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Teaching Assistants, Respected Enough to Teach, but not Enough to be Paid Accordingly

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Abstract: In this article, we examine the role and responsibilities of teaching assistants (TAs) in primary schools in England. A survey exploring the health and wellbeing of educators received 244 responses, with 70 TAs eager to share their experiences. While literature indicates that expectations placed upon TAs are often unclear and fluid, our data suggest that this vagueness can be exploited by leaders. In response to our survey, a picture emerges where the responsibilities of TAs increased exponentially during the pandemic and have not lessened since. In a role that is very poorly paid and can be relatively unsupported, the inevitable impact of this is a significant increase in stress and anxiety. This stress not only impacts TAs' mental health and wellbeing but also affects their family relationships. In this article, we call for a review of this role at school level and for consideration to be given to clearer pay scales and job descriptions. We advise schools to consider actions that create a more respectful school culture, where the skills, knowledge, and wellbeing of TAs are valued on a par with their teaching colleagues.

Keywords: teaching assistant, school, stress, mental health, support

1. Introduction

In the aftermath of the pandemic, research carried out by the DfE in 2023 found that significant numbers of teachers in the UK were contemplating leaving the profession due to heightened levels of anxiety and stress. While many recent publications have shed light on the mental health of teachers [1–3], there remains a notable dearth of research focusing on the experiences of teaching assistants (TAs) in the UK. This glaring gap underscores the relevance and timeliness of the data that we present in this article, which addresses this vital, but so often overlooked aspect of our education workforce in the UK.

The role of the TA, similar to the role of the early years practitioner, is one that is often viewed as "less than" other teaching professionals in the wider education landscape [3], having little power [4] and "lacking a voice" [5]. Although the specific dynamics between individual teachers and TAs can vary widely, evidence exists of a general power imbalance in school, with TAs persistently ranking low down in the hierarchy of perceived importance [6]. There is even ambiguity in the title, with designations such as TA, classroom support, or learning support, among others, used interchangeably. In this article, we use TA throughout for clarity. When collecting data from education professionals in England (244 responded to our survey), we were surprised, perhaps wrongly in hindsight, to find that almost a third of respondents were TAs. And this group of professionals had a lot that they wanted to share about how they had been treated, particularly through the pandemic. In this article, we aim to do justice to this key role in our education system, by highlighting their value, and their resilience, in a position that is poorly paid and inadequately recognized.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The role and responsibilities of the TA

Both nationally and internationally, there has existed considerable ambiguity about the role of the TA [7–9]. In the UK, qualifications for TA roles vary greatly, there being no clearly defined qualification requirements for the role[1]. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [10] report that "training specifically to work with children is not universal . . . overall education levels mask differences within some countries between staff who work as teachers and those who work as assistants". In the UK, TAs may possess a bachelor's degree or higher qualification, though some may only hold high school level qualifications in English and Maths. Bradwell and Bending [5] suggest that the role of the TA has developed beyond "mixing paints and sharpening pencils" to one where significant expectations are placed upon them, both within the classroom and the whole school community. They also comment that TAs have been increasingly "taken advantage of" as their role has developed. This key role played by TAs became particularly apparent during the COVID-19 Pandemic, when many TAs remained in the classroom offering face-to-face teaching whilst their teaching colleagues worked from home[2]. There is elasticity

[1]'Teaching Assistant,' National Careers Service, 2024, https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/job-profiles/teaching-assistant

[2]'How COVID revealed the essentialness of teaching assistants, and how they can help pupils survive and thrive', EDPSY, https://edpsy.org.uk/blog/2023/rob-webster-how-covid-revealed-the-essentialness-of-teaching-assistants-and-how-they-can-help-pupils-survive-and-thrive/

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inherent in the role [11], where fluid boundaries and role-creep [12] are rife, without consideration afforded to the conflicted professional identity and wellbeing of the TA.

Wilson *et al.* [13] suggest that the use of an "extra pair of hands" is a long-standing practice within classrooms. Swann and Loxley [14] highlight that as far back as 1933 there were recommendations that classroom assistants "support" teachers, and recent data highlight that the numbers employed within this role are consistently increasing. The Department for Education school workforce data[3] highlight that in 2022, there were 281,100 full-time TAs in England and increase of 5,300 since the previous year's data. The number of TAs and support staff is at the highest since school workforce data began (and this does not include the part-time workforce). Yet, despite the ever-increasing numbers within this workforce, a lack of clarity regarding the role persists [5].

In 1967, The Plowden Report[4] called for additional adults within the classroom to offer support to teachers, as they were encouraged to develop more diverse and creative approaches to teaching. It is interesting that the initial creation of this role, at the time referred to as "classroom aides", was teacher, rather than child-focused. The role was further highlighted in both the Warnock Report [15] and the Education Act[5], which both called for additional adults who could focus on supporting children with Special Educational Needs. And with this, there was a change in purpose to the role, as the TA became more focused upon the child's needs within the classroom. Ainscow[6] describes how in the 1980s a "Mums Army" filled this role within the classroom, with varying degrees of success; and as the main qualification for the role appeared to be motherhood, it was highly gendered.

Changing social policy regarding SEND provision and inclusion within mainstream schools in England [16] continued to shape the requirements of the TA in the classroom. As demands became increasingly complex and specialized, there was a need for these predominantly voluntary positions to be formalized into employed positions that focused on students" welfare within the classroom [17]. Hall and Webster [18] suggest that without the "employment and deployment of this relatively new kind of classroom support", the provision and inclusion of pupils with SEND in mainstream schools would have been untenable. Yet, Geeson and Clarke [12] note that even though within SEND provision there appears to be some understanding about the roles and responsibility of the TA generally, there is still a "lack of agreement and clarity about the role and purpose". This ambiguity serves to erode the professional identity and the opportunity to a defined community of practice for TAs.

In 2016, although the DfE published professional standards for TAs, they failed (perhaps foreseeing that a "professional" wage might be demanded for such a role) to support an endorsement of these, suggesting that each school could decide how to employ and deploy TAs [5]. As a result, TAs have become a "new kind of paraprofessional educator" [17], fulfilling many of the roles of the teacher but with neither the pay nor the recognition.

Skipp and Hopwood [19] describe how the Department for Education's 2019 research identified four primary roles performed by TAs. The first role is whole class deployment, offering general support in the classroom. The second is in-class targeted support; the research suggested that this role was seen more in secondary education, but it appears to be a widespread approach in primary schools and Early Childhood settings. The third role for TAs was to undertake withdrawal intervention delivery, principally with pupils with identified needs, those with the pupil premium, and those with Social Emotional and Mental Health issues. Finally, the research found that TAs were required to be flexible and to take on additional, ad-hoc tasks, for example supporting pupils with personal care. This research captured an ever-evolving role, which required flexibility and a willingness to be deployed to a wide variety of tasks often without training. Interestingly this research was completed just before the COVID-19 Pandemic, when the role of the TA changed significantly in response to these unprecedented events.

2.2. The role of TAs in the pandemic

Research strongly indicates that without the contributions of TAs in UK schools, it would have been impossible to provide education during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Moss *et al.* [20] describe TAs as the "unsung heroes" of the pandemic, with 51% of them managing a whole class or "bubble" alone. Yet, post-pandemic, only a quarter of them felt that their schools recognized, or fully understood the role they had played in supporting children and their families at that time. Within school, the TA identity remains fluid, employed as and when circumstances require, sometimes no more than "helper", and sometimes "a parallel role to the teacher" [21].

Perhaps more important than status is the vulnerability that many of Moss *et al.'s* [20] respondents shared, feeling exposed to the risk of COVID-19 on a daily basis. Most of the participants in the research highlighted that in addition to their rapidly inflated teaching responsibilities, they were also responsible for the cleaning of equipment and furniture (84%), and for monitoring and enforcing pupils' adherence to social distancing recommendations (83%). Their data offers a powerful and emotive window into the lived experiences of the TAs, with one stating "We have put our lives at risk more than any school staff during the pandemic" (Ibid, p3). The same research suggests that within this period one in four TAs were asked to take on new roles and tasks without training. This reflects Conboy's [22] findings, where TAs tasked with supporting children's mental health expressed concerns about their own ability to cope with this important, and emotionally draining aspect of the work, having had little or no relevant training in the area.

Webster [23] suggests that, following the pandemic, many roles and responsibilities that the TAs acquired during lockdown have remained, significantly increasing their workload. Unison's [24] Cost of Living survey finds that 65% of TAs' workloads had increased over the past year, whilst 52% reported a reduction in the number of support staff at their school over that period. Bradwell and Bending's [5] view is that the "ethos within primary educational settings that TAs can 'do it all' at all times" has persisted. As schools reopened and pupils returned to school the role of the TAs became crucial in supporting pupils by providing targeted support, supporting children and young people's mental health, and practically helping pupils return to a *new normal*. Yet TAs remain extremely poorly paid compared to other educational roles, (£14,000-rising to £21,000) [25] with many working beyond their contractual hours without being paid overtime (52%, according to [24]). The unbalanced demands of

[3]Department for Education, 'School workforce in England', 2023, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-workforce-in-england#explore-data-and-files

[4]'The Plowden report: Children and their Primary Schools: A Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England)', HMSO, 1967, https://www.education-uk.org/documents/plowden/

[5]'*Education Act 1981'*, Gov.uk, 1981, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/60/enacted

[6]'Poor Tactics let down mum's army', Times Educational Supplement, 2020, https://www.tes.com/news/poor-tactics-let-down-mums-army

this role inevitably take their toll on recruitment, retention, and perhaps most importantly, the individual's health and wellbeing.

2.3. TAs' health and wellbeing

Literature suggests that the return to a very different place of work post-pandemic, and the effect of the continuing cost of living crisis, have significantly impacted upon the wellbeing of TAs and their capacity to stay within the profession [26]. Unison's [24] cost of living survey for support staff warrants a total of 13,063 responses, 64 % of these responses were from TAs. The data revealed stress and worry related to their day-to-day work, as well as concerns shared by 96% of the respondents that the rate of pay was not enough to cope with the rising cost of living. 46% of respondents reported actively looking for better-paid work elsewhere. One in seven said they had used a foodbank, community larders, or apps to enable them to obtain reduced-cost food, and over a quarter (26%) said they had to take on a second or third job to make ends meet. This is not the first time that research has revealed how many in TA posts, who are often working hard to support parents and families in poverty, are struggling with their own finances. Solvason, Webb, and Sutton-Tsang painted a similar picture in 2020, and Lydon, Solvason, and Webb in 2024. The question is, how long this can continue?

Hodgkins and Prowle [27] state that "feeling happy, being productive and realizing our potential are all important aspects of mental wellbeing and this is essential to enable us to cope with the daily stresses of life", but Unison's [24] data indicate that TAs are increasingly struggling to cope. Giangreco [28] adopts the idea of Maslow's Hammer [29] to examine how TAs are often used within the education system. Maslow [29] suggests that "it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail". Giangreco [28] suggests that we have become over-reliant upon TAs to fill the many significant gaps in the education system. The irony present in the data related to the TA role is that, although these professionals are best placed within schools to offer support for struggling children and their families, the demands of this role come at a cost to their own health and wellbeing, and, indirectly, to their own families. The role, as it is, is not sustainable, and it will be our most vulnerable children who are worst affected when the inevitable exodus of talented staff to better-paid, and less grueling employment occurs.

3. Research Methodology

This study was designed to gather rich data of participants' experiences of working in schools in England and to better understand the impact that they perceived this having upon their health and wellbeing. The survey was distributed to all staff working in primary schools across the regions of the UK. Respondents included head teachers and school leaders, with the majority being class teachers and TAs. A smaller number of respondents were lunchtime supervisors and administrators. A feminist paradigm underpinned the research, as feminist research acknowledges power imbalance, focussing on hearing the voices of groups of people who are most vulnerable, oppressed, or underprivileged [30], as is the case with the unrecognized role of the TA. We chose a mixed methods approach in order to gain a statistical overview of the "big picture", as well as qualitative data which would provide a more nuanced experiences of the individual, through their rich descriptions.

Anonymity was of paramount importance within our approach, as we wished to ensure that power differentials did not influence our potential participants" willingness to respond [31]. Because of this, a totally anonymous online survey (created through JISC, as a platform recognized for its security) was selected as the most appropriate approach for the project. The anonymity of the survey encouraged participants to answer frankly for several reasons, the most obvious being that there would be no repercussions for negative responses, but it also prevented "social desirability bias" [32], where respondents give answers that they believe to be socially acceptable, rather than sharing their true thoughts.

As with all methods, online surveys have strengths and limitations; a strength is the reach of a survey and the ability to obtain views from a large number of people in a relatively short space of time, a limitation is the comparative lack of flexibility and depth of information that could be gathered through an interview situation [33]. That being said, research by Chuey et al. [34], which compared results from online surveys and in-person research, suggests that results are likely to be comparable.

Although reliability is not a term that we apply to qualitative data, using a survey approached enabled data to be gathered from a substantial sample (n TAs = 70), adding to the potential of some generalizability of the data [33]. Although there is no guarantee that the views found below represent those of all, or even most TAs, there is also no reason why they should not, and we can reach what Bassey et al. [35] refer to as "fuzzy generalizations" about the TA experience.

The survey design was based on three measures of wellbeing: the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scales [36], the Wellbeing Measurement for Schools Staff Survey[7] (Anna Freud Centre for Children and Families & CORC, undated), and the CIPD Good Work index[8]. The survey included sections on general wellbeing, the staff wellbeing culture of the school, and staff wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The scales used aimed to obtain a general picture of the mental health and wellbeing of practitioners; however, because we also wished to gather rich data related to the participants' lived experiences, open-ended questions were also included throughout. The majority of the closed questions were followed by an additional: "can you expand on your choice?" or "are you able to explain why you think that?" providing an opportunity for more detailed explanations of the selections made. Many participants took advantage of this, providing comprehensive responses and sharing examples from their experiences, suggesting that they valued this opportunity for their voices to be heard.

4. Data Analysis

To identify the particular views and experiences of TAs, their data were extracted from the data as a whole. Of the 244 participants in the study, 70 (29%) were TAs. 85% of these TAs were working in a primary or first school, 9% were working in an early years setting within a school and 3% worked in a secondary school. 59% of TAs involved in the research were working full time and their age ranged from 18 to 56+.

In the first stage of data analysis, each member of the research team examined the data independently, allowing their own notions about significance to emerge, they then came together to discuss their thoughts as a team. During this discussion, significant themes were identified and agreed by all. Bias is always a natural aspect of qualitative data analysis, so this was acknowledged [37]

[7] 'Wellbeing measurement for school staff survey', Anna Freud Centre for Children and Families & CORC, https://www.annafreud.org/resources/schools-and-colleges/wellbeing-measurement-for-school-staff-survey/

[8] CIPD, 'CIPD Good Work Index 2022', 2022, https://www.cipd.org/globalassets/media/comms/news/2023-images/good-work-iindex-executive-report-2022_tcm18-109897.pdf

and minimized as much as possible by adopting a team approach to data analysis, and by being led by the predominance in the volume of certain concepts within the data. This process was facilitated by organizing the data within a data reduction grid, which enabled conceptual triangulation across the range of concepts. Within the discussion below, we focus upon those topics which were most prevalent within the data, including the expectations of the TA role, and the impact of the role upon individuals in terms of stress, mental health, and relationships. The responses are labeled with the final digits of their survey identifying number, in order to show the spread of responses across the participants.

5. Findings

Findings from this research point to a workforce in schools feeling stressed and overwhelmed with their workload. Teachers and TAs alike reported feeling "undervalued, lacking autonomy, and experiencing low morale" [38]. TAs in particular felt the pressure of high expectations; the comments from the TAs below indicate that the role continues to expand, often without the pay or recognition to accompany it:

> "Due to the workload in a school, you can never get to the end of your list of things to do in the timeframe that you would like and because of the amount of "hats" you have to wear throughout the day and roles that you may take on, sometimes you feel like you're not doing your job properly" (047).
>
> "I take on other responsibilities in school that are not directly related to my role. I am happy to do this, but it means I usually end up working an additional 10 hrs per week" (446)

The ambiguity of this role, identified within the literature, is clear in the responses, with responsibilities fluctuating between the most menial and the highest stakes. Although the qualifications of TAs are also hugely variable, for many the role appears to have become all-encompassing. It is no surprise, then, that when asked for suggestions of what might improve their workload, there were many responses that related to the need for clarity concerning the responsibilities included in their role. For example, this TA commented:

> "Placing clear parameters on expectations of job roles would be valuable" (289).

There is a general sense, throughout the data, that TAs felt that they were increasingly "put upon" or being taken advantage of. For example, this TA shared how she was expected to organize and "teach" intervention groups with no support, and no recognition for the work through pay or conditions:

> "TAs are expected to run a large amount of interventions in order to help/support children catch up on work missed . . . a lot of pressure is put on TAs – no extra support or money also no time to plan interventions . . . it's all becoming a bit much" (789).

It goes without saying that being taken for granted in this way can impact on people's self-worth. Indications of a TA feeling taken for granted and disrespected were found throughout the data, for example this TA shared:

> "Over the last 6 months, I have not felt supported by senior leadership and . . . just expected to get on with things, when I should not be put in that position" (301).

In this response, the TA clearly feels unsupported and expected to do things that they do not see as appropriate.

5.1. Working through the pandemic

For TAs, working through the pandemic was particularly challenging. Of the TAs completing the survey, 67% reported that the pandemic had impacted negatively upon their mental health. The increased demands placed upon them by their settings took no account of their own struggles in their personal lives, which ranged from being told by a GP that they "would likely die" (750) if they got COVID, due to an existing lung condition, to losing a parent just before the lockdowns were implemented, meaning that they

> "couldn't see [their] friends and support network" (620).

Respondents shared how, as the pandemic took hold, both their physical and mental health were increasingly affected. Participants described weight gain through comfort eating and problems with sleep and concentration. One respondent described the time as being

> "Constantly in turmoil, [I] didn't eat or sleep" (902).

Yet at this time, the work demands placed upon them increased exponentially. Four of our respondents shared that they were still suffering physical symptoms associated with Long COVID two years later. A word cloud created from the responses to the survey question, "can you explain how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on your mental health?" gives an illustration of anxiety, worry, and vulnerability that TAs coped with during the time (see Figure 1).

Many TAs clearly felt unsafe at work during the pandemic, and there are concerning comments in the data which allude to a lack of protection for staff, and the anxiety, panic, and fear that resulted. Just two examples of many comments are found below:

> "Did not feel protected in school at all. Masks were worn all over the place but discouraged and frowned upon in my setting" (465)
>
> "I felt isolated and unsafe in the setting, precautions were minimal. Masks were discouraged due to being scary for the children. You simply cannot distance yourself from the children that you work with" (931)

During the pandemic, as TAs played a crucial role in supporting the children of key workers in school; for many there was a significant increase in workload. Yet most of our respondents commented that their redoubled efforts, as they went totally unrecognized by their management. Reflecting upon the lack of "recovery" time given to students and staff following the pandemic, and how "business as usual" resumed, with expectations higher than ever, this TA commented:

> "There are times when I wonder if the "powers that be" have forgotten what we've all endured over past two years in the pursuit of academic achievement" (476).

5.2. Health and wellbeing

One set of survey questions related to the general health and wellbeing of participants. The responses indicated that the

Figure 1
Impact of the pandemic on the mental health of participants

majority (83%) sometimes or often felt optimistic about the future. 80% of them sometimes or often felt useful at work, and 84% sometimes, often or always felt that their work had a positive impact on their mental health and wellbeing. There were additional comments made in this section, which presented an image of fulfillment and positivity within the profession.

> "Happiness at work provides a feeling of self-worth that I find invaluable. Trying to do my best at what I'm asked to do, stretch beyond what I'm asked to do and do things that I see make a positive effect and have a beneficial interest on others, means I feel fulfilled and satisfied at work that ultimately follows on at home" (777)
>
> "Working with and helping the children is a privilege and, there are lots of rewarding moments. Helping them helps me to have a brain break from my own stresses in my personal life" (047)

It is interesting to note that half of the positive comments had "a barbed edge" [38], an acknowledgement that even the positive aspects of the job are tarnished by the overly demanding work environment. As this TA commented:

> "When you see the impact that your work has had . . . it is an amazing feeling but when you feel that your best is not enough it is emotionally exhausting" (719).

This supports the research by Bradwell and Bending [5] who find that TAs in their study felt valued by the children but not by managers, feeling "needed but silenced" within the classroom.

When asked directly about negative aspects of health and wellbeing, participants identified some of the less healthy outcomes of their role. 73% of participants had been upset about something during the previous week at work, 68% had felt unable to cope with all the things they had to do, and a considerable 95% of them had felt nervous and stressed. As researchers, we were keen to discover what caused this stress.

One participant listed several causes of work-related stress, including:

> "Lack of communication, unfair treatment of staff, inconsistency, work overload" (699).

Several of the participants told us that continual changes in plans at school were a significant stressor. They described times when plans altered at short notice and the impact this had upon their ability to carry out their myriad work tasks. This TA told us that:

> "changes are made without warning that often prevent me being able to carry out work that I have, meaning that I am constantly playing catch up" (931).

And the stresses of the job were not limited to the working day; several participants described an impact on their home and family lives, with one respondent describing how:

> "I sometimes take those moments home and reflect on them and I upset myself" (029)

and another that:

> "I have an inability to separate home life and work at times, I often take work home" (013).

As researchers, we were keen to get a picture of how mental health and wellbeing were understood and managed within school. Participants were asked if they were confident that they would be supported by their managers if they were to approach them with mental health concerns. 21% disagreed or strongly disagreed giving reasons such as:

> "she is rarely in school and doesn't see what goes on" (620)

and claims that managers are too busy to deal with such things. 44% of participants, however, felt that they would be very well supported; two examples of such responses are shared below:

> "I have been open about my anxiety . . . the school have always been happy to listen and understand me when I have a concern. They make me feel welcome I know I can confide in them when issues arise" (038).
>
> "The head is approachable and warm. She's sympathetic to issues that affect people's mental health" (777).

When participants were asked if they were encouraged to speak openly about their mental wellbeing in their school, only 33% agreed that this was the case. It is concerning how many negative examples there were of reactions to TA's mental health concerns from their leadership teams, including comments such as:

> "When you speak up, you then become a target . . . anything that goes wrong it's because of what you've disclosed" (020), that
>
> "No one comes to check up on you. Your close teachers or TA friends might do but not higher senior staff" (037), and
>
> "Management never ask and never listen" (289).

There were also many examples of mental health support in settings being tokenistic, with:

> "a wellbeing box to put thoughts in, but nothing is ever acted upon" (620), and
>
> "We are often told to be kind to ourselves, but the atmosphere can rather make you think is this lip service" (476).

When participants were asked who they would go to for help, if they felt stressed or worried at work, responses suggested that fellow TAs or friends and family outside the workplace were the people most likely to be approached for support.

Although support from colleagues is useful in that peers can best understand your position, it is a concern that almost two-thirds of the sample took stresses home, negatively impacting upon their families and their home lives.

5.3. Strategies

Participants were asked what would be most valuable for improving their mental wellbeing at work, with developments that could be put in place to support their future wellbeing in mind. The highest number of responses indicated a need for more information and awareness around staff mental wellbeing (Figure 2). Also ranking highly in the responses was increased support from both peers (45.6%) and professionals (44.1%), and time off/ flexible working (44.1%).

Only 42.9% of participants were aware of any mental health/ wellbeing policy at their school and very few knew what it included. Again, there was ambiguity around whether mental health and wellbeing were seen as important by leadership teams, but participants were happy to make suggestions about how their workplace could be more supportive (Figure 3). For some this was more direct support from their managers, for example:

> "One-to-one sessions on our wellbeing and checking up on us once in a while" (037)

and for others it was a more supportive working culture:

> "More of a team feeling where you are heard, and your feelings and ideas are taken into consideration" (828).

Many of the participants commented that their relationships with others at work were supportive and positive. One participant commented that their team was:

Figure 2
Seeking help for stress or worry at work

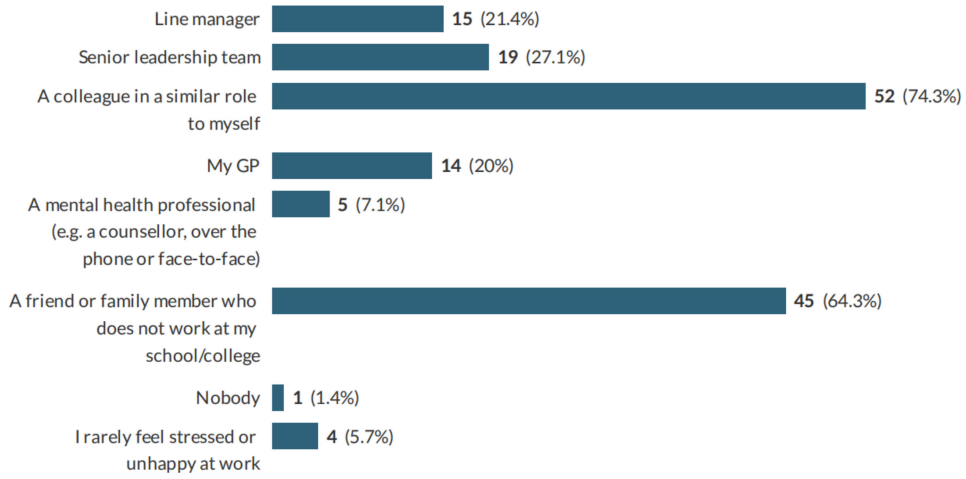
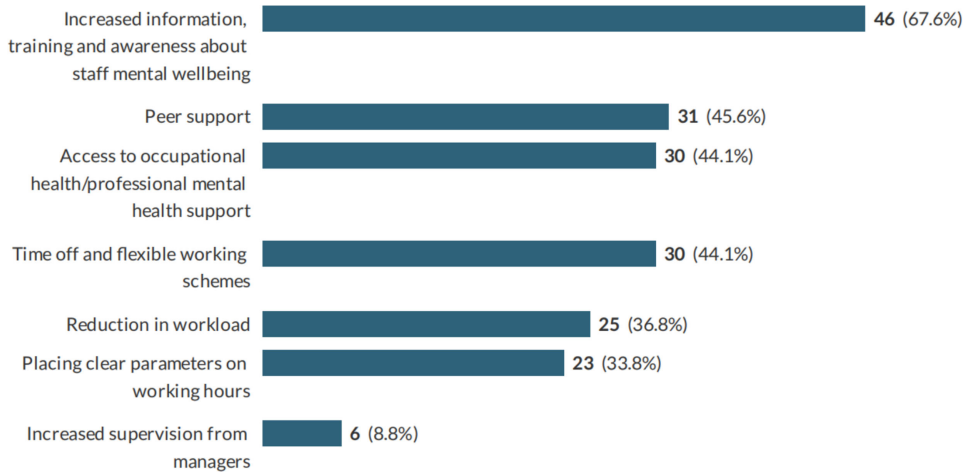


Figure 3
Mental wellbeing "wish list"



> "supportive and we have the opportunity to discuss things as well as work to support each other" (047),

and another that:

> "It is possible to approach work colleagues to discuss matters and it helps as at times all you need is another perspective" (726).

This support, however, appears to come most often from the class teacher they work with every day, or their fellow TAs, rather than managers, as this comment attests:

> "Work itself and SLT have a very negative impact on me, but relationships with other members have staff have become really important to me and I have a wonderful group of friends at work who support me" (620).

There were some positive comments about Head Teachers supporting staff with mental health issues; however, responses regarding managers' reactions to being approached about this were extremely variable, from this very positive comment about a head teacher being:

> "caring and understanding. She is warm and welcoming, very approachable which allows me to put my trust in her understanding and accepting my well-being" (038)

to others feeling that their concerns were:

> "shrugged off" (828),

that their managers

> "are very busy and . . . do not have time to deal with or help you" (301)

or that their manager's response would:

> "depend very much on the mood of the manager on that day!" (750).

In summary, our data suggest that the TA role is an extremely varied and challenging one, often with no clear expectations or parameters. However, this is balanced by the fact that there is satisfaction to be gained from working with children and from positive working relationships with colleagues. Considering the demands of the role, it remains poorly paid and often the vital work undertaken by TAs is taken for granted. The poor working conditions and lack of power and voice [5] are universal and put

unwarranted strain upon the mental health of those in the role. However, it is important to note that the data is not all negative and yields an extremely varied picture of the awareness of and support for staff mental health and wellbeing schools, and varied levels of support for the TA.

6. Discussion

6.1. The TA role

Throughout the exploration of the findings, there are numerous voices of participants that suggest the diversity of the expectations of the role of the TA. There continues to be, as Lübeck and Demmer's research [8] suggest, ongoing ambiguity concerning the role. Alongside this, there is evidence in the literature that TAs are exposed to situations that they do not feel confident in [22].

This is compounded by the ever-increasing demands having no financial recognition for additionality both in tasks and time. Interestingly, comments also confirm the diversity of the role and expectations, supporting the findings of Bradwell and Bending's [5] research. They found that TAs identified an ethos where they are expected to carry out mundane tasks such as washing paint pots and "dealing with bodily fluids", but also to manage behavior and safeguarding, and teaching a whole class when required. They also found that as well as TAs having a variable role there is a lack of clarity in both role and responsibilities [5]. The lack of recognition of the role clearly has an impact on participants' sense of worth and perpetuates a culture where TAs are undervalued and taken advantage of.

6.2. Working through the pandemic

Consistent with, and mirroring the literature explored previously [20], this research found that participants felt that the work that they undertook wasn't valued. Some participants confirmed that they often undertook roles during this period without training for the role. However, comments also highlighted that for some TAs there was an opportunity to develop skills that previously they did not have this included development of their IT skills and use on online platforms. The delivery of face-to-face lessons to the most vulnerable children became commonplace, and with this, there was the anxiety about their own physical and mental health. Participants highlight that they were required to be in school unlike many class teachers and that often the wearing of masks was discouraged to prevent the children feeling anxious. This caused increased anxiety and compounded feelings of not being appreciated. Moss et al's [20] research also suggested that most TAs felt that the work they were doing was not recognized. Again, this was echoed in the data from this research, with comments suggesting a lack of acknowledgement of their professional contribution throughout the pandemic.

6.3. Mental health and wellbeing in school

This research identified numerous instances of TAs feeling stressed, upset, or overwhelmed. The responses support Bradwell and Bending's [5] suggestion that TAs are being exploited and expected to take on responsibilities beyond their defined roles. The ambiguity of the role results in variable and changeable work tasks. Much of the stress experienced by TAs stems from inequity within school teams. Factors such as unfair treatment, inconsistency, lack of communication, and additional responsibilities all contribute to their stress.

The research revealed varied experiences concerning support from managers. While some TAs felt they could approach their managers to discuss mental health, a significant number (21%) felt this was not possible, believing managers were too busy to address such concerns. For most TAs, emotional support came from colleagues in the classroom and from family and friends outside of school, rather than from school leaders. Classroom teams provided substantial support, fostering close and sustaining relationships. However, support from leaders can be tokenistic; some school leaders claim to support staff, but this is not reflected in their sustainable actions.

The stresses of the working day often follow TAs home, either because they have to complete work due to time constraints during the school day or because they struggle to leave work worries there. This impacts their work-life balance and ability destress. Hodgkins and Prowle [27] assert that feeling fulfilled in our work is an important aspect of our mental health, and that good mental health, in turn, enables us to deal with life's daily challenges. Although this survey did include responses indicating fulfillment and positivity arising from the TA role, these were frequently overridden by the exhausting demands of the role.

7. Conclusion

TAs have become the workhorses of schools over recent years, dropping in and out of various roles and responsibilities as and when needed. It speaks volumes about the capability and tenacity of these individuals that they continually rise to the challenge planning, teaching, and assessing alongside their teaching colleagues, but they do so for a fraction of the wage and the recognition. Their flexibility and capacity cause them to become key players in schools, but without any of the status that this should afford. This exploitation of TAs' goodwill, and their relentless commitment to the best interests of the children that they support, needs to be acknowledged and to stop.

Recommendations

The TA position needs to be re-appraised at a national level. In the meantime, below we suggest positive and respectful actions that school leaders can take to recognize to show that they value the richness that their TAs bring to their schools. They will require some extra time, and in some cases an increase in wages, but these are, by far, the better option when compared to the long-time sickness or resignation of your most capable employees.

1) Employ a transparent pay scale aligned with explicit job descriptors. If TAs are asked to work beyond their outlined responsibilities, then pay accordingly.
2) Recognize capability, not only qualifications, and pay accordingly.
3) Put regular appraisals for TAs in place for any issues to be shared and dealt with in a timely manner.
4) Prioritize ongoing professional development for all school staff, with a particular focus on TAs. This approach acknowledges the ever-evolving challenges that schools face.
5) Include TAs, as those that often know the children best, in decisions made about those children that they work closely with.
6) Pay TAs the extra time to attend staff team meetings and training sessions, as appropriate.
7) Be aware of the health and wellbeing of your TAs and have clear strategies in place when staff are overwhelmed or ceasing to cope.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in WRaP (Worcester Research & Publications), University of Worcester at https://eprints.worc.ac.uk/, reference number 1475–7575.

Author Contribution Statement

Angela Hodgkins: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Project administration. **Michelle Malomo:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Project administration. **Carla Solvason:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration.

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