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## **Crossing the line: Constructs of TA Identity**

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After teaching in mainstream primary schools for almost 18 years, **Emma Clarke** now teaches on a primary PGCE course. Her interests include research methodologies, approaches to managing behaviour, and challenging behaviour in primary schools. Her PhD considered the tensions experienced by teaching assistants in mainstream primary schools when managing behaviour. She has presented her research nationally and internationally, as well as publishing both in books and peer-reviewed journals.

## **Crossing the line: Constructs of TA Identity**

This paper considers issues around identity for teaching assistants (TAs) in mainstream English primary schools. We discuss the concomitant problems TAs experience around role definition and role-creep as well as the challenges inherent in equivocally defining their evolving and flexible role. We used key themes drawn from the literature considered to suggest that professional identity is broadly socially, relationally and contextually dependent, changeable and multifaceted. We then explore how these terms relate to the work and roles TAs undertake in school. The paper concludes with recommendations for schools to support the development of a contextually relevant identity for TAs so the flexibility in their role can be advantageous for TAs, teachers and children.

Keywords: Teaching assistants; professional identity; identity construction; liminal space; role-creep.

### **Introduction and background**

This paper considers how the professional identity of TAs is constructed in English primary schools, proposing that it is context and relationally dependent. This allies with research highlighting difficulties in defining TAs' multifaceted role in primary schools and the fuzzy, fluid boundaries or role-creep between teachers' and TAs' roles (Blatchford, Russell, Bassett, Brown and Martin, 2007). Research (Trent, 2014; Warhurst Nickson, Commander and Gilbert, 2014) demonstrated in England and Scotland, TAs' 'direct pedagogical role' is greater than time spent helping the teacher or the school, with this evolution in TAs' role (from ancillary support to curriculum delivery [Bach, Kessler and Heron, 2006]) happening 'with little debate or public discussion or research' (Blatchford, Webster and Russell, 2013). This change from 'paint pot washers' (Bach et al., 2006) to 'pedagogues' exemplifies the 'role-creep' (Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, Martin, Russell and Webster, 2009) many TAs and teachers experience, where TAs

regularly undertake direct teaching with individuals, groups of children or even whole classes – a role that once would have been considered solely the teacher’s. TAs have also been described as functioning as the ‘cultural and interpersonal glue between teachers, children, and families’ (Watson, Bayliss and Pratchett, 2013). This results in significant difficulties delineating their roles, with TAs’ work often straddling boundaries - what our participants defined as ‘crossing the line’, when occupying the grey area between ‘teacher’ and ‘not teacher’ (Clarke and Visser, 201; Lehane, 2016). As a result, consideration needs to be given to how to support teachers and TAs navigating this liminal space together.

The lack of clarity, where role definition is simultaneously ‘a given and emergent process’ (Thomas, 1992) has, we will argue, resulted in TAs’ roles being defined by context and individual relationships (Graves, 2013). This can be problematic, as joint understanding between all stakeholders of TAs’ roles has been suggested to be necessary to support TA efficacy and their work supporting children and teachers (Devecchi and Rouse, 2010; Trent, 2014). This paper highlights the lack of clarity in the TA role in English primary schools and how this affects the construction of TA identity.

There are approximately 176,000 TAs currently employed in English primary schools (compared to 221,000 teachers [DfE, 2019]), meaning most primary school teachers will work with at least one TA each day. This workforce of TAs is almost all female and the percentage of women working as TAs in primary schools continues to rise from 92% in 2014 (DfE, 2014) to 95% in 2017 (DfE, 2017). The average TA is reported to be aged between 41 and 50, have a lower level of formal education than teachers and have family responsibilities (Bach et al., 2006; DfE, 2014). Blatchford et al. (2007) found from their large-scale survey (n=202 schools) that 43% of TAs had nine or more years’

experience, and 63% had been in the same school for at least five years, with half of these having more than ten years' experience in the same school.

In England TAs are employed by schools depending on their needs and budget, and there are no overarching criteria, qualifications or job specification for the role. This means that there may be little parity between the TA role in different schools or even at times within the same school. Although steps were taken to provide a range of professional standards for TAs (in line with those which govern teacher's work in England) these were not endorsed by the English government and were instead published independently (Dethridge, 2016). The DfE withdrew from the project, stating the standards remained unpublished to give schools freedom in how they deployed TAs (Scott, 2015). It should be noted that while not recognised nationally as a qualification for TAs, foundation degrees in learning support are offered in a number of HEIs.

The blurred boundary between the role of the teacher and the TA has been acknowledged in much research (for example: Blatchford et al., 2007; Fraser and Meadows, 2008) and the roles TAs fulfil can include undertaking administrative tasks, providing support to teachers or children, or a combination of these roles. However, as noted, TAs' direct pedagogical role now usually outweighs any other aspect of their deployment (Trent, 2014). TAs may routinely offer academic support to children on an individual or group basis, and they may also teach whole classes at prescribed times to provide teachers with the mandatory planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time. Research shows TAs largely continue to work supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) including those with behavioural difficulties in mainstream schools (Sharples, Webster and Blatchford, 2015; Webster and Blatchford, 2013).

In their review of literature considering teachers' professional identity, Beijaard, Paulien, Meijer and Verloop (2004) concluded there was a lack of clarity in definitions of professional identity, despite earlier describing identity as who or what someone is, the various meaning people can attach to themselves, or the meaning attributed by others' (Beijaard, 1995, p. 282). Later work by Edwards and Edwards implied continued difficulty in defining the term, summarising it has long been recognised that;

...identity and the development of this identity are complex constructs embedded in the array of experiences, interactions, thinking and responses of the individual (2017, p. 195)

Edwards and Edwards' (2017), echoed Akkerman and Meijer's (2011) argument that historically teacher identity was broadly seen as the knowledge and skills required to teach, more recent post-modern literature suggests teacher identity involves sub-identities and an ongoing process of construction, which is dependent on various social contexts and relationships. As no current research can be identified relating specifically to TA identity, we have used considerations of teacher identity as our starting point in this paper. Clearly there are limitations to this, and a wide body of research has identified differences between teachers and TAs' roles including – but not only – differences in status, training and deployment. Whilst we acknowledge issues related to TA identity are likely to be even more complex and challenging than those for teachers we have, in the absence of TA specific research, used this as a basis for our discussion.

### **Aims of the paper**

The paper draws on research from two separate empirical studies considering TAs' professional role. Data collection methods in both studies focussed on foregrounding TAs' voice which, historically and currently, has been underrepresented

in research, often being *about* them, but not *with* them (Lehane, 2016; Roffey-Barentsen and Watt, 2014).

By drawing together the findings of two separate research projects, this paper considers how TA identity is conceptualised, how it differs from current understandings of teacher identity, and where our research on TA identity mirrors or diverges from conceptualisations of teacher identity. We will develop our findings into a range of action points to support schools in developing TAs' role and identity independent from other professionals they work with.

As noted, there are challenges in defining *teacher* identity (Edwards and Edwards, 2017; Akkerman and Meijer, 2011) despite the presence of national professional standards (DfE, 2011); what this paper does not aim to do is suggest an analogous framework for TAs can be created. This is something which is perhaps alluded to by the 'hands off' approach that the government adopted when they removed their support for the professional standards for TAs (Blatchford, Russell and Webster, 2013; Radford Bosanquet, Webster and Blatchford, 2015).

## **Methods and samples**

Although the research this paper draws on the result of two separate projects, they are bound by a number of common features, including the focus on TAs' voice. The aim to foreground TAs' voice in these research projects resulted in both having complementary methodologies and a similar range of data collection methods.

### *Becky's research into TAs becoming teachers*

In Becky's research, all participants (n=6) were TAs training to teach as part of a

university-based programme in England which progressed from a foundation degree in learning support (or equivalent). Semi-structured interviews (5 per participant – around 1 hour per interview) were conducted, along with document analysis, timeline creation and categorisation tasks over the course of 18 months during which time they transitioned from TAs to qualified teachers. As such, participants were able to consider TA identity from two different perspectives; that of a TA themselves and later as a teacher. The concepts of teacher and TA identity were considered in depth in this study; a key research aim was to consider when the TA themselves felt they had stopped being a TA and saw themselves as a teacher, regardless of when they met the national requirements for qualified teacher status (QTS).

Becky used a narrative inquiry approach foregrounding the voice of the TAs in data collection (Webster and Mertova, 2007). Wenger (1998) asserted identity is a temporal trajectory that undergoes constant renegotiation, incorporating the past and future in the process of negotiating the present to enable ‘ways of sorting out what matters and what does not, what contributes to our identity and what remains marginal’ (p. 155). Using narrative inquiry enabled Becky to consider identity development by understanding what mattered and what did not to her participants over time.

#### *Emma’s research into TAs managing behaviour*

Emma’s research considered TAs’ role in managing behaviour and involved a group of TAs in a larger than average mainstream primary school (NOR=478) with 19 teachers and 16 TAs. The data collection methods in Emma’s study included the analysis of a behaviour policy, questionnaires (n=13), a focus group (n=11) and a series of individual interviews (n=4). The research was qualitative and conducted from a feminist viewpoint using a pragmatic methodology. Letherby (2003) defined feminist research as

broadly ‘adopting a position which does not ‘add’ women in but begins from their perspective’, where the ‘messiness’ of the process is acknowledged. Nielsen (1990) defined feminist research as ‘multimethodological’, mirroring the pragmatic research approach utilised in the study (for a more detailed discussion see Clarke and Visser, 2018).

## **Findings and discussion**

### *Becky’s findings and discussion: findings from documentary evidence*

Although it is disingenuous to reduce ‘TA identity’ to ‘TA role’, Becky’s interview findings supported documentary evidence which showed each participant had different views on what TAs did in schools, and that these views changed over time. A categorisation activity which asked participants to identify what TAs, teachers or both do in schools was completed once, and then repeated 18 months later (36 diverse duties such as ‘tracking progress’ and ‘teaching groups of children with SEN’ were presented). It showed that while participants responded unanimously when assigning responsibility to the teacher to write lesson plans and reports, and both the teacher and TA to carry out 12 other tasks (for example ‘manage class behaviour’ and ‘photocopy’), responses to 61% (22/36) tasks were varied – for example ‘lead classes’ was seen as a teacher task in 67% (8/12) of responses, but also as a task for both TAs and teachers. This showed that in different contexts, the understanding of the TA role differs.

The categorisation task also showed that as participants moved away from the TA role, their view of what TAs did changed, but not consistently. When they were TAs, the participants felt both TAs and teachers were responsible for most tasks in the primary classroom. At the end of their teacher training, they identified marginally more tasks from the same list as solely the responsibility of the teacher. The main difference between the

data from the participants' earlier and later views was that most had changed their mind about many responses. For example, three participants had initially identified 'marking work' as a teacher task, but later saw this as a task for both teachers and TAs.

Interestingly, none of the participants identified more than 8% (3/36) of tasks as being *only* for TAs, and where they had identified tasks as being purely TA tasks, this was not consistent – for example one participant initially felt that 'clearing away resources' was a TA job, but 18 months later and post-qualification, she felt this was the responsibility of both the TA and the teacher. This showed what they understood about the TA role had changed over time and was arguably influenced by their changing role.

While the fact that this group of participants were undertaking a teacher training course may have meant their views could be seen to differ from TAs who were not training to teach, we argue that their views present a 'double sided' understanding of TA identity from both a TA and a teacher perspective which gave them a unique position from which to reflect on both TA and teacher identity formation.

### *Interview findings*

Becky's interviews were semi-structured to allow participants to focus on the events they felt illustrated their changing professional identity. All participants felt they understood what being a TA meant to them as individuals; they understood their own TA identity, yet in comparing these, it was clear that their views were not analogous, and they did not necessarily appreciate that other TAs might explain their TA identity differently.

The themes that emerged in Becky's interviews showed that constructs of TA identity align with research considering teacher identity formation (for example, Edwards and Edwards, 2017) which broadly identified professional identity for teachers as:

- socially, relationally and contextually dependent
- changeable
- multifaceted

We use these headings below to support the discussion of Becky's interview findings.

### **Socially, relationally and contextually dependent**

Although considering teacher induction as opposed to TA induction, Tickle (2000) suggested how others see the teacher is important to identity formation. TAs in Becky's study considered how others saw them as being a fundamental part of their TA identity, specifically noting incidences of praise from teachers with whom they worked. However, there was little evidence that any formal appraisal took place. One TA in Becky's study was particularly concerned about what she felt was a lack of understanding on the part of the senior leadership team (SLT) in a previous school about her practice:

I was never observed, I was there for eight months, and they knew that I had no experience, so why would you not come and see me? And not to be observed?... How can I get better?

Of the two TAs who noted their schools did carry out TA appraisals, one felt their targets were co-created and useful but the other felt it was merely a 'box ticking exercise'. This was reflected in comments from Emma's participants who saw any appraisals they had as a purely paper-based exercise, removed from their actual work in school:

It depends on what your role is, if your role is what's written down on a piece of paper that defines your pay bracket or whether it's actually what your role is within the school this year, because more changes are made every year.

Beijaard et al. (2004) summarised the work of Mead (1934) who suggested identity 'can arise only in a social setting where there is social communication' to support their assertion that 'identity is not a fixed attribute of a person, but a relational phenomenon'

(p. 108). This idea was supported by a TA in Becky's study who felt that the role of the TA;

...depends on the teacher. I have the opportunity to work with a lot of different teachers...the role is very much is based on how the teacher views themselves...if you get a teacher who's older, or more experienced, they tend to do everything to do with the class, all the filing, all display boards, and then small one-to-one groups. That is what the TA role is for them. But then I work with someone [else]... I have a lot more of an active role...they want me to help them with the children...they will do it by ability, so they will have either the higher group and I would have the low group, and the class just split in half. I help with the teaching, and then we swap over. So I think it really depends on how the teacher wants the TA's support, than the actual role.

Nichols, Shultz, Rodgers and Bilica suggested that identity 'involves a negotiation between the person and an understanding of the contexts in which he/she works' (2017, p. 407). However, none of the TAs in Becky's study had had an induction specific to the role of the TA within that school, and all felt their job descriptions were never clearly defined, arguably limiting their understanding of context. Contextual differences between schools were noted, for example, in how and when pupil interventions were carried out, whether attendance, or engagement with staff meetings was expected, and whether lunchtimes were different for TAs and teachers. These contextual differences, while apparently insignificant, appeared to have an impact on TAs identities. Those (n=4) that had the opportunity to eat lunch with the teachers and attend staff meetings identified themselves as central participants in their school community.

### **Changeable**

The lack of role clarity and associated issues of role-creep are highlighted in research as a persistent issue for TAs (e.g. Mansaray, 2006). This was a central theme in all forms of data collected our studies. In line with Blatchford *et al.*'s (2007) findings, fluidity in definitions and boundaries within TAs' role was associated with the 'messiness

of identity construction' (Tucker, 2009). Similarly, when considering teacher identity, Biesta, Priestley and Robinson (2015) highlighted that 'motion' (Soini, Pietarinen, Toom, and Pyhältö, 2015) resulted in teachers 'left regularly confused about their role' due in part to 'externally imposed systems which alter the dynamics of schooling' (p. 636). Arguably, TAs' identities are even more challenging to discern within schools in a constant state of flux. TAs' role have continued to evolve from historic and pejorative considerations of them as 'paint-pot washers' (Bach *et al.*, 2006) to more modern conceptualisations of them as para-professionals (Blatchford *et al.*, 2007; Kerry, 2005).

Constant change was evident in interviews; two participants spoke about senior leadership teams (SLTs) in their schools checking that staff were following the latest policy and they explained that TAs were not given training in how to follow new policies in practice. One talked about a daily log book designed to record work with children;

...most of us [TAs] don't do it because there's never time to do the interventions we are meant to be doing. I think we're going to get in trouble for not doing it.

This suggested that TAs were ill-prepared for new policies which resulted in non-compliance.

Intrinsic changes based on TAs' experiences also prompt change. In research considering the identity formation of new teachers, Nichols *et al.* (2017), proposed that both pleasant or unpleasant emotional experiences informed emerging professional identity. This idea reflected Webster and Mertova's (2007) focus on critical events within narrative inquiry which they argued revealed a change in worldview by the storyteller, or a change in their identity. One TA in Becky's study discussed her emotional response to an incident in which a child had refused to follow her instruction to tidy away some PE equipment, and (in the TAs' eyes) the teacher had not supported her actions. This experience had upset her, but had also enabled her consider the incident from a different

perspective and changed her understanding of her identity as a TA; she had reflected that it was perhaps right that as a TA she was not party to relevant contextual information about the child;

I was cross with myself because I just assumed he [the teacher] should have backed me up, but since then I have been much better at thinking 'I may not know the full story'

This supports Beijaard *et al.*'s (2004) view that identity formation is an 'ongoing process of interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences'.

### **Multifaceted**

Becky's interview data showed that TAs found themselves to be part of many communities. Akkerman and Meijer's (2011) wrote that 'identity is multiple' which explains why we 'respond differently in various situations and differently towards other persons' (p. 310).

TAs within a primary school may be part of the school community, part of a TA community of TAs, part of the year group or key stage community, part of the governing body and also part of the community of parents at the school. As such, what they *do* – their role(s) or the tasks they carry out - is multifaceted. One TA spoke about feeling that she was wearing different hats in her role as a TA, and even adopting a façade when in school that she put aside once she was home. Another whose role involved being in a number of different classes during each week explained that their TA role was different with each teacher; 'it is having to swap, and chop and change'. In one class, the teacher directed the TA to work with a small group, in another the teacher and TA split the class in half and both taught the lesson.

*Emma's findings and discussion*

Emma's research highlighted issues for her participants in what they termed 'knowing their place' - a key theme that emerged both in the focus group and interviews. This understanding of 'place' was echoed by all of Emma's interview participants, with one TA stating that teachers should be shown 'respect' and that TAs needed to 'be very careful not crossing a line'. All of the participants were conscious of the unspoken boundary that they felt existed between the teacher and TA, which they expressed as the need to 'know your place'. Developing an understanding of their place or 'role' within the context of this study - specifically in managing behaviour - was made challenging by teacher's implicit and varied expectations of TAs and the role they should play in the classroom. Reflecting on the contributions of the participants, specifically their references to 'place', a new theme emerged during the latter phases of the data analysis. This was the concept of agency, which had not been widely discussed in published research on TAs.

Agency was a pervasive theme in the data from Emma's research, but one not explicitly articulated by the TAs. This may be due to challenges in defining this 'slippery' term (Edwards, 2015; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) which, despite being 'widely debated' and 'romanticised' remains 'elusive' (Robinson, 2012). Despite these difficulties some distinct ideas about the nature of agency emerge, with influences impacting on agency including the 'expectations and assumptions' of the agent and others, as well as the 'external culture' (Biesta et al., 2015; Robinson, 2012). This suggests some of the difficulties participants in Emma's study had in developing their agency were associated with a lack of understanding of their role in relation to others for example, the teachers.

Pantić (2015) noted agency was 'contingent with social structures', whilst Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) definition proposed agency as 'intrinsically social and

relational'. Considerations of agency including historical, social, relational and structural facets links to TAs' changing role and expectations of them which have resulted in a lack of a shared, clear, and cohesive understanding of the TA role (Blatchford, R and Webster, 2012; DfES, 2003; 2006; DfE, 2010). Quicke (2003) suggested rather than a clarification of the role, uncertainty had increased with TAs 'in an ambiguous position with no clear boundaries'. This was reinforced by later research suggesting a continued lack of clarity on roles, autonomy and 'professional identity' for TAs (Blatchford, Bassett, Brown and Webster, 2009). Graves (2013) later supported this suggesting TAs' roles were 'chameleon like' which 'militates against a distinct professional identity', with the role defined only in the negative - that TAs were 'not teachers' - which obscures 'what exactly the nascent role is'.

The close link between identity and agency is recognised (Etelapelto, Vahasantanen, Hokka and Paloniemi, 2014); if TAs do not understand their identity/place they are not able to exert agency. Without an understanding of their 'place' within the wider school, for the TAs in Emma's research, the possibility of 'self-direction' which Abrams (1999) considered defined agency was challenging. Roffey-Barentsen and Watt (2014) stated TAs were;

...bound by the structures of the school, Local Education Authorities and government policies, affecting their choices, actions and...their professional identity. (p. 19)

This was reflected in one participant's description of herself as 'very much an observer' who had to 'sit back and watch'. This allied with Edwards's (2011) understanding of 'boundary work' where, rather than 'destabilising' the boundaries TAs worked across, resulting in the possibility of 'undermining' teachers by 'crossing the line' they remained 'passive observers'. Pantić (2015) suggested 'agents' intentions, knowledgeable and reflexivity' were mediated by their 'power and autonomy within given structures'.

Emma's findings supported assertions TAs knowingly relinquished their own 'position', 'status' and as a result, agency in order to benefit the teacher (Barkham, 2008, Watson et al., 2013).

### **Lack of understanding of the role of the TA: how this impacts on TA identity**

Burke (2004) highlighted the importance of sharing 'definitions and meanings of role and group categories' amongst colleagues. A significant body of research identifies tensions resulting from role-creep or lack of clear definition and identified role boundaries for TAs work in general (including, but not only; Blatchford *et al.*, 2013; 2016; Harris and Aprile, 2015; Kerry, 2005; Rose, 2000). Our findings also highlight the issues TAs experienced when these 'meanings' and boundaries and not understood, shared, or even in Emma's research - discussed.

As we noted, although our research projects had different questions and aims, the findings of both reflect issues related to identity and agency for our participating TAs. Like Watson *et al.*'s (2013) study, Emma's research showed a key concept was participants' description of their need to 'know your place' in relation to managing behaviour. This can be seen to mirror many of Becky's findings about identity and was described by one TA in Emma's study as;

...sometimes it's about knowing your place, if that's the right thing to say  
(.) there is a line that you don't want to cross which I think affects how you deal with things...

The TAs sampled in Emma's research expressed concerns their actions in managing behaviour would be perceived as 'overriding' the teacher, making them feel 'inadequate' and 'bad' as a result. One participant contended she did not want to damage teachers' self-perception and 'wouldn't want to put anybody in that position'. This was associated with an acknowledged obligation for TAs to – Emma's participants reported -

‘remember who you are’ and ‘know your place’. TAs in Becky’s study also noted a reluctance to ‘step on the teacher’s toes’ with one noting she actively avoided raising issues relating to behaviour management; she felt that doing so would reflect badly on her. TAs in Emma’s study described how they felt they were ‘left to get on with’ behaviour management, judging how best to proceed using a combination of ‘inference’, ‘common sense’, and ‘summing up the situation’. This supported Tucker's (2009) view that TAs’ roles were often ‘self-determined’.

Watson *et al.* (2013) indicated that ‘place’ was implicit through understood ‘rules and duties’ however, TAs in Emma’s research were in the difficult position of not ‘knowing their place’. This was due to the unspoken and variable expectations of behaviour management from a range of teachers, which TAs were required to ‘infer’. The issues raised by the participating TAs about the importance of understanding their ‘place’, or where they fit in the classrooms and ranges of context they work in, is related to ideas about identity. Identity control theory suggests that;

Identities are sets of meanings people hold for themselves that define “what it means” to be who they are...as role occupants, and as group members. These meanings constitute...an identity standard. The identity standard serves as a reference with which persons compare their perceptions of self-relevant meanings in the interactive situation. (Burke, 2004, p.5)

The findings from Emma’s research demonstrated that participants did not have a clear understanding of the ‘identity standard’ for TAs. Without what Burke (2004) termed this ‘reference’, to enable distinctions to be drawn between TAs’ and others’ roles, TAs’ ability to ‘know their place’ and professional identity in relation to the wider school system becomes distinctly problematic. Burke (2004) asserted identities were ‘verified’ through one’s place in social structures – in this case the school, as well as wider policy narratives. It was suggested the ability to ‘verify a group identity’ was used to manage

and ‘maintain the division between in group and out-group’ (Burke, 2004. p.13) - for example, between teachers and TAs. However, it did not help to provide a fixed TA ‘identity standard’, with challenges in terms of establishing a ‘group identity’ for TAs noted as a site of tension in extant research and in the findings of both of our studies (Mansaray, 2006; Anderson and Finney, 2008; Blatchford *et al.*, 2013; Graves, 2013; Roffey-Barentsen and Watt, 2014).

### **Steps for schools**

Our findings showed above all that TAs’ identity is constructed, not around an analogous framework, but instead responds to their changeable, contextually dependent and multifaceted roles, and stems from a lack of clarity around what a TA does due to an ever changing generally agreed view of what the role involves. Edwards and Edwards argued that similarly;

Teacher identity develops in ways that mirror the unique combination of culture, contexts and experiences that [teachers] possess (2017, p. 193)

We argue that rather than attempting to pin down what TA identity would look like, we should accept the rich, varied and ‘unique combination of culture, context and experience’ (Edwards and Edwards, 2017) that TAs possess and make this diversity the ‘identity standard’ for TAs, while facilitating schools in supporting their TAs to identifying and reflecting on their individual TA identity. As a result, it is not straightforward to offer steps for schools without being reductive. Nevertheless, there were some commonalities which could form the basis of guidance to support schools in positively developing a contextually and individually specific recognition of TA professional identity and supporting their agency. A flexible understanding and mutable view of TAs’ identity

construction could support TAs' boundary and 'line-crossing' work and enable them to support teachers and children more effectively.

- Change should be recognised as unavoidable and rather than seen as challenging, be celebrated as part of professional identity development. (Howes, 2003; Mansaray, 2006)
- TA roles should be identified in policies that involve them – i.e. in the whole-school behaviour policy to support agency (Clarke and Visser, 2019).
- Clear, TA specific induction should go beyond (for example) basic health and safety or fire drill information (Tucker, 2009; Symes and Humphrey, 2011; UNISON, 2013).
- People's performance in society is connected to their identity (Gee, 1990) so a planned appraisal or performance management process should allow TAs to make use of their experiences and be co-creators in targets relating to both pupil progress and their own continued professional development (CPD).
- TAs should be involved in life of school, staff meetings, training etc., with their opinions, knowledge and understanding being seen to be valued alongside others in the school to show trust in them (Clarke and Visser, 2019; Groom and Rose, 2005)
- Time should be given regularly for TAs and teachers who work closely together to negotiate and re-negotiate their identities based on their experiences and their changing contexts (for example a new cohort of children or recently implemented school or national policies) (Houssart, 2013; Lehane, 2016)

### **Concluding thoughts**

As others have (Hancock, Hall, Cable and Eyres, 2010; Tucker, 2009), we suggest that the construction of a TA's identity is individual, contextual, and bounded by

relationships formed through their varied deployment in schools. Therefore, as we have highlighted, any guidance needs to take these factors into account. Beijaard *et al.* highlighted that;

Professional identity formation is often presented as a struggle, because (student) teachers have to make sense of varying and sometimes competing perspectives, expectations, and roles that they have to confront and adapt to (2004, p. 115)

We suggest this struggle is additionally challenging for TAs navigating the liminal space with limited generic or specific guidance. Taking an individual and contextually based approach to each TA/teacher relationship would allow TAs to make sense of their own professional identity.

We propose the need for schools to consider, as part of their strategic deployment of TAs, planned opportunities for teacher/TA teams to meet together, enabling them to negotiate together a shared understanding of roles. This would go some way to addressing concerns that suggest TA deployment by teachers is unsatisfactory (Blatchford *et al.*, 2009). It would also allow teachers to take into account how TAs' contextual identity influences their agency when 'crossing the line' between TA and teacher, providing an opportunity to develop a shared and situated understanding of each TA's identity, alongside that of the teacher.

We have suggested in this paper a range of practical steps schools and settings can take to consider how TA, and by implication other staff, are supported in understanding what TAs' role and identity may be. As has been suggested, it is important to acknowledge the context specific and micro-political nature of schools (Maguire, Ball and Braun, 2010; Rose, 2000). We have proposed here not a single model of supporting an understanding of TAs' identity, but rather suggestions for explicit conversations and actions to ensure that the flexibility and fluidity in the role is advantageous for all and that TAs' identity can be developed supportively in the context they work in.

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