**Continuing professional development for teaching assistants: encouraging competence or ensuring performance?**

**INTRODUCTION**

The last few years have seen a substantial and sustained increase in the number of teaching assistants (TAs) in school, many of who are now working in a pedagogical role. This increased pedagogical role has created a concurrent interest in their professional development (Horden, 2012; Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, Martin, Russell and Webster, 2009; Russell, Webster and Blatchford, 2013; Moyles & Suschitzky, 2006; Tucker, 2009; Moyles, 2001; Oberhuemer, 2013; Radcliffe, Jones, Vaden, Sheeham and Hunt, 2011; Farrell, Alboz, Howes, Pearson, 2010; Nutbrown, 2012).

This paper outlines the design, and outcomes, of an initiative to facilitate the continuing professional development (CPD) of TAs. It reports the impact of knowledge based CPD on TAs’ practice, and highlights the tensions created by engagement in CPD that challenges some of the current demands of the education system.

**BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

The CPD was developed in response to an identified need for TAs, working in the early years, to develop their knowledge and understanding of speech and language. The schools were aware that provision was made for children with defined speech and language needs, but had identified an increasing number of children coming into school, whose language was not yet sufficiently well developed to access the curriculum. The head teacher of a federation of schools approached the university to develop a CPD opportunity for TAs who, like many support staff in schools, worked with the children identified as having additional needs but falling outside special educational needs provision (Blatchford et al., 2009; Russell, et. at., 2013).

**An evidence base for the CPD course**

A range of issues were considered in the development of the CPD course. Where possible, evidence was used to inform both the delivery and content of the CPD, significantly;

* The Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project, (Blatchford et al., 2009; Russell, et. at. 2013).
* The on-going debates within early years about the current direction of policy, particularly, in this context, with regard to communication and language, and literacy (Whitebread and Bingham, 2011; Flewitt, 2013)
* Coe (2013) & Hall’s (2013) work on what makes good CPD.

The DISS project (Blatchford et al., 2009; Russell, et. at. 2013) concluded that more needs to be done to prepare classroom based support staff for their now common pedagogical role. They argued that subject knowledge and understanding are fundamental to effective teaching, and that the current “sitting by Nelly” approach to developing subject and pedagogical skills must be addressed. (Russell et.al., 2013: 74). They concluded that “preparedness” for a pedagogical role requires training to raise the quality of TAs’ contribution to pupils learning and academic progress, and that TAs and class teachers need to work in concert to “promote thinking and learning through their interactions with the pupils” (OFSTED, 2011b in Russell et.al., 2013: 74). It would be difficult to argue against these assertions, and, in accordance with this, the overall aim of the CPD was to enable TAs to be more prepared for their pedagogical role in school. However, the notion of “preparedness” became more problematic when considered in the context of the current lack of consensus about the curriculum and pedagogical approaches in early years, particularly with regard to communication and language, and literacy (Larsen and Marsh 2013; Whitehead, 2010; Neaum, 2012; Charles and Boyle, 2014). This lack of consensus raises a vital question: what should CPD be preparing TAs for?

Historically, provision for our youngest children has had a strong pedagogical identity that has differentiated it from school. It has sound theoretical and research based underpinnings, and a clearly articulated understanding of children and childhood (Moyles, Georgeson and Payler, 2014; Early Childhood Action, 2012; Miller and Pound, 2011; House, 2011; Broadhead, Howard and Wood, 2010; Brooker and Edwards, 2010; Moyles, 2010), and, there is a strong, observable relationship between these understandings and the resulting provision (Bingham and Whitebread, 2012, 2014; Moss and Petrie, 2002; Edwards Gardini and Forman, 1993; Prout, 2000; Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999; James and Prout, 1997; Prout and James, 1997). However, the current political imperative to align early years with statutory schooling has challenged this distinction, resulting in significant disparities between teaching and learning in early years as understood within professional and academic fields, and teaching and learning in early years as required by the education system (Moyles et.al 2014; Moss, 2012; House, 2011; Whitebread and Bingham, 2011, 2014; Miller and Hevey, 2012; ECA, 2012; OECD, 2006; Anning and Fleer, 2004). So, whilst there may be consensus about the importance of a policy focus on early years, the direction of policy, and resulting expectations, are significantly more controversial. This debate again raises the question of what is meant by “preparedness?” What should the focus of the CPD be when there is a disparity between what is known in the academic and professional fields, and what is expected in schools? (Moyles, 2001; Osgood, 2007; Tucker, 2009; Horden, 2012) Should the main aim of CPD be to encourage competence in a professional role, or ensure performance of a given professional role?

Hall (2013), in an exploration of the literature on effective literacy teaching in the early years of school, provides evidence for the content of the CPD which seemed particularly important in this context of the disparity between what is known about very young children’s learning, and the current political imperative to align early years with later schooling. She questions the validity of perspectives that seek to find a single best approach, and argues that successful CPD consists of guiding practitioners towards creating their own solutions for raising achievement, as opposed to implementing solutions designed by outsiders. She concludes that effective literacy teaching cannot be packaged in ‘teacher proof scripts or prescriptive programmes on the assumption that one-size-fits-all’ (Hall, 2013: 535). (Moyles’ (2001) work supports these assertions. She shows how engagement with critical reflection on practice, linked to associated theory, enabled TAs to grow in confidence and, as a result, to begin to construct their own understandings of practice, and thus to challenge prescriptive practice.

Development of the CPD was also informed by the work of Coe (2013), who outlines ‘what kind of CPD helps learners’. He acknowledges that it would require a culture shift to achieve, but, that evidence shows that effective CPD should be:

* Intense: at least 15 contact hours
* Sustained: over two terms
* Content focused: on subject knowledge and how children learn
* Active: opportunities to try it out and discuss
* Supported: external feedback to improve and sustain
* Evidence based: promotes strategies supported by robust evaluation evidence

In addition, development of the course took into account the conclusion of Russell et.al (2013), that CPD that leads to qualification and accreditation should be available to TAs, to develop and formalise the acquisition of subject knowledge and pedagogical skill.

Taking this evidence into account, the CPD opportunity developed was a university accredited level 4 (first year degree level) CPD module entitled Early Language. It included a theoretical understanding of how children acquire and develop language, and the impact of language development on literacy. Clear and explicit links were made to pedagogical practice to support language acquisition and development, and early literacy. The course content encouraged the TAs to engage with theory and research, and to consider the implications of this for their practice. The course was delivered and assessed over a term and a half, and practitioners were encouraged to engage in ‘theory and research in practice’ and given time to reflect on, and discuss, what they done and/or noticed.

This approach is referred to as “knowledge-based CPD” to differentiate it from training, for example training in a particular intervention, or assessment tool, scheme or skill.

**THE RESEACH**

**Research question**

The pragmatic aim of the CPD was to develop the TAs’ knowledge and understanding to enhance their professional role in school. So, having given due consideration to the design and content of the CPD, it was important to consider the impact that completion of the course had on their role in school. The research question was therefore:

In what ways does a theoretical understanding of children’s language acquisition and development impact on the TAs’ role?

**RESEARCH METHODS AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES**

**Methodological Issues**

I entered this research, not as a disinterested observer, but as someone deeply interested in early years, who is actively engaged in developing understandings of teaching and learning, and shaping pedagogical practice. An on-going issue was therefore my position of an ‘insider’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). This was evident in a number of ways: in my existing commitments to early years education; to a particular understanding of early language and literacy; and to a particular view of the role and capabilities of TAs in schools. Additionally, because I had delivered the CPD course, the TAs were aware of my understandings and commitments. This required on-going, active cognisance of how my perceptions were filtered by these commitments, for example, when framing the interview questions, in my stance during the interviews, and in my response to the emerging data. What this implies is that data in this study is *produced* rather than *collected* as findings emerge through interaction and interpretation rather than being external to the research process.

**Methods**

I began with the assumption that the TAs hold complex knowledge and understanding, both tacitly and explicitly, which mediates their professional role (Turner-Bisset, 1999; Elbaz, 1983). Also, that there is a complex emotional dimension to working with young children that shapes and directs their role (Hargreaves, Liberman, Fullan and Hopkins, 1998), in particular the issue of confidence, which is highlighted in the literature as a significant factor in TAs’ professional identity (Tucker, 2009; Osgood, 2007; Moyles, 2001). Facilitating the voice of TAs who participated in the CPD was thus the central part of the research project.

Two qualitative data production methods were used: rating scales and interview.

The research had three stages.

1. The course participants completed two reflective rating scales at intervals through the course. They placed themselves on a line between two statements:

* “I don’t yet understand how children acquire and develop language” to “I understand how children acquire and develop language”
* I can’t yet apply my understanding of language acquisition and development in practice” to “ I can apply my understanding of language acquisition and development in practice

A numerical scale was avoided as there is evidence to suggest that numeric values provided as apart of a rating scale, may influence respondents’ interpretation of the endpoint labels (Schwaz, Knauper, Hippler, Noelle-Neuman Clark, 1991). The scales were completed confidentially over the period of teaching, with both informal and formal opportunities for discussion to inform the self-rating. These scales were referenced in the first interview.

2. The first interview took place in the TAs’ schools in the month following the end of the CPD course.

3. The second interview took place five months after the end of the course, again, in the TAs’ schools.

**Ethics**

A research ethics application was completed in accordance with university guidance. Briefing information about the research was given to the TAs and their consent received to be involved in the study. Consent was also received from each head teacher to complete the interviews in school. Anonymity for the schools and participants has been maintained throughout the research.

**Data analysis**

Initial data analysis involved collating and tabulating interview responses from the first interview. A thematic analysis was then undertaken to identify key themes in the responses. A number of the emergent themes directly informed the questions for the second interview. The second interviews were similarly collated, tabulated and analysed for emergent themes. A number of findings emerged from the data analysis.

A theoretical interpretation was made of the wider implications of the findings, using Bernstein’s codes and modalities of practice (Neaum, forthcoming; Bernstein, 2000). This theoretical interpretation enabled the findings to be viewed through a wider lens as it connected this small-scale study to a broader established theoretical base. Articulation of the findings within a broader framework enabled this small-scale study to tell a much bigger story, and in doing so added further support to the longstanding, theoretical and research-based evidence on early learning. Discussion of this theorisation is beyond the scope of this paper

**Research findings**

* ***Attendance on the course led to rapid changes in practice***. The TAs reported small but significant changes in their interaction with children, in child-initiated activities and adult led activities, both during and after the course. Five months after the end of the course the TAs reported that the changes had been sustained, and that they regarded them as embedded in their practice.
* ***Knowledge based CPD enabled the TAs to see the provision in their settings with ‘new’ and ‘old’ eyes***.

Most of the TAs reported an on-going sense of dis-ease with the current demands made of the children that they worked with. They reported that they lived with the discomfort engendered by a disparity between what they regarded as developmentally appropriate practice, and their required role in the setting. Reasons given for this were, that they regarded the teachers and the ‘system’ as more knowledgeable then them, and/or, that they lacked confidence in their knowledge to articulate their concerns, and thus to ask questions or offer an opinion.

Learning on the CPD course marked a return for all the TAs to seeing current provision with ‘old’ eyes; to what they ‘knew’ from their initial training, and many years of observing and supporting young children’s learning.

The CPD also enabled the TAs to see the current provision with ‘new’ eyes. A new depth of knowledge and understanding, warranted by a university accredited course, that offered frameworks to articulate what they were observing in schools, and encouraged them to ask questions, offer suggestions and, at times, challenge the appropriateness of the practice in their setting.

* ***The CPD resulted in a change of role for a number of the participants***. A significant number were given a specific speech and language role at Foundation Stage. Early indications in three schools are of positive, measurable outcomes for the children (measured by existing, in-school assessments).
* ***Adopting developmentally appropriate practice created tensions*** between what the TAs wished to implement as being developmentally appropriate and the demands of the teachers/school/system. There was a sense of having to be subversive to move towards more developmentally appropriate practice.
* ***The CPD engendered a sense of powerlessness*** for a number of the TAs: powerless within the class/unit, the school, and the education system, to make broader changes that they saw as necessary.

**Implications**

1. Knowledge based CPD has the potential for deep learning which TAs report has an impact on their confidence, practice, role and, some early evidence of an impact on children’s achievement.
2. Knowledge based CPD for TAs can be problematic when it challenges the current demands of the education system. This tension can be articulated within a Bernsteinian framework of Competence & Performance Pedagogical Models (Bernstein, 2000; Neaum, forthcoming).
3. In discussion of the professional needs of TAs who are in a pedagogical role we need to consider the implications of the gap between what is known about young children’s learning, and what is required in schools. Is the aim of CPD to enable the development of TAs practice to encourage competence in their professional role, or to ensure closer performance of requirements?

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