

The teaching assistants role in developing childrens learning



The role of the Teaching Assistant has changed significantly in recent years (Cheminais, 2008) and has, due to the governments 2003 initiative to change the staffing structure within schools (OfSTED., 2004), led to numerous publications and studies concerning the effectiveness of these changes.

Historically, teaching assistants, or auxiliaries as they were sometimes formerly known, (Clayton, 1993) were non teaching adults who helped qualified teachers by carrying out day to day administrative tasks, and provided pastoral care to children. Several years later the Government (LGC., 1998) outlined proposals for employing a greater number of support staff in order to provide even more support for pupils and teachers. They also announced suggestions for a “ more effective use of, and better training for, teaching assistants and other school support staff” which, along with a subsequent OfSTED review, (2002a, p6) declared the need for training that would, “ match any proposed structure of qualifications and to facilitate career progression.” The implementation of national occupational standards for teaching assistants, approved in 2001, and the HLTA status introduced in 2003, (TDA., 2008), offered committed support staff the opportunity to acquire the skills to become more accomplished educators. In other words, working as a teaching assistant had become a career, and so began the real debate about the role of the teaching assistant.

In my experience, the title of ‘ teaching assistant’ is interpreted in a variety of ways. Nevertheless, a common theme that I have encountered is that most teaching assistants have the potential to be effective educators and are therefore important elements in the development of independent

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learning. How well this potential is utilised, however, is less clear and depends on the employer's interpretation of the role along with appropriate training and development opportunities (Department for Education and Skills, 2000, pp15-16).

In order to develop learning, teaching assistants ought to have a good understanding of how children learn. Piaget (Slavin, 1994a), described the process as the creation of new ideas by adapting those already known. This was followed by Vygotsky's claims (Slavin, 1994b, p49) that children move between zones when learning. He describes this as them moving out of their comfort zone and towards their potential via their " zone of proximal development" through the use of social interaction. In order to instigate this progression, adults need to provide opportunities for discussion and exploration between children and themselves. This also has the potential to enable children to discover and explore language, also vital to a child's progress (Bruner, 1983, pp 64-66). A teaching assistant must be aware of the pupil's current level of understanding and then know how to " scaffold" new learning. They must also know when to withdraw support to enable the child to build on, succeed and be responsible for their own progress.

Furthermore, with current class sizes in the region of up to 30 pupils, a class teacher may be unable to offer such an individual approach to addressing the theories of the philosophers, and so it could be considered the role of the skilled teaching assistant to do this.

During my recent survey of reluctant readers, carried out as a prelude to the introduction of an initiative to promote reading, I discovered that the pupils had formulated an opinion that reading was a chore to be undertaken with <https://assignbuster.com/the-teaching-assistants-role-in-developing-childrens-learning/>

animosity and only when instructed to do so. It became apparent that these children had encountered a variety of barriers that had influenced their attitude and ability to read [See Appendix A]. Many of these barriers are classic examples of Erikson's "Industry versus Inferiority Crisis" (Slavin, 1994c, p56), whereby outside influences have contributed towards a pupil forming a negative self image of themselves as readers. In order to overcome this, the pupils needed the support of an "enabling adult" as described by Chambers (1991). This provided them with a role model, a positive attitude towards reading and an opportunity to share and discuss reading experiences. This inspired in them a new willingness and enjoyment of reading, the outcome of which became apparent in their understanding of written text. The children also began writing with enthusiasm, using their own knowledge and experiences; as a result, they had taken control of their own learning. The children's responses to the initiative [See Appendix B], demonstrated that they felt empowered by the fact that they were discovering new language for themselves (Gross, 1992a) and were directly responsible for the progress that they were making.

These principles apply to all children, although some children with SEN require a higher level of support traditionally provided by teaching assistants (Alborz et al, 2009). This has previously been an area for debate with The Daily Telegraph (2009) publishing an article claiming that research shows that, "Pupils make less progress in classrooms where schools employ more teaching assistants". The article states that teaching assistants often support lower attaining pupils, resulting in them being less supported by a qualified teacher and to them making limited progress, although it does not appear to

take into account the training of the teaching assistants. While reviewing the impact of workforce remodeling, a report by OfSTED (2004) stated that when a teaching assistant is appointed to work with carefully chosen pupils and is provided with the appropriate training to do so effectively, the pupils make significant progress. This is as well as the obvious benefits of providing the teacher with more time to focus on other pupils.

In a recent observation of a year 5 class, it was obvious that the use of a teaching assistant to provide children with language difficulties with personalised, individual help benefited the targeted pupils and the class as a whole. The support enabled the children to access the curriculum in a mainstream classroom while allowing the class teacher to focus on the majority of the pupils. The teaching assistant's intervention involved the re-enforcing of the whole class teaching, simplification of vocabulary and offering praise, encouragement and feedback on the task. The support gave the pupils the confidence to participate in class discussions and enabled them to experience new language in context; a vital aspect of developing new concepts (Gross, 1992b). Following the lesson, the teaching assistant also provided the teacher with assessment and monitoring feedback to enable assessment of and for learning. This assessment has become a crucial part of the role of the teaching assistant and supports the teacher and pupil by enabling differentiation and personalised learning to become every day practice (Kay, 2005).

Guidance published by the NFER (2002, cited in Department for Education and Skills, 2005, p. 22) found that when teachers and teaching assistants work in partnership, the results are a more effective level of teaching and <https://assignbuster.com/the-teaching-assistants-role-in-developing-childrens-learning/>

learning. An example of this is a scenario I have experienced recently where a skilled teaching assistant supported the learning of the majority of the class while the class teacher focused on the children with SEN. As a result of the teacher and teaching assistant having spent time working together to plan the lesson, the teaching assistant was able to assist pupils in their achievement of the learning objectives.

By implementing a combination of all of these approaches and with effective training and guidance, teaching assistants can provide invaluable support for all children within any lesson.

Supporting behaviour management and providing an alternative level of perception within the classroom are also key aspects of being an effective teaching assistant. In daily Literacy lessons, I have observed a teaching assistant supporting a pupil with ADHD and have no doubt that without her presence, the class teacher would have to spend a large proportion of the lesson settling the child and addressing low level distractions. Personal experience has shown me that children with emotional or behavioural difficulties respond positively to the support of a teaching assistant with whom they can forge a good adult / child relationship. This can contribute towards the social and emotional wellbeing of the child as outlined in a review by Alborz et al. (2009); however he also found that this type of intervention does have the potential to create a barrier between the supported children, their peers and teachers. The teaching assistant's must, therefore, have a good understanding of the pupils needs in order to prevent this.

Besides the opportunity to support children's learning during lesson time, teaching assistants continue to carry out administrative tasks in order to support the class teacher and the school as a whole. The National Agreement (ATL et al. 2003, p. 2), implemented as part of the governments workforce remodelling initiative, states that teachers should not spend their time carrying out administrative responsibilities that do not make full use of their skills and expertise, but that these tasks should be completed by support staff. The outlined tasks include the preparation of classroom resources and setting up of displays. These duties must also, therefore, be considered the responsibility of the teaching assistant. Many of the administrative obligations have an impact on the physical surroundings, and therefore contribute towards (Primary National Strategy, 2004) creating a positive ethos and the creation of a successful learning environment. In practice, however, the requirement for teaching assistants to be more involved in the delivery of lessons means that they have less time for carrying out administrative duties which relays these duties back into the hands of the teachers (OfSTED, 2002b, p8).

In my experience, teaching assistants offer unconditional support for the school in which they are employed. Many carry out duties beyond their working hours, providing curriculum enrichment activities and regularly being at the forefront of fund raising events. They frequently are able to provide a connection between parents, local communities and their schools as they often live in close proximity to their workplace. This is a valuable part of their role as it enables teaching staff to be aware of local issues and provides a link between parents and schools (Logan, E. & Feiler, A. 2006).

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In conclusion, a teaching assistant's role is to offer personalised learning, pastoral care and administrative assistance. They encourage good learning by providing invaluable differentiated learning support to individuals and groups of pupils. Skilled teaching assistants promote enjoyment and achievement in a safe, nurturing environment while contributing to the academic and emotional wellbeing of all children. They establish positive relationships with parents and help pupils to become successful members of the school and wider community.

(1639 words)