The Role of Teaching Assistants

1.0 Introduction

Across the global landscape, classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse and complex. Teachers are working with students who have varying ability levels, speak different languages, live with disabilities, and may be significantly behind grade level—especially in the aftermath of COVID-19. International research from UNESCO, ILO, and EEF indicates that no single teacher can meet all these needs alone, which is why teaching assistants (TAs) play a crucial role.

Evidence and practice show that TAs reinforce instruction, deliver small-group remediation, support students with special educational needs (SEN), and facilitate routine tasks, allowing teachers to focus on core teaching activities. Importantly, TAs are most effective when their roles are clearly defined, they receive targeted and meaningful training, their deployment is coordinated with teachers, and their support aims to foster learner independence rather than dependence. When these conditions are lacking, issues such as role confusion or the “velcro effect” can arise.

In Nigeria and across sub-Saharan Africa, paraprofessionals are already addressing gaps in many classrooms and community centers. Volunteers, youth corps members, and facilitators are running reading groups, managing behavior, and supporting inclusion. However, formal systems are lagging behind. For example, a UNESCO review of Nigeria finds that “schools usually have no support personnel” such as TAs[1], even as awareness of their value grows

Across Nigeria and much of sub-Saharan Africa, classrooms face multiple structural pressures: very large class sizes, a high number of out-of-school and over-age learners, and chronic teacher shortages. These realities mean that the traditional model — one teacher responsible for all learners — is no longer sufficient. When the roles of Teaching Assistants (TAs) or paraprofessionals are clear, training is purposeful, and their work is coordinated with teachers, TAs expand instructional reach, support inclusion, and materially improve learners’ engagement and foundational skills

Regulatory bodies, such as the Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN), set teacher standards but currently do not recognize teacher assistants (TAs). They also do not provide competency frameworks, training pathways, deployment guidance, or supervision models. As a result, there is a valuable workforce that remains largely informal and unsupported.

This webinar will outline key aspects of teacher assistants in this context, including professional development opportunities, how teacher educators can support and train TAs, strategies for deploying TAs in the classroom, and the special role TAs play with learners who have special educational needs (SEN).

2.0 Professional Development Opportunities for Teacher Assistants

Teaching assistants in Nigeria typically enter the role through government initiatives, NGO funded education programme or on-the-job learning rather than formal teacher training. For instance, the N-Power *Teach* programme recruited educated young Nigerians as volunteer TAs in primary and secondary schools[2]. These volunteers receive orientation and even training materials (e.g. guides and scripted lesson plans) to help them assist in lessons[2]. In addition, many TAs gain skills informally by working alongside experienced teachers. Research in South Africa notes that such assistant teachers essentially “learn and develop themselves into productive members of the school” through classroom experience[3]. Beyond these avenues, some teacher training colleges and NGOs offer short certificate courses or workshops (for example, on basic pedagogy, literacy support, or sign language) aimed at classroom aides. However, these formal opportunities remain limited. In summary, TA development in Nigeria

ranges from structured schemes like N-Power to informal mentoring and occasional specialized workshops[2][3].

- **Government and NGO programmes:** The N-Power scheme is a prime example of a national initiative that includes TA training and deployment[2]. Other NGOs may run inclusive education projects that train TAs in delivering foundational literacy skills such as the FCDO funded Kano Literacy and Mathematics Accelerator (KaLMA) programme which trained paraprofessionals from the World Bank Better Education ServiceDelivery for All (BESDA) project to be able to facilitate accelerated learning classes in Kano State, Nigeria.
- **On-the-job training:** Many TAs improve through hands-on experience. By assisting in daily lessons, they pick up pedagogical techniques and classroom management skills – essentially "learning and developing themselves" on the job[3].
- **Short courses and workshops:** A few colleges or education NGOs offer short courses or workshops for aides (e.g. literacy tutoring methods or disability inclusion). These help TAs build concrete skills, but wider access and certification paths are still needed.

Studies show that targeted TA support can yield measurable learning gains. For example, the UK's Education Endowment Foundation found that when TAs delivered focused reading or math interventions, pupils gained about five extra months of learning progress[4]. Teacher educators can use this insight to design training for TAs on small-group instruction (e.g. guided reading or remedial drills). Embedding such focused tasks in TA training helps turn general on-the-job learning into effective teaching practice. In practice, professional development for TAs may include modules on running small tutoring sessions or using visual aids - skills that have been shown to boost student engagement and achievement[4].

This image shows a classroom scene in an African school, illustrating the typical context where TAs support teachers.

3.0 Role of Teacher Educators in Supporting Teacher Assistants

Teacher educators (university and college lecturers, government master trainers, and in-service trainers) play a key role in preparing both teachers and TAs for effective collaboration. Research indicates that successful TA deployment “requires effective management and support”, including clear training programs for assistants and instruction for teachers on how to work with them[5]. In concrete terms, teacher education programs can integrate TA-related content into their curriculum. For example, a review of global studies found that teachers themselves need training in co-teaching approaches: “Teachers therefore need to be trained in these approaches” to use TAs best[5].

Teacher educators might run joint workshops or seminars where classroom teachers and TAs learn teaming strategies together. They can model collaborative lesson planning (showing, for example, how a lead teacher and TA divide responsibilities during a lesson) and facilitate school-based practicums that include TA supervision. By doing so, teacher educators help raise overall awareness of the TA role. In addition, they can offer professional learning communities or online resources specifically for TAs (such as modules on literacy intervention techniques) to supplement the informal on-the-job learning. These educator-led supports ensure that TAs are not isolated but integrated into the professional development ecosystem alongside certified teachers[5].

4.0 Integrating Teacher Assistants in Classroom Teaching

Classroom teachers benefit when TAs are assigned clear, focused roles. International evidence shows that TAs have the greatest impact when they lead well-defined activities (for instance, running a reading group or math drill), rather than performing ad-hoc “extra help”[5][4]. Teacher educators and school leaders can guide teachers on deployment strategies. For example, a practical approach is to use TAs to lead small remedial or enrichment groups while the lead teacher circulates, ensuring every student gets attention. Training sessions for teachers might emphasize co-planning: teachers and TAs jointly set daily learning goals, so the TA’s work directly supports the teacher’s lesson plan.

Evidence underlines the pay-off: studies report that teachers overwhelmingly see positive effects when TAs are used this way. School leaders in one survey noted TAs “improve pupil behaviour and engagement” and allow teachers more time with small groups[6]. In practice, proper TA deployment has been observed to “facilitate pupil engagement in learning” and even enhance teachers’ job satisfaction[7]. In short, teacher educators can train teachers to leverage TAs as co-teachers – for example, by demonstrating “team teaching” methods – and emphasize that clear communication and planning between teacher and TA are essential for classroom harmony[7][6].

5.0 Teacher Assistants and Learners with Special Educational Needs

Teaching assistants are especially valuable for learners with special educational needs (SEN). Well-trained TAs can provide the individualized support that enables these students to participate in mainstream classes. Research highlights that **“well-defined, and well-trained classroom assistance”** is an excellent strategy to help children with disabilities engage in learning[8]. For example, a TA might adapt materials (e.g. large-print books for a visually impaired child) or sit with a student who needs one-on-one guidance. In many Nigerian schools, where specialist teachers are scarce, TAs may act as de facto inclusion aides: they can break down complex instructions, use assistive devices (like Braille labels or picture cues), or give extra time on tasks.

Teacher educators and trainers should prepare TAs for these roles by covering basic SEN strategies in their training. Workshops might include simple modules on recognizing different disability needs or supporting communication (such as basic sign language or social stories). In practice, when teachers and TAs work together to support SEN learners, it helps fulfill Nigeria’s inclusive education goals. As global research notes, properly trained TAs can **facilitate a higher**

degree of participation for students with disabilities[8]. Thus, TAs in Nigerian classrooms not only reinforce learning for all pupils but can be key allies in making inclusion real for children with special needs.

6.0 References

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