SARA ALSTON

Working Effectively with your Teaching Assistant

A Handbook for Primary Teachers

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A handbook for primary teachers

Sara Alston

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I dedicate this book to my parents, Janice and Michael Rich, and my brothers, Ben, Johnny and Eddie, who have helped me become who I am, and my sons, Sam and Joshua, who daily inspire me to be more.

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Preface

I am in the odd position of writing a book using a job title – teaching assistant or TA – that it would not be my choice to use. I use it for clarity as it is the job title in most common usage for support staff working within the classroom in England. It is used in government guidance and most of the research in this area. However, when I refer to a TA, I do not mean a 'teacher's assistant' whose role is purely to support the teacher as a kind of personal assistant by providing admin support and so on, but an LSA, a learning support assistant – the job title I prefer! This is the role that the majority of classroom support assistants carry out. Their primary role is to support children and their learning, though they may do this in different ways and under different guises. Their role may include assisting the teacher but their focus is and should be on the children and their needs and learning, not those of the teacher.

I am aware that there is a huge array of job titles in use in British schools to describe the amazing people who are not teachers working to support children in our classrooms. Some reflect specific qualifications or areas of practice; others the ways staff are used in a particular school. They may also reflect variations in the expectations placed on staff or the roles they carry out, but not always. The job titles I have found include:

- CA – classroom assistant
- BSA – behaviour support assistant
- ETA – education teaching assistant
- SNA – special needs assistant
- INA – individual needs assistant
- ANA – additional needs assistant
- Cover supervisor

- HLTA – high level teaching assistant
- ELSA – emotional literacy support assistant
- LM – learning mentor
- AT – associate teacher
- PA – pastoral assistant
- Consequences gatekeeper
- Associate tutor
- Bilingual support assistant
- NNEB – National Nursery Examination Board (qualified)
- UT – unqualified teacher
- NA – nurture assistant

In addition to any questions over the job title 'TA', I ask for forgiveness for using the term 'your TA'. This is not to imply either a hierarchy where teachers are superior to TAs or that TAs are owned by teachers. If writing from a TA's perspective, I would equally write 'your teacher'. I merely mean the TA or teacher that you work with and with whom you share your room and class.

Throughout this book, when I refer to 'parents', I mean parents, carers and guardians – anyone with caring responsibilities for children.

Throughout the text, I have included the stories of teachers, TAs and children. All of these are fictional, though the inspiration comes from those I have had the privilege to work with and who have taught me so much.

Though I am the author of this book and accept responsibility for any errors in it, I was supported by many other people. Particular thanks should go to my publishers Hannah Marston (now at BERA), Emily Badger and Cathy Lear at Bloomsbury and to those who read the book at various stages, including Michael Purches, Ben Slater, Sue Allingham and Howard Webber.

I need to also thank the staff, especially the TAs and LSAs with whom I have worked in a range of schools over the last 35+ years,

particularly at Pyrcroft, Leatherhead Trinity and Pirbright Village Primary Schools.

Specific thanks go to Sue Allingham and Grace Durdle for being amazing resources of all things Early Years, Ruth Swailes for the word 'outvention', Chiara Dow for her ideas about the intervention monitoring form, Rachael Reeves for work on some of the images in the text, the Surrey Behaviour Support specialist teachers for shaping and supporting my thoughts about behaviour management, and those I worked with in nurture groups, particularly Melissa Heard and Carolanne Gale. Last, but not least, Wendy Howells, because friendships made in the classroom can last a lifetime.

How to use this book

While this book will include some theory and background information, its focus is on practical advice and strategies based on real classroom practice. To support this, I have included:

- lots of case studies and 'If this isn't working ... try this' examples to provide links to practice in real classrooms
- personal stories from my time as a teacher, school leader and education consultant
- quotes from teachers and TAs
- an occasional 'Extra useful information' box.

Each chapter ends with a summary, including:

- key points to remember
- things to discuss with senior leaders – because we don't work on our own in schools and there are things we need to share and be supported with by others
- things to think about – ideas to reflect on and discuss with colleagues

- things that work really well – simple things that others have tried and that work.

At the end of the book is a glossary of some of the key terms and abbreviations used throughout the book.

Introduction: The ten challenges of working with TAs and why they are no one's fault

'Sometimes, we end up blaming ourselves and our TAs for things that we can't control, rather than working to improve what we can.'

Teacher

Sharing the cape

In recent years, we have been reminded that 'not all heroes wear capes'. This was a key message of the 'Clap for Carers' during the UK's first Covid lockdown in the spring of 2020. Teachers were named as key workers. However, using 'teachers' as a shorthand for all school staff disregards the more than a third of school staff who are not teachers. While some are administrative, site and catering staff, the majority are teaching assistants. It was often they who kept schools running during the Covid pandemic – providing the on-site teaching for vulnerable pupils and the children of key workers while the teachers developed and taught an online curriculum. It was an example of the teamwork that underlies the good practice in so many classrooms. If teachers are heroes, so are their TAs. The 'cape' needs to be shared.

Yet TAs and their role and impact are largely ignored by many thinking about schools. The Ofsted inspection handbook in 2021 (since updated) included just *one* reference to teaching assistants in 49 pages: that observations of pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning in lessons should include 'how well pupils respond to teaching assistants and other support staff'. The 2022 SEND Review (DfE, 2022b, p. 43) recognised that 'Teaching assistants play a key role in supporting children and young people with SEND to access learning in the classroom' and promised more on their effective use and deployment as part of the proposed national standards for SEND. But it gave no further details.

When TAs are considered, the focus is on school leaders and how to deploy TAs or in the hundreds of books on how to be a good TA. There is very little for class teachers on how to work with TAs and manage these vital classroom relationships. It is assumed that this will happen by magic. Such guidance as exists tends to focus on remediation, problem-solving and intervention when relationships go wrong, rather than on a proactive approach to equip teachers with the skills and understanding they need to work effectively with their TAs to promote learning.

In this book I am going to take the teacher's point of view, focusing on how you as a teacher can work effectively with your TAs, so that you can become the leader of a team in your classroom, 'sharing the cape' and supporting children's learning. We are going to start by considering some of the challenges to effective teacher/TA working relations, which, to be clear, are the fault of neither.

Challenge 1: The assumption that if you can manage children, you can manage adults

There is an implicit belief within teacher training and within schools that those who can manage a class of children can also manage an adult or adults, implying that managing children and deploying staff effectively are the same thing. They are not. Taking the same