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Ten titles and roles

Roger Hancock and Jennifer Colloby

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Reading 1

Ten titles and roles

Roger Hancock and Jennifer Colloby

The roles and responsibilities of teaching assistants have become increasingly defined and stratified. In this chapter, Roger Hancock and Jennifer Colloby, from The Open University, document the wide ranging work of ten teaching assistants across the United Kingdom and consider the significant variations in their roles and responsibilities.

Learning support staff in the United Kingdom have many titles and many types of responsibilities. Preferences for job titles are to be found at both regional and local levels. Generic titles like ‘classroom assistant’, ‘learning support assistant’ and ‘teaching assistant’ are commonly used but there are many other terms by which support staff are known. There is too a tendency to combine roles so that someone who works generally with children in classrooms may also work specifically with an individual child with complex learning needs and be involved in after school provision. Also, given the possible range of duties, staff can find themselves doing significantly different work with varying levels of responsibility.

Job titles are important. Titles can be closely related to our sense of worth and status at work. Ideally, they should accurately describe the nature of work as an employer defines it, but also as employees themselves experience it. Titles that achieve this balance help people to feel good about themselves and the work they do. ‘Non-teaching staff’ was once used in schools to refer to staff not qualified as teachers. Marland (2001) suggests this title is offensive. The use of the term ‘assistant’ can be questioned too, given that support staff are often doing much more than just assisting a teacher or a child.

In order to explore titles and roles, we obtained thumbnail sketches from ten classroom support staff from around the UK. Ten schools were selected

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with a degree of randomness through local authority website lists. Telephone contact was established with headteachers who helped with the identification of a support staff member from their school. The ten staff then collaborated with us to construct short accounts to capture what they saw as the main purpose of their work.

We make no claims for the representativeness of our findings. However, through the words of support staff themselves, we feel these accounts give a good sense of the nature of the work that is often termed 'learning support', and an indication of the variety of titles and roles that can be found across the UK.

A learning support assistant (LSA)

I give support in the classroom – especially with literacy and numeracy. I personally do a lot of craft, design technology and art. In fact, I run a lunchtime art club. I organise the staffroom, and when we have visitors I look after them. I'm the first-aider and I keep an eye on health and safety. I also stock-take art and audit the general use of materials, as well as having an involvement with our Book Fairs. I am team-leader for the other LSAs and I do quite a lot of clerical jobs. I accompany children and teachers when they go out on trips. I work the ICT equipment. I set up televisions, do photocopying and ensure the copier is running properly. I set up the overhead projectors and the listening centres. I have to make sure these machines are ready and available. I also take money and liaise with parents. I work with Years 1 and 2 but I'm all encompassing. We have LSAs who are attached to classes. However I divide my time between Years 1 and 2. This means I work with four teachers. I don't work in Reception. I'm therefore more wide-ranging than some colleagues who are based in single classrooms. I do a lot of display throughout the school as well as in classrooms. I'm there for the children but I support the staff as well. Everywhere in the school that I can be used, I'm used.

Jane Powell, St Francis RC Infant School, Cardiff South Wales

A classroom assistant

As a classroom assistant at Alexandra Parade Primary School I have lots of different duties assigned to me. I have responsibility for running the school tuck shop and children come to buy their tuck as school starts. I have to keep a check on stock levels and order more items, as they are needed.

Four days a week all the children receive a piece of fruit and it is my responsibility to distribute fruit throughout the school. After this is done I help out in the classrooms as needed. I work with small groups of children to

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develop their reading or help them with their writing. It depends on what the teacher asks me to do. I help to create displays by selecting and mounting children's work. Each day I work to a different timetable but I always undertake any administrative duties such as photocopying and filing for the teachers in Primary 4 to Primary 7 (8–12 years). I tidy up after art sessions and I particularly enjoy my work with individual children who are struggling with some aspect of mathematics. Every day I do playground duty and I share the role of first-aider with other assistants in the school. My husband runs the school football team and my duties include 1 hour each week to help organise the team and their equipment and transport them to away matches. At the moment there are just two girls in the football team and I hope that eventually more will want to play.

Margaret Verrecchie, Alexandra Parade Primary School, Glasgow, Scotland

A nursery assistant

I work in the pre-school with children who are 3 and 4 years of age. My main duties as a nursery assistant are to assist the teacher in both the planning of activities and the work with the children. I help to develop the yearly plan and, from this, the monthly plan which is then broken down into the daily plan. When I arrive at school I help to set out the resources that are first needed. The children arrive at 9.15 am and I settle them to various activities and help those who are painting to put on aprons and make sure names are written on paper so I can easily identify children's work. I am responsible for 'brek' for all the pre-school children. Brek is a healthy eating snack, which consists of milk, some fruit, and often toast. The supervision of this takes 1 hour as children come in groups of 6 at a time. After this I supervise class activities but if it is PE that day I go and set out the equipment in the hall. Some kind of physical activity takes place each day and I help the children with this. When we return to the classroom I help children change back into their shoes. The final 30 minutes of the morning is spent on reading or puzzle activities and making sure the children have all their belongings when parents collect them at 12 o'clock. After this I clear and tidy the classroom and update the teacher with any information I have been given by parents. Together we also evaluate the morning's activities and consider our next day's plan.

Sheila McKnight, Strabane Primary School, County Tyrone, Northern Ireland

A nursery nurse

As a nursery nurse my main role is to assist the Nursery and Reception teachers with children in the early years, but I also help out generally throughout the school when necessary. I have a lot of direct involvement with children but I also oversee the classroom resources – I keep the art and craft areas running smoothly, for instance. I get involved in all parts of the curriculum, particularly supporting children’s learning in literacy, numeracy, music, art, and IT. I am involved in planning learning activities with the teachers. At the moment, in the afternoon, we are taking steps to integrate the Nursery and Reception children and I find this enjoyable. I am a first aider, I assist children with toileting and washing, I take them to lunch and out into the playground, and I drive the school’s minibus. I work with all children when in the classroom and I particularly enjoy working with those who sometimes struggle with their learning. I find it very satisfying to succeed with them, although I do have to work concertedly at achieving this success with some children.

I frequently attend one-day courses which I find very important for my development and knowledge. For instance, I recently went on an ‘improving the classroom’ workshop with the Reception teacher and an early years conference. I feel very fortunate to be employed as a nursery nurse because posts are not that easy to find in North Wales. When qualified nursery nurses get a nursery nurse post here they tend to stick with it.

Dawn Jones, Ysgol Cynfran Llysfaen, Colwyn Bay, North Wales

A learning mentor

I work with individual children who have barriers to learning. The overall aim is to improve attendance, reduce permanent and fixed term exclusions, and improve behaviour. I’m currently based in the Infants right through to Years 3 and 4. As the learning mentor, I observe them in the class to see how they are getting on. They might have targets they need to meet – for instance, to arrive on time or finish a task without being distracted. I liaise with parents early in the morning and they know that I am available at that time. Parents also know that they can ring me or ask to see me at other times. We run a breakfast club and that provides a good opportunity for me to talk informally to parents and children. There may be something that’s on a child’s mind – something that’s troubling them. I have a room with resources where I can talk to children who are upset. I have regular planning meetings with teachers every Monday. I was a nursery nurse in the school for 15 years before I took on my current role. I had therefore developed relationships with most parents which are essential for my new role.

It's quite hard for me to draw the line between a classroom support role and a learning mentor's role, especially when you've done the former job for so many years. I am working with 13 children at the moment – the maximum is 15. When I'm in a class helping one of my children, if another child needs help of some kind and the teacher's busy I usually help out.

Alison Cundy, Alt Primary School, Oldham, England

A higher level teaching assistant (HLTA)

Becoming a HLTA has certainly presented me with a great many challenges. At present I support children in a Year 1 class every morning. I try to ensure a creative approach to my work and thrive on the challenges that I am given in preparing stimulating experiences for the children both indoors and out. I continually build on my specialism which has been in Early Years. By acquiring further knowledge of how children think and learn I feel more able to meet the many aspects of my role. I cover two classes twice a week for teachers on planning, preparation and assessment time (Years 1 and 3). I cover a Year 2 class for two afternoons per week. Curriculum subjects here range from design and technology, art, religious education, personal and social education, and physical education. I also support children who require language support, those with IEPs and those who need extra help in specific areas. As our school has extensive grounds, I develop areas into outdoor learning environments for the children. I am also passionate about playtimes in primary schools and have developed this aspect of school life for the children so that they engage in very positive experiences on a daily basis.

I feel my role as a HLTA demands a certain amount of self-evaluation and reflection so although my day starts early, it also finishes late. I am continually seeking ways to present a stimulating lesson, one that above all ensures children enjoy their learning.

Karen Brownrigg, Percy Main Primary School, North Shields, Tyne & Wear

Behaviour support teaching assistant

My main role in the school is to support the behaviour of children so they can complete their education timetable. I do this in a number of ways. I'm on call all day, so if a teacher needs support with an incident I get a phone call and I go and withdraw that child and help them work through any issues as quickly as possible to get them back into class and on task. I can also go into a class and be an additional support whenever I'm needed. My biggest role is Diners Club, which is about placing children on individual behaviour plans. At the start of lunch they come to see me in my room and we go through their targets

to see if they've been able to meet those for the day. Predominantly it's boys that I work with – I'd say they're ninety per cent of the children I see, particularly at the Diners Club. With girls, it tends to be that they're experiencing difficulties with friendships.

I took on my specialised teaching assistant role because it encompassed many aspects from my previous work. I've worked with the Youth Offending Service as a community panel member using Restorative Justice. I've also supported a lot of young people with complex needs who find it hard to fit into mainstream education. I felt my current role was exciting because it took all this previous experience into consideration and enabled me to feel I am utilising my skills.

James Galloway, Herbert Thompson Primary School, South Wales

A bilingual assistant and home–school link worker

I have two jobs – the first is a bilingual classroom assistant and the second a home–school link worker. In the first I work mainly with Turkish children, most of whom are new arrivals from Turkey. I am employed for thirteen hours a week. I usually work within the classroom with small groups, but sometimes I take one or two children outside the room. I also run a small class myself when I teach Turkish to Year 4 children. I find 8–9 years is the best age to teach Turkish because children have learnt to read and write English and this can be used to support their progress in another language. At this age they also seem to particularly enjoy learning Turkish – they appear 'ready'.

My second job arose out of the liaison work with parents that I did as part of the bilingual classroom assistant role. For this, I am employed for six hours a week. I work entirely with parents, supporting them as and when necessary. I help them with a range of tasks related to their children's schooling. I liaise with teachers, get involved in translations, help them with written English when, for instance, they need to register their children or fill out a school meals application form, take phone calls when parents find it hard to express themselves in English. I try to resolve any communication difficulties that may arise. I find I'm needed in many ways and that six hours is not enough time to meet the needs that parents have so I often give additional time that is voluntary.

Didem Celik, Whitmore Primary School, London, England

A parent helper (now classroom assistant)

When I was a teenager, I worked in a children's clothes shop, 'A and V Fashions', Lerwick, where there were always children coming in with parents. Some could have their tantrums and whatever else when they couldn't get

things, but I'm a very patient person. Working in a clothes shop prepared me for working in schools. I kept a toy box and books in the corner. If the parents were looking a bit stressed then I would say to their children, 'Oh come and see this', and read them a story.

When my children went to school I started going on their school trips. I also volunteered to do the youth club as well as being a parent helper. It inspired me to do more. I just love working with children. As a parent volunteer I was flexible and would help with sale tables and raising money for charity. I would donate things to be sold. I'd go on school trips, any sort of trips with any age. I would get involved whenever I had the opportunity. I helped out for five years and it was fine because I could still be home for my three children.

At one time, I wasn't sure whether to work with children or older people, so I decided to go for K100 ('Understanding Health and Social Care') with The Open University. I got my certificate and ended up applying for a job here. My three children are fine about me getting involved. When I see them in school, two call me 'mam' and the other one calls me 'Louise'. I just treat them the same as the other bairns. They know I'm now a member of staff.

Louise Dix, Aith Junior High School, Shetland, Scotland

A teaching assistant

I work with small groups of pupils outside the classroom in a resource room. My work is part of the school's performance management programme and I am regularly observed by the head teacher. The majority of my working week is spent supporting a Year 4 class but for 30 minutes a day I withdraw a small group of Year 2 children to support their phonic awareness. I also withdraw a group of Year 4 children for literacy learning.

I discuss and co-plan my input with the class teacher. We all return to the Year 4 classroom for the second half of the literacy lessons. During mathematics, I ensure my group are working well and offer support across the class.

I spend my lunchtimes preparing materials. In the afternoon I offer general support and thus build relationships with all the children. The school has a reading intervention programme and I spend the final 30 minutes of each school day working with Year 2 children who need this additional help. The school sent me on a 12-week training course for this. I also help children with their reading and each Tuesday afternoon I undertake pupil assessments. I liaise with parents and we work together to help children with their reading. I write reports for the SENCO and help create IEPs. As a school governor, I have responsibility for SEN provision.

I am the school's PE co-ordinator. I organise both PE lessons and the after-school sports clubs. As a qualified football and athletics coach, I run the

football (for both boys and girls), run athletics clubs and assist with the clubs for skating and gymnastics.

Keith Eddyshaw, Warren Primary School, Nottingham, England

Discussion and conclusion

The ten roles and titles featured in this chapter are learning support assistant, classroom assistant, nursery assistant, nursery nurse, learning mentor, higher level teaching assistant, behaviour support teaching assistant, bilingual assistant, parent helper and teaching assistant, respectively. Analysis of these thumbnail accounts reveals the following main categories of involvement for those featured:

1. clerical and administrative duties (e.g. stock checking, photocopying and filing)
2. out-of-class involvements (e.g. liaising with parents, art club, support on trips)
3. setting up and maintaining equipment (e.g. IT support, reprographic maintenance)
4. health and safety (e.g. distributing fruit, overseeing children's snack time, first aid)
5. curriculum and learning support (e.g. literacy and numeracy, art, teaching Turkish, encouraging appropriate behaviour)
6. releasing teachers from classroom teaching
7. management (e.g. leading other TAs)
8. servicing (e.g. staffroom maintenance, tidying the classroom).

We note the wide-ranging nature of the duties highlighted in the above analysis but also the rich mix of involvements within each individual thumbnail sketch. We believe, however, that if we talked to the same group of people in a year's time we would pick up significant shifts in their duties and responsibilities. Moreover, if we had selected a different group of ten people with similar same titles, we would have found a slightly different set of duties being carried out. Lee (2003), in a review of the existing literature on learning support staff, suggests there is 'no common pattern to teaching assistants' work' (p. 25).

Although we identify eight types of work, Category 5 (direct support for children's curriculum learning) took, by far, the highest proportion of respondents' time. It is important to remember too, that other categories of work can result in support for children's curriculum-related learning – for instance, liaising with parents (Category 2) or distributing fruit (Category 4).

We suggest that the variation in titles, roles and responsibilities of learning support staff in this small enquiry arises because there is a great deal of negotiation about their roles and related deployment at the level of individual schools and, even, individual classrooms. Variation is also explained by the way in which support staff and teachers are working in locally negotiated 'interdependent ways' rather than clearly designated hierarchical relationships with watertight role boundaries (see Hancock & Eyres, 2004; Eyres et al, 2004).

Teachers and learning support staff, we believe, are involved in an on-the-spot process of decision-making whereby the totality of the work to be done is, in certain ways, shared with teachers. This means that learning support staff in this study are taking on some duties that once were done only by a qualified teacher but, we suggest, they are also doing work that teachers have not had sufficient time to do. Clearly this poses questions about where teacher professional boundaries should be drawn, but also what is to be done about the appropriate remuneration of support staff who are now very involved in teaching-related duties. However, that said, the variation in learning support staff roles seems to be a desirable workforce development. It offers a localised, creative way of utilising adult skills thus maximising support for teachers and for children's learning.

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