From Teacher Aides to Teaching Assistants: how Plowden promoted parental participation in our primary schools

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ABSTRACT The author describes the changes which classroom assistants have seen over the past 40 years in terms of their job title and role. He argues that the Plowden Report's recommendations for greater responsibilities, better training opportunities and an increase in the number of teaching assistants in schools are at last being implemented.

As Bridget Plowden sat at an official dinner next to Sir Edward Boyle, Conservative Education Minister (Corbett, 2000, p. 6), a chance conversation started what was to be a visionary report on primary education in England – and the first since the Hadow Report on *The Primary School* in 1931. At the time, Professor Richard Peters said that if the recommendations of the Plowden Report were carried out it would 'lead to a marked improvement in primary school education' (Peters, 1969, p. ix). As a consequence of that informal meeting Bridget Plowden was persuaded to chair the Central Advisory Council for Education. The Council's brief was to 'consider primary education in all its aspects' and under Bridget Plowden's skilful leadership it produced a substantial document with recommendations which would profoundly change primary schools for ever. This paper looks at one of the main recommendations – an increase in the use of ancillary staff or 'teacher aides' – and how that links to another recommendation, increased parental participation in primary schools.

Definition of Terms

The first notion of consistent additional support staff in assisting primary class teachers in class was in the Plowden Report. In the report, the term 'teacher aides' was used to describe what had previously been termed ancillary staff:

'Teachers' aides is the term used for trained ancillaries who give substantial help to teachers inside and outside the classroom' (para. 921).

Figure 1. A teaching assistant supporting a numeracy group.

Today, the term 'teaching assistant' (TA) is a term used almost universally in primary schools while 'learning support assistants' (LSAs) are staff specifically appointed to work with children who have a special needs statement. The changing role and responsibilities of teaching assistants are reflected in their changing title over the years, from 'ancillary support', 'teacher aide' (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967), 'non-teaching assistant' (NTA) and 'classroom assistant' (CA) (Moyles & Suschitzky, 1997), to 'teaching assistant' (TA) and now even 'higher level teaching assistant' (HLTA) (Department for Education and Skills, 2003). This change from 'teacher's aide' to 'teaching assistant' shows a very clear progression in terms of role expectation. TAs are there to help children learn, and thus to teach (in broad terms rather than with the specific skills of the teacher, as described by Berliner, 1992), whereas in the past, a 'non-teaching' assistant supported the teacher and prepared children for learning. However, in her research on CAs and STAs (Specialist Teacher

Assistants) in 1997 Janet Moyles still found evidence of role confusion in schools. 'There is an unresolved dilemma faced by all schools regarding the "old ancillary role" of classroom assistants in supporting teachers' work, versus the new "teaching role" in supporting children's learning' (Moyles & Suschitzky, 1997, p. 5, para. 1.8).

Helping Children Think ... and 'Improve School Standards'

Chapter two of Plowden – on children's growth – showed that the Council understood how speech serves as 'instruments of thought' and so worried about the impact of the small amount of individual contact a class teacher could afford to have with a child (para. 580). So there was a determination in the report for another member of staff to work with the teacher, not just to wash paintbrushes but to help guide (or 'scaffold') children through their talk, and therefore thinking, into work.

In child development, Piaget theorised that the progress in children's thinking is limited by a pre-determined cognitive stage whereas Vygotsky based his research on the importance of culture, the social environment and cultural activities (such as the use of tools and language). He showed that these factors had a considerable impact on children's development and perception of the world. 'The acquisition of linguistic and practical skills was appropriated from the local human environment' (Harre, 2006, p. 25). This is echoed in Plowden, chapter 16, on children learning at school: 'Discussion with other children and with adults is one of the principal ways in which children check their concepts against those of others and build up an objective view of reality' (para. 535). The report was therefore visionary in its desire to see more adults (TAs) in the class to help children and far-sighted in its recommendations to involve parents more in their child's school.

With the introduction of Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs) following the start of the National Curriculum in 1988 there was a hope that the use of TAs with small groups of children would 'boost' literacy and numeracy levels at the age of seven and eleven. Thomas did some interesting research (Thomas, 1989) in which head teachers of local primary schools in Oxford were asked how TAs were deployed. As a result of that research he suggested that schools needed to rethink their deployment of staff in classrooms. Teachers should work with small groups of children, as they had the best training, while other staff such as TAs would supervise the rest of the class working on teacher-set work. If this idea had been taken up then perhaps the research by Blatchford 15 years later would have seen TAs having a definite impact on SATs standards achieved in primary classrooms. Instead, his research found that TAs had an 'indirect impact' on children's learning with no discernible improvement in test standards:

> This study found little evidence that the presence of TAs, or any characteristic of TAs, such as training or experience, had a measurable statistical effect on pupil attainment in the school class

> where they were deployed. This is in line with results from the KS1 phase of the project. (Blatchford et al, 2004, p. 1)

What was worrying was that 'the research shows clearly that there is confusion concerning the exact specification of the work of TAs when interacting with pupils' (Blatchford et al, 2004, p. 3). With the new contracts and levels of responsibilities since this research it is hoped that the 'role confusion' has finally been put to rest.

Increased Staffing in Future Primary Schools

Up to the time of the Plowden Report, the use and number of ancillary staff had been patchy. The National Union of Teachers (1962) reported that only 22% of schools in 1962 used these staff in classes. Perhaps it was because of this that Plowden recommended not only an improvement in the ratio of aides to children but that there should be 'a national scheme for the employment of aides' (para. 949: vii).

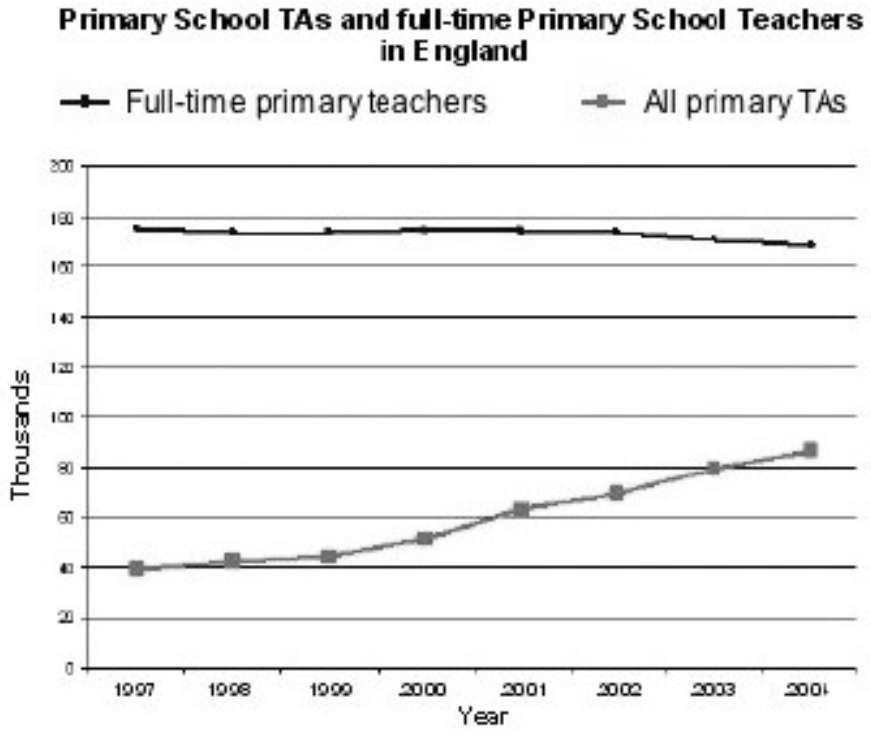

Figure 2. The growing numbers of TAs in primary schools from 1997 to 2004.
Source: DfES Statistics, 2002, 2004, 2005: Tables 13 & 28.

The report made it very clear that other additional staffing would also be needed in order to implement its recommendation on pupil–teacher ratios (para. 897: iii) and the expansion of the national provision for nursery education.

Although the report was written when there was a shortage of teachers, acknowledged by the committee (para. 950), it reflected very strongly the mood of the country for a greater investment in children's education.

This investment in greater numbers of TAs supporting children did not occur until the start of the twenty-first century, as Figure 2 demonstrates. This increase could be attributed to the increasing use of TAs (or LSAs) in supporting children with special needs statements, followed by the Workload Agreement of 2003, encouraged by additional grants.

Timing of the Plowden Report

The 1960s saw the sweeping away of post-war greys, to be replaced by a kaleidoscopic vigour and enthusiasm for a progressive society, where each individual 'did their own thing'. Thus the timing of Plowden and the recommendations it contained for the primary schools of the future was perfect. This thirst for change was evident in the report in its concentration on theories of child development and the uniqueness of the individual child. As the brain matures, so emphasis on the individual becomes of greater importance. Of Piaget's theories, chapter two says:

> There seems good reason to suppose that Piaget's successive [mental] stages depend on progressive maturation or at least progressive organisation of the cerebral cortex. For the cognitive stage to emerge, brain maturation is probably necessary, though not, of course, sufficient. (para. 23)

The report also understood the influence of the home environment and the preparation of children by parents for school (as did the Hadow Report of 1931). 'Our argument in this and the following chapters is that educational policy should explicitly recognise the power of the environment upon the school and of the school upon the environment' (para. 80). The report envisaged the school fitting in with the child's needs rather than the child trying to fit in with the school and for schools to work with parents. These two themes were pivotal in the development of the role of TAs.

Plowden's desire that schools should cater for individual children's needs faced at least two hurdles: over-large classes (see chapter 23: Table 20 and para. 887) and the poor level of communication between some schools and their parents. The report endeavoured to show how these problems could be overcome.

On class sizes, it recommended that:

> Trained teachers' aides in the ratio of one full-time aide to 60-80 children (two infant classes) and one aide to 120-160 children (four

> junior classes) (except in educational priority areas) should be employed in primary schools under the supervision of qualified teachers to provide them with help within the classroom. (para. 948: vii)

Thus Plowden was clearly anxious that support staff, whether nursery nurses or TAs, should be used *across the primary age range*. 'There seems to be no justification for the sudden decrease in the ratio of adults to pupils as children pass from nursery to infant schools' (para. 581).

On home–school links, the report recommended that 'All schools should have a programme for contact with children's homes' (para. 130) and gave a list of examples of how the contact could be achieved, such as the involvement of parents in 'out of school activities'.

Parents' Participation

The report felt that parents should also be involved *inside the school*: 'There are mutual advantages in opening the schools to the community. Mothers can help in school libraries and in other ways' (para. 927). The report also noted that in some schools specific children were helped already: 'The head teachers of a few London infant schools which have many children from problem families have enlisted Care Committee workers to look after small groups of children with behaviour difficulties for a day each week' (para. 927).

The Council were well aware of the dangers of employing mothers to work in the same school as their child. A newly appointed mum and TA might not have the objectivity or understanding of child development (rather than child rearing) to be of any help to the teachers or children:

> It cannot be taken for granted that a mother's experience with her own children will of itself qualify her for the work. Neither type of work will be a 'soft option' for a mother who wants an easy part-time job. (para. 1039)

Nevertheless, volunteer parents working in schools became a useful pool of potential TAs. As primary school budgets increased over time these parents became TAs as they knew the school and even how TAs worked. Primary schools took their role in appointing non-teaching staff seriously and, in my experience, went through a tough interviewing programme and personnel criteria to pick the right candidate for the child or class. My present research shows that it is still common practice for TAs to be parents of the school, or at least drawn from the school community.

Clearly, the need for good external training of new TAs was going to be critical but sadly this did not occur nationally with the few TAs who were appointed, despite the report's recommendations outlined below.

Training Needs

The report recommended that 50,000 additional TAs would need to be trained in 1973-74:

> We are also recommending that teachers' aides should be trained for employment throughout the primary stage of education and that their training should equip them for wider functions in the schools than those of welfare assistants. (para. 1035)

There would also be a new salary structure to recognise the training of new TAs:

> It would be desirable that a salary structure should provide for equality of status between nursery assistants and trained aides. (para. 925)

The first training of and qualification for teaching assistants did not occur until 1994 when the Department for Education and Employment introduced the optional Specialist Teacher Assistant (STA) programme. Financial recognition that TAs had gained the STA qualification depended on the school, as Janet Moyles found three years later in 1997. 'STA training, together with generally increasing competence and the changing roles of assistants, has meant that headteachers and governors are grappling with redefining pay structures for differing levels of personnel' (Moyles & Suschitzky, 1997, p. 5). Her recommendation was that the government should take a lead, something the Plowden Report had recommended 30 years previously.

In September 2004, the optional Higher Level Teaching Assistant qualification course was launched as part of the Workload Agreement between government, employers and school workforce unions (except the National Union of Teachers). This was in recognition that the teacher's workload had significantly increased because of curriculum demands and successive Special Educational Needs Codes of Practice (Department for Education and Skills, 2001), which meant that schools would need to 'deploy more support staff in extended roles, as a means of releasing the extra time for teachers and reducing their workload' (Department for Education and Skills, 2003). This was not what the Plowden Report had envisaged but it did go a long way towards increasing the role, responsibilities, training opportunities and, more importantly, the number of TAs in schools. It could be said that 'Teachers' Aides' have at last come of age in 2007, 40 years after the Plowden Report was published.

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