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What did the TAs say?

Perception of sensitivities for students

Participants spoke with one voice on this topic. TA3 refers to pupils reluctant to have classroom help, who, as TA7 points out, "don't put their hand up … drawing attention to themselves". Therefore TAs report walking around, "scanning" for signs of difficulty (TA7). Circulating and observing (TA5), not making "a big deal of it" (TA1), or "without it being really obvious" (TA4), in "a roundabout way" (TA7) seem universal in this group. TA7 would not say "do you need any help?" because "they'd probably feel completely useless". Most refer to pupil choice and TA3's strategies include ensuring pupils overhear advice.

Discretion in TA approach

All but one participant talked about discreet, even imperceptible, work and/or indicate this in their manner of speech. TA1, for example, mentions "a quiet word" and reproduces quiet speech and gesture. TA3 will "nip" downstairs to print out notes for a child "run down … try and just discreetly, say, will that help?" As TA6 points out "you're … hidden … at secondary you need to be … students are older … don't want you right there". Discretion is actively created by TAs who wait for the cover of "chatter … talk to them without it being really obvious" or snatch time "in a quiet lesson" to work on differentiation of a written exercise " … but again [spoken wistfully] it's getting it in front of the kids". Two TAs report TAs being told off "for talking while the teacher was talking".

Little or no sight of lesson plans

TA3, TA5, TA6, TA7 and TA8 all state that they never or rarely see lesson plans. This might be underestimated as this only became an explicit interview question as the pattern emerged. Some TAs state that this can prevent useful materials being brought along.

Communication "on the hoof"

In place of systematic access to plans, communication on the hoof is the default position in a busy day. Typically, this takes place in doorways or as pupils arrive (TA3, TA7). As TA8 puts it, "as we go in the door … staff will say … we're going to be doing …". TA4 says that the teacher would simply "give me the nod as to who would need the support".

Limited differentiation by teachers

TA1, TA3, TA4, TA6 and TA7 all indicate that, in their eyes, teacher differentiation for pupils with "SEN" is at best very variable and generally very limited. TA8, for example, refers to supporting a pupil where "he had already got the differentiated sheet but … I struggled to find out what the heck he was supposed to do, it was limited but it wasn't clear". There is interesting mitigation from TA7, "I don't think you can expect them to differentiate … I just think it's quite impossible".

Initiative for communication resting with TAs

Broadly, initiative is perceived to lie with TAs. TA5 is clear that "It's down to TAs … we bombard them with … information … very rare a teacher will come to see us". TA1 describes reporting after lessons and uploading information electronically. TA4 reports verbal (albeit hurried) "mention to the teacher … sometimes … written notes" and TA6 "at the end of the lesson … but … very much dependent on the teacher … and your relationship". TA7 reports "there isn't really an opportunity to feedback … unless you literally go and seek them out … at lunchtime". As TA6 puts it: "some just say thanks, Miss, for the lesson and never kind of start any kind of conversation with you …"

Centrality of relationship with teachers

Five TAs convey a sense that communication and collaboration is dependent on rapport and relationships and that this is personal and subject to teacher disposition rather than a matter of professional routine or school systems. TAs, however, report needing to actively manage these relationships. In the words of TA3: "you know how to handle them as much as you know how to handle the kids" but, much can depend on "whether [the teacher] comes [away] from the front and works with you or stays there … I work with both sorts".

Sense of TA standard of inclusive practice not met by teachers

A number of comments from TAs indicate a perception that teachers do not always meet their expected standard of inclusive practice. TA6 feels that sometimes the "teacher really hasn't … taken account of the full scope of learning needs in the

classroom". TAs also comment on: • Copying from the board: "we do say that a lot of students shouldn't be copying off the board but … doesn't always happen like that" (TA3). • Lesson objectives: "although there's a rule to put up the learning objectives sometimes they might not do that … I … fill in the gaps" (TA8).

Knowing the pupils

TA1 states that TAs get to know pupils "on a 1:1 basis … teachers … can't do that can they, because they are there to teach and they haven't the time". She feels "they don't really know what makes them tick really and we felt that we did", "you tend to get to know the students after a while how they're gonna operate" (TA3), similar points being made by TA5, TA6 and TA8.

Sense of being a "go-between"

The sense of being "in between" is a repeating theme. TA1 describes herself as a "go between … not one or the other …". TA4 says she is a "liaison between … some students and the teacher" and TA5 describes being "Beside them and working with them". TA6 refers to "in between roles … caught in the middle sometimes and it's hard to find a place" (TA6). TA8's turn of phrase is "the meat between the sandwich … communicator between the two" (TA8).

"Mainstream" and "base"

TA4, TA5 and TA6 all spell out a sense of the "mainstream" school and "base" within it as being separate entities with distinct characteristics. For TA4, this extends to her own sense of inclusion, feeling "very much a part of the Inclusion Department … more … than sometimes the mainstream school" . TA5 is more explicit in the view that "we include the students … here but I sometimes feel … we're a unit within and apart from the school". TA6's analysis is detailed and offers reasons why pupils may wish to "stay … here" in the base. While other TAs are less explicit and do not use the words "mainstream" and "base" in the same sense, it is also possible to discern in the comments of TA1 and TA2 the sense of separation between supporting those who can largely keep up with "the curriculum" and the very different experience of supporting those who cannot. While strictly speaking not metonymy, since "mainstream" and "base" are not exactly place-names, the sense of place as reifying the two "distinctive" groups and contested at least since the Warnock Report, the "handicapped" and "non-handicapped" (DES 1978, 100), is evident.