Teacher aides’ voices: perspectives on teaching pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

Background: Over recent decades, teacher aides (TAs) have had an increasing presence in mainstream classrooms internationally, providing vital support to students and teachers on a daily basis. Although the evolution of the role has given rise to many implicit and explicit shifts in TAs’ responsibilities, opportunities for TAs to develop and shape their own identities within school contexts remain limited.

Purpose: Set in Australia, our study responds to calls for TAs to be afforded ‘a voice’ to contribute to the improvement of the teaching pedagogy used in their schools. We sought to investigate TAs’ perspectives on their school’s pedagogical framework, based on the TAs’ lived experiences of carrying out their roles in the classroom.

Methods: A total of 23 TAs from a primary school in Queensland completed an online survey, which included questions that invited the TAs’ views on the main approaches and strategies embedded in the school’s pedagogical framework, and their reflections about the strengths and challenges of using it. Descriptive statistics were produced from the survey data and open responses were analysed qualitatively.

Findings: The analysis suggested that the TAs felt they had good knowledge and understanding of the teaching pedagogy and were confident and supportive of its use in the school. Participants cited student self-confidence in their learning, and improved academic results for children with diverse learning needs and those working beyond year-level expectations, as key strengths of the pedagogy. However, time constraints and student behaviour were seen as challenges to the success of the teaching pedagogy.

Conclusions: Whilst these findings are focused on one school, understanding TAs’ perspectives on their school’s teaching pedagogy as they go about their classroom work offers a starting point for further study into an important but insufficiently explored area of research. It highlights the need for TAs to be included as valued partners in their schools’ pedagogical journeys.

Introduction

In recent decades, the prevalence of teacher aides1 (TAs) in mainstream classrooms has increased substantially (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2012; Bowles, Radford, and...
Bakopoulou 2018; Butt 2016b), in part reflecting developments in the conceptualisations of inclusion, and evolution in the understanding of student diversity. For example, in Australia, which is the country context for the study reported here, there has been a four-fold increase in TAs since 1990, with more than 105,000 of these support staff working in classroom settings (Sonnemann and Hunter 2022). Additionally, this staffing increase has been accompanied by changes in role descriptions throughout the country (Harris and Aprile 2015; Stephenson and Carter 2014) – a shift which is also apparent internationally (Navarro 2015).

The roles and responsibilities of TAs have been investigated over the years (see Sharma and Salend 2016), with other areas receiving attention including: qualifications, professional development, and training (e.g. Butt and Lowe 2012; Carter, Stephenson, and Webster 2019; Monfore, Lynch, and Erikson 2015); maximising impact and deployment (e.g. Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2012; Webster et al. 2011); employment procedures (e.g. Butt 2016a); supervision and supervision models (e.g. Douglas, Chapin, and Nolan 2016; Giangreco, Doyle, and Suter 2014); behaviour management (e.g. Chambers 2015; Clarke and Visser 2019); and identity (e.g. Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2012; Trent 2014). However, although Blatchford et al. (2012, 130) observed, over a decade ago, that ‘if educational institutions around the world are to attract and retain school-based TAs, it is essential that opportunities be provided for these individuals to construct their identity and status within the school and wider workforce’, many questions remain about the status of TAs in school settings – and whether, and how, they have been enabled to develop and shape their own pedagogical identities.

Despite TAs’ increasing presence in classrooms throughout the globe, the unique and valuable pedagogical and practical perspectives they bring to teaching and learning within the school context tend to be overlooked. This paper responds to calls for TAs to be afforded a voice to contribute to the improvement of the teaching pedagogy used in their schools (Webster and de Boer 2021). It offers a contribution to this space by reporting on a small-scale study involving TA participants, which was conducted in a primary school in the Australian state of Queensland. The research explored TAs’ perspectives on the approaches they used when carrying out their pedagogical roles on a daily basis. However, ahead of presenting the study in detail, we first consider the wider research context.

**Background**

**Conceptualising the role of the teacher aide (TA)**

Historically, the TA role has typically been focused on three main areas: administration (e.g. filing, preparing resources); assisting the personal care and mobility requirements for students with high needs; and aiding classroom and specialist teachers to modify the curriculum (Giangreco, Doyle, and Suter 2014; Woods, Wyatt Smith, and Elkins 2005). It is abundantly clear that TAs’ roles have evolved in significant ways in the past few decades (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2012; Chambers 2015; Giangreco 2010) to include generalised support in mainstream classrooms, working with student groups, in-class rotational activities (Houssart and Croucher 2013), and the taking on of increasingly pedagogical instructional roles (Collins and Simco 2006; Sharma and Salend 2016).
Broadly, the variety of expanding roles can be described as including (a) a one-to-one model, whereby the TA works with one student; (b) a class support model, in which the TA supports the entire class under the direction of the teacher; and (c) an itinerant model, in which the TA works across several classes with a number of students and several teachers (Butt 2016b). Job titles, too, have changed and proliferated over time, with variations including inclusion aides, teaching assistants, support officers (Howard and Ford 2007), and paraprofessionals (Butt 2016a).

The majority of studies examining the role of the TA in recent decades, and therefore much of the research evidence, tend to originate from the United States of America (USA), the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia (Sharma and Salend 2016). Globally, there appears to be little consensus about how TAs should be utilised in schools or what the duties should be that they are required to perform (Giangreco and Doyle 2007). TAs are often described as non-teaching staff and, in many jurisdictions, may have responsibilities for students with severe disabilities in mainstream classrooms (Jardi, Puigdellívol, and Petreñas 2021). For example, research completed by Carter et al. (2009) with elementary, middle, and high school TAs in the USA described TAs working alongside a diverse range of students with disabilities in mainstream and special classrooms, while delivering support and educational services such as literacy and social skills instruction in a group or one-to-one format. A further example provided by Webster et al. (2011) in the UK draws attention to the ambiguity that can exist around TA roles and responsibilities. In the main, they observed that TAs in mainstream schools were responsible for supporting students with behavioural and learning needs by supplementing teacher instruction and working with these students individually, or in small groups, within and outside the classroom. Meanwhile, Quill and Kahu (2022, 164) highlight the importance of the student – teacher aide relationship in terms of meeting student learning needs and fostering engagement in class tasks and activities, in their report of an ‘exploratory study in primary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand’. Through a TA’s positive impact on students’ sense of belonging and wellbeing, the authors indicated that student engagement and educational outcomes may be enhanced.

In Australia, Stephenson and Carter (2014) reported that TAs’ work was predominantly casual and short-term, predominantly non-specific, and focused on the capacity to work as a team member. In line with this, when investigating the roles of TAs in regional Queensland schools, Harris and Aprile (2015) identified in-class instructional support and small-group instruction as dominant work tasks, alongside non-instructional duties (e.g. photocopying, ordering supplies) and one-to-one learning activities with students who had high and complex support needs. Such research not only emphasises the evolving roles of TAs, which are often ambiguous and poorly defined, but also affords awareness of some of the negative or challenging aspects around their work.

Analysis and review of national or regional governmental documentation about TAs’ roles in schools can give helpful insight into the various ways that their roles and responsibilities may be conceptualised. For instance, in Queensland, Australia, a position description for TAs provided by the Department of Education states that ‘they work closely with teachers, developing and obtaining resources, setting up and operating equipment, supervising students and participating in learning activities under the direction of a teacher’ (Queensland Government 2022). More specifically, this work includes assisting and supporting ‘teachers in the preparation of quality and effective
teaching and learning programs which are consistent with the Principles of Effective Learning and Teaching and relevant syllabi, curriculum policies, work programs and educational trends’ (Queensland Government, Department of Education n.d., 2). This role description is similar to those used in other Australian states and territories (e.g. New South Wales Department of Education; Victorian Department of Education and Training), where TAs are required to undertake a variety of instructional, support, and administrative tasks within schools. However, whilst terms such as participating in learning activities and specific literacy and numeracy duties may be used in such descriptions, more detail would be needed to reflect a comprehensive picture of what such roles might involve.

Employing TAs to work alongside teaching staff in a school is typically considered to be a cost-effective and efficient way to support students with additional educational needs (Harris and Aprile 2015; O’Rourke and West 2015). However, it may not be uncommon for TAs to be providing extensive support with limited qualifications or training. For example, currently, TAs in Australia are not required to hold post-school qualifications (Butt 2018; Butt and Lowe 2012). Indeed, around a decade ago, Stephenson and Carter (2014) commented that qualifications were not necessary for TAs to be employed in Australian schools and, more recently, Butt (2016b, 997) claimed that ‘in some jurisdictions in Australia, a person can be employed as a TA with no training or qualifications beyond Year 10’. In all, it is apparent that there are many different conceptualisations of TAs’ roles and responsibilities across the globe, and, whilst qualification requirements may vary, the duties undertaken by TAs tend to continue to evolve and expand.

**Study context**

Internationally, the notion of quality education for all students remains a focus and goal (e.g. UNESCO 2000, 2007, 2015a, 2015b, 2017/18, 2020). As progress in the design and implementation of high-quality education is necessary in working towards this important aspiration, policy designers at the global level have grappled with ways of improving and reforming schools (Murphy 2013). In Australia, the use of evidence-based pedagogies for teaching is encouraged throughout the country’s schools (Australian Council for Educational Research 2012). For instance, government schools in the state of Queensland, the Australian state in which this study was carried out, are required to develop and implement a research-validated pedagogical framework (Queensland Government 2018). The requirement for schools to implement such a framework is connected with the notion of supporting every student to achieve the best possible learning outcomes (Queensland Government 2018).

The study reported in this paper formed part of an enquiry by a Queensland primary school’s leadership team, together with university researchers, into staff perceptions of the school’s pedagogical framework. This framework had been developed over a six-year period by the school’s leadership team, in consultation with staff and the school community. It was designed both to lift the achievement of students who do not meet year-level expectations and challenge those students who are working beyond their current grade level (Goss and Hunter 2015). Within this framework, the overall pedagogical approach to teaching at the school involved direct instruction and explicit instruction. Both of these pedagogies are considered to be data-driven and structured ways of
teaching (sometimes referred to as targeted teaching) to improve student learning (Goss and Hunter 2015). As these approaches are key to the context of the study, they are briefly described further below.

Firstly, direct instruction, or ‘little di’ (Mason and Otero 2021; Stockard 2020), involves elements of explicit and systematic instruction within a broader spectrum of teacher behaviours. Exemplifying the work of Rosenshine (2012), the range of teacher behaviours includes employing: (a) structured materials, (b) clear and unambiguous instruction, (c) encouragement of student responses, (d) systematic feedback and correction, and (e) monitoring for student independence. Instructions are sequenced systematically, along with gradual increases in rigour and difficulty (Mason and Otero 2021). Secondly, explicit instruction is an evidenced-based, direct approach to teaching that is dependent on specific behaviour goals and outcomes (Bahr and Mellor 2016). It includes teaching strategies which are characterised by a series of supports so that students are guided, by the learning process, to include teacher demonstrations, supported practice with feedback, class discussions, and monitoring of performance until mastery is achieved (Archer and Hughes 2011).

Purpose

As mentioned above, the study reported here represents one aspect of a wider school-based enquiry that was undertaken in a Queensland school. The first part, to be reported elsewhere, investigated how teachers at the school (n = 54) perceived the school’s pedagogical framework and explored their suggested areas for improvement. The aim of the study reported in the current paper was to gain insight into TAs’ perspectives and reflections on the school’s pedagogical approach. Seeking the TAs’ opinions on this was crucially important, as they assisted in implementing the school’s pedagogical framework through their daily practice. Thus, by means of gathering the TAs’ views about the school’s approach to teaching and learning within this context, we also sought to identify and highlight the TAs’ valuable contributions through their presence and daily involvement in classrooms. The study addressed the following research questions: (1) What perspectives do TAs have about the pedagogical approach used at their primary school? and (2) What are the key reflections reported by TAs on the pedagogical approach used at their primary school?

Method

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained through Griffith University’s Human Research Ethics Committee (Ref No: 2021/755), following the school principal’s approval. Recruitment of TAs to participate in the study occurred initially through two meetings with the school’s leadership team, in which the purpose of the study was described to them. This was followed by a series of email communications with the principal. After gaining endorsement to conduct the research, information and consent packages were sent to all TAs, via an email from the principal. The school leadership team allocated time at the beginning of a weekly staff meeting for the TA participants to complete the online survey. The consent package provided information and assured prospective participants
that taking part in the survey that it was voluntary, and that withdrawing from the research at any time during the survey would not affect their relationship with the school. It also made clear that responses would be stored in a secure manner at the lead researcher’s university, and that all data would be de-identified.

**Research setting**

The setting for this study was a government primary school in south-east Queensland. Located in an established middle-to-high socioeconomic area, the school adopted an approach to successful learning that emphasised inclusion and support, and valued student proficiency in literacy and numeracy as essential building blocks for future success. Over 1,000 students aged between 5 and 12 years attended the school, which welcomed catchment enrolments and international enrolments to support a culturally diverse school community. At the time of the study, the school staff was made up of a leadership team of 10; between 60–70 teachers; and between 25–30 TAs, who provided support to teachers and students in multi-ability classrooms.

**Data collection**

A survey was constructed using an open-source, online statistical survey tool which was hosted by the researchers’ university. The aim of undertaking the survey was to collect data so that the viewpoints that the TAs held about the pedagogical framework used in the school could be identified. As part of the survey development process, a hard copy of the survey instrument was initially sent to the leadership team and adjusted according to their feedback. The survey was then pilot tested (Creswell 2014) with two TAs who were known to the researchers. This resulted in no changes to the original instrument. Once the online survey was activated, the principal was notified and emailed the link. TAs were then invited by the principal to complete the survey at a predetermined date and time via the link on the school intranet. As explained above, time for the TAs to engage with the survey was provided at the start of a weekly staff meeting.

The online survey was made up of three main sections. The first section included five demographic items (gender, age group, highest qualification, years of experience as a TA, years of employment at the school). This was followed by an open-response question, with a free-text box as the response format, which invited the participants to describe the key approaches and strategies embedded in the school’s pedagogical framework. The second section used a 5-point Likert-type scale (ranging from very low to very high) to gauge participants’ perceived levels of understanding, confidence, personal satisfaction, satisfaction connected to student outcomes, and level of support in relation to the pedagogy (e.g. *From a teaching assistant perspective, my level of confidence in implementing the school’s pedagogical framework is . . . ; my level of satisfaction with the school’s pedagogical framework is . . .*). The final section of the survey contained two open-response questions. Through these, participants were asked about their perceptions of the strengths (i.e. *Please identify the strengths in implementing the school’s pedagogical framework*) and challenges (i.e. *Please identify the challenges in implementing the school’s pedagogical framework*) of the framework, together with a final question inviting further comments about any aspect of the pedagogical approach.
A total of 25 TAs were recorded as responding to the survey. Following a data cleaning process, any cases with substantial missing data were excluded. This process yielded responses from 23 TAs that could be analysed. These TAs were female, and most (83%) were in the 40 to 50 plus years age range. Their qualifications ranged from a Year 10 Certificate to a Bachelor of Education qualification. In addition, almost 70% of them had more than six years’ experience as a TA and over half had worked at the school for six years or more. In summary, these data indicated that the TAs in this study were experienced in their role and had been employed at the school from the early development and implementation stage of the pedagogical framework.

**Data analysis**

The closed-response elements of the survey were analysed to produce descriptive statistics, using a quantitative analysis tool. In this way, the frequencies with which the TAs selected particular options were calculated.

Further, the TAs’ free-text responses from the open-ended questions were analysed qualitatively, using constant comparison method (Boeiji 2002; Memon, Umrani, and Pathan 2017). In terms of this qualitative analysis, a four-stage process was used. It commenced with the first author reading the survey responses to identify key concepts. Following this, the TAs’ responses were re-read. Data were re-checked in terms of how they had been organised and sorted, so as to ascertain whether the categories were a suitable match for the proposed assigned code. Each code was then compared and revised, resulting in category confirmation. For example, in the case of the TAs’ responses to the survey question *Please identify the strengths of the school’s pedagogical approach*, two codes were identified, which were *consistency* (number of responses: 6) and *supports all* (number of responses: 14). The emergent categories were refined further by grouping them into major themes. The emergent themes for the example given above were: *supports all students, provides consistency and student achievement*. Next, synthesis of the data began, involving themes being named, and quotations being selected. Once themes and subthemes had been identified, the two researchers mapped them on a document and attached quotations. To support the maintenance of consistency, the researchers engaged in discussion over the quotations. This resulted in moving some from one theme to another theme, until consensus was achieved.

At this point, the first author conducted a primary detailed analysis of the mapping. This was then cross-checked by the second author to strengthen the trustworthiness of data interpretation. The iterative process that we underwent to produce the qualitative analysis enabled any differences in coding and categorisation to be discussed and adjusted in a systematic way.

**Findings**

The analysis methods set out above enabled us to gain insight into our research questions, and thereby better understand the TAs’ perspectives and reflections on the school’s pedagogical approach. In the three subsections below, we present the main findings from the analysis. Firstly, we describe the findings relating to the TAs’ self-report ratings. Secondly, we set out the TAs’ identification of the pedagogical framework’s strategies;
and, thirdly, explore their perceptions of the framework’s strengths and challenges. Where it is helpful to illustrate key points, anonymised quotations have been included to represent the views of some or all participants.

**TAs’ self-report ratings of the pedagogical framework**

As explained above, the TAs were invited to consider their own understanding, confidence, and satisfaction connected to teaching and student outcomes, and overall endorsement of the framework on a scale ranging from ‘very low’ to ‘very high’. The outcomes are given in Table 1. Inspection of these data shows a broadly consistent response pattern of ‘moderate’ to ‘very high’ ratings across items, with the majority of respondents selecting ‘high’. Therefore, overall, the TAs’ self-report ratings across these survey items suggest generally, in the context of the pedagogical framework, that the TAs considered that they went about their pedagogical duties with understanding, confidence, and satisfaction, and that they were very supportive and affirming of the pedagogical framework they used in their daily work.

**TAs’ identification of approaches and strategies in the pedagogical framework**

The TAs were invited to engage with an open-response question concerning conceptual knowledge about the pedagogical framework. The question asked them to nominate approaches and strategies which were contained in the framework. Table 2 presents a summary of their responses. It indicates that *direct instruction* was overwhelmingly the most frequently mentioned approach or strategy, while other approaches identified by

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects under consideration</th>
<th>Very low</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Very high</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Own understanding of the framework</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own confidence in the framework</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own satisfaction (teaching) with the framework</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own satisfaction (student outcomes) with the framework</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own overall endorsement of the framework</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note on Table 1: total number of TAs rating each aspect under consideration = 23.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach or strategy mentioned</th>
<th>Number of mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct instruction</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion strategies</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct instruction and explicit instruction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Targeted teaching</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Direct instruction and mastery learning</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>One-to-one instruction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsive teaching</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Approaches and strategies in the pedagogical framework identified by the TAs.

Some TAs identified more than one approach or strategy; total number of TAs responding = 23.
three or more TAs were: inclusion strategies, direct instruction and explicit instruction, and targeted teaching.

The approaches which were most frequently nominated by the TAs aligned well with the school’s documentation and description of the framework. It had been anticipated, though, that the TAs might identify one-to-one instruction as a component of the framework, because working intensively with a single student had been an integral part of TA duties for many years (Butt 2016b; Giangreco, Doyle, and Suter 2014). However, only a few TAs responded along these lines. It was noteworthy, too, that most TAs highlighted direct instruction in isolation or in combination with explicit instruction or mastery learning as the dominant pedagogy in the framework. It is possible that this is related to the realisation that the framework emphasises a very structured approach to teaching, and these three pedagogies all support this method of instruction.

**TAs’ perceptions of strengths and challenges related to the pedagogical framework**

In this subsection, we focus on the themes that emerged from the TAs’ views about the strengths and challenges of the pedagogical framework. *Table 3* gives an overview of the thematic analysis findings that stemmed from the TAs’ responses to the two open-response survey questions inviting them to share their opinions.

According to the analysis, the strengths of the school’s pedagogical framework, as identified by the TAs, related to one major and one minor theme. The major theme, supports all students \((n = 22)\), contained subthemes related to inclusion, supports for learning, and student achievement; the minor theme was provides consistency for teaching \((n = 3)\).

Comments made by the TAs in relation to the major theme, supports all students, were almost equally distributed around notions of inclusion, supports for learning, and student achievement. In relation to the subtheme inclusion, the TAs wrote about how students with diverse learning needs or those falling below year-level expectations were supported with ‘respect and responsibility’ by their teacher. They also reported that individual needs were accommodated through ‘support, communication and inclusiveness’. As one TA observed, ‘school staff work together to provide quality education [for all students]’, while another highlighted that ‘changes to learning increases student confidence and desire to learn’.

*Table 3*. Overview of the findings from the thematic analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TAs’ perceptions of the framework’s strengths</td>
<td>Supports all students (major theme)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provides consistency for teaching (minor theme)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Catering to the needs of all students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAs’ perceptions of challenges relating to the framework</td>
<td>Inclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supports for learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Across grades and school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability level</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Engagement</td>
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</table>
Comments written by many TAs in relation to the subtheme supports for learning focused predominantly on how learning support was beneficial for some students as a way of working to close the learning gap. For example, one TA commented that ‘extra support classes are offered for children needing extra help. Most of the time they are then able to move back into the mainstream class’, whilst another TA felt that the school’s pedagogical approach ‘gives the student confidence and knowledge to progress to a level that may be higher than what they have previously been at’.

Further, the sense that the school’s pedagogical strategy supported the notion of success for every student as they are working to their own level of ability was highlighted by a TA’s comment that the approach ‘identifies students who need extra support easily and the overall standard of results is high across the school’. A feeling of continuity as a strength was also evident, with one TA explaining that the pedagogical framework ‘gives a strong foundation of knowledge in the first few years in the lower school that carries through to the upper school’ and others describing that there was ‘ongoing learning for teachers and meetings regarding student updates’.

In terms of the subtheme student achievement, some TAs shared comments about improvements in student grades. For instance, one noted that ‘children seem to be more focused when it comes to learning, resulting in better grades at the end’, whilst another commented that ‘it [the pedagogical framework] allows bright students to learn quicker’ and ‘intensive learning [occurs] with excellent results’. Furthermore, a TA expressed the view that the pedagogical framework provided ‘intensive learning with excellent results’ and a further TA highlighted ‘[it is] unified, and offers individual support where needed’.

With regard to the minor theme, provides consistency for teaching, TAs acknowledged that ‘everyone is doing the same program that can give confidence to excel at a higher level’ and that there was a ‘whole school approach to one teaching pedagogy thereby providing consistency of the program in classrooms’. It appeared that TAs were confident that the school’s pedagogical approach not only raised student self-confidence in their own learning but also that academic results were improved for students with diverse learning needs, including those who were working beyond year-level expectations.

The challenges perceived by the TAs in implementing the school’s pedagogical framework were clustered into three main themes: catering to the needs of all students (n = 10); student behaviour (n = 6); and time constraints (n = 5). Many TAs expressed the view that the school’s pedagogical framework was not catering to the needs of all students, particularly those with learning difficulties. For example, one TA stated that students below grade level ‘can sometimes struggle as it is such a fast pace of learning environment’.

Similarly, several TAs commenting on ability level were of the view that the approach was ‘challenging for children who are low and need extra support. If students have delays or learning difficulties, they can be left behind as it is a fast-moving approach’. Continuing school student enrolment was seen as a challenge, too, in terms of the need to ‘give all students that same level of inclusion, support and respect’. Further, some TAs commented on the framework’s inability to sustain students’ engagement in learning; with one TA suggesting that ‘students who do not engage can make it difficult when you are trying to deliver the lesson to the remaining part of the group’, with another observing that ‘explicit delivery of lessons can bore some students if the teacher lacks presentation skills and enthusiasm’.

A few TAs indicated their view that student behaviour was a deterrent to the success of the pedagogical approach. For example, one explained that ‘some students find it difficult to sit still, some have a very short attention span and these students do fall behind’ and others expressed concerns about ‘the behaviour of the students coming to our groups’ or that ‘challenging behaviours are hard at times’. Moreover, students being ‘not focused and feeling tired’ was seen as a challenge.

It was noteworthy, too, that a few TAs commented that time constraints resulted in ‘less time for other important areas of development necessary for an all-rounded student’. It was evident from the analysis that managing time was perceived as a difficulty by these TAs. Reasons given for this included the fast-paced timetable, and the requirement to move from one classroom to another, mark student workbooks and find time to enter student data into the school’s database. As one TA reflected, ‘it takes time to adapt and feel confident teaching at first [and it] doesn’t leave much time to get to know the students’. Overall, it was clear that the TAs considered that restricted time was a significant factor that had implications within their multifaceted role (Bowles, Radford, and Bakopoulou 2018).

Discussion

In this study, we were interested in building a picture of TAs’ perspectives and reflections on their school’s pedagogical approach. In general terms, the findings draw much-needed attention to the importance of seeking TAs’ opinions. In many schools, TAs play increasingly significant roles in implementing their school’s pedagogical strategy through their daily practice in the classroom. Their varied and insightful perspectives can help inform and improve teaching and learning in schools.

Our in-depth analysis of survey data suggested that the TAs in our study had a good understanding of, and confidence in using, the school’s pedagogical approach. Further, they were very supportive and affirming of the approach, which they used in concert with the classroom teachers. In alignment with recent work conducted by Jardi et al. (2021), where the roles of TAs are regarded as facilitators with emerging new roles, it underscores the extent to which TAs make substantial contributions to teaching and learning processes in schools.

In terms of TAs’ perspectives on the approaches and strategies embedded in the pedagogical approach, it was not surprising that direct instruction was held to be a commonly used teaching strategy (Davis 2018), with TAs identifying inclusion strategies, explicit instruction, and targeted teaching as other teaching approaches used by classroom teachers. While direct instruction may maximise the learning opportunities to a diverse range of learners, through its complex employment of student-teacher interactions and instructional formats (Rolf and Slocum 2021), it is evident, too, that a variety of teaching strategies can be beneficial (Kuhn 2007).

It was clear from the analysis that the TAs felt overwhelmingly that the pedagogical approach supported all students. It is noteworthy, with this in mind, that Mason and Otero (2021) suggest that the use of direct and explicit instruction is becoming more popular in schools. A further strength of the pedagogical approach, as suggested by the TAs, was its provision of consistency for teaching:
or, in other words, a whole school approach using one teaching pedagogy. According to the TAs, this apparent strength helped teaching to retain consistency from one classroom to another, thereby providing regularity in instructional practices across the different areas of the curriculum.

Despite the TAs reporting their perception that the pedagogical approach had a great number of strengths, they also, importantly, highlighted their thoughts about challenges in its implementation, including points relating to pace of lessons, and students’ sense of engagement or otherwise. Collectively, these findings underscore the value of the TAs’ perspectives, draw attention to the multifaceted nature of their roles and resonate with the literature discussions about the boundaries of TAs’ roles in relation to student behaviour management (Clarke and Visser 2019). More broadly, the thematic findings also link with observations about the varied roles and responsibilities that TAs are required to fulfil (Harris and Aprile 2015) and raise awareness of the expectations for TAs to maintain and juggle the variety of tasks that they are required to undertake, sometimes at pace, on a daily basis.

In all, the analysis allows a picture to emerge that reflects how the TAs in our study were active agents, effectively working alongside their teacher colleagues to endorse and support the pedagogical approach used in the school, believing that it promoted inclusion, learning, and academic achievement for students. They shared a common aim with classroom teachers, which was to implement the school’s approach with confidence and develop a good working knowledge of the pedagogy.

Limitations

In interpreting the findings from the study, it is important to note that this small-scale study was inevitably limited in scope. All participating TAs were working in the same primary school, which had a distinct pedagogical framework. The views put forward by these TAs about the framework at their school, therefore, should not be compared to those of TAs from other schools in Queensland or elsewhere. Generalisation is not intended from findings related to this piece of research: rather, the strength of the study lies in the insights gained from the in-depth, qualitative analysis of rich data and the opportunity to gather valuable perspectives from the TAs.

More widely, it would be helpful to consider future research into schools’ pedagogical frameworks, as such structures drive the teaching practices that are in place in schools and therefore influence student engagement, learning and achievement. For example, it would be instructive to investigate the different pedagogical frameworks and schemes operating in other primary school settings to ascertain how far, and in which ways, the strengths and challenges identified by TAs at these schools are similar or different. If this line of inquiry identified a set of common problems, then solution-focused activities among leadership teams within and across systems could be instigated. At the same time, it may be instructive to gather and reflect on fresh data about TAs’ qualifications, in view of Butt’s study (2018), as part of a broader discussion about opportunities for TAs’ professional development.
Conclusion

This small-scale study has reported on the perspectives and reflections of some TAs in relation to the pedagogical approach used in one primary school in Queensland. It underscores how gathering opinions from TAs is necessary, significant and instructive in terms of valuing their contributions and managing to better understand their varied roles in today’s classrooms. The provision of TAs’ feedback on matters associated with teaching and learning draws attention to the crucial nature of their active and collaborative roles, as they work alongside classroom teachers to support learning for all students. Whilst these findings are focused on one school, we argue that understanding TAs’ perspectives on their school’s teaching pedagogy as they go about their work can offer a starting point for further study into an important, but sometimes overlooked, education research space. Above all, it highlights the need for TAs to be included in their schools’ pedagogical journeys.

Note

1. The term ‘teacher aides’ (TAs) is adopted in this paper as it is familiar throughout many jurisdictions and was the term employed at the school in which the research was carried out. As discussed below, it is important to acknowledge that roles and definitions vary, and alternative terms such as teaching assistants, paraprofessionals, inclusion aides and support assistants are in use internationally.

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