

**0237**

## **Chameleon or Chimera? The role of the Higher Level Teaching Assistant in English Schools**

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### **Background**

The role of the Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) was introduced into schools in England in 2005 as part of a remodeling agenda for the school workforce. This new status was a recognition that some Teaching Assistants (TAs) in schools were working at a higher level and national standards were devised against which this could be assessed. To date approximately 25,000 HLTAs have been awarded the status using the national standards, but their role within the remodeled school workforce has been determined locally at the level of the school. The metaphor used in the title of this paper attempts to describe this differential deployment in terms of chameleon adapting and adopting a professional status and role to suit the local surroundings, or chimera developing a hybrid role, something betwixt and between a teacher and a TA. The effects of adopting these two positions on the development of a coherent and consistent workforce and on the professional development of HLTAs is examined in this paper using a case study approach with a small group of HLTAs who gained the status in 2006/7.

### **Research Questions**

The case study focuses on evaluating the experiences of 37 HLTA's in the North West of England who took part in a locally devised mentoring programme in 2006/07. Participants were from both primary and secondary maintained schools in the region and were interviewed over a two year period. This paper reports on their perceptions of their evolving professional identity and access to professional learning during this period and aims:

- To investigate the impact on participants' perception of their status within the workplace in terms of their development and professional identity
- To determine how the professional learning of support staff is being organised within the Remodelling Agenda

### **Key Questions**

1. What is the impact of the local employment and deployment of support staff within a remodelled workforce in schools from the perspective of the HLTA role?
2. How has professional learning been developed for HLTA to enable them to undertake their evolving roles?
3. What are the potential implications for the traditional teacher role?

### **Methods**

#### **Methodology**

This study is concerned with participants' experiences and their perceptions of their own learning and development and therefore a qualitative approach was adopted to gather this data. The case study used for this research is an instrumental one as it attempts to examine the particular situation of workforce remodelling from a specific vantage point to gain insight into this phenomenon. The boundaries within which this study is being conducted are in terms of:

**Role** - all participants work as HLTA's and many work as mentors to colleagues

**Place** - all work within maintained schools in the North West area of England

**Time** - all have worked in support roles in schools for more than 5 years and their views have been sought over a period of 2 years.

Findings from the study do not claim to be representative of experience of workforce remodelling by those in other roles, in other places at other times, but rather offers a plausible explanation of the nexus between the experiences of the individuals in the study and the theoretical framework within which the study was developed.

### **Sampling**

The sample is purposive and comprises 37 HLTAs working in primary and secondary schools in the North West of England who undertook a locally devised peer mentoring course in 2006/7.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection took place in two phases, in phase 1 semi-structured questionnaires, one-to one semi-structured interviews and e-mail interviewing was used. In phase 2 email interviewing and asynchronous discussion groups on a closed social networking site were used to gather participants' views. This paper reports on findings from phase 2 of the research.

### **Frame**

The theoretical framework within which the study was undertaken includes concepts such as learning in the workplace (Boud & Solomon, 2001; Symes & McIntyre, 2000; Eraut, 1994; Solkin, 2006; Beaney, 2006) and notions of professional identity (Ozga & Lawn, 1981; Eraut, 1994; Englund, 1996; Bottery, 1998; Dillabough, 1999; Hargreaves, 2000). Additionally notions regarding the gendered nature of work in schools (Casey 1990, Dillabough 1999), the concept of the hidden care work of mothers (O'Brien, 2007, Griffiths & Smith 2005) and the commodification of women's emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983, Boler, 1999) are explored.

### **Research findings**

#### **Findings**

- The ambiguity of the HLTA role means that individuals have no recourse to comparison with equivalent roles in other schools which may affect progression opportunities for individuals and succession planning for schools.
- The lack of a national structure and the concept of adaptability, flexibility and fluidity which is afforded to the HLTA role, leaves individuals vulnerable to the capriciousness of senior managers and to some extent to charges of exploitation and abuse of goodwill.
- Paradoxically, it is the unstructured and adaptable nature of the HLTA role which the interviewees in the case study valued and appreciated.
- In the absence of a shared conception of what HLTA status means attempts to articulate the role by individual interviewees inevitably resort to the language of the teacher which presents problems as HLTAs are not teachers.
- The informal learning the participants received from teacher colleagues in terms of mentoring and role-modeling was valued very often much more than any formal learning they had undertaken.
- Opportunities to discuss with teacher colleagues what had been observed during this informal learning were not routine and in this situation it could be argued that what results is a morass of unexamined and untested empiricism which is uncritically applied in situ.

