

Serial number	0130
Title	Being 'an in-between': Teaching assistants negotiating their role alongside higher education study.
Session	Transforming lives transforming places: Foundation degrees and their impact on mature female learners and their communities. (Bovill)
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Context

The *Transforming Lives* research centres on teaching assistant (TA) graduates at three English universities. Following questionnaire sampling of 129 graduates, extended semi-structured individual face to face, Skype or telephone interviews with 21 participants provided data concerning their higher education (HE) experiences. This paper explores the experience of TAs as they negotiate their working roles alongside their experience of academic study.

The number of school support staff in schools has trebled since 1997 (Webster et al 2011), with an expansion of their roles and responsibilities (Blatchford et al 2011). Historically denigrated as 'classroom helpers' and assigned menial jobs such as washing paint-pots (Dunne et al 2008) TAs and Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs) now fulfil a number of pedagogic roles alongside teachers, providing support for pupils with special needs, core curriculum subjects and covering classes (Webster et al 2011; Graves 2013). However, this expansion has taken place without a clear definition of the role, or provision for career development leading to school-based role allocations based in local need with variability evident between schools and even classes within primary schools (Houssart 2013; Graves 2013; Sharples et al 2015). This in turn makes separation between the roles of teacher and TA difficult, with the TA role defined 'negatively in relation to the teacher role' (Graves 2013:257) making a clear professional identity difficult to attain. This negative designation was evident within proposals for Workforce Reforms which gave TAs a central role (DfES, 2003) when activities which were deemed not part of a teaching role were allocated to support staff.

Foundation Degrees (FdAs) played a substantial role in addressing policy demands for remodelling the workforce in education and children's services (Edmond et al 2007; Harvey, 2009) offering TAs the opportunity for professional development whilst

allegedly raising the status of the role (Dunne et al 2008). Designed as a two year HE qualification, FdAs were based around vocational, technical and professional subjects and those already in work and seeking to upgrade their skills were seen as an important component of their target market (Tierney and Slack 2003). FdAs were thus part of a 'vocational ladder of opportunity', which progressed from school based work experience and vocational qualifications to higher education and employment (DfEE 2001: 6). Following their introduction in 2001-2 enrolments to FdAs showed a rapid rise, though there are distinct differences between FdA students and those on other forms of HE provision (Harvey, 2009). A higher percentage of FdA students are aged over 21 and engaged in part-time study, representing greater diversity in modes of HE study (IPPR 2013) and addressing the espoused aims of widening participation and lifelong learning (NCIHE 1997; Fryer 1997). However Harvey (2009) identifies two separate clusters of FdA students, one of which, males under 25, enrolled full-time with qualifications from previous study, parallels traditional HE intake. TAs, the focus of this study, typify the other cluster, females over 25 studying part-time, who were more likely to enter from employment, without academic or vocational qualifications.

Although often undertaken for career- based reasons, many FdA students, including TAs, report greater self-confidence as a result of their studies (Tierney and Slack 2003), TAs also reporting greater professionalism (Dunne et al 2008). Dunne et al found that although two thirds had gained greater responsibility or promotion, this was not solely attributable to the qualification. This is perhaps not surprising given the absence of any structured career progression for TAs leading to some feeling disillusioned that their achievements were not recognised by their employers (Harvey 2009; Ooms et al 2012). Despite difficulties associated with undertaking study alongside their work and family responsibilities (Reay et al 2003; Tierney and Slack 2003) half of the TAs studied by Dunne et al (2008) were continuing on to further study to complete an honours degree. Furthermore a third of these were undertaking further study to gain a teaching qualification, which would give them a clear role and professional status. For those remaining in the TA role the complexities of their position remain.

Theoretical approach.

This paper conceptualises TAs as traversing liminal spaces, constantly in a process of 'becoming' in response to the requirements of the role and their changing status. Lucas (2013), drawing on work of Deleuze and Guattari (1988), discusses the 'co-construction of work practices' and the opportunities offered by liminal spaces for transition and becoming. These processes resonate with the experience of the TAs interviewed for this project.

Findings.

Themes from the interviews:

- Gaining a degree as a mature student studying part-time – reformulating identity as 'one who can' *'I wanted a degree because I just thought I can do this'*
- Juggling identities as student, parent, TA, teacher, *'throughout my degree I was working full-time as a teaching assistant'*
- Negotiating their professional role and the overlaps with teaching *'I don't particularly want to teach. I teach as part of what I do, but teaching's not something that I'm overly fussed about'*; – lack of clarity particularly in the eyes of parents *'I don't know if many parents see the real distinction between a TA and the teacher'*
- Relationships with others
 - Some participants felt they weren't treated any differently *'I don't think it affected the way we worked together'* but several commented on being more on a level with teachers, *'I felt like I'd crossed that barrier and was able to have professional conversations with teachers'*.
 - supporting other TAs, *'I kind of helped out with assignments'*
 - mixed relationships with other TAs, the study *'put a bit of a barrier between me and them'* sometimes this was explicitly evident when they were openly challenged *'a couple of TAs who tested me'*

Participants continuing as TAs valued their experience of study, which enabled them to feel more confident and provided a theoretical base to underpin their practice. Those who had qualified to teach negotiated further boundaries, whether leaving a familiar school environment, or taking up the new role within the same setting.