

# THE ROLE OF TEACHING ASSISTANTS IN SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN HONG KONG

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## **Abstract**

Teaching assistants (TAs) have undergone an exceptional development internationally in the past decade. TAs have been employed in supporting students with special educational needs (SEN) in many countries. The continual development of TAs has transformed its role from the traditional classroom helper to one that encompasses a range of tasks with a focus on engaging students with SEN in educational learning and key aspects of social, emotional and behavioural developments with more inclusive approaches. This paper studied the role of TAs in supporting students with SEN in government aided primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong. A mixed methodology was employed, combining a quantitative survey and qualitative semi-structured interviews in order to collect “mixed” forms of data. 500 questionnaires were distributed and 113 valid responses obtained. Six schools (three primary, three secondary) participated in the qualitative part of the study. Data gathered identifies clearly a lack of clarity and understanding on how the role of TAs may be most effectively utilized in Hong Kong. A clarification of the role is essential if the effective deployment of TAs is to be achieved to support the inclusion agenda. Key findings that relates to the role of TAs who have a direct bearing on learning, social and emotional developments for students with SEN in mainstream schools will be discussed in this paper. As the number of TAs working in supporting inclusion continuous to grow, it is important for the school leaders, policy makers and academic researchers to draw

from this baseline data and studies from other countries so as to find further ways of improving the quality of support by TAs to support inclusion and ensure that this brings the utmost possible effects.

**Keywords:** Teaching assistant, SEN, Inclusive education

## **Introduction**

Teaching assistants (TAs) have undergone an exceptional development internationally in the past decade. First of all, TAs have been employed in supporting students with special educational needs ‘SEN’ in many countries such as Canada, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Iceland, Malta, South Africa and Singapore (Giangreco & Doyle, 2007). Secondly, the continual development of TAs has transformed its role from the traditional classroom helper to one that encompasses a range of tasks with a focus on engaging students with SEN in educational learning and key aspects of social, emotional and behavioural developments with more inclusive approaches (Groom & Rose, 2005; Groom, 2006; Quilty, 2007).

In Hong Kong, the inclusion process has been firmly established since the implementation of a whole-school approach to integrated education by the Government of the HKSAR in 2002 (Forlin & Rose, 2010). TAs, termed as learning support assistants, are described as supporting the learning and participation of all students in a government document titled “Catering for student differences – indicators for inclusion 2003” (EDB, 2003). The document proposed the following:

Learning support assistants

1. Are involved in curriculum planning and review,
2. Are attached to a curriculum area rather than particular students,
3. Help to increase the participation of all students,
4. Aim to maximize independence of students from their direct support, and
5. Encourage peer support of students who experience difficulties in learning.”

To further support the inclusion process, the Government has improved the allocation of funding in 2008 by providing schools with additional resources and professional support (EDB circular no. 10/2008). The document suggests that schools can flexibly and strategically deploy the allocated funding in order to provide more comprehensive services for supporting the inclusion of students with SEN. Specifically, the funding can be used employing additional teaching staff and/or TAs.

Forlin & Rose (2010) suggest that, in general, there are broadly three different kinds of TAs in schools in Hong Kong based on their broad job roles. Firstly, they are those supporting the school administration with no bearing on students’ learning. Secondly, they are those supporting the school curriculum such as mathematics or music and have roles in classrooms supporting teachers for that curriculum. Lastly, they are those supporting students with SEN and whose roles have direct bearing on learning, social and emotional developments for these students. Traditionally, the use of TAs was limited to special schools in the government system and to support teachers in the independent

mainstream schools. It is believed that the demand of TAs in supporting students with SEN is growing in response to the implementation of a whole-school approach to integrated education.

### **Aim**

This study aimed at drawing baseline data on the current situation of the role of TAs in supporting the inclusion of students with SEN in the government subsidized primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong. We focused our attention on TAs whose roles have a direct bearing on learning, social, emotional and behavioural developments of students with SEN.

Two key questions were examined. They were: (1) the role of TAs in supporting students with SEN in learning in a regular classroom and their social interaction in a regular school environment, (2) the role of TAs in supporting the teacher in the implementation of inclusive education, including the collaboration between teachers and TAs and an observation about a teacher's approach to students with SEN in a classroom in the presence of a TA.

### **Method**

A mixed methodology was employed and comprised of two parts. The first part was a questionnaire survey. 500 questionnaires were distributed and 113 valid responses obtained. Participants of the survey were TAs working full time in government aided secondary and primary schools. The second part of the study took place at six schools (three primary, three secondary) and consisted of three components (1) semi-structured interviews, (2) time logs, and (3) classroom observations.

First, semi-structured interviews aimed at exploring key issues emerged from the questionnaire survey. 18 interviews conducted including 35 stakeholders and six schools. Each school had three separate groups of interview; one with school leaders, one with teachers, and one with TAs. 35 stakeholders included 12 school leaders (6 principals, 2 vice-principals, 4 student support team heads), 10 teachers, 1 social worker and 12 TAs. Second, time logs were distributed to all TAs at the end of each TAs' interview; 36 copies were returned and two key data collected. Third, classroom observations took place in six schools, one lesson each school, with the aim of observing the role of the TA in the classroom support and his/her interaction with the teacher and targeted students with SEN.

### **Results**

#### *TAs' contribution was recognized*

All stakeholders had explicitly recognised the contribution and the role that TAs play in supporting students with SEN in mainstream schools. Overall, the role of TA supported teachers in teaching and students' attention in learning. As Balshaw (1999) described, recognizing the contribution from TAs is one of the key principles in the effective use of the resource. Data from the study has indicated that stakeholders appreciate TAs' contribution but has not suggested if TAs, as a resource, has been effectively deployed in supporting the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools.

### *TAs' duties*

We notice that TAs in Hong Kong assumed 48 different tasks within the teaching and the learning processes of inclusion, as revealed by the study. Among all, 17 were related to supporting the school, 16 supporting students and 15 supporting teachers. The duties which individual TA undertook were diverse and included tasks that involved administrative support to teachers and school through to working intensively to support the academic learning, social, emotional and behavioural developments of an individual student with SEN. Data from the questionnaire survey showed that most TAs (63%) were uncertain or dissatisfied with the contract and conditions of employment. In addition, data generated identifies that the role of TAs varied from school to school depending on the leadership of the school leaders.

### *TAs' main task*

The top three tasks that TAs had carried out in the study were clerical/admin support, managing student behavior and class preparation including display. Data from the questionnaire survey indicated that TAs spent the most time in supporting teachers' clerical work. The result was echoed by data collected from time logs of which TAs at six schools spent the most time in supporting teachers' clerical work. It was found that, on average, a TA spent around three and a half hours a day in school supporting the task. In Hong Kong, a school staff starts a working day at around 8 am and finishes around 5 pm; 8 hours a day excluding lunch and break times. If a TA had worked eight hours a day, he/she would have spent around 50% of time in supporting teachers' clerical work.

### *TAs' role to students with SEN*

Broadly speaking, this study found that the typical role of TAs that supported students with SEN, mostly but not exclusively, was within learning and behavioural needs, inside and outside the classroom. TAs worked in the classroom by providing more opportunities for students' participation and by stopping students' disturbing behaviour. Many TAs also worked with students outside the classroom with two tasks; first was supporting students who were not making the expected levels of progress in core subjects, and secondly was delivering structured intervention programmes to improve behaviour or social skills. All these endeavors both inside and outside the classroom aimed to support students with SEN to become better integrated in the mainstream school and are in line with reports from the international literature (see Groom & Rose, 2005; Giangreco & Broer, 2007; Quilty, 2007). However, the data revealed differences in the deployment of TAs between primary and secondary schools; including the role of TAs and the interaction of TA-teacher-students with SEN. Following are the key findings:

### *TAs' role in classroom support*

Data from the questionnaire survey of the study showed that 41% of TAs (n=86) supported students with SEN in the classroom (see Table 1 below).

Table 1

<b>In which learning area do you support if you are supporting students with SEN?</b>		
	Frequency (n=86)	%
<b>Literacy (Chinese and English)</b>	64	79.0
<b>Numeracy</b>	46	56.8
<b>Sciences</b>	14	17.3
<b>General/Integrated Humanities (e.g. geography, history, economics)</b>	22	27.2
<b>Art Education (e.g. PE, music, visual art)</b>	26	32.1
<b>Others (please specify)</b>	18	22.2

TAs' tasks were mainly supporting students' learning in core subjects (literacy 79%, numeracy 57%) and managing their behaviour. TAs helped students understand learning goals, learning strategies and instructions. In semi-structured interviews, a question of whether TAs were needed in classroom support was explored among the six schools in the study. Results found that all TAs had a role in the regular classroom support except in one secondary school that the TA was needed in a remedial class instead of a regular classroom. Most school leaders and teachers appreciated the presence of the TA in classroom support. They felt strongly that the TA helped teachers support students with SEN.

However, it was found that there was a difference on the role of TAs between primary and secondary classrooms. In classroom observations, primary TAs were to manage students' behaviour with an aim of avoiding disturbance in the classroom. In secondary schools, TAs' role was mainly supporting students' learning needs. Regardless of primary and secondary schools, the report revealed that all TAs supported students by group. There was no one-on-one support observed in all six schools.

#### *TA-teacher-students interactions*

Findings from classroom observations revealed that the class teacher had more interaction with the TA and students with SEN in secondary schools than in primary schools. In secondary schools, the TA/teacher collaboration appeared working as a team in supporting students with SEN. There were noticeable eye contacts between two parties to ensure that students with SEN followed the instructions. The class teacher regularly walked around the group where the TA supported to check out students' work during the class. In contrast, there was absolutely no interaction observed between the teacher and the TA and the teacher and students with SEN in the classroom among all primary schools. Students with SEN were left completely to the hands of the TA. In the study, students with SEN, in all three primary classrooms, were left to the hands of TAs.

#### *TAs' support outside classroom*

More than half (54%) of the TAs, from the questionnaire survey of the study, had to provide support outside the classroom or afterschool. They helped students catch up with homework, revisions and delivered structured behavioural management programmes. Semi-structured interviews revealed that all TAs of the six schools had responsibilities in supporting social, emotional and behavioural needs for students with SEN. Moreover,

the questionnaire survey indicated that, in Hong Kong, TAs provided support mostly to students with ADHD (63%), autism (60) and dyslexia (49%).

## **Discussion**

### *The role of TAs in Hong Kong*

Our aim of the study was to understand the role of TAs in supporting the inclusion of students with SEN in the government subsidized primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong. Consistent with the international development about the role of TAs being broadening over time (Groom 2006), we found that TAs in Hong Kong played a supporting role in supporting teachers in teaching and students with SEN in learning, social, emotional and behavioural developments.

### *TA support in the classroom*

The deployment of TA in classroom support could be a critical factor in the promotion of inclusion and the work by TA contributes to the development of an inclusive classroom (Farrell & Balshaw, 2002; Moran & Abbott, 2002, Clarke et al., 1999). In our study, most school leaders and teachers appreciated the presence of the TA in the classroom. They felt strongly about the value of the TA in supporting the teacher for the inclusion of students with SEN in the mainstream classroom. The role of the TA was reported as maximizing students' attention to their work and encouraging students' participation. This appears to be in line with reports by Lacey (2001), Farrell & Balshaw (2003) about the contribution the ways TAs work to the learning process.

### *The role of TAs in behavioral support*

In our study, all TAs had responsibilities in taking care of the social, emotional and behavioural developments for students with SEN. Some TAs initiated programmes such as social stories in correcting inappropriate behaviour for students with autism. Others run afterschool resource classes with the aim of helping students with SEN in changing misbehavior. TAs had regular, direct and face-to-face interactions with students. TAs listened and responded to their needs. Groom (2006) described that the wider role TAs undertaken is the important contribution in the support of students with SEN in the social, emotional and behavioural learning. These are essential to the inclusion process. They are crucial factors in building positive relationships that build on trust, care, respect and understanding. Positive relationships are fundamental to successful learning. As students feel that they are listened and responded to by a trusting adult, they are harnessed to engage in the learning process. The range of activities undertaken by TAs in our study in social skill programmes such as social stories, afterschool resource class in adjusting inappropriate behavior, lunch time play and play support highlights the skills and knowledge that students need to secure a successful engagement in the learning process. "Successful learning is built on positive relationship" cited Groom (2006).

### *The partnership between TAs and teachers*

Literature suggest that TAs generally desire more interaction, training, and planning time with their collaborating teachers to increase their competence and assume important responsibilities (Downing et al., 2000). We found that most TAs asked for more communication with teachers in our study. Successful deployment of TAs depends on the quality of the partnership formed with teachers, including clearly outlined roles and expectations and effective team management and support. Effective collaboration between teachers and TAs is one of the key factors contributing to the successful use of

TAs as proposed by Balshaw (1999). In our study, the majority of TAs felt the appreciation from the school but admitted that they are lacking of sufficient communication and preparation time together with teachers. As Lacey (2001) pointed out that a crucial aspect in the relationship between the TA and the teacher is having time and planning together. If communication was poor, collaboration undeveloped, the impact of the TA would be reduced and implementation of inclusive practices would be less effective (Fox 2003; Farrell et al., 1999, Lacey, 2001). This obviously is one important element that school leaders are to work on in the deployment of TAs.

### **Conclusion**

The inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream classrooms is considered challenging from the perspective of the policy makers and the schools in order to facilitate change to accommodate the needs of these students. The use of TAs in many aspects has been seen as a resource to support more inclusive classrooms. The Government of the HKSAR has stated that the role of TAs supports the learning and participation of all students in a document titled “Catering for student differences – indicators for inclusion” in 2003. In this small-scale study, the finding has provided a firm foundation upon the importance of the role of TAs in supporting the inclusion of students with SEN as a result of the implementation of a whole-school approach to integrated education in Hong Kong.

Despite a growth in importance, data gathered identifies clearly a lack of clarity and understanding on how the role of TAs may be most effectively utilized. This results in the current situation of a limiting and a variation of their deployment. This relative neglect reflects the structure of the TA position in Hong Kong. TAs have been largely presented as a means to an end, in this case improving teachers’ workload in coping with the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools rather than as a tenor of importance and interest in its own right.

A clarification of the role is essential if the effective deployment of TAs is to be achieved to support the inclusion agenda. This requires a commitment on the part of the school leaders and policy makers to adopt a longer term approach to planning for including the TA position as part of the school structure and possibly some changes in the existing practices to enable them to be engaged more in supporting the teaching and the learning process. Frustrations about the lack of a clear vision of the role of TAs including their career structure were voiced out in our study. This will limit the effective deployment of the role until such time that the role is clearly defined.

### **Acknowledgement**

This work was partially supported by the Hong Kong RGC General Research Fund (project number 844313).

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