



## Scaffolding learning for independence: Clarifying teacher and teaching assistant roles for children with special educational needs



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### ABSTRACT

Support for children with special educational needs (SEN) in inclusive classrooms, in many countries, continues to be provided by teaching assistants (TAs). Whilst they frequently take responsibility for instruction, they are rarely adequately trained and prepared. As TAs have ample opportunities for individualised and group interactions, this paper recommends scaffolding as the key theory to inform their practice. From a large dataset of interactions in mathematics and literacy lessons, episodes of TA scaffolding were selected. Using conversation analysis, three scaffolding roles emerged: 1) a support role that maintained learner engagement, on-task behaviour and motivation; 2) a repair function that focused on learning and fostered independence when children were in difficulty; and c) a heuristic role that encouraged students to use their own learning strategies. The paper concludes with implications for trainers and managers and how teachers can support TAs in implementing each role.

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### 1. Introduction

The main drive behind this paper is to positively influence how children with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities are supported in the classroom. Educating children with SEN in the mainstream/general education classroom is an increasingly preferred option in many countries for reasons associated with equity; children with additional needs have an entitlement to the same high quality education, provided by appropriately trained teachers, as their peers (Giangreco, Suter, & Hurley, 2011). There has been a wealth of discussion around instruction in inclusive classes, notably exploring the concept of 'inclusive pedagogy'. The aim of inclusive pedagogy is to increase the participation of *all* learners in the class, as opposed to focusing on individual needs (Florian, 2009). A recent observational study examined how inclusive pedagogy operates in terms of teaching strategies for children in Scotland (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

A key issue in schools, worldwide, is that young people with special educational needs and disabilities are increasingly taught by non-teaching staff known as teaching assistants (TAs) or para-professionals in the USA (Blatchford, Russell & Webster, 2012; Giangreco, Doyle, & Suter, 2013). Indeed, Giangreco et al., (2011)

report that up to three quarters of the instruction for children described as having SEN was provided by TAs. In the UK, one in five (19%) interactions involving pupils with high level SEN are one-to-one interactions with TAs (Webster & Blatchford, 2013). The main reason for the significant increase in TA numbers is because of the inclusion policies in many countries; head teachers report that they are essential for the implementation of inclusive practices and teachers say that they reduce stress and ease their workload (Blatchford et al., 2012).

Despite the benefits, there are several key reasons to be alarmed about the increase in TA support for learners with SEN. Results from the large scale, longitudinal Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project showed that there is a negative relationship between the level of support provided by TAs and achievement in core academic subjects: English, mathematics and science (Blatchford et al., 2012) and that this is not accounted for by pupil characteristics such as prior attainment and level of SEN. Further quantitative and qualitative research demonstrates, convincingly, that one of the reasons is lower quality interactions and TAs' lack of preparation for a pedagogical role: TAs are much more likely than teachers to ask lower quality questions and reduce pupils' independence through supplying answers; they are also prone to giving inaccurate or misleading information, albeit unintentionally (Radford, Blatchford & Webster, 2011; Webster et al., 2011).

TAs are not to blame for this state of affairs because they are regularly expected to perform tasks for which they are not qualified

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or trained, such as planning instruction and adapting the tasks set by the teacher (Giangreco et al., 2013; Webster & Blatchford, 2013). Put briefly, it is the decisions made *about* TAs (by school leaders and teachers), not *by* TAs, that offer the most compelling explanation for why TA support has a negative impact on pupil outcomes. A continuing worry, however, is that the constant presence of the TA has a separation effect: it reduces students' opportunities for interaction with the teacher and nearly halves the number of interactions with their peers (Webster & Blatchford, 2013). They show that pupils without SEN have enjoyed an increase in the amount of peer interaction they experience in the classroom, yet, over the same period, there has been no change in the amount of peer interaction.

These problems have caused some to argue that it may be time to seek alternatives to TA support (Giangreco et al., 2013). Despite this, TAs are widely used. There has been a year-on-year increase in the number of TAs in English mainstream schools since the 1990s. TAs comprise a quarter of the school workforce, and a third of the primary school workforce (Department for Education, 2014).

The context within which the studies included in this analysis took place reflects a position in England where successive governments have avoided explicitly setting out in policy terms the role and purpose of TAs, relative to teachers; that is, what roles TAs should and should not undertake. The government, responding to media reports that TA jobs might be axed as part of on-going austerity measures, stated in March 2014 that it did not have 'any plans or powers to make that happen' (HC Deb, 2014). Employment and deployment decisions relating to TAs, it claimed, were best left to individual school leaders, not policymakers. This position is consistent with contemporary approaches to devolving responsibility for developing educational practices from the centre by giving schools greater autonomy. Yet the effects of evolving TA practice in less systematic ways, and with little conceptual or evidential underpinning to decision-making, are writ large in the findings from the DISS project.

Headteachers, therefore, need to make informed decisions about how to prepare their TAs and use them to optimum effect in support of learning. Given the mounting evidence that interactions are at the heart of successful inclusion (Radford et al., 2011; Skidmore, 2004), what is now needed is further detail regarding the moment-by-moment experiences of the learners themselves when directly supported by an adult; crucially, this means further exploration of how TAs interact with pupils, and how this can be as effective as possible. This interaction role for TAs must be distinct from, but complementary to, the interaction role of the teacher.

Our key argument is that, if schools continue to deploy TAs in a pedagogical role, TAs need an understanding of the importance of language for learning and, significantly, the theory of scaffolding which has its origins in the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky. The theory proposes that, through social interaction with others at the intermental level, young children develop higher mental functions such as thinking and reasoning (Vygotsky, 1981). To be effective, such social exchanges must lie within children's 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD), that is, the distance between what they can accomplish on their own as opposed to what they can do with the help of more capable others, such as parents (Vygotsky, 1978). The ZPD was developed further and taken from parent–child interaction and applied to educational contexts.

One of the strongest criticisms of scaffolding, as originally conceived, is that it represents an asymmetric view of adult–child interaction whereby the scaffolder constructs the scaffold alone and presents it to the child in the role of 'novice' (Daniels, 2001). Many have since argued that the child needs to be an active participant in the interaction; Newman, Griffiths and Cole (1989) made the case for a 'construction zone' that is created in the ZPD

through negotiation between a more advanced partner and the learner. How the zone is created, through interaction, has been the topic of many studies across different domains of learning.

An extensive review of scaffolding research concluded that three fundamental principles were commonly found across studies (Van de Pol, Volman, & Beishuizen, 2010). The key characteristics are contingency, fading and transfer of responsibility. The first concept, *contingency*, refers to how support is adjusted in the moment, either tailored to the learner's current level of performance or (ideally) to a slightly higher level. For a TA, an example of such a move would be to use a diagnostic question such as 'What do you think x means?' to ascertain the student's current level of understanding. After listening carefully to the child's response, if the TA pitches the next turn at a slightly higher level, it is possible to claim that she or he is interacting contingently. The other two principles of scaffolding, *fading* and *transfer of responsibility*, are closely interrelated. In the case of fading, the TA would gradually withdraw the scaffold by decreasing support for the student and withdrawing it altogether when it is no longer needed (Van de Pol et al., 2010). If fading is successful, responsibility will be transferred to the student.

Observational research has provided thick descriptions of the scaffolding process that are relevant to this study. An important distinction has been made between the intentions of scaffolding (their purpose) and the means by which they are accomplished (Rojas-Drummond, Torreblanca, Pedraza, Velez, & Guzman, 2013; Van de Pol et al., 2010). In terms of intentions, these authors shows that adults can use scaffolds for contingency management/frustration control, cognitive structuring, reducing the degrees of freedom (by simplifying the task), recruitment (to get a student interested) and direction maintenance (to keep the child on task). A typical list of means (ie. oral strategies) includes: modelling, instructing, explaining, questioning, prompting and feeding back (Mercer, Dawes, Wegerif, & Sams, 2004; Meyer & Turner, 2002; Rojas-Drummond et al., 2013). It is clear that scaffolding is a sensitive process and constitutes much more than merely helping the learner.

There is already strong evidence, within a socio-cultural perspective, that peer group interactive approaches and peer tutoring benefit children with SEN both academically and socially (Nind & Wearmouth, 2006; Nind et al., 2004). Our paper aims to extend this work by examining detailed examples of dialogue between TAs and children to demonstrate possible scaffolding strategies that could be useful for teachers and others who train, guide and support the TA.

### 1.1. Which interactions best include pupils with special educational needs?

Discourse is central to what takes place in any learning context and teachers engage in hundreds of interactions a day, thousands a week and potentially millions in a career (Dillon, 1988). An extensive review of studies conducted in inclusive classrooms concluded that statements and questions that promote high level reasoning are associated with better social and academic outcomes (Rix, Hall, Nind, Sheehy, & Wearmouth, 2006). Yet, when learners with SEN are asked higher order questions, they frequently have difficulty responding successfully: they may not know the answer or answer inappropriately; research shows a variety of repair strategies that adults could use, some of which foster more independence for the learner (Radford, 2010a; Radford, 2010b).

However, support for children with SEN in inclusive classrooms has changed in recent years. Since the studies included in Rix's review were conducted between 1994 and 2005, they did not take account of the huge increase in TA numbers. The TA, rather than the

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