

'Yes, but...' rhetoric, reality and resistance in teaching assistants' experiences of inclusive education

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Background

This paper examines the role of teaching assistants (TAs) working in special educational needs (SEN) in an increasingly complex and diverse context. The role of the TA has been given more attention recently, partly due to the increased focus on their effectiveness within an inclusive education system (Cajkler et al., 2007a, 2007b; Blatchford et al., 2009) in a time of workforce reform (Burgess and Shelton Mayes, 2007, 2009, Groom, 2006, Gunter et al., 2005.) The research takes a life history approach to examining the experiences of TAs within inclusive contexts and focuses upon how their backgrounds and experiences impact upon their role within the classroom, as well as how their experiences within inclusive classrooms demonstrate ambiguity, tension and contradictions.

Research Questions

Rather than a focus on pupil and institutional outcomes, it is the intention of this paper to analyse the tensions between the policy and institutional frameworks of inclusion and how TAs experience this. TAs' experiences of contradictions, tensions, resistance and also pleasures of their work will be explored from their own perspectives. The personal interpretations, understandings and day-to-day implementation of inclusion will be the focus (Sikes et al., 2007.)

The study follows the approach of O'Brien and Garner (2001) who examine TAs' perceptions of how they are currently viewed and some indications as to how they would prefer to be regarded. O'Brien and Garner highlight that TAs bring a wide range of life experiences which can be drawn on as resources for teaching.

Methods

Evidence of TAs' experiences was sought by the use of two focus groups, comprising of one student group who were also TAs, and one mixed group of TAs and SENCOs. The student TAs attended a London university following an undergraduate course and taking modules on special educational needs. Three TAs were also interviewed using a life history/autobiographical approach. The total sample size was eleven.

The study used an opportunity sample based on responses to an advert placed in two major special needs magazine, the magazine of a teacher union, and an electronic request that went to all students in the university in which the author is working. The transcripts of the focus groups and interviews produced the data for analysis via NVivo and were informed by Huberman's study (1993.)

The results are presented as case studies, following Lawson et al., to examine participants' understandings and experiences of inclusion. The results focus on personal, subjective and emotional understandings of inclusion and how participants had come to develop their views.

All participants were asked to complete a consent form and were issued with an information sheet for the project. Respondents were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the project at any point. Due to the nature of the responses, some participants were concerned that they might be identified by their school or their local authority. Therefore, all identifying information has been changed, including names of participants, schools and local authorities. This perhaps has led to a degree of artificiality in the names substituted in the paper, but this was felt to be necessary in order to render the participants completely anonymous.

Frame

The use of qualitative techniques such as narrative and autobiographical investigations provided interviewees with the opportunity of telling their own stories in their own ways, similar to O'Brien and Garner's approach (2001.). This helped in the reconstruction and interpretation of meaningful features and incidences in respondents' lives (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1989, Lawson et al., 2006, Sikes et al., 2007.)

Life history can be seen as 'sociologically read biography' (Bertaux, 1981.) The popularity of auto/biography is that it is a form of 'licensed voyeurism' into the lives of others (Measor and Sikes 1992, p. 209), which brings its own challenges, to be addressed in the paper. The approach uses qualitative techniques which provides interviews with the opportunity of telling their own stories in their own ways.

When assessing the advantages of a life history approach, Goodson argues that life history is crucial to an understanding of teaching, as 'in understanding something so intensely personal as teaching, it is critical we know about the person the teacher is' (Goodson, 1992, p. 234.) In their accounts about school, teachers and TAs constantly referred to personal and biographical influences on their career. According to Nias, 'the self is a crucial element in the way teachers themselves construe the nature of their job' (1989, p.13) Although most life history research focuses on teachers, the same advantages apply to examining the experiences of the TAs.

Professional practices are embedded in wider life concerns (Goodson, 1992.) What goes on inside classrooms is closely related to what goes on in teachers' and TAs' lives outside the classroom. The way that TAs work is also grounded in their backgrounds, their biographies, and in the kinds of workers they have become. Life history is informative in its own right, but also plays a role in furthering understanding of a wide range of topics concerning education and schooling and can link teachers' and TAs' stories to social and political developments (Goodson and Sikes, 2001.)

Research findings

Emerging results from the interviews and focus groups are explored within the paper. This current paper builds on and extends previous life history research, and takes a case study approach to presenting the findings and focuses on: how TA's life experiences influence their work in the classroom; TAs relationships with other staff; the impact of gender on the TA role; their understandings of inclusion and models of disability; motivations to carry out the role; and tensions between official policy and practice on the ground.

TAs reported frustration with how policy had influenced the micro level of school contexts, particularly around issues of classroom management, professional identity, feelings of expertise, and working with colleagues and the increasing intensification and complexity of their functions.

This is a work in the early stages of development. However, the illustrations show that working in SEN is partly characterised by contradictions, tensions and ambiguity about how inclusion is operating in practice.

The conclusion of the paper identifies the significance of the study for the implementation of policy such as Every Child Matters (DfES, 2004) the Children's Plan (DCSF, 2007) and workforce reform (DfES, 2003.). It demonstrates the impact of policy demands upon their day-to-day work and the tensions between the demands of policy and TA's feelings of self-efficacy around meeting such demands. It also highlights that the impact of inclusive policy should not be measured solely in terms of policy outcomes but also on the ways it impacts on TAs in personal, subjective and emotional ways.