



Department
for Education

Exploring Teaching Assistants' appetite to become teachers

Research report

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CooperGibson Research



Social Science in Government

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Executive Summary

The number of teaching assistants (TAs) in state-funded schools has grown rapidly since the early 2000s, with the ratio of TAs to teachers also increasing throughout this period.¹ Simultaneously, challenges in teacher supply have increased. Whilst TAs fulfil a valuable role in schools, there has been little evidence available on TAs' appetite to become teachers. DfE therefore commissioned CooperGibson Research to undertake an explorative study to better understand TAs' perception of teaching as a career, including any perceived challenges for those who may wish to become a teacher.

Throughout this report, TAs are defined as classroom-based staff employed in roles other than teachers, students and instructors.²

Aims and approach

The overarching aim of this research was to explore the appetite among TAs for becoming a teacher, particularly among those TAs who did not already hold a degree qualification. To do so, a series of 64 semi-structured qualitative telephone interviews were completed with current TAs. Interview participants represented a range of settings by school type, phase, size and Ofsted grading, as well as characteristics of TAs such as age, gender and highest qualification held.

Key Findings

Becoming a TA

Motivations for becoming a TA were most commonly dependent on individual circumstances and family commitments. Over one-quarter of the TAs interviewed (in both full-time and part-time positions) identified that the working patterns were compatible with their existing responsibilities, which had attracted them to the role. Others were motivated by helping children and young people, or supporting those with special educational needs (SEN). Thirteen TAs stated that they had become a TA with the intent to become a teacher in the future.

¹ DfE (2018) 'School Workforce Census in England: November 2017':

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/719772/SWFC_MainText.pdf

² Definition of instructors, as per the Education Specified Work Regulations 2012: 'a person appointed, or proposed to be appointed, to give instruction in any art or skill or in any subject or group of subjects (including any form of vocational training), where special qualifications or experience or both are required in order to carry out the specified work'.

Perceptions of being a TA

The majority of TAs (50) who participated in the interviews said that they found working with children and young people rewarding, watching them progress and develop during their school careers. TAs in primary schools felt that they were able to nurture students and give them more one-to-one time than class teachers were able; those in secondary schools mentioned the trust placed in them by students.

When asked what they disliked about being a TA, over half stated that they were very happy in their job and there was either nothing or very little that they did not like. Where challenges were identified, most commonly these were:

- Perceived low levels of pay and a lack of career progression opportunities beyond Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs, primary TAs)
- Behaviour management and a perceived lack of authority and respect among students that TAs have compared to teachers (secondary TAs)
- Lack of understanding among teachers about the role of the TA, and the specialist skills TAs possess (primary and secondary TAs)
- Lack of support and remuneration for taking responsibility for a whole class (primary TAs)
- Precarity of the TA role in terms of job security and dependency on SEN funding to cover some TA posts (primary and secondary TAs)

Career aspirations

Over half of the TAs interviewed were either intending to, or considering, becoming a teacher: 34 of the 64 interviewed reported either a definite intention to become a teacher, or were yet to decide. Some TAs said that their self-confidence had grown as a TA, meaning that they were considering a teaching career for the first time. Others had been inspired or encouraged by teaching colleagues, or by watching the progress made by teacher trainees on placements. However, some TAs did not believe that moving into teaching was a possibility for them because they did not have a degree, or they did not know how to go about it, suggesting a lack of awareness among TAs regarding the range of teacher training options available.

In the sample of 64 TAs, there were no specific patterns identified in the career aspirations of TAs according to working patterns, age, amount of experience or level of existing qualifications. Instead, intentions or motivations to become a teacher appeared to be dependent on personal circumstances and perceptions of the role.

Perceptions of teaching

Aspects of teaching that were attractive to TAs were: making a positive difference to children and young people, gaining increased respect compared to the role of TA, improved opportunities for pay and progression, and increased responsibility and autonomy across the school.

Perceptions of teacher workload were a common theme throughout the telephone interviews. Levels of workload were unappealing to nearly two-thirds of the 64 interview participants; in addition, the perceived workload burden of undertaking teacher training alongside employment as a TA was cited as a challenge to becoming a teacher by just less than one-quarter of all TAs interviewed. Smaller proportions of TAs mentioned behaviour management, the lack of one-to-one interaction with students, and uncertainty as to whether they could lead large classes as unattractive aspects of teaching.

One-third of TAs felt that the length of training was a deterrent to them (particularly where they would complete a full degree over three years). Eleven mentioned that they would want to be able to complete their training within one or two years, with their prior experience allowing them to fast-track some teacher training requirements. One-quarter mentioned the cost of training (e.g. covering tuition fees, and a potential reduction in salary if they changed working patterns in order to take up training) was a challenge to undertaking teacher training. The requirement to have a degree was also cited as a barrier to becoming a teacher.

Incentives to becoming a teacher

Some interview participants suggested ideas about how these barriers to teaching could be overcome, or how they could be incentivised to be a teacher. The most common responses were the availability of a bursary, the ability to continue to earn a salary whilst they trained, and the need for more information about teacher training. TAs commonly felt that there needed to be:

- More tailored information for TAs, including the types of tasks involved in teaching that they would not know about as part of their TA role.
- Information tailored to TAs in a centralised place.
- Information addressed to them directly as TAs.

TAs in primary schools mentioned receiving information directly from headteachers, indicating that this was also a valuable source of support and information related to progression.

Teacher training

There was a general lack of awareness among TAs regarding the range of teacher training programmes available, although some were aware of school-centred training. Very few were aware of the Postgraduate Teaching Apprenticeship. Where they had carried out research into teacher training, interview participants mentioned finding out information via social media, from headteachers and through word of mouth from teaching colleagues.

Interview participants went on to discuss, in broader terms, whether they would be interested in teacher training if a training programme appeared to be suitable for them. The most common point raised by TAs in both primary and secondary schools was that being able to work and train at the same time was an important consideration for them. The other most commonly raised issues related to cost, duration of training, logistics (travel and distance), and the types of support that would be available to them.

Summary

Overall, the TAs involved were passionate and enthusiastic about working with children and young people, and the vast majority enjoyed the work that they carried out. Although 13 of the 64 interview participants had become a TA with the direct intention of progressing into teaching, over half went onto say that they were intending to, or considering, becoming a teacher in the future. Where they were considering becoming a teacher, the drive to help children and young people and have input into their educational progress was a key motivation. However, it was common for TAs to be unsure as to the progression routes available to them.

Perceptions of teacher workload were a common theme throughout the telephone interviews. Over two-thirds of TAs mentioned that teacher workload was an unattractive aspect of teaching as a career. Where TAs were not considering becoming a teacher, this tended to be due to concerns related to the length of time it took to complete the necessary training, the cost of training, the potential reduction in salary, perceived high levels of teacher workload, and the requirement to have a degree in order to become a teacher.

Levels of awareness among TAs about the Postgraduate Teaching Apprenticeship were very low, although many were interested in the idea of practical work-based training that they could carry out whilst remaining in their role as a TA. However, there were misconceptions among several TAs that the apprenticeship would not require them to obtain a degree.

TAs raised questions around the logistical challenges involved in balancing the workload of both work and training alongside existing responsibilities. Subsequently, they

commonly suggested that training delivery needed to be flexible. Some felt that training should be condensed and should acknowledge TA experience in order to fast-track their progress. However, others recognised the requirement for a rigorous and robust process that ensured each option for progression had parity of esteem with other training programmes available.

1. Introduction

Teaching Assistants (TAs) are defined as classroom-based staff employed in roles other than teachers, students and instructors.³ The number of TAs in state-funded schools has grown rapidly since the early 2000s, with the ratio of TAs to teachers also increasing throughout the period.⁴ Simultaneously, challenges in teacher supply have increased. In this context, the Department for Education (DfE) has developed a Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy,⁵ which aims to address these teacher supply challenges and consider new ways to encourage potential teachers to join the profession.

Whilst TAs fulfil a valuable role in schools, there has been little evidence available on TAs' perceptions of teaching as a career, or their appetite to become teachers. To help fill this gap, and to explore any perceived challenges for those TAs who may wish to pursue a teaching career, the DfE commissioned CooperGibson Research to undertake an explorative study with TAs working in a range of school settings.

1.1 Aims and objectives

The overarching aim of this research was to explore the appetite among TAs for becoming a teacher, particularly among those who did not already hold a degree qualification (see section 1.2.3 for detail on the sample). The specific objectives to achieve this aim were to:

- Identify the motivations for becoming a TA, including current qualifications and their intentions to undertake further education and/or training.
- Explore TAs' perceptions of their current roles, including the benefits and challenges of being a TA.
- Establish whether TAs had any desire or intention to become a teacher, and the reasons for this.
- Understand TAs awareness, understanding and perceptions of teacher training routes.

³ Definition of instructors, as per the Education Specified Work Regulations 2012: 'a person appointed, or proposed to be appointed, to give instruction in any art or skill or in any subject or group of subjects (including any form of vocational training), where special qualifications or experience or both are required in order to carry out the specified work'.

⁴ DfE (2018) 'School Workforce Census in England: November 2017':

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/719772/SWFC_MainText.pdf

⁵ DfE (2019), 'Teacher recruitment and retention strategy':

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teacher-recruitment-and-retention-strategy>

- Identify any challenges associated with TAs becoming teachers, and what might help overcome those challenges.

1.2 Approach

A series of 64 semi-structured qualitative telephone interviews were completed with current TAs.

1.2.1 Sampling approach

A sample of just over 400 schools was drawn from the School Workforce Census 2017 (published 2018), using a sample base where schools were showing a headcount of one or more TAs. Using a systematic sampling technique, an equal number of maintained schools and academies/free schools were selected across a range of local authorities (LAs) for each of the nine English regions. These were supplemented with schools purposively selected to increase the number of schools in the selected sample with Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs) and schools with male TAs and TAs representing minority ethnic groups.

The sample frame was built around two key characteristics, phase and type of school, and targets were monitored primarily across these two variables. In addition, to ensure a range of schools were represented, the sample was monitored for coverage of varied school sizes, regions, location types, deprivation levels and Ofsted ratings.

Using the Unique Reference Number (URN) of the 400 selected schools, the DfE provided contact details for schools, including where possible, first and second contact email addresses and a telephone number. These details were supplemented with additional checking of school websites and telephone calls to gather sample contact details.

1.2.2 Recruitment to the research

Headteachers/Principals were contacted in the first instance by email, providing details of the research and requesting that they forward the email invitation to their TAs to request their participation in the telephone interviews. To boost response rates, follow-up telephone calls were made and reminder emails were sent to schools.

At the outset, response was slow, probably due to the need to contact TAs via Headteachers/senior leaders and that the fieldwork started just before a school holiday period. In response, the research team supplemented the sample with additional schools through the use of snowball sampling and existing contacts with schools or TAs (with necessary permissions for involvement in research). Part-way through the research, some sampling criteria were relaxed to allow more TAs to respond. For example,

conducting interviews with two or three TAs from the same school in a small number of cases.⁶

1.2.3 Key sample focus

Whilst it was important to gather feedback from a wide range of TAs, an important feature of the sampling approach was to prioritise TAs without a teaching qualification or degree level qualification. Since this research focused on appetite to become teachers, it was felt that:

- Those with a teaching qualification were not directly relevant to this small exploratory research since they could enter teaching if they wished to.
- Those with an undergraduate degree or equivalent were out of scope as they would have access to teacher training; the majority of routes into teaching are postgraduate pathways.

These requirements were explained to Headteachers in the email invitation and during telephone calls. However, in some cases the invitations were forwarded to TAs who were out of scope (in addition, some TAs did not make it clear that they held a degree qualification until part-way through their interview). Due to relaxation of sampling criteria, some of these TAs were able to participate. Whilst those with a teaching qualification were not included, three said that they had started or were due to start teacher training and there were nine TAs included who held a degree level qualification.

1.3 Sample breakdown

In terms of school phase, 29 interviews were carried out with TAs in primary schools, 25 with TAs in secondary schools and ten in special schools (Table 1).

Table 1: Number of interview participants by school type and phase.

School type	Primary	Secondary	Special	TOTAL
LA Maintained	12	8	4	24
Academy	17	17	6	40
TOTAL	29	25	10	64

There was a broad spread of schools by characteristics such as region, size and Ofsted grading (see Appendix).

⁶ In total, 51 schools were represented across the 64 TA interviews, there were nine schools with two TAs involved and two schools with three TAs involved.

The 64 TAs held a range of roles, most commonly HLTA and general TA roles (Table 2).

Table 2: Number of interview participants by job role.

TA type	Primary	Secondary	Special	TOTAL
HLTA	16	3	2	21
General TA	10	12	6	28
Subject specialist TA		2		2
Special Educational Needs (SEN) TA	1	4	1	6
Cover and Planning, Preparation and Assessment (PPA) TA	1			1
Learning Support Assistant (LSA)	1	4		5
Apprentice TA			1	1
TOTAL	29	25	10	64

Interview participants were predominantly female, with most having worked as a TA for between three and ten years. Demographics for TA participants can be found in the Appendix.

Forty-five of the 64 TAs participating in this research were employed on a full-time basis (see Appendix), despite the majority of the TA workforce working part-time hours. This should be kept in mind when considering findings.

2. The TA role

This section explores the reasons why the 64 TAs interviewed became TAs. It includes a summary of the roles that they undertook, the types of task that this tended to involve, and the aspects of being a TA that they liked and disliked.

2.1 Becoming a TA

Motivations for becoming a TA were most commonly dependent on individual circumstances and family commitments. Over one-quarter of the TAs interviewed (in both full-time and part-time positions) identified that the working patterns were compatible with their parental responsibilities, and this had initially attracted them to the role. Many of these, predominantly TAs working in primary schools, said that they had worked voluntarily in school settings after they had their own children. They had subsequently found this work very enjoyable, which either led them to seek opportunities to work as a TA, or they were approached by the school to become a TA. A small number had undertaken the TA apprenticeship.

Other TAs were particularly motivated by the drive to help children and young people to progress, especially supporting students who were disadvantaged or had special educational needs (SEN).

‘After [working] one-to-one with children with special needs I realised it was something I was passionate about and I wanted to further my career with children in mainstream school’. (Full-time TA, secondary LA maintained)

Thirteen TAs directly identified that they had become a TA primarily because they wished to become a teacher in the future (see section 3 for changes in career aspirations once in the TA role).

‘I couldn’t figure out what subject I was keen on studying [at university]. I knew that this [was] a stepping stone, starting as a TA and then working my way up [to teaching]’. (Full-time TA, secondary LA maintained)

Others had always known that they wished to work with children and young people in some capacity. Thus, several interview participants had either undertaken an apprenticeship in supporting teaching and learning, or moved into being a TA having undertaken qualifications and training in related occupations, such as working in childcare and nursery settings.

A small number, mostly male TAs, cited that they knew family members or friends who worked in school settings and that this led them to becoming interested in a career

working with children and young people. However, this should be treated with caution due to the small number of male TAs interviewed.

2.2 About the TA role

When asked about their current roles, the 29 TAs in primary schools generally provided cover teaching, supported the work of teachers in classroom settings, or covered Planning Preparation and Assessment (PPA)⁷ or Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) time.⁸ They commonly spoke of the variety of tasks involved in the working day, as well as the range of year groups and subjects for which they may provide support. Over half of TAs in primary schools were cover supervisors or were HLTAs and therefore provided more support in relation to whole class teaching. All TAs worked with small groups or provided one-to-one support. They were often assigned a specific year group, or to support development in core subject areas (English and mathematics).

The work of the 25 TAs in secondary schools was focused mainly on delivering small group interventions, with whole class teaching reported less commonly than among those in primary schools. TAs in secondary schools mentioned supporting teachers to differentiate lessons, breaking down tasks to help students to understand their learning, or providing specific support where individual students had Education and Healthcare (EHC) plans in place. The latter included one-to-one mentoring and pastoral support.

The ten TAs in special schools mostly had specific roles related to the delivery of one-to-one support for individual students, or they led intervention work with small groups of students.

2.2.1 Positive perceptions of the TA role

The majority of TAs (50) who participated in the interviews said that they found working with children and young people rewarding, including all ten TAs working in special schools. They appreciated the opportunity to be creative and find ways to support learning, and they particularly enjoyed seeing the progress that children and young people made as a result. TAs across all school phases very often spoke about a sense of fulfilment in watching the confidence, skills and self-esteem of children and young people develop.

⁷ Planning, Preparation and Assessment time is a statutory entitlement for all teachers working on the School Teachers' Working Pay and Conditions Document (STPCD) to have a minimum of 10% of their timetabled time out of the classroom to enable them to undertake planning, marking and other related tasks.

⁸ NQT time is protected time for Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs).

'To see that "lightbulb moment" in the kids when they understand, for me that's what teaching is all about - getting them from where they don't understand, to totally getting it'. (Full-time TA, secondary LA maintained)

Smaller numbers of TAs across all phases also mentioned enjoying the following aspects of the role:

- The varied nature of the role meant that it was different each day, with several TAs mentioning that they enjoyed working with students of different abilities or changing between year groups. These TAs felt that the variation in the role helped to maintain their interest, and that they also continued to learn new skills and knowledge as a result.
- Being able to provide support to students with complex needs, SEN or English as an Additional Language (EAL) was important to the ten TAs in special schools, and to a few in primary and secondary settings. TAs in primary schools in particular felt that they were able to nurture students and give more one-to-one time than class teachers were able. They enjoyed getting to know individual learners, identifying difficulties and helping them learn how to overcome them. Four TAs in secondary schools specifically mentioned the trust that students placed in them. They felt that students more readily approached them than teachers, which helped to build positive relationships (however, this was counteracted by a perceived lack of respect among others – see section 2.2.2).
- The increased responsibility of an HLTA or level 3 TA⁹ role was mentioned by a small number of TAs; others noted that they enjoyed the positive working relationships that they had developed with class teachers.

2.2.2 Challenging aspects of the TA role

When asked what they disliked about being a TA, the responses of interview participants differed according to school phase. However, over half stated that they were very happy in their job and there was either nothing or very little that they did not like.

Where challenges were identified, those working in primary schools most commonly mentioned perceived low levels of pay (including pay levels not reflecting the challenges of the role) and a lack of career progression opportunities beyond HLTA (9 TAs). Those in secondary schools most commonly highlighted that behaviour management could be a challenge (8 TAs). In relation to the latter, some TAs suggested that they lacked the authority and respect of a teacher and therefore this was perceived to make behaviour management more difficult. TAs in special schools also highlighted behaviour

⁹ This is a TA that has completed a relevant level 3 National Vocational Qualification (NVQ), such as a level 3 Award/Certificate/Diploma in Supporting Teaching and Learning in Schools.

management issues, particularly where students were physically aggressive, and it was reported that dealing with such behaviours was demanding and tiring.

In both primary and secondary schools, a few TAs noted that teaching colleagues did not appear to understand the role that they undertook, which they felt led to a perceived lack of respect from some. Specifically, TAs in special schools highlighted that colleagues did not always recognise the specialist training, skills and knowledge that they possessed.

A small number of TAs in primary schools (4) reported that they did not enjoy taking on responsibility for a whole class. They highlighted that as TAs they were designated to support teachers, yet when they were required to deliver lessons to a whole class they often did so on their own without support – or the associated remuneration – in return.

‘Sometimes you feel like you are being taken advantage of a little bit....you [are] not actually getting paid that salary...for covering somebody’s class’.
(Part-time TA, primary academy)

Four TAs (two each in primary and secondary schools) mentioned a perceived lack of job security; one had been through redundancy processes twice, another highlighted that SEN funding to cover their post could be variable depending on student need.

Small numbers of TAs (one or two each) mentioned a range of aspects that they found challenging, including a perceived high workload, a lack of autonomy compared to being a teacher, a lack of flexibility in working arrangements such as being able to take term-time leave, and sometimes the work of a TA was felt to be quite repetitive.

3. TA perspectives on teaching

This section provides an overview of the feedback that the 64 interview participants gave about their career aspirations, and the challenges and incentives to becoming a teacher. It includes what TAs thought was attractive about the teaching profession, and the areas of the job that they felt were less appealing.

3.1 Career aspirations

Over half of the TAs interviewed were either intending to, or considering, becoming a teacher. Of the 64 TAs interviewed, 23 reported a definite intention to become a teacher in the future. This included those currently applying for, or undertaking, some form of teacher training, those studying towards Higher Education qualifications (such as Degrees or Foundation Degrees), or other qualifications (such as GCSE subjects) with a view to progressing into teacher training.¹⁰ In addition, 11 were considering going into teaching, but had not fully decided.¹¹

From the number of TAs subsequently reporting that they were working towards, or considering, teaching as a career, it is clear that several were influenced positively by their experiences in schools. During their interviews, a few TAs in both primary and secondary schools mentioned that their self-confidence had grown as a TA and, consequently, they had started to consider a teaching career for the first time. Others said that they had been inspired or encouraged by teaching colleagues to move into a teaching role, or had watched trainees on placements in their schools and recognised that they would be able to do the same work.

TAs who were interested in becoming a teacher included those currently in full-time and part-time roles. There were no specific patterns identified in the career aspirations of TAs according to age, amount of experience or level of existing qualifications. For example, some TAs aged between 25 and 35 were concerned about the length of time training would take, whereas a few aged over 45 were intending to undertake teacher training. Those in HLTAs were sometimes happy to remain in their role and reported being contented with the level of responsibility and work/life balance that they had achieved; conversely, other HLTAs were looking to progress into teaching. Furthermore, some TAs with a degree were interested in teaching, whilst others stated that they were not. Thus, intentions or motivations to become a teacher instead appeared to be dependent on personal circumstances and perceptions of the role.

¹⁰ Ten were TAs in primary schools, ten were TAs in secondary schools and three were in special schools.

¹¹ Five were TAs in primary schools, five were TAs in secondary schools and one was a TA in a special school.

Although TAs often reported that they would like to go into a teaching career, they were generally unsure about how to go about it (see section 4.2 for a summary of the information they requested). They were uncertain whether they would be able to afford the training, or whether it would be possible due to their lack of degree qualification. This included a range of TAs who intended becoming a teacher, and those who remained unsure (for more discussion on the challenges of becoming a teacher, see section 4.1).

‘Ideally I’d love to go into some form of teaching, but the funding worries me. Also at my age, I’ve got kids and I can’t afford not to have an income. If I was in a position where I could go for something, I would do it’. (Full-time learning support assistant, secondary LA maintained)

Where they stated that they were not interested in becoming a teacher, TAs tended to be aged 45 or over and did not believe that the time spent training would be worthwhile (although some in this age group did intend to take up training), or they otherwise reported being very happy in their current role as a TA or HLTA. Furthermore, several TAs, split fairly equally by phase, reported that they would not wish to become a teacher due to the level of workload and pressure that they felt teaching colleagues were experiencing (see section 3.2.1). Few TAs in special schools said that they would consider going into teaching, however this should be treated with caution due to the small sample. Where they did not want to become teachers, TAs in special schools noted a variety of reasons including teacher workload, a perceived lack of respect for the profession, and that they did not have a degree; three were considering teacher training routes; two had considered progression to HLTA status.

Instead of considering teaching, five TAs in primary schools and six TAs in secondary schools aspired to undertake additional training and development either as TAs, or towards other pastoral roles (e.g. safeguarding officer or family liaison). This included specialist training such as child and adolescent counselling, student mental health and wellbeing support, safeguarding training, nurture training, as well as progress to HLTA status.

3.2 Views of the teaching profession

When they were asked to consider the aspects of teaching that were attractive to them, over one-third of the 64 interview participants suggested that teaching offered a valuable opportunity to make a positive difference to children and young people. Other common themes included receiving greater respect as a teacher (compared to being a TA), accessing more opportunities in terms of pay and progression, and increased responsibility and autonomy. There appeared to be little difference in the spread of opinions between part-time and full-time TAs.

- **Making a difference to learners:** Over one-third of TAs across primary and secondary schools highlighted that they enjoyed the process of contributing to the development of children and young people, having the opportunity to make a difference to young lives and a sense of achievement in watching them progress. They felt that this was something they would be able to continue in a teaching role, whilst also having more input across the school.
- **Increased respect:** More than half of TAs in primary schools believed that becoming a teacher would mean that they would gain more respect from the school community (including among students and colleagues, and senior leadership teams). To some extent, this notion of increased respect was felt by interview participants to stem from teachers having more responsibility and authority within a classroom setting (see below). In addition, four TAs in secondary schools felt that they would feel prouder to be in a teaching career.
- **Opportunities for pay and progression:** Reflecting the frustration that some TAs expressed regarding the lack of progression beyond HLTA, several TAs across the range of school phases felt that there would be a greater range of opportunities for career progression if they were a teacher. They thought that as a teacher they would have the chance to experience a broader variety of school settings and environments, with clearer pathways for career development. Participants highlighted that this increased progression would also lead to increased remuneration.
- **Increased responsibility and autonomy:** Some TAs in primary and secondary schools felt that becoming a teacher would give them more ownership over their work. The increased responsibility for classes appealed to them. For a TA in a special school, this equated to having more 'freedom' in terms of planning and approaches to delivery, whilst those in primary schools spoke of having increased control over classroom behaviours, and greater influence on how to approach teaching and learning.

'At the moment [as a TA], you are following somebody else's plans, you are teaching what you are told to teach, how it should be taught. Whereas if you have got your own class, you have got responsibility for it [and], at the same time, the outcomes and everything...you are putting into it. That does appeal. To run my own class'. (Full-time TA, primary academy)

In addition to the points above, a few TAs (one or two each) felt that they would relish the hard work and challenge of being a teacher, the sense of teamwork among colleagues, or the ability to specialise in one subject rather than acting in the generalist role of a TA.

3.2.1 Aspects of teaching that were not appealing

Teacher workload was unappealing to nearly two-thirds of the 64 interview participants. Nearly all TAs in primary schools, and half of the TAs in secondary schools and special schools, reported that the perceived workload and pressures associated with teaching did not appeal to them. Across all phases, TAs (including those working full-time and part-time) commonly mentioned a perceived lack of work/life balance that they saw among existing teaching colleagues. They reported that teachers worked long hours, including regular homeworking during the evenings and weekends.

‘The work after school, the workload. That would be now the main [aspect of teaching that does not appeal to me]. I wouldn’t want to spend the hours. It is quite demanding...My class teacher spends hours every night, and most of her weekend. I wouldn’t want that. It would be too much’. (Part-time HLTA, primary LA maintained)

Consequently, a small number of TAs in primary schools (less than five) said that seeing the workload of teaching colleagues in their current schools had deterred them from pursuing teaching as a career. They reported having seriously considered teaching as a career, for example one had attended open evenings convened by teacher training providers, but they were put off the role by the workload burden and the perceived negative impact on their own family life as a result.

Specific tasks such as planning, collating data, and reporting requirements (e.g. for SEN records) were thought by TAs to create a high level of workload for teachers. Regarding data management, several interview participants mentioned that if they became a teacher they would be worried about increased accountability and any related pressure they may feel in relation to meeting targets and expectations.

‘I worry that the kind of teacher I want to be, might not be the teacher that I get to be. Because of things like targets and data and expectations of [raising outcomes]’. (Full-time HLTA, primary academy)

Nine TAs in secondary schools emphasised that behaviour management was a challenge for teachers. They felt that the social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) issues experienced by young people required a large amount of pastoral support, and this made teaching less attractive to them as a career.

Smaller numbers of TAs, across all phases, felt that if they became a teacher, they would lose the level of one-to-one interaction with students they currently had as a TA. For example, four TAs in secondary schools were not sure that they would want to lead large classes compared to the more individualised work that TAs carried out.

Other aspects of teaching that were felt to be unattractive, mentioned by a few TAs each, were the length of training, the requirement to undertake a degree, the financial burden of completing teacher training, and concerns that there was a decreasing lack of respect and support for the profession more generally, for example among parents/carers.

4. Becoming a teacher

This section summarises the challenges that the 64 interview participants identified to becoming a teacher. Following this is a discussion around what TAs felt would help them overcome these challenges or incentivise them to become a teacher.

4.1 Challenges

There were a number of challenges to teacher training identified by the TAs participating in the interviews. Their feedback tended to focus on the need to balance existing family and work commitments with the expectations and requirements of teacher training, financial and logistical considerations, and the potential workload involved in undertaking training whilst being in work.

- **Length of training:** One-third of the 64 TAs interviewed (across all school phases) reported that the length of time it took to complete teacher training was a deterrent to them, particularly where they would be required to complete a degree. Where they were in the process of training to become a teacher, several TAs confirmed that they were doing so part-time and this was a lengthy process (see section 5.3). The duration of training was frustrating for some, and they suggested that their experience in the TA role should count towards meeting some teacher training requirements.
- **Cost of training:** Financial considerations were identified as a barrier by one-quarter of all TAs interviewed. This included the cost of training such as covering tuition fees, the potential reduction in salary (e.g. if they changed to working part-time in order to undertake training), and the lack of funding available to cover a school-based teacher training course (e.g. for a salaried programme) in their current school.
- **Workload:** The perceived workload burden of undertaking teacher training alongside employment as a TA, as well as potential workload as a teacher, was cited by just less than one-quarter of all TAs interviewed. This was particularly related to the perceived amount of paperwork involved, and pressures that TAs thought would be associated with meeting targets, achieving outcomes and increased accountability. These TAs were concerned that by becoming a teacher, their work/life balance would be negatively impacted. Several mentioned their existing family responsibilities, and that their role as a TA worked well in enabling them to balance work and family life. They were not sure that becoming a teacher would allow this to continue.

- **Qualification prerequisites:** This was identified as a barrier to teacher training by eleven interview participants, who highlighted that they did not have a degree, or were concerned that they would not perform very well or achieve the required grades if they underwent the necessary qualifications in order to progress. Several had been out of education/study for a long period of time and were not confident that they would be able to meet the expectations of training.

Smaller numbers of TAs mentioned personal challenges, including feeling that their age was a barrier, lack of confidence in their own ability, and concerns that they would not be supported in their school if they wanted to undertake the training.

4.2 Incentives

Some interview participants suggested ideas about how these barriers to teaching could be overcome, or how they could be incentivised to be a teacher. The most common responses were the availability of a bursary, the ability to continue to earn a salary whilst they trained, and the need for more information about teacher training.

In relation to the latter, TAs commonly felt that there needed to be:

- More tailored information for TAs who want to move into teaching and the potential pathways for doing so, including for older TAs and career changers. This included information about the types of task involved in teaching that they would not know about as part of their TA role, e.g. lesson planning, data collection and analysis.
- Information tailored to TAs to be made available online in a centralised place; very few mentioned the Get into Teaching website, suggesting that awareness levels of this among TAs may be limited.
- Information addressed to them directly as TAs; some noted that if materials were sent to schools generally, they did not always trickle down to the appropriate individuals and could be missed. However, it was also clear that a few TAs (less than ten) – particularly those in primary schools – had received information directly from headteachers, indicating that it would be valuable to ensure that any materials developed specifically for TAs were also promoted to school senior leaders to ensure maximum visibility (see section 5). Several TAs in primary schools noted that when information about training was given to them by senior leaders, this boosted self-confidence and indicated that there was support from the school in putting themselves forward for training.

The issue of support was a common area of feedback. For example, where they described the types of information they required, TAs mentioned that they would want to know about the types of support and guidance that they would receive during teacher training (e.g. internal and external mentoring). As mentoring is a mandatory aspect of

teacher training programmes, these requests emphasise the lack of awareness among TAs generally about what is involved in teacher training. Requests for information included how they would be supported during teacher training to deal with challenging behaviours, and how they could progress so that their specialist skills were valued in a school environment. Subsequently, they requested information on how their experience as a TA could count towards their training (i.e. rather than being required to 'start from scratch'). Locally relevant information about the training routes available was also important to some.

Several TAs said that a training programme specifically aimed at TAs would be appealing to them, particularly if it took into account their experience in schools, previous professional development and specialisms such as support for SEN. They felt that they needed assurance that teacher training would be manageable alongside the work of a TA, and that if the two could be combined via a specific training route, this would be logistically practical and professionally encouraging.

Being able to remain in their current school (or at least in the local area) whilst training was identified as a potential incentive for a small number of TAs. Considering the impact on their schools, one TA undertaking the undergraduate teacher training route suggested that a local buddy scheme between TAs who were attending training placements could help support schools in terms of their staffing capacity:

'I have done one placement so far and the way that it works is that I have swapped schools with another person who is on my course. So then that way neither of our schools [have been] one person down...and we were able to get experience of how [different] schools worked. And whilst on placement we are working as a teacher, not a TA'. (Full-time TA, primary academy).

5. Teacher training

This section explores TAs' awareness of teacher training programmes, including the Postgraduate Teaching Apprenticeship. It also summarises the feedback provided by the 64 TAs interviewed as to the factors that would make teacher training suitable for them.

5.1 Awareness of teacher training

Interview participants were asked which teacher training routes, programmes and qualifications they knew about. Levels of awareness varied, with the following options mentioned specifically:

- Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE, mentioned by 14 TAs)
- School Direct (mentioned by ten TAs)
- School-Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT, mentioned by seven TAs)
- Teach First (mentioned by five TAs)
- Bachelor of Education (BEd, mentioned by four TAs)
- Assessment Only (mentioned by two TAs)

In addition, nine TAs were aware that school-centred training programmes were available but did not name them directly, or they were unsure of specific names (for example, 'Teach Direct' was referenced by one, illustrating the lack of awareness among some participants). A few TAs commented that school-centred training programmes were appealing to them because they would need to continue to earn a salary as they trained. Consequently, these TAs were interested specifically in the School Direct salaried programme and Teach First. Some had found that when they had tried to apply, there was no funding available for the School Direct salaried programme in their area at the time and they had not pursued training further.

Where they had carried out research into teacher training, interview participants generally reported gathering their information from three main channels:

1. **Research online**, particularly social media because it included commentary on first-hand experiences, and opportunities to ask questions of those that were going through, or had been through, the various training programmes.
2. **Information from headteachers** was mentioned by several TAs in primary schools specifically. These TAs had been approached directly by their headteachers about the idea of taking up teacher training. Some reported that headteachers had provided them with information about the different training programmes or encouraged them to consider looking and applying for a place. One

TA in a secondary school had spoken with the NQT coordinator in their school, who had talked through the different training options with them.

3. **Word of mouth** had been useful for some, including conversations with NQTs, other members of teaching staff, and trainee teachers undertaking placements in their schools.

One-third of TAs noted that they did not feel very aware of teacher training options; one-quarter (mostly TAs in secondary schools) had not looked into the training, others had looked but said that they could not remember much or did not see anything that had appealed to them. Where they gave a reason for not looking into teacher training, a small number said that this was because they did not hold a degree qualification. Other TAs commented that information about the range of teacher training programmes that was specifically targeted at TAs was difficult to find, and as a result they were unable to decide whether the guidance available applied to their specific situation.

5.2 Postgraduate Teaching Apprenticeship

The large majority of interview participants said that they were not aware of the Postgraduate Teaching Apprenticeship. Of the 64 TAs interviewed, five said that they were aware of the apprenticeship. These TAs mentioned hearing about the apprenticeship via school senior leaders.

'Recently I had a career call with the [university]... to see how quickly I could try getting this degree topped up. They mentioned to me the SCITT route and the PGCE route. But more than anything though, I have got family and I really don't want to leave my job. I just want to stay. So when the headteacher mentioned the apprenticeship, it seemed ideal. To train and get paid'. (Full-time HLTA, Primary LA maintained)

As the majority of interview participants were unaware of the apprenticeship, they were asked if they would consider this training programme if it was available to them. In response, nearly half of the TAs interviewed said that they would consider undertaking a Postgraduate Teaching Apprenticeship. These TAs were split between primary and secondary schools, since those interviewed in special schools were less inclined towards moving into a teaching career.

There were two key factors for those interested in the idea of a Postgraduate Teaching Apprenticeship:

1. **Prerequisite qualifications:** Many TAs misunderstood the requirements of the apprenticeship, and thought that they would not be required to undertake a degree as part of their training. This requirement had commonly deterred them from other teacher training programmes. They said that the idea of returning to study and completing a degree was daunting. The concept of an apprenticeship helped to reduce their apprehension because they thought that this meant they would not complete a degree qualification too.
2. **Ability to work:** Being able to work whilst training was an important consideration for many, as they needed to ensure that their existing family and financial responsibilities could be met. They often highlighted that practical, work-based training would be more appropriate for them as a result.

'The fact that it is an apprenticeship so that you can work as well as study ... I think people [would] think "actually, I can do this". It might give them, [including] me, the confidence... Teaching assistants will be out of practice with academic work, [the apprenticeship] would put [them] a bit at ease thinking it is not straight essay writing'. (Part-time TA, secondary academy)

Several TAs mentioned that existing family commitments and the potential workload associated with training whilst remaining in work would influence their decision whether or not to consider a teaching apprenticeship. TAs within ten years of the normal pension age indicated that they would have considered the apprenticeship earlier in their career but did not believe it was an option that they would undertake currently.

5.3 Considering training programmes

Interview participants went on to discuss, in broader terms, whether they would be interested in teacher training if a training programme appeared to be suitable for them. Generally, feedback was received from TAs in primary and secondary schools, reflecting the lower level of overall interest among TAs in special schools in becoming teachers.

The most common point raised by TAs in both primary and secondary schools was that being able to work and train at the same time was an important consideration for them. The other most commonly raised issues related to the duration of the training, logistical factors such as distance and flexibility in delivery, and levels of support. Each of these considerations is summarised below.

- **Cost:** Remaining in work and earning a salary whilst they trained was appealing to half of the 64 TAs interviewed, who emphasised that they could only undertake teacher training if it was financially viable for them. Some suggested that the

availability of a bursary would be attractive, or recognition on the TA pay scale that they were trainee teachers as well as TAs.

‘It is just nice to have the thought of staying within your school, and them still offering you the [TA role]... until a teaching role does become available. I know that my school doesn’t have any teaching roles at the moment. So if I was to finish the course, I would still just continue being an HLTA, and then I know that I wouldn’t lose my job...And if something then came up for a teaching role, then I could apply for that whilst still being the HLTA’. (Part-time HLTA, Primary LA maintained)

- **Duration:** There were mixed views on the duration of the training, with several wary of the idea of completing a degree¹². Around half of TAs suggested that timings needed to be flexible, due to existing responsibilities and commitments. This included opportunities to be able to train part-time. They felt, though, that this would require assurances from schools that they could remain in post whilst undertaking training over a potentially long duration and that schools would be committed to supporting this. Indeed, a few TAs in secondary schools suggested that it would be important for the training to be undertaken over a long period of time (i.e. several years), so that they did not feel it had been rushed and they would have adequate time to complete assignments.

However, reflecting earlier feedback that the length of training could be a challenge to undertaking training, eleven TAs felt that they would want to be able to complete their training within one or two years, with their prior experience allowing them to fast-track some teacher training requirements. These TAs were unsure that they would otherwise be able to balance the demands of work, training and family responsibilities.

- **Support:** Over one-quarter of TAs also highlighted that it would be necessary to ensure that there was an adequate support base available to them. This generally related to concepts of mentoring throughout a teacher training programme. TAs suggested that they would like access to mentors both internally and externally to school placements, and would want to feel assured that their school would grant the necessary release time for placements.

‘I think there would have to be a good mentor support structure. Maybe...both inside and outside of school. Not just a teacher within the school. Only because then you get a slightly more detached perspective [and] a more holistic view of the ideal ways to [approach an issue] and the realistic way... That would allow you to find your own compromise in the middle’. (Part-time LSA, secondary LA maintained)

¹² One questioned whether an apprenticeship would have as much respect among peers if a degree was not a requirement of the training.

- **Logistics:** Just less than one-quarter of TAs said that it would be important for training to be accessible locally, as travel and distance would be a factor for them in terms of both the time commitment and travel costs. Some suggested that the availability of distance or online learning would be helpful, others raised questions as to whether training would be delivered during the daytime or evenings (with preferences for both mentioned). A few mentioned that SCITT had been attractive to them as a training option because they would be able to remain in the local area. Some reiterated that they would prefer practical work-based training where they could apply the theory they were learning on a day-to-day basis in the classroom. They felt that this would complement the skills they had already developed in their TA roles.

Many TAs spoke more broadly about the concept of teacher training and raised a range of points related to the content of the training and their own skills and experience. They were particularly interested in the idea of attending different school placements¹³ so that they could develop experience of different contexts and settings. They felt that training placements would be a valuable way to develop their skills for handling different situations, including behaviour management. A few TAs in primary schools mentioned that they would want to focus on developing their skills in planning, data and assessment, which they felt were areas that TAs did not have as much input or experience. Others commented that they would need to focus on subject knowledge development, or would like to specialise in SEN teaching.

A small number of TAs spoke about the importance of applicants to teacher training being able to show that they had an appropriate level of education and skills. One suggested a minimum of five years' experience as a TA before starting the Postgraduate Teaching Apprenticeship. This connected to the suggestion that they would want a training programme for TAs to be respected by employers, and that they would prefer the training to be led by a Higher Education Institution to help ensure this respect.

¹³ All teacher training programmes require training to take place across a minimum of two school placements.

6. Summary

This exploratory study involved 64 qualitative interviews with TAs working in a range of school settings. Overall, the TAs involved were passionate and enthusiastic about working with children and young people, and the vast majority enjoyed the work that they carried out. This was varied and involved small group and one-to-one work, leading interventions, support for SEN, pastoral care and mentoring. In addition, TAs in primary schools were more likely to say that they covered whole class teaching, compared to those in secondary or special schools. This led to some challenges, for example where TAs felt that they did not receive appropriate remuneration for the level of responsibility that they took on when covering whole classes.

Although 13 of the 64 interview participants had become a TA with the direct intention of progressing into teaching, over half went on to say that they were intending to, or considering, becoming a teacher in the future. They reported that they had been inspired or encouraged by teaching colleagues, that their own self-confidence had grown during their time working as a TA, or that they had seen trainees on placements in their schools and this had made them consider training for themselves. In the sample of 64 TAs, there were few patterns found in career aspirations according to age, experience, or qualification held. Instead, intentions or motivations to become a teacher appeared to be dependent on personal circumstances and perceptions of the role.

Perceptions of teacher workload were a common theme throughout the telephone interviews. Over two-thirds of TAs mentioned that teacher workload was an unattractive aspect of teaching as a career, although a smaller proportion went on to identify teacher workload as the specific reason that they did not want to become a teacher. Where TAs were not considering becoming a teacher, this tended to be due to a range of concerns related to the length of time it took to complete the necessary training, the cost of training, the potential reduction in salary, perceived high levels of teacher workload, and the requirement to have a degree in order to become a teacher.

Where they were considering becoming a teacher, the drive to help children and young people and have input into their educational progress was a key motivation. However, it was common for TAs to be unsure about the progression routes available to them. They reported not knowing what careers information was relevant to them or found it difficult to find information about teacher training programmes that was specific to the needs of TAs. The latter was particularly important as many TAs said that they would need to be able to continue to work whilst undertaking training, in order to meet existing family and financial commitments.

Levels of awareness among TAs about teacher training programmes generally, and the Postgraduate Teaching Apprenticeship in particular, were low. However, many were interested in the idea of practical work-based training that they could carry out whilst

remaining in their role as a TA. However, there were misconceptions among several TAs that the apprenticeship would not require them to also obtain a degree.

TAs commonly obtained information about teacher training opportunities via social media and teaching colleagues. Some TAs in primary schools noted that they had received information directly from school senior leaders. This had boosted their confidence, particularly as it had given them the sense that they would be supported by their schools if they decided to apply for teacher training. Assurances that they would receive such support from senior leaders was important to TAs in considering teacher training, as was information about the type of support they would receive during training itself (e.g. mentoring internally and externally to teaching placements). They also wanted further information on the types of tasks that they would undertake as a teacher that they did not carry out as a TA. Very few TAs mentioned the Get Into Teaching website, despite several suggestions from interview participants that there should be a central online source of information.

The financial cost of training (both in terms of tuition fees and potential reduction of salary if working part-time during training) was a key concern for many TAs. This raised questions among them around the logistical challenges involved in balancing the workload of both work and training alongside existing responsibilities. Subsequently, TAs commonly suggested that training delivery needed to be flexible in order to meet the needs of individuals, including in terms of the length and timing of training. Although some felt that training should be condensed and acknowledge TA experience in order to fast-track their progress, others recognised the requirement for a rigorous and robust process that ensured each option for progression had parity of esteem with other training programmes available.

Appendix: Sample demographics

School level characteristics

Table 3: Number of interview participants by region.

Region	Primary	Secondary	Special	TOTAL
East Midlands	2	4	0	6
East of England	9	2	3	14
London	2	3	2	7
North East	8	3	1	12
North West	3	4	1	8
South East	0	4	1	5
South West	0	1	0	1
West Midlands	1	1	1	3
Yorkshire and Humberside	4	3	1	8
TOTAL	29	25	10	64

Table 4: Number of interview participants by school size.

Size	Primary	Secondary	Special	TOTAL
<200	5	0	10	15
210-400	6	0	0	6
401-1000	18	7	0	25
1001+	0	18	0	18
TOTAL	29	25	10	64

Table 5: Number of interview participants by geographical context.

Urban/rural setting	Primary	Secondary	Special	TOTAL
Urban	24	21	10	55
Rural	5	4	0	9
TOTAL	29	25	10	64

Table 6: Number of interview participants by deprivation level¹⁴.

Deprivation level	Primary	Secondary	Special	TOTAL
Low	7	6	1	14
Medium	6	8	3	17
High	16	11	6	33
TOTAL	29	25	10	64

Table 7: Number of interview participants by Ofsted grading.

Ofsted Grading	Primary	Secondary	Special	TOTAL
Requires Improvement	4	8	2	14
Good	11	15	7	33
Outstanding	14	2	1	17
TOTAL	29	25	10	64

Individual TA characteristics

Table 8: Number of interview participants by gender.

Gender	Primary	Secondary	Special	TOTAL
Male	3	4	1	8
Female	26	21	9	56
TOTAL	29	25	10	64

¹⁴ Deprivation levels were configured from Middle Layer Super Output Area (MSOA) boundaries and ranked deprivation scores into tritiles.

Table 9: Number of interview participants by age.

Age	Primary	Secondary	Special	TOTAL
Under 25	4	6	3	13
25 to 29	4	7	3	14
30 to 34	3	2	0	5
35 to 39	2	2	1	5
40 to 44	7	4	0	11
45 to 49	5	2	0	7
50 to 54	2	2	2	6
55 to 59	2	0	0	2
60 or older	0	0	1	1
TOTAL	29	25	10	64

Table 10: Number of interview participants by years working as a TA.

Years working as a TA	Primary	Secondary	Special	TOTAL
Less than 1 year	1	6	1	8
1-2 years	1	3	3	7
3-5 years	9	10	1	20
6-9 years	7	2	1	10
10-15 years	6	4	2	12
Over 15 years	5	0	2	7
TOTAL	29	25	10	64

Table 11: Number of interview participants with a degree level qualification.

Degree level qualification	Primary	Secondary	Special	TOTAL
Holds an UG degree	3	4	2	9

Table 12: Number of interview participants by job type.

Job type	Primary	Secondary	Special	TOTAL
Full-time	20	16	9	45
Part-time	9	9	1	19
TOTAL	29	25	10	64



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