their Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP) or PGCE programmes, leading to Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) status. Having researched the experiences of participants on an NVQ programme, further research into experiences of BA students, as a comparison, would be interesting. How do these students combine their (young) families with study, how are their knowledge and skills utilised in school, are they regarded differently because of their qualifications, despite the lack of differentiation in level of teaching assistant within the current career structure.

Implications

The main issues arising from this research are not only for the schools but also for the Local Education Authorities and on a national basis, policy makers. Recent research (Higgins *et al*., 2011:7), suggested that teaching assistants had a 'very low or no impact, for a high cost'. Therefore, if teaching assistants are employed with the intention of raising standards and improving pupil attainment, they should not undertake task they are currently routinely assigned to do. Instead, they need the training and support necessary to fulfil their roles, also acknowledging and building

on current strengths and previous experience. Teaching assistants and their teachers should be allocated time, for which the teaching assistant is paid, to discuss planning and other pupil or school related issues. To give more status to the important role teaching assistants fulfil, with regard to supporting our next generation in their education, the following need to be implemented:

- clear job descriptions
- clear career structure and related pay structure, that takes experience and qualifications into account
- permanent contracts
- adequate conditions of service, which do not rely on the goodwill of teaching assistants
- opportunities for staff development and training, related to outcomes of appraisals
- training for teachers to work most effectively with their support staff, including training in how to support them and conducting appraisals if relevant.

To conclude, if teaching assistants are deployed with a view to raising standards and are seen to be an integral part of the school staff, they need to be treated as the para-professionals they are, supported by the school employing them. After all, as stated by one of the participants:

> Emma: I tell you why we do it, we care, we want to do the best job possible, we want to make a difference.

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Appendix 1

National occupational standards for supporting teaching and learning in schools (sample unit)

STL1 Provide support for learning activities
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STL1 Provide support for learning activities

UNIT SUMMARY

Who is this unit for?

This unit is for those who support the teacher in providing learning activities.

What is this unit about?

This unit is about the support provided to the teacher and pupils to ensure effective teaching
and learning. It involves agreeing with the teacher what you will do to support planned
learning activities, providing the agreed support and giving feedback to the teacher about
how well the activity went.

The learning activities may be for individual pupils, groups of pupils or the whole class.
However your contribution to supporting the learning activities is likely to involve you working
only with individuals or small groups. The learning activities may be delivered in the classroom or any setting where teaching and learning takes place such as field studies,
educational visits, extended hours provision and study support arrangements.

This unit contains three elements:

1.1 Support the teacher in planning learning activities
1.2 Support the delivery of learning activities

1.3 Support the teacher in the evaluation of learning activities

Linked units

STL6 Support literacy and numeracy activities

STL8 Use information and communication technology to support pupils' learning

STL11 Contribute to supporting bilingual/multilingual pupils

STL18 Support pupils' learning activities

STL23 Plan, deliver and evaluate teaching and learning activities under the direction of a
teacher

STL24 Contribute to the planning and evaluation of teaching and learning activities

National occupational standards for supporting teaching and learning in schools

STL1 Provide support for learning activities

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STL1 Provide support for learning activities

Glossary of terms used in this unit

Difficulties
potential barriers and hindrances to your providing the required support for the planned learning activities, such as inadequate time or the need for additional expertise and/or development

Feedback providing the teacher with information about:

• the pupils' response to the learning activity

• the materials used

• your contribution to supporting the activity

Learning activities the learning activities planned by the teacher for individual pupils, groups of pupils, or the whole class. The activities may relate to a single lesson or span several lessons, for example, as part of a topic, project or theme. They may be delivered in the classroom or any setting where teaching and learning takes place such as field studies, educational visits, extended hours provision and study support arrangements

Learning resources materials, equipment (including ICT), software, books and

other written materials (eg. handouts, worksheets), DVDs,
etc. that are required to support teaching and learning

Planning deciding with the teacher what you will do, when, how and with which pupils, to ensure that planned learning activities are implemented effectively. The plan may be recorded in writing by the teacher or yourself, or just agreed verbally between you

National occupational standards for supporting teaching and learning in schools

STL1 Provide support for learning activities

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STL1 Provide support for learning activities

1.1 Support the teacher in planning learning activities

Performance criteria

You need to:

P1 offer constructive and timely suggestions as to the support you can provide to a planned learning activity

P2 identify and explain any difficulties you may have in providing the support needed

P3 agree your role in implementing the learning activity

P4 make sure you are adequately prepared for your contribution to the learning activity

1.2 Support the delivery of learning activities

Performance criteria

You need to:

P1 provide support for the learning activity as agreed with the teacher

P2 obtain and use the agreed learning resources

P3 provide support as needed to enable pupils to follow instructions

P4 make yourself available and easy for pupils to approach for support

P5 use praise, commentary and assistance to encourage pupils to stay on task

P6 monitor pupil response to the learning activities

P7 provide support as needed to enable pupils to complete any follow-up tasks set by the teacher

P8 promptly seek assistance if you experience difficulties in supporting the learning

activity as planned

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STL1 Provide support for learning activities

1.3 Support the teacher in the evaluation of learning activities

Performance criteria

You need to:

P1 offer constructive feedback on the learning activity in discussion with the teacher

P2 identify and explain any difficulties you had in providing the support needed

P3 share your feedback with the teacher at an appropriate time and place, and in a way

that maintains effective working relationships

P4 provide relevant information to contribute to the teacher's records and reports

National occupational standards for supporting teaching and learning in schools

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Appendix 2

Participant Information Sheet

Title of project / investigation: An exploration of the perceptions of teaching assistants: their backgrounds, roles and responsibilities, experiences on an NVQ programme, and their aspirations.

Brief outline of project, including an outline of the procedures to be used:

The purpose of this research is to find out what makes teaching assistants 'tick'. What motivated them to become a teaching assistant in the first place; what are their backgrounds; what aspirations do they have; how do they define success. In addition, I'm also interested in how teaching assistants perceive their training on an NVQ programme and their attitudes to learning in general, what supports or encourages them and what causes a barrier to learning.

To gain this information I will be carrying out interviews, either in focus groups or individually, or even by telephone if that suits.
All the views I am collecting will be used in such a way that they cannot be attributed to anyone specifically. In analysing the data I will be looking for patterns and themes across the responses that I collect.

Involvement in this research project is entirely voluntary. At any stage during the project you may withdraw from participation or withdraw the responses you have given. Your progress on the NVQ programme will not be affected, whether you agree to participate or would rather not.

On successful completion of the project I will host an informal coffee morning (or afternoon!), to share the outcomes with the participants.

Thank you very much for your cooperation!

Jodi Roffey-Barentsen

Tel: 07867786590
jroffey@brooklands.ac.uk

Appendix 3

Consent Form

Full title of project: An exploration of the perceptions of teaching assistants: their backgrounds, roles and responsibilities, experiences on an NVQ programme, and their aspirations.

Name and contact address of Researcher:

Jodi Roffey-Barentsen
Brooklands College, Heath Road, Weybridge KT13 8TT
jroffey@brooklands.ac.uk

		Please Initial Box
1	I confirm that I have read the information sheet and understand the purpose of the above study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and had these answered to my satisfaction.	☐
2	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.	☐
3	I agree to take part in the above study.	☐

		Please tick box Yes	No
4	I agree to the interview/focus group being audio recorded.	☐	☐

Name of participant	Signature	Date
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date

Appendix 4

Discussion Schedule

- Reason(s) for becoming a TA
- Period of having been a TA
- Type of school
- Type of contact / job title
- Roles and responsibilities
- Previous employment
- Experience on the NVQ programme
- Support from your school; financially / time for study / mentor
- Hopes / expectations / aspirations for the future?
- Age range 20-30 30-40 40-50 over 50

Appendix 5

Extract from Transcript Focus group 2

Researcher: Jodi
Participants: Emma, Fiona, Gina, Helen, Irene, Katherine and Laura

Jodi: Just for the benefit of having everything on tape can I just confirm with you that you all agreed to be here and don't mind participating.

All: YES

Jodi: oh lovely, thank you very much. For my first (.) question really is why you have become teaching assistants, what is your background?

Emma: I think initially..... because I had young children it fits school hours.....I actually really enjoy helping children to then actually go and get paid for it is even better.

Katherine: I didn't know a job like that existed when I started helping

Emma: no, no neither did I. Its only when you actually get into the environment that you actually…

Katherine: then you find out, you realise that a lot of the other people there are also mums with young children and you realise that you can actually do it.

Jodi: Did you start off as a volunteer

Several respondents: yes.....

Jodi: all of you?

All: yes

Fiona: I didn't.....

(laugh).....

Jodi: ooooh that's interesting..... and you said that you started being paid straight away

Fiona: well I erm I have taught in further education for years and through then reducing to part time and going in and helping in school with my own children just (.) could see where adult learners have their weaknesses and where those

weaknesses came from in education and I thought actually that's what I'd quite like to go into.
Jodi: that's interesting so you started with the adults then ..... trying to (.) remedy it.....

Fiona: yes

Jodi: wow

Laura: but again started, you know, once my children were at school and going in and helping and realising what jobs were available and my children were young so the hours suit and its.....the holidays as well

Jodi: yes the holidays

Laura: quite scary, staff knowing me as a mum and helper.

Fiona: cause it was quite scary when I first went in and a lot of.... knew me as a helper and knew what I had been doing and everyone expected an awful lot from me and I made it very clear that, you know, that was further education and I wanted something to recognise that this is now in erm compulsory education rather than....

Jodi: well that's really interesting.....how long have you been a teaching assistant?

Emma: 3 years
Fiona: me too
Katherine: and me, erm , well 3 ½
Gina: 8
Laura: 6
Helen: only 4
Irene: yeah, 4

Jodi: ..... so you're all quite experienced. What do your roles involve?

Appendix 6

Glossary of acronyms

ALS	Additional Literacy Support
BIS	Department of Business, Innovation and Skills
CACHE	Council for Awards in Children's Care and Education
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
DfE	Department for Education
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
ECM	Every Child Matters
ELS	Early Literacy Support
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
FTE	Full-time Equivalent
GTC	General Teaching Council for England
HLTA	Higher Level Teaching Assistant
HMI	Her Majesty's Inspectorate
INSET	In-Service Educational Training
LEA	Local Education Authority
LSA	Learning Support Assistant
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
NLS	National Literacy Strategy

NNS	National Numeracy Strategy
NOS	National Occupational Standard
NQF	National Qualification Framework
NQT	Newly Qualified Teacher
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
PANDA	Planning and Achievement Document
PPA	Planning, Preparation and Assessment
PRU	Pupil Referral Unit
QTS	Qualified Teacher Status
SEAL	Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SLD	Severe Learning Difficulties
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
SSEN	Statement of Special Educational Needs
SSSNB	School Support Staff Negotiating Body
STA	Specialist Teacher Assistant
TA	Teaching Assistant
TDA	Training and Development Agency for Schools
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
WAMG	Workforce Agreement Monitoring Group