Approaches to meeting the professional development and training needs of primary school teaching assistants

Dr Ayo Mansaray, Churchill Fellow 2013
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ABSTRACT

In 2013, I received a Churchill Travelling Fellowship, which facilitated 6 weeks of travel to the USA and Finland, to research issues concerning primary school teaching assistants and their professional development needs. I sought to find out how those needs and aspirations are identified and met, and to explore innovative and effective practices in the two different national and cultural contexts. During my travels, I visited university centres of expertise in teaching assistants’ roles and work, schools, and other institutions. I spoke with teaching assistants, academics, teachers, school leaders, and pupils. Some of the key recommendations, based on my findings, are: that effective in-service training for assistants should be comprehensive, systematic, evidence-based, and flexible in content and delivery; training should be backed by a robust and coherent policy development framework and supported by career counselling/advice; training should also be provided for teachers/managers on the supervision of assistants; and that universities have an important role to play, in partnerships with schools, local education authorities, to lead, broker and develop innovative training for assistants.
1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

In this section, I introduce the topic and concerns which inspired my application for a Churchill Travelling Fellowship, and the specific research questions which I formulated to guide my travels in the USA and Finland.

The past 15 years has witnessed a phenomenal growth in the number of educational support staff working in English primary schools, in particular, amongst those classified as teaching assistants (TAs). The term “TA” refers to paid adults who work in state schools providing pupil or classroom-based support, although it should be recognised that such individuals are known by varying job titles (e.g. classroom assistants, learning support assistants (LSAs), cover supervisors, higher-level teaching assistant (HLTAs), etc.). In the USA, an equally varied list of job titles is used for approximately the same role: two of the most widely used terms are “paraeducator” or “paraprofessional”– titles that have no currency in the UK. The use of the “para” prefix was introduced by Anna-Lou Pickett, an advocate for assistant training and professionalization, to emphasise the fact that TAs work “alongside” professionals (i.e. teachers). However, several individuals that I spoke to on my travels felt that the term was inappropriate, given assistants’ generally lower levels of pre-service training and education than teachers, and that it is not widely understood by the public. In Finland, the term used to refer to TAs, in translation, is “school assistant”. For ease of understanding, I will use the English, American, and Finnish terms interchangeably where context dictates.

According to English Department for Education (DfE, 2013) statistics, the number of TAs in England has increased from 53,400 (full-time equivalents) in 2000, to 146,7000 in 2012 (DfE, 2012). One of the spurs for this Travelling Fellowship was the realisation that the increasing use of assistants within primary school education was not confined to England, but observed in several other countries such as Scotland (Wilson et al., 2003), Ireland (Moran et al., 2002), the USA (Pickett et al., 2003), Finland (Takala, 2007) and Australia (Bourke, 2008). Concomitant with the rapid rise in the number of assistants, in England and elsewhere, has been the transformation of the assistant role itself. Once seen as “paint-pot washers” or more vaguely as “helpers” in the classrooms (Clayton, 1993), assistants have come to occupy a pivotal pedagogic role within primary schools in England, for example, in the implementation of curriculum interventions to raise standards – e.g. national literacy and numeracy strategies (Ofsted, 2002) – and in relation to the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs, those from black and minority ethnic groups, and low-attainers (Farrell et al., 2000; Mansaray, 2006; Margerison, 1997). Research consistently shows that assistants have an expanded role which encompasses active teaching with pupils as well as wider pastoral roles (Webster et al., 2011). In fact, it has been suggested that, for many of these supported pupils, assistants are their main educators (Blatchford et al., 2012).

A key issue identified by researchers and classroom practitioners in England is the preparation of assistants for their enhanced roles. Assistant preparedness refers here to professional development opportunities, curriculum and pedagogic knowledge, as well as aspects of everyday practices (e.g. involvement in planning and feedback loops) and working relationships with teachers. These factors contribute to assistant effectiveness and impact on children’s learning (Blatchford et al., 2008; Ofsted, 2008). Studies have shown that assistants are often inadequately prepared for their enhanced roles, with limited training opportunities and time to meet with teachers or plan learning activities (Hutchings et
al., 2009). Recent research by Blatchford and colleagues (2012) has suggested that poor and inadequate preparedness, which is common and widespread, may contribute to poorer academic progress for pupils supported by assistants. Whilst their research calls into question the use of assistants to raise standards and improve pupils’ learning, they also point, perhaps more pressingly, to the need to better support the preparation of assistants, particular for those in post.

These therefore were the concerns which framed my questions and aims for the Churchill Travelling Fellowship. I wanted to explore how the training and professional development needs of TAs are identified and effectively met in different national and cultural contexts (where assistants are routinely deployed) and how this can enhance their preparedness. As an academic with an interest in the role and working lives of assistants in the UK, I know that there has been very little comparative, international research or evidence base attending to effective models of supporting the training and professional development of assistants, in ways which enhance their preparedness, and thus their capacity to impact positively on children’s learning. Thus, my Fellowship sought to explore the research questions outlined below:

1. To identify the professional and training needs and aspirations of TAs within primary/elementary schools in the USA/Finland;
2. Explore how those needs and aspirations are met at the school and wider levels;
3. To identify effective and innovative ways to address the professional development needs of assistants, particularly those that enhance their preparedness;
4. Explore the guiding assumptions, rationale, processes and mechanisms which underlie effective and innovative practices.

As well as addressing these questions, I hope that my Fellowship will enhance my professional capacity to develop future research and scholarly activities relating to assistants’ role and work, and pupil learning, encompassing a comparative international dimension. However, this is not an academic research report; there is much in what follows that needs unravelling and deeper analysis. Hopefully, this is a useful beginning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank everyone that I met and spoke with on my travels in the USA and Finland for being so generous with their time. I learned so much in our often wide ranging conversations. Hopefully, it was mutual. In particular, I would like to thank a number of individuals who supported my Fellowship: they played many roles in facilitating my travels, as drivers, tour guides, local historians, translators, diary planners, and much more: Ritu Chopra, Geri DePalma, Michael Giangreco, and Arja Virta. Lastly, I would like to thank the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for making it all happen.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Dr Ayo Mansaray, FRSA, is a lecturer in Education at Brunel University. He conducts research into educational policy and inequalities in education.
2. WHY THE USA AND FINLAND?

I chose the USA because the assistant role is well established within the educational system, and routinely deployed. Secondly, there are a number of centres of research excellence in higher education institutions (HEIs) across the USA with expertise in study of the roles, impact and working lives of assistants. Also, at the socio-cultural and linguistic levels, there are similarities in the American and British systems of education, although these superficial resemblances should not be overstated, as I soon came to appreciate.

In choosing Finland, I wanted to compare my experiences in the USA with a European country and national educational context that was significantly different. Finland has one of the world's most esteemed and high performing education systems, which consistently out ranks those of the USA and the UK in international tests of Mathematics, Reading, Writing and Science (Sahlberg, 2011). Perhaps even more intriguingly, Finland manages to achieve such excellence whilst remaining one of the most equal educational systems, with relatively small variance in performance between students (OECD., 2013). My preliminary research indicated that assistants were deployed within the Finnish education system, in both mainstream and special education settings (Takala, 2007). Overall, I hoped that choosing these countries would provide for an interesting contrast in which to explore my research questions.

THE PROJECT DESIGN AND VISITS

I visited the USA from the 16th April to the 26th May 2013. During that time, I travelled to Salt Lake City, Utah, where I attended, from the 16th - 21st April, the annual National Resource Centre for Paraeducators (NRCP) conference. This is the foremost gathering of assistants, academics, and education professionals on issues relating to TAs in the USA. It provided an ideal introduction and contextualisation of the national level picture, and opportunities to meet with, and hear from, conference organisers and delegates from across the USA, including the host state of Utah, about practices and developments.

After Utah, I then spent two weeks, 21st April to 5th May, at the Paraprofessional Resource and Research Center (The PAR²A Center) at the University of Colorado Denver. Denver is the state capital of Colorado, in the West of the country. Flanked by the Rocky Mountains, at a mile altitude, Denver is a bustling, multicultural city. During my two-week stay, I met and interviewed all the staff at the centre, observed meetings and other centre business, and also met with various academics within the School of Education and Human Development in which the centre was located. My main contact was Dr Ritu Chopra, executive director of the centre and a recognised authority on assistant training and development. I visited two schools in the Denver metropolitan area, the Escuela Tlatelolco and Edison Elementary School where I observed lessons, and spoke to staff and children.

Following Denver, I spent two weeks, 11th - 26th May, at the Center on Disability and Community Inclusion at the University of Vermont (UVM) in Burlington. Burlington is the largest city in Vermont, a small, predominantly rural state in the North-East corner of the USA that is known for its liberal and socially-progressive values. My visit was focused around my main contact Professor Michael Giangreco, a leading expert on TAs in special education. I also met and interviewed several academics and researchers within the centre and the wider College of Education and Social Services. In terms of
schools, I visited the Integrated Arts Academy and Sustainability Academy in Burlington School District and several schools in Essex Town School and Williston School Districts, a few miles outside of Burlington.

In addition to these visits, I conducted a telephone interview with Thalia Thompson who was, for many years, until its closure in 2012, director of the Paraprofessional Academy based at the Center for Advanced Study in Education, The City University of New York. The Academy was established in 1993 by the New York City Board of Education to address problems in retaining, training, and providing career advancement opportunities for TAs. I also interviewed Professor Kent Gerlach, a leading academic based at the Pacific Lutheran University, and policy advisor at state and federal levels on the training and supervision of TAs.

Having returned to England, I embarked on the second leg of the Fellowship from the 17th - 31st August. My visit to Finland was shorter and less extensive. I spent a week at the Department of Teacher Education, in the Faculty of Education, at the University of Turku. Whilst there, I met and interviewed several academics; visited the Turun Normaalikoulu (a teacher training school affiliated with the University of Turku) and Turku International School, where I observed lessons and interviewed teachers, assistants and other staff. My visit was facilitated by Professor Arja Virta. I also visited an adult education college (Turun Aikuiskoulutuskeskus) which provided education and training for classroom assistants, and spoke with the programme leader of the course and some students. Travelling to Helsinki, I met with Professor Marjatta Takala of the University of Oulu and Helsinki, an expert on TAs and special education in Finland, and visited a special school for communication and language disorders in Helsinki (Brahenpuiston koulu). I also met with Professor Markku Jahnukainen, a leading expert on the comparative study of the Finnish and Canadian education systems.

In a project of this kind, some of my visits and opportunities to meet with individuals were planned; others arose from chance encounters whilst travelling. I used the opportunity afforded by the Fellowship not only to increase my knowledge about TAs, but various aspects of the USA and Finnish education systems. In terms of research methods used in the project, this consisted of ad hoc observations; recorded semi-structured qualitative individual interviews with TAs, teachers, academics, and education professionals; and the collection of policy, training and other documents.

Having outlined the project design and itinerary, the rest of this report details the findings of the Fellowship for the USA and Finland, followed by an integrated conclusions and recommendations section, in that order.
The political system of the USA affords individual states significant autonomy over the provision and delivery of public education, which is both a source of strength, in terms of the capacity to innovate, and weakness in relation to consistency and equality of provision. Schooling is a state responsibility and generally funded by locally raised taxes, which means that there are significant differences in the level of resourcing between school districts, and local authorities. This means that any educational change and implementation, and therefore practice, can vary considerably across the country.

It was clear from my visits and interviews that the identification of assistants’ training needs was being driven by the response of state government to federal legislation. According to Kent Gerlach, an academic and someone closely involved in the policy process, the period of 1997-2004 was important politically in the recent evolution of the paraeducator role. During this time, a number of key pieces of federal legislation were passed. Key provisions for assistants were made in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 and 2004. Together these pieces of federal legislation sought to clarify roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals in relation to their work in schools in urban areas with significantly disadvantaged intakes (referred to in the USA as Title 1) and Special Educational Needs (SEN). These laws required assistants, and all educators, working in these educational settings, to be “highly qualified”, appropriately trained and supervised. According to Pickett the IDEA sought to:

*Establish standards and systems to ensure that a highly skilled paraeducator workforce was available to support teachers’ programme and administrative responsibilities … [and] have the skills and knowledge necessary to meet the identified needs of learners with disabilities.*

Some of these changes were prompted by political concerns that pupils were being taught by “unqualified” and inappropriately deployed paraprofessional staff in Title 1 schools, and that this was only acceptable because these were disadvantaged children (often from minority communities). As one director of compensatory education said: “you would never see people without a college education teaching rich kids, because their parents wouldn’t stand for it” (Title 1 Report, 1999: 12). The NCLB defined paraeducators’ roles and responsibilities, and the need for “career developments systems” in place to ensure assistants, supported by Title 1 funds, are “highly qualified”. Thus since 2002, all newly employed paraeducators are required to have a minimum of two years of tertiary level education to meet the “highly qualified” requirement, through an earned associates degree¹, or demonstrate that they meet these standards through a formal state or local academic assessment² (i.e. tests). Overall, the framework specified in the IDEA and NCLB legislation threw a spotlight on the issues of role

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¹ No direct equivalent exists in England, but associates degrees are similar to Higher National Diplomas and Foundation degrees introduced in 2001, and normally represent two years of full-time study at a higher education institution.

² In addition, all paraeducators must have a high school diploma or its equivalent.
clarification, preparedness, training and qualification, and encouraged states and education authorities to act.

Whilst it was highly progressive and laden with good intentions, several of my interviewees pointed out that in practice the legislation had not led to the improvements in support for assistant training and career development that they had hoped. Firstly, given the often prohibitive costs of higher education in the USA, interviewees suggested that there was little incentive for assistants to attain an associates degree if they could meet the standards by taking a test. One of those contributing to the policy debate at the time was Kent Gerlach:

The best thing is it [the IDEA] focused in on paras need to be qualified. … It focused in on this appropriate supervision. … If you look at what the law says it says, [associates degree] or you pass this test. Well why would you go to community college then? You know and spend two years doing that. … All the money that we put into community college development went out the window on a law that I thought was going to support paras, which actually pulled us back.

Equally, states and municipalities saw the administration of a test as preferable to the more costly option of supporting assistants’ training aspirations. In addition, tests are not run by the federal government and states can choose their test provider. Different providers offer different tests, with different pass marks. Consequently, there are significant variations between states on what constitutes “highly qualified” for a TA. The tests themselves are general, basic assessments of literacy and mathematics, with little specific to the paraeducator role and its competencies. As Thalia Thompson, director of the Paraprofessional Academy added:

It was just a way for the state to sort of say…this is the minimum standard that you need. … It’s not that they came up with a sort of national curriculum, for example, in terms of what they wanted every paraeducator to know.

Despite these problems and issues, there were examples of states and education authorities that were engaging with the legislation and implementing robust and innovative systems of support and training, and policy development, which will be discussed in the next section.

Several of my interviewees identified pre-service preparation, structured in-service provision, and access to tertiary education as key issues for paraprofessional training. Others suggested that the focus should be on teachers, and preparing them to lead and work in teams with assistants. I was told that many teachers feel unprepared and ill-equipped to supervise their assistants. As a delegate at the NRCP conference said: the issue is “not lack of training but lack of supervision”. Some reported poor systems of performance management for assistants. Kent Gerlach reiterated that training must be considered within a well-developed policy framework. He spoke about the experience in Washington State:

I feel training paras alone could actually be problematic, and the reason I say that is … they seem to be getting more responsibility and less supervision, so I’m one that really does believe in supervision but I also believe in policy and guidelines. … So I’m an advocate for handbooks. … it’s not just training, training, training which will go nowhere unless we have a [legal] foundation.
A key and often overlooked issue, both in England and USA, is the dearth of career guidance for assistants. Many individuals “fall” into paraeducator work when their children are very young or school age, with little or no prior experience within the education field. Few are knowledgeable about the opportunities for training and career development available, particularly in tertiary higher education. I was thus interested to talk with Thalia Thompson, director of the now defunct Paraprofessional Academy. Though its name may suggest that the Academy had provided training, its main role was providing career counselling and brokering staff development opportunities for paraeducators. The Academy, Thompson said, arose out of a need for “consistent and effective academic planning and career counselling services” for paraeducators, in particular, support in navigating the community college system in New York City. She described what the academy did:

*It reviewed … [paraeducators'] documents, provided them with career counselling and information as to which college or colleges might be the better choice for them in terms of their career goals and getting from point A to point B … and it was you know kind of nice because it wasn’t in the context of a busy administrative office … they really got to sit down in a very quiet sort of educational setting with somebody who actually cared.*

The service was provided to both pre and in-service paraeducators. It was, she continued, for “for newly hired paraeducators and substitutes … but it was also for full time paraprofessionals who might have been there for a while but would just like to learn how to do their jobs better, and a lot of them were interested”. Thompson pointed out that career counselling is very important for paraeducators, since most do not want, or intend, to pursue teacher education programmes.

### INNOVATIVE TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORKS

Marilyn Likins, director of the National Resource Centre for Paraeducators (NRCP), has written that effective training for assistants should include content on: roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals; ethical issues for paraprofessionals; instructional strategies; behaviour management practices; basic academic skills (i.e., reading, writing, and maths); observing and recording student performance; teamwork and communicating with students, teachers, parents, and other colleagues; health issues; working with students with disabilities (2002: 6).

At the NRCP conference, I learnt about the work being done in Utah, which satisfied most of Likins’ recommendations. Utah has established a consortium (Utahparas), with representation from local universities, teachers, paraeducators, senior education professionals at the state and district levels, which works to enhance, support and broker training and development opportunities for paraprofessionals within the state. This has led to a state level “paraeducator handbook” which sets out the role definitions, expectations, standards, working relationships between assistants and teachers, and the laws regulating paraeducators. In Granite School District, they have organised their training and development for paraeducators into four “lanes” (A-B-C-D). Assistants can, depending on their level of prior experience, education and career stage, enrol on a programme of core and optional courses (e.g. on teaching strategies for mathematics, inclusion, etc.). Support is also provided for those who want to undertake further studies or teacher education at university. The model recognises that paraeducators have different training needs and aspirations that require an organised and coherent response. I was referred to other great examples of policy developments by delegates at the NRCP.
conference, such as those in Washington State and Pennsylvania where the state education department is using an online platform to deliver a range of training and professional development courses for paraprofessionals as well as teachers.

In concluding this section on the context of assistants’ work and issues of training, it is worth commenting briefly on the NRCP conference, as it was a very enlightening and unique experience. The organisation itself was founded by the doyen of the paraprofessional movement, Anna-Lou Pickett, in 1979, and is currently led by Marilyn Likins, a Professor of Special Education at Utah State University. I met and attended meetings with Marilyn and Anna-Lou, and learnt a phenomenal amount about the history of paraprofessionals and their own important personal contributions. The NRCP conference is the most visible aspect of their activism and advocacy in driving forward the training and career development agenda. It is a connecting event and space, where academics, paraeducators, policy makers and senior education officials meet and converse, and reflect on issues at the national level. I experienced this process in the committee meetings, plenary sessions, workshops and presentations that I attended, and in the many conversations I had with delegates. For paraeducator delegates, sessions could count towards their training record, and to top it all there is an outstanding paraeducator award! In the conference, Marilyn and Anna-Lou have created a vital space for the articulation, development and mobilisation of assistants’ voices.

4. DENVER AND THE PAR²A CENTER

The work of the PAR²A Center is an exemplar in many respects, and I gained much from my visit and conversations with its staff. First, it is a highly successful and networked institution linking schools, local education agencies, and higher education. It is a centre which both provides training and researches issues impacting assistants’ work and roles, located within the University of Colorado Denver and supported by grant funding. Second, over the past two decades under the leadership of Dr Nancy French and subsequently Dr Ritu Chopra, it has developed a highly respected training model to identify, support and meet the needs and aspirations of paraeducators, in terms of career and skills development. Through its work, the centre has also influenced policy and debate not only in Denver, and the state of Colorado, but the wider inter/national conversation. The centre has also more recently extended its work with primary school paraeducators into early years settings, as well as a transition into a teaching programme (funding for which has now ended), which supported assistants with degree level qualifications onto alternative routes into teacher qualified status. The centre also maintains an online resource database, collating training materials and research on paraeducators.

The centre aims to enable schools and state agencies to enhance the work of their paraeducators and meet their federal duties (Chopra et al., 2009). The centre has developed its activities in the context of a large state that has significant rural communities, as well as the Denver conurbation, facing barriers such as lack of finance and local expertise, and small school size, which limit opportunities for engagement with training opportunities for teachers and assistants alike.
At the heart of the centre’s work in Denver and elsewhere is the **Comprehensive Training Opportunities for Paraprofessionals (CO-TOP)** programme. CO-TOP is a research-based programme which “provides in-service training to already-employed paraeducators who may have little preparation to do their jobs, and may or may not have prior college education” (Chopra et al., 2009: 4). The training is delivered through a network of CO-TOP-trained trainers – administrators, teachers and other qualified personnel, who work with assistants – to deliver the CO-TOP curriculum developed by the centre. Rather than delivering the training directly, the centre “trains the trainers”. Chopra, the director of the centre, explained the rationale for their approach:

> The premise behind this is that we need to enhance the capacity of school districts to be able to carry on the training themselves. So you give them trainers…who learn how to you know deliver the curriculum to them but also who know what a paraprofessional is, what kind of supervision they need, all those pieces.

Chopra went on to describe the training for trainers:

> Yes, it’s a very interactive training. … We set the stage, why we use paraprofessionals, why do we need to train them and what do they do, what is your role, what is their role – role clarity. Then we go into how to plan for paraprofessionals, how to delegate to them, how to provide them feedback, how to coach, on the job coaching, how to conduct meetings, planning, conflict management, problem solving because these are the skills teachers are not taught.
The curriculum consists of manuals for a number of courses, each referred to as a CO-TOP “Academy” designed by consultants and academics. Courses undergo continuous development and can count as credits towards an associates degree. The curricula include content on the supervision of assistants; the legal framework for paraeducators’ work (e.g. IDEA, NCLB and state policies, etc.); teamwork; interpersonal skills; behaviour management; general teaching strategies; instructional technologies; several courses on specific aspects of mathematics and literacy; English as an Additional Language (EAL); special education needs as well as a few practice-based courses. The CO-TOP approach thus offers a continually updated menu from a coherently designed curriculum that articulates with the community college system, and offers potential progression routes into teacher education for paraeducators who want to do so.

According to evaluation evidence provided by the PAR²A Center, the CO-TOP approach is effective in increasing teachers’ confidence in assistants’ work; paraeducators report greater confidence in their own effectiveness with students; and it improves assistant retention. CO-TOP has been implemented successfully within other states in the USA.

Figure 1: The CO-TOP model
The PAR²A Center has extended the original CO-TOP approach through additional funding into new arenas, for example, the Comprehensive Training Opportunities for Paraprofessionals in Early Intervention Services (CO-TOP*EIS). This project focuses on developing and implementing a Colorado state-wide system of training for paraprofessionals who work with families that have infants or toddlers (birth through to two years) with developmental delays or disabilities. One consequence of this work has been the creation of a job role and title for paraeducators who work in these contexts: Developmental Intervention Assistant (DI Assistant). Another interesting project is the Preparing Paraprofessionals for Early Childhood Education programme (P²ECE) which focuses on reviewing and enhancing courses on existing associates degree programmes at Colorado Community Colleges, by incorporating and aligning curricular content with national standards and competences.

During my stay in Denver, I visited two quite different schools in the Denver area. At the Edison School, I observed assistants at work in an intensive needs autism classroom. I was impressed by the collaborative teamwork of the special education teacher and two assistants. Both assistants had received specialist autism training and intended to go to teacher education programmes. I also visited the Escuela Tlateloco. This is a unique all-through community school that serves predominantly Latino/a children, and is located in what was historically a poor and working-class neighbourhood. Founded in 1970 as an outgrowth of the Latino/Chicano Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, the school’s curriculum and ethos is infused and enhanced by Chicano/Indigenous culture and aims to instil Chicano/a cultural pride and community leadership. Teaching and general interaction is conducted in both English and Spanish. Paraeducators, mainly Spanish speaking, play a very important role, supporting the school’s aims of creating empowering learning experiences, through their cultural
knowledge and linguistic skills. The school has a highly innovative curriculum and pedagogy that is grounded in experiential learning and culturally responsive pedagogies.

5. VERMONT – AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO THE ASSISTANT TRAINING AGENDA

My time in Vermont offered a very different perspective on my research. In contrast to the activism and pro-training agenda that I had encountered at the NRCP conference in Utah and the PAR²A Center in Colorado, Professor Michael Giangreco and colleagues at UVM, and the schools I visited in Vermont, approached the issues of paraeducator training largely from a learner perspective located within special education. This has resulted in a sceptical, and what might appear initially to be a critical, stance toward the use of paraeducators in primary schools.

The state of Vermont is known for its strong focus on the inclusion of students with disabilities and special educational needs. Over the past two decades Giangreco and colleagues have conducted research on the training of assistants, their deployment and impact on learners (e.g. Giangreco et al., 2005; Giangreco, 2010; Giangreco et al., 2012; Giangreco et al., 2001). In particular, Giangreco has raised concerns about the overreliance on assistants within primary schools, and the unintended consequences of their deployment for students with SEN (e.g. limiting their interactions with peers and teachers).

Giangreco wants education professionals to reconsider why paraeducators are used so routinely, and particularly in relation to some learners (those with SEN). For him, it is thinking foremost about what the learner needs, and sometimes that might be a paraeducator, but it could also be support from a specialist teacher or some other professional. As he explained:

*If the only tool you have is a hammer you treat everything like a nail you know and so by assuming that the answer is paraprofessionals in one way or another that is the answer to a whole bunch of problems related to supporting kids with disabilities as opposed to peer supports, more SENCOs [special educational needs co-ordinators] or more Special Ed. teachers.*

This is also an issue of social justice. There are concerns that in deploying some of the least well-trained and educated staff to work with learners that have the most complex and challenging needs, this reinforces societal assumptions about which groups of children are valued more in the education system.

*So while we’re really clear to say that we think that there can be a valued role for paraprofessionals, what we’re really challenging people to really ask the questions about is, is this an equitable service and would it be OK to provide this service to the non-disabled kids or is it a second class service.*
Another related issue which informs Giangreco and his colleagues' perspective on paraprofessional training is the “over” identification of SEN in American schools. For them, the (over) reliance on assistants to support pupils with SEN stems from, in part, the way SEN are identified and organised. According to USA government statistics 2010-2011, on average 13 percent of school students have a SEN, as specified by the IDEA, and a resulting Individual Education Plan (IEP) which tends to be implemented by paraeducators. These students are classified as having a “learning disability”. The comparable proportion in English schools that have a statement of SEN is approximately 2.8 percent in 2013, and this has remained unchanged over the past five years. The percentage of school children who are on the special needs “register” is about 16 percent, which is much closer to the USA figure. However, the English SEN “register” is a more fluid school categorisation which merely highlights children who need additional support, and has little to say about any underlying conditions. Giangreco expands on the situation in the USA:

_We identify approximately 13 percent of our students as disabled. Most of those students have learning disabilities or very mild speech language impairments. In most other western countries they would not be considered disabled. They would be considered to have some kind of action plus need, they might need some accommodation but they’re not full blown disabled. Here they’re disabled and so we’ve developed this really skewed sense of what disability is. Like everybody’s disabled. The term almost doesn’t mean anything anymore. You can meet a child at a school who is articulate, does well in school, participating in all the regular Ed. curriculum and then find out that they have a learning disability._

One of the reasons for such high rates of learning disabilities, according to critics, is the way SEN is identified and labelled in many states. Many use the “discrepancy model” which uses the diagnostic criteria of the “discrepancy” between a child’s academic performance and their assessed cognitive ability. Academics and schools in Vermont are attempting to move away from this model, as part of their rethink of special education provision, to a **response to intervention** (RTI) approach. RTI is a “treatment-oriented diagnostic process” with three tiers, with the majority of learners at the bottom and a few at the top, with the assumption being that only those at the apex will have intensive /severe SEN and disabilities which will require IEPs (see diagram below).

![RTI Tiers](https://eddataexpress.ed.gov/data-element-explorer.cfm/deid/5/)

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RTI is a radical attempt to integrate special and mainstream education on a continuum, and suggests that with appropriate, early, evidence-based intervention few children should require intensive, full-time special education. Thus, within this approach, assistants have a different, more specific and targeted role to play rather than the general “teacher-type” roles they have assumed in relation to learners with SEN, because in part SEN is no longer a distinct and segregated provision. Equally this approach will have implications for the kind of training that assistants want and need.

RTI IN PRACTICE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING ASSISTANTS

Professor Giangreco and colleagues at UVM are working with several school districts to develop and implement RTI. The particular version of RTI being developed in the school districts I visited is referred to as **multi-tiered systems of support (RTI-MTSS)**. It is a research-based institutional model of school improvement and change management that “meets the needs of all students by eliminating silos and unifying general and special education in a deliberate, intentional, ongoing collaborative and data-driven way that improves outcomes for all of our students” (Essex Town School District). The aim of adopting this approach is to shift the emphasis away from classification and diagnosis of learning difficulties to prevention. According to one director of special education: “[it’s about] intervention before identification, that’s what we are trying to do because identification doesn't really help the kid: intervention is what does. … Philosophically I think we over identify because learning disabilities should be taken care of by good first instruction and differentiation”. Within RTI-MTSS, decisions about support for all pupils are made collaboratively between special education and mainstream classroom teachers. Key components of this approach are that it is systematic and comprehensive; based on effective collaboration; high quality instruction and intervention that is responsive and differentiated; with a
comprehensive and balanced assessment system; and expertise – supported by well-designed professional development – (Vermont Department of Education., 2012). In Williston School District, these components have been fleshed out in a set of guiding principles, reproduced below:

**Collaboration** – common structured planning time, with classroom teachers, paraeducators, special education teachers to co-create teaching opportunities, applying differentiation, universal design, multi-level instruction and other pedagogic strategies.

**Inclusive practices** – clear understanding of connection of the intervention and the core curriculum. The idea that a targeted intervention *supplements* but does not *supplant* the primary teaching undertaken by the qualified teacher. Classroom teachers maintain a primary role in curricula and planning for teaching.

**Expertise** – an intervention/specialised programme is delivered by the most qualified professional for the given area. Paraeducator use should be limited and circumscribed (e.g. supplementary reinforcement of skills, expert teachers leading instruction).

As a consequence of implementing this model of special education, schools have had to rethink how they organise their classrooms and staffing. It has meant looking at how work is distributed amongst teachers and assistants (who does what and when). This has involved more planned use of co-teaching by special education and classroom teachers at the same time, which as a special education teacher told me, can have its challenges: “We really try to keep it fluid. So, it’s not all the kids who are always struggling with me, or that the classroom teacher is always the one in front. We switch roles”. This more collaborative way of working has focused attention on assistant deployment and training, and awareness that assistants were often being tasked with duties that they were not sufficiently prepared or qualified to do. As a director of special education explained:

> One of the guiding principles is called expertise, and we are not sure that the paraeducator has the expertise to do some of the things that we’ve been asking them to do before and should be done by a licensed professional. We are in a transition time where we are shifting over.

There was recognition that additional resources were needed to support these new working practices. He continued: “to make the co-teaching work and this different distribution, we really need to look at our schedules and how we are going to reconfigure that, and para[professional] resources”. Implementing changes to the way assistants were being deployed was challenging for everyone concerned, as he explained:

> It’s hard because a lot of those paraeducators really like the instruction, they signed up for that job because they can be a teacher but not have the pressure that the rest of us have…so I think that’s going to be an issue for us and for them. … We are making that gradual shift. We still value them and we need them, but we are way over-staffed in terms of the rest of the country. It’s a shift for the teachers as you can imagine too, teachers like it because they [paraeducators] do their work [for them]. Five…years ago we couldn’t have an IEP meeting without a paraeducator because the teacher didn’t know what was going on, now we have a practice where paras don’t come to the meeting, so you have to know about the kids.
In order to facilitate new working roles and arrangements, the schools I visited were conducting skills audits of their paraprofessionals to ensure a better match between paraprofessionals’ interests and strengths and their roles and responsibilities. At Essex School District, I observed the implementation of a 4-1-2 model in two high-needs Early Years classrooms: in short, four teachers, two assistants and one special educator. In another district, I observed a unit, within a mainstream school, for children with emotional and behavioural special needs, which was organised around a very effective collaboration between a school social worker, two paraeducators and two teachers.

One of the schools in Williston School District that is implementing the RTI-MTSS approach to special education.

It is fitting that this section ended with a discussion of attempts to locate assistants’ role and work within a different way of approaching special education, namely RTI. As we will see in the discussion of Finland, the path of educational change seems to be in the same direction, albeit from a radically different starting point.
My visits and interviews indicate the assistant role features less prominently within the Finnish education system, and it is deployed in a more circumscribed manner. This is due to the relatively unique characteristics of the Finnish education system and society which I outline below.

The Finnish education system is distinguished, according to Professor Arja Virta, by a number of key features:

- Common consistent and long-term education policy, which was initiated in the 1970s.
- Common commitment to equalise educational outcomes and mitigate socio-economic class differences. Universal provision of school books, meals, healthcare.
- The provision of organised special education.
- A culture of trust and co-operation based on strong teacher professionalism (academic and pedagogic expertise).

Teaching is still a highly regarded profession, in esteem and status within society, and attracts a large pool of well-qualified applicants. Demand is high and places are restricted. For example, at the University of Turku, the acceptance rate is between 5-10 percent of applicants for the primary teacher education programme. Teaching is also a masters-level profession, and the degree programme takes between four to five years to complete. The high educational qualification level and research emphasis contribute to the status of the profession. Primary classroom teachers in Finland also commonly have a subject specialism (at degree level study), often in mathematics or Finnish language, which adds to their pedagogic expertise. Moreover, since higher education is free, teachers can, and often do, return to acquire further subject specialisms after graduation. Teachers are responsible for curriculum and assessment, and there are no external inspection bodies (such as Ofsted in England) or league tables. Leadership and management reside at the school and municipal level. At the socio-political level, a high value is placed on consensus, and educational change is viewed in evolutionary and not revolutionary terms. Due to the relative attractiveness of teaching as a career, there are no significant problems of retention, unlike the USA and England where at least 25 percent of all newly qualified teachers leave the profession before their third year of service. In addition, teaching and teachers have also played an important role in the formation of Finnish national and cultural identity, hence there is a symbolic resonance that is absent in the USA or England.

A very important and distinguishing feature of the Finnish education system is the organisation of special education. Special education is an integral and organised part of mainstream education. Although it is in the process of change, this has historically been referred to as “part-time” special

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education. As part of the original settlement amongst the political elite in 1970s, to assuage concerns that universal comprehensive schooling would lower standards, the Finnish state has organised special education that is available to all children in mainstream schools. Most of the resourcing is put into the lower stages of primary schooling, and focused on language and mathematics support. According to Professor Jahnukainen: “The long-term advantage of the Finnish model is that children do not need to ‘wait to fail’ to get special support: students who struggle academically have access to immediate assistance without having to be diagnosed”. The Finnish system works on the assumption that a majority of children will require, particularly in their primary schooling, some additional support, provided by special education teachers within mainstream schools. There is no need for any formal process of labelling – this again reduces stigma – since pupils are able to access specialist teacher support as needed. Over half of all pupils receive some “part-time” special education during their schooling career. Another assumption of the Finnish approach is that for the majority of children the support will be temporary. A number of academics have argued that organised and integrated special education is one of the factors responsible for Finland’s unique combination of high academic outcomes and equity – in other words, low variance amongst pupils’ performance (Kivirauma et al., 2007). As well as special education teachers, there are “pupil welfare teams” which include other staff such as educational psychologists, welfare officers, school nurses, and school counsellors. Although so-called part-time special education is organised and integrated in mainstream, children with what are seen as severe forms of disability and SEN are educated in special schools.

There is, in Finland, a manifest commitment to state education, equality of outcome and common schooling for the majority of children. This is reflected in the limiting of “parental choice”. There is little differentiation in the types of schools available and it is assumed that most children will attend the school closest to their home. Private education in the sense of fee-paying schools is illegal, and the independent sector insofar as it exists is miniscule and exerts no cultural pull for parents. As an egalitarian society, children start school without the sharp socio-economic polarisation found in the USA and England. According to UNICEF figures for 2007, 3.4 percent of Finnish children live in poverty, compared to 21 percent in the USA (Sahlberg, 2011: 69). Equally important, as highlighted by the points set-out by Professor Virta above, the education system is founded on a very generous welfare state, with universal provision and an egalitarian ethos. The welfare state provides support on a largely universalistic basis; for example, good quality nursery and childcare is available to all families and all school children receive free lunches. Even though Finnish children start school later than their contemporaries in England, seven years old compared to four years old, most actually attend pre-schools, which employ well-trained staff who have a minimum Bachelors qualification.

Finland is also a high trust society. An interesting illustration of this was my visits to schools. Being from England, I assumed that I would need to report to a school office when I arrived, and possibly have to enter via a gate or locked door. In fact, none of the schools I visited had any kind of formal reception area: adults can, and do, walk into schools and classrooms without question. There are no gates or barriers separating schools from their surroundings. There is little of the suspicion of adults or anxieties about children’s safety that is found in the USA or England, or concerns that an open school would encourage truancy.
One key challenge for the Finnish education system and society in general is ethnic diversity, through immigration. Until relatively recently, Finland has experienced little non-European immigration. It has therefore been a relatively homogenous society, at least racially, with Swedish, Sami and Russian speaking minorities. The cultures of home and school were assumed to be congruent. However, over the past two decades significant waves of non-European immigration from the Horn of Africa, the Middle-East and elsewhere have occurred. Some of my interviewees talked about how this presented a challenge to Finnish self-image and cultural identity, as a “white” society, and the need for the education system to become more culturally responsive to the increasing diversity of learners.

During my visit, I learned that there was a restructuring of special education towards a more inclusive model. So many special education schools were merging with mainstream schools to create more inclusive and integrated learning environments, or closing. There is a movement towards a fully unified school provision. As a result of these changes, the numbers of assistants within the education system has increased. Interestingly, these developments are inspired in part by the American RTI model I observed in Vermont. This seems a very promising development because Finland in practice already does and achieves much of what RTI is designed to accomplish.

Having outlined the contexts in relation to which TAs’ role and responsibilities should be viewed, in the next section I will report on the role of assistants and how their training needs are met and organised.

THE TRAINING OF ASSISTANTS IN FINLAND

The TA role in Finland is referred to as school assistant. My interviews with school assistants in Finland indicate a similar demographic profile as found in the USA, of young women and older women
with children. As one assistant reported about her trajectory into the role: “I had nothing to do with children before I had mine … before that, I wouldn’t have even thought that I would work with children” she suggested that as well as women like her who became assistants, the role also attracted others who “instead of becoming a nurse or something like that, they might consider becoming an assistant in a school”.

Unlike the USA and England, school assistants are less visible. This is partly because assistants tend to work in special schools and the Finnish self-image of the teaching profession as highly educated sits somewhat uneasily with the existence of a paraprofessional group. Several of the university teacher educators I spoke to admitted that they knew very little about this group of workers, even though it is quite likely that some of their students would find themselves working with assistants once qualified. The majority of assistants work in primary school settings.

I encountered two kinds of assistant roles in my travels. There are assistants who focus on supporting the education of ethnic minority children (particularly newly arrived migrant children). Many of the bilingual individuals who fill such roles, are qualified teachers with teaching qualifications that are not recognised within Finland. These assistants are part of an organised and well-supported programme of mother tongue education, where migrant children are taught core subjects in their own native language as well as Finnish language study. This form of parallel education can last from six months to over a year. During my school visits, I met Somali and Iraqi individuals in these roles. These bilingual assistants work in “preparatory” classrooms or in mainstream “integrated” settings supporting migrant children.

The majority of assistants however work in mainstream and special classroom settings. Assistants are employed by principals and tend to be assigned to a year group, rather than specific pupils. I was told that, at most, a school might have three/four assistants, and many have none. Most of the mainstream schools I visited had two or three assistants for the whole school, whilst special schools had many more. This contrasts with England and the USA, where assistants might even outnumber teachers in a school.

Classroom and special education teachers are seen as pedagogic experts and have paramount responsibility for teaching and learning. Thus, TAs work in a less autonomous manner and are not expected to undertake substantive pedagogic interventions as they do in the USA and English contexts. Moreover, since so much of special education is delivered through “part-time” special education led by special education teachers, there has been less of a role available for assistants within the school system. Assistants, particularly in mainstream schools, supplement rather than supplant teachers’ input. As one assistant said: “the teacher always decides what to do”. I did not get a sense, as I did in the USA, that there was much blurring of the assistant and teacher roles (at the moment). In the schools I visited, there did not appear to be the same assumption that assistants would always work with the struggling learners. In part this is because those who require specialist intervention are referred to special education teachers. Assistants I spoke with indicated that they did not take away the same groups of children on a regular basis. One added: “I think the teacher wants to keep seeing what the children are doing herself, not just asking me how they are doing”.

As in the USA and England, there are no established career structures for assistants, and in-service training is ad hoc. Salaries are relatively low for Finland – although there is some negotiability in
regards to pay – and assistants have poor terms and conditions, and are often employed on term-time contracts (which are technically illegal in Finland). However, there is a well-organised pre-service accredited qualification for those wanting to work as a school assistant. It is referred to by its abbreviation KAIPO\(^6\). The KAIPO qualifies and prepares classroom assistants for education support roles (in mainstream and special schools) as well as more autonomous roles as after-school activities workers. City municipalities have a legal duty to provide after-school activities for young children in primary school, and this is a source of employment for assistants.

The KAIPO is focused on the ways that assistants can support students with disabilities and SEN. It can be completed as a one-year vocational course or a two-year apprenticeship. Most students complete the KAIPO whilst working part-time in a school or gaining other relevant experience. The KAIPO is offered by vocational institutes of adult education, akin to FE in England, or community colleges in the USA. The course covers knowledge about the school system and relevant laws; human growth and development; functional skills (e.g. communication skills, first aid, hygiene); support for learning (common types of SEN, reading and writing difficulties, sensory disabilities). The training and education of assistants is regulated by the National Board of Education. The KAIPO is a competency based qualification. Part of the assessment involves an assessor from the college, the principal of the school, and either a teacher or an experienced assistant (normally with three years or more of experience). One assistant that I spoke to was initially employed in a school as a “trainee” for six months before embarking on the KAIPO course whilst working. She did the course in 14 months and spoke about her experience:

\textit{It was interesting obviously, some of the things you learnt there, you had already seen in practice at school [like] special needs. Basically, there was a course book...we did kind of essays, the course was in four major topics, so we did write essays on those topics. … Then somebody comes and sees you at work and assesses you. … I think we had three of those.}

Other assistants that I spoke to said the course was a good preparation for the job, particularly because they could do it whilst working in a school. This meant that they were able to make those links between classroom practice and theory.

In Finland, the qualification systems for teachers and assistants are very separate, with few points of convergence. Assistants with the KAIPO qualification and work experience can progress into the polytechnics (see appendix B for a diagram of the Finnish education system), which are institutes of higher vocational education, and undertake further studies in social and health care studies. However, since teacher education is firmly within the university sector, the opportunities for progression into initial teacher education are highly unlikely and difficult given the competition for places. There is therefore somewhat of a gulf that separates teachers and those who assist them in comparison to England and the USA. This distance in status could be reflected in interactions between assistants and teachers, as one assistant told me:

\textit{In regular schools the teachers consider themselves quite higher, and hierarchy...and there's the idea that teachers' assistants are people who can't get any other jobs [laughs], don't have education and lots of people who are doing their second profession. …they are not valued so...}

\(^6\)The full version in Finnish is: \textit{Koulunkäynnin ja aamu- ja iltapäivätoiminnan ohjauksen ammattitutkinto.}
high. I’ve heard in some state schools you have to wash the coffee cups of the teacher, I’ve never done that [laughs].

The assistant role and its spread within the mainstream education system is relatively new and many Finnish teachers at the moment do not perceive that they need pedagogic support in their classrooms.

A history of strong classroom autonomy means that teachers find it difficult to delegate or work with assistants, as one interviewee reported: “they are not used to having people around, except themselves, they can decide on everything, what they do with the children”. Issues of teamwork between teachers and assistants were also raised by the programme leader of the KAIPO that I spoke to: “teachers … they don’t know how to work together. They don’t know what those people do, what they can do or what we can do together”.

I found that, overall, the issue of assistant preparation, outside of the initial qualification and education taken by TAs, was decidedly variable, and managed on a local basis. Identifying the training needs of assistants, unlike in the USA, is not on the national agenda, and for the time being assistants remain largely invisible. It will be interesting to see how the move towards inclusion and full integration of children with more intensive needs progresses and its impact on assistants’ work and position in the Finnish system.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this final section, I summarise key conclusions from the Travelling Fellowship and discuss recommendations and next steps.

I. Universities working in partnerships with schools, local education authorities, can lead, broker and develop innovative training for TAs.

I was impressed by the cooperation between academics, schools and local authorities on my visits, particularly in Denver Colorado and Burlington Vermont, to change and develop practice in relation to TAs’ work and training. This process was facilitated by strong ties between schools and universities. For example, in Burlington, many of the teachers and senior staff had completed their teacher training or post-graduate studies in the faculty of education at the University of Vermont. At the PAR²A Center in Denver, they had a member of staff with responsibility for marketing and managing relationships with schools and districts in relation to their training programmes. Also, the nature of the CO-TOP programme itself invited a broad range of stakeholder involvement for its successful implementation (see earlier diagram on page 11), which in turn enhanced the centre’s networks. The involvement of universities also meant that the training offered was evidence-based and clearly embedded in a wider teaching and learning framework. Too often assistants’ training needs are met through ad hoc, poorly designed courses or sessions offered by private providers, and generally disconnected from the wider knowledge base of teaching and learning. The involvement of universities can therefore raise the quality of assistant training by embedding it in the most up-to-date research base.
- **Recommendation**

I would recommend partnerships and collaboration between universities, schools, local authorities and other stakeholders in developing TA training and supporting school change. Universities should become involved in designing and/or brokering TA training that is responsive to the needs and aspirations of TAs, and informed by research. The involvement of HEIs will also hopefully raise the status and importance of good quality TA development. More ambitiously, I would like to see the establishment of a research centre, much like the PAR²A Center in Denver, which both studies and organises training for TAs.

II. **The Response to Intervention-Multi-Tiered System of Supports (RTI-MTSS) approach offers an interesting way to approach the issues of TAs’ training needs and effective deployment.**

Whilst it is early days, the implementation of RTI-MTSS appears to be having a positive impact in Vermont, and its incorporation into the Finnish education system is a fascinating development. It seems to offer an alternative, and more integrated, way of thinking about SEN and mainstream education, and the place of assistants. In providing a coherent framework and set of principles for supporting all learners, it helps schools to answer the question of what and who TAs are for, and to tackle the difficult question of how they can be deployed more effectively. As we saw in Vermont, implementing RTI-MTSS challenges the way schools currently distribute work and responsibilities between assistants and teachers. I think RTI is worthy of serious exploration and research, and may hold important lessons for the English education system, not least on how to integrate the work and roles of TAs within a more general approach to teaching and learning in schools. RTI moves schools away from the idea of viewing learning support and special educational needs as somehow distinct from the core teaching and learning that occurs in schools, and the problematic assumption that lesser qualified and prepared staff should have responsibility for those with the most intense needs. This represents a massive cultural shift, impacting on teachers and assistants’ expectations and assumptions about their work roles.

- **Recommendation**

A key recommendation from my time in Vermont and its implementation of RTI-MTSS, where schools were generally well-resourced, particularly in the numbers of TAs, is the more considered use of TAs, and greater attention to the organisation of classroom teams and work roles. So, for example, greater use of co-teaching and planning with the support of TAs, and environmental and peer supports. Schools must be unafraid to review their current deployment of assistants, and as a result, in some cases, be prepared to limit the roles assistants undertake. As I observed in Vermont, this will involve difficult conversations with assistants and teachers alike. Training and support needs to be provided, and most importantly, any such change needs to be encompassed within a more general approach to the organisation of teaching and learning, such as RT-MTSS. I aim to communicate and share these insights with colleagues in initial teacher education, and their students, in the department of education where I work, through seminar activities and lecturing.

III. **The importance of career counselling/advice**
A key message from my conversation with Thalia Thompson about the Paraprofessional Academy in New York City is that the provision of independent career counselling for assistants is important and often overlooked. Due to the fragmented and complicated nature of the training and career pathways available to TAs, and the diverse range of qualifications held by individuals working as assistants, there is a need for such support and advice. Recently in England, we have witnessed the withdrawal of financial support for the Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) status, and limited support for the development of Foundation degrees, which has further fragmented and disrupted moves towards a more coherent skills and career development framework for assistants in post.

- Recommendation

I would recommend provision of independent career counselling and advice for TAs. Of course, how this support is implemented and organised, whether as a standalone centre or service, or part of a wider range of services within some kind of institutional setting, is something that requires further consideration.

IV. Effective in-service training that is comprehensive, systematic, evidence-based, and flexible in content and delivery

The CO-TOP programme at the PAR²A Center, and the “lanes” system in the Granite School District, Salt Lake City, are very good examples of effective and innovative in-service training provision that is coherent, well-structured and designed to meet the diverse needs and aspirations of TAs as adult learners. Their training is consistent, comprehensive and flexible. What characterised these programmes is their systematic approach to identifying and supporting the training of assistants at different stages on their development trajectories. A key component of effective TA in-service training is ensuring that it provides generic and specialized academic content. The CO-TOP approach highlights not only the role that HEIs can play in supporting and meeting the needs of assistants, but that this can be delivered in an imaginative and accessible fashion (e.g. train-the-trainer model).

- Recommendation

I would like to investigate the feasibility of developing a TA training programme based at a HEI in London, which has all of the features above and draws from the experience of the CO-TOP programme at the PAR²A Center.

V. TA training should be backed by a robust and coherent development framework.

All the evidence from my travels in the USA suggests good innovative training needs to be framed by a solid and supportive policy framework. In most cases, this was in part driven by the legal requirements of the IDEA and NCLB. However, several examples, including those in Utah and Vermont, illustrated how school districts and whole states had established a robust and clear policy framework which set common expectations for the TA role, legal parameters, training and deployment. Assistants often find that their roles can change dramatically depending on the school that they work in. A good development framework provides a consistent framework which can contribute to a shared set of expectations at various levels (i.e. school, local etc.).
The legal and statutory framework provided by the IDEA and NCLB legislation has been an important driver of change, advancing the training agenda for assistants. Although not without its critics, legislation has provided a certain level of clarity, at the highest level, concerning assistants’ roles, responsibilities, and set standards for their training and education. In several states, it has prompted significant policy development at school and local levels.

- **Recommendation**

The identification of the training and development needs of assistants has to be done not only at the local level, but also in relation to wider policy and legislature developments. TAs’ work needs to be part of a wider conversation about how education itself is organised and how support is provided to learners, partly those who are struggling in the education system. In my role as an academic, I feel that my Fellowship has enhanced my capacity to contribute to policy debates and potential future development of the assistant role.

**VI. In order to move the training agenda forward, TAs’ voices need to be mobilised.**

My experience at the NRCP conference highlighted the fact that there is nothing remotely similar in scope and organisation in England, providing opportunities for knowledge sharing and mobilisation. The TA workforce in England is fragmented and tends to be highly localised in its concerns and activism. TAs’ voice in educational change and reform at the wider levels urgently needs to be heard.

- **Recommendation**

I would recommend organising a conference or other forum which brings together and connects TAs, academics, education professionals and school leaders in an on-going dialogue. Such an event would be a useful contribution to the education debate, and raise awareness of TAs’ perspectives on learning support, training and wider issues. A possible direction this could go, might be the establishment of a London conference. I am also considering seeking funding for a seminar series which brings together various stakeholder groups, such as assistants, academics, into dialogue to define a research agenda for training and other aspects of the TA role.

**VII. Training for teachers/school leaders on the supervision of TAs’ work**

All the evidence from my travels in the USA and Finland suggests that teachers and school leaders and senior education need more training on effectively managing and supervising the work of TAs. More needs to be done at the level of initial teacher education as well as training for teachers in post. Greater awareness by school leaders of their responsibilities could also lead to an emphasis on supporting the training and development of assistants.

- **Recommendation**

More training for teachers (in post and trainees) on the supervision and management of TAs’ work, and teamwork. Since my Fellowship, I have begun to collaborate with colleagues in initial teacher education to organise sessions for students on managing, supervising and collaborating with TAs, and communicating the findings of this Fellowship and wider research on TAs’ work, role and effectiveness. I aim to develop a CPD module for teachers on working more effectively with assistants.
VIII. Common pre-service preparation and training

The KAIPO qualification is a good example of an effective form of pre-service training and preparation which enables assistants to work in learning support roles within mainstream or special schools. Although vocational, it has an academic component grounded in the basics of pedagogy and child development. The KAIPO ensures that all assistants have a common qualification and minimum standard of training and preparation. This level of training seems to be appropriate for an entry level preparation. Also, the fact that the qualification also qualifies assistants to work in after-school settings is very useful given that significant numbers of assistants tend to do so anyway in Finland and England.

- Recommendation

Good common pre-service qualification and training is the building block for subsequent training and development. I would recommend further research into pre-service education and training for TAs. This might involve a mapping of the structure and content of existing pre-service qualifications and education available for TAs in England, to explore how closely these match national standards and competences. Also, one could investigate how pre-service qualifications and training articulates with tertiary level training (namely Foundation degrees for teaching assistants). To further this goal, I have applied for funding to do some exploratory research on the structure and organisation of Foundation degrees, and TAs’ experiences of them.

Moving the research agenda forward

As an academic and researcher, a key way in which the Fellowship has made, and will continue to make a difference is developing my capacity to contribute to the policy and research communities. Since returning from my Fellowship, I have begun to disseminate some of my findings within my own institution and intend to do so more widely. I have connected with a wide range of colleagues from the USA and Finland, some of whom I hope to collaborate with in the near future on research and scholarly activities – conferences, seminars and journal publications. The Fellowship has undoubtedly broadened my research horizons beyond the national context. As with all research, this Fellowship has raised a number of issues which I feel require further investigation and exploration. I think that more research is needed, particularly of an international scope, into how struggling learners and low-attainers are supported in schools, and how that support is organised, in different educational systems. It would be very interesting to see how the implementation of RTI-MTSS progresses in Vermont schools and the move to a more systematic use of TAs, informed by research, impacts on assistants’ roles, experiences and the kind of training they need and want.

Similarly, it would be fascinating to see how the Finnish shift to fuller inclusion of learners with intensive special educational needs and disabilities impacts on TAs’ deployment. As TA numbers grow, partly in relation to the change in inclusion policy, how the Finnish education system bridges the gulf in terms of education and training between school assistants and masters-level educated teachers and the tensions that this might generate, remains open. And how will these developments affect the teacher-led orientation of the Finnish model? What my Fellowship highlights is the need for more international and comparative research which seeks to understand how local and national cultures mediate understandings of what constitutes teachers and assistants’ roles and responsibilities and the boundaries between the two, and I hope to be able to kick-start that research.
APPENDICES

APPENDIX – A: RESEARCH METHODS

I spoke with over a hundred individuals during my travels, on two continents. I spoke with teaching assistants, teachers, academics, school administrators and pupils. Most of my interviews and conversations were recorded, and a few have been transcribed. I also took notes during my visits and travels. Most of the formal interviews were qualitative and semi-structured. Topics covered in the interview were tailored to individual interviewees, but most included questions concerning: background information about the institution (i.e. school, university, college etc.) in which they worked; role and career trajectories; educational background; knowledge of assistants’ role; issues arising in relation to the education and training of assistants; awareness of any local, regional, national differences in the development of the assistant role; details about specific training undertaken or organised relating to TAs’ work. I collected policy, training and other documents on my travels, and I was referred to several websites, academic articles and other publications by my interviewees. Interviewee and other data were thematically analysed for this report.

APPENDIX – B: DIAGRAMS OF THE FINNISH AND USA EDUCATION SYSTEM

Finnish education system

The American education system
### Appendix C: The Paraprofessional Conundrum (Reproduced from Giangreco and Broer 2002)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Asked to Implement Teacher-Type Instructional Roles</th>
<th>Trained/Supported to Implement Teacher-Type Instructional Roles</th>
<th>Paid Commensurate with Teacher-Type Instructional Roles</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. YES + YES + NO =</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ambivalence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Paraprofessionals report feeling taken advantage of when asked to do teacher-type work for low pay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. YES + NO + NO =</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Inconsistent with the IDEA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>IDEA requires training and supervision of paraprofessionals; without it the likelihood of inadequate instruction increases. Ambivalence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. NO + NO + NO =</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Disrespect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Paraprofessionals feel disrespected if their abilities are not utilized, resulting in low morale and high turnover. Inconsistent with the IDEA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. NO + YES + NO =</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Frustration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>If paraprofessionals are trained (e.g., some are certified teachers), they report feeling frustrated if they are not expected to do higher-level tasks. Ambivalence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. YES + YES/NO + YES =</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ineffective Budgeting of Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Schools do not want to pay higher wages unless employees are engaging in higher-level roles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6. YES + YES + YES =</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Questionable Personnel Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Why hire paraprofessionals at near teacher wages when schools could hire qualified professionals instead?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


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