

# The role of teaching assistants



This essay will discuss the different roles of teaching assistants in primary schools, through first hand observation and also by way of other resources such as government guidelines and journal articles. Teaching assistants (TA's) were originally given the title of non-teaching assistants, however, the 'non' was dropped when it became clear that teaching assistant provided valuable input into the everyday workings of the classroom. TA's were introduced in an attempt to reduce the workload of teachers which would in turn "raise the standards of the classroom in which the work" (DfES, 2000).

Between 1999-2001 the government injected considerable funds into Local Education Authorities to enable them to employ and train around 20,000 new teaching assistants (Ofsted, 2002). The DfES (2003) states that "teaching assistants are providing effective and valuable support in a wide range of settings" and envisages an "enhanced role for teaching assistants to free teachers from non related tasks". My observations seem to mirror the government's guidelines and proposals for utilizing TA's to reduce the workload of teachers.

From my observations of teaching assistants in the classroom, I have found that they have many roles and responsibilities. I have also observed that different teaching assistants have different roles. For example: the main TA for the class has duties varying from gathering resources and taking photographs, to playground duties and helping small groups of children stay on task in the classroom. This particular TA also has the responsibility of teaching small groups of children for 'Rocket Reading'. In rocket reading, children gather from different classes and are grouped by ability rather than age. The TA has the responsibility of teaching the key sounds and words for

their level. There is also a 'floating teaching assistant who moves between classes, as and when she is needed. This TA appears to mainly focus on tasks which do not involve the children such as photocopying resources and making up the display boards.

However there is research that suggests, if not used effectively, that TA's could possibly have a detrimental effect (albeit inadvertently) on the educational and social wellbeing of some pupils, particularly those who have special educational needs. Children with special educational needs often have a TA who works almost exclusively with them. There is research which suggests that 'excessive proximity of teaching assistants' could lead to things such as behavioural problems and social isolation as the child becomes to dependant on the TA (Giangreco & Doyle, 2007).

I have observed rare occasions when the teaching assistant has had responsibility for the whole class. However, this is only for very short amounts of time and usually during transition times for example, between the end of lunchtime play and the start of the afternoon session. I have not seen any evidence that the TA's are expected to do any whole class teaching. In the absence of the class teacher, a supply teacher is used rather than giving the responsibility to the teaching assistants. This may be due to the lack of adequate training of the TA's or the preference of the head teacher, unfortunately I have not, as yet had the opportunity to find out this information. However, the Secretary of State has suggested that the role of teaching assistants could be expanded to include 'supervising classes undertaking work set by the class teacher, administering tests and covering teacher absence' (Ofsted, 2002).

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Cajkler & Suschitzky (2007) suggest that TA's should be quite deeply involved in the everyday workings of the classroom. This should include knowing about the curriculum, schemes of work, policy and lesson planning. However, from my observations, the TA's do not have any input into what is taught or how but just follow instructions given by the teacher. These are usually things such as keeping children on task rather than giving any in-depth help on the lesson being covered. The TA's often have to refer back to the teacher when asked a question by a child. The TA's do seem to be expected to know the curriculum in any depth, schemes of work or policy. These things do not appear to be relevant to the tasks which are expected of them. The only task in which I have seen the TA's using and needing any in-depth knowledge is in the rocket reading exercises. Some of the TA's in the school have had training in this area and therefore have the extra knowledge which is used to the advantage of the rest of the teaching staff and also benefits the children as they can be taught in much smaller groups.

Many reports and studies show that the use of teaching assistants in the classroom benefit the teacher as well as the children. However, a report by the Institute of Education suggests that less progress is made by children who have the support of a TA than those of a similar age and ability who do not receive the same level of assistance. The report claims that 'the more support they receive the fewer gains they make'. The findings are based on two main problems that are interlinked. It is claimed that teaching assistants are often assigned to the children in most need of educational help.

However, this means that the child has less time with a qualified teacher,

therefore reducing the amount of actual teaching they receive (Times, 2008).

From my observations i would somewhat agree with these findings. One child in the class has recently joined the class after arriving from Poland. he receives extremely little support, guidance or teaching from the class teacher. his day is spent either with a non speaking TA or working independently. However he is lucky enough to have another six year old in the class who is also Polish but speaks very good english who translates for him.

In conclusion, i feel that that TA's are an extremely important part of the daily running of the classroom. The main roles in which they are involved in allows the teacher to concentrate on actually teaching the class rather than concentrating on what could be seen as less important tasks. However, i feel that TA's need to be trained in all aspects of the roles which they are expected to undertake.

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