

12: The Butterfly Effect: Teaching Assistants and Workforce Reform in Primary Schools

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Introduction

Government reform of the primary teachers' workforce through the introduction of teaching assistants has major implications for classroom practice and teachers who work in key stage two (KS2). The idea of teaching assistants causing a 'butterfly effect' came from the Primary Strategy document *Excellence and Enjoyment* (DfES 2003b) as the picture that precedes the section on workforce reform in primary schools contains an adult pointing at an information chart entitled *A Butterfly is Born*. Smart (2003) in the Collins English Dictionary, explains the 'butterfly effect' as 'the idea used in chaos theory, that a very small difference in the initial state of a physical system can make a significant difference to the state at some later time.... (a butterfly flapping its wings in one part of the world might ultimately cause a hurricane in another part of the world)' (Smart 2003: 156). In the case of teaching assistants and the re-modelling of the workforce what will the 'effect' turn out to be? Will it enhance or compromise educational standards? Will it reduce teacher workload and help prevent teacher stress? Will it have an impact on learning? This chapter will address these questions through reviewing current research on teaching assistants in the period of 'performance culture' identified elsewhere in this book (see, for example, Chapters 2, 3 and 13).

The role of the teaching assistant to support pupil achievement has become increasingly important in an era of international concern about qualified teacher shortages and school improvement. In the UK, Slater and Dean (2001) reported that there were 95,000 teaching assistants working in English schools. The predicted numbers of teaching assistants is set to rise year on year with more than 16,700 full-time equivalent additional support staff recruited

since 2003 (WAMG 2004). By 2004 there were 133,440 full-time equivalent teaching assistants working in mainstream and special schools and Pupil Referral Units in England (Vincett *et al.* 2005). According to the DfES Education statistics, by 2004 there was a ratio of 2.08 teaching assistants to every teacher (DfES 2004g). This dramatic rise confirms that support staff lie at the heart of the government's radical plans for a modernised, remodelled workforce 'to find new ways, for the 21st Century, of helping schools to realise the potential for all our children' (DfES 2003b: para 1).

A major factor behind the increase in teaching assistants is the inclusion in schools of pupils with special educational needs. This defined the type of support these pupils would need and led to new roles for teachers and other adults in schools. Funding was often linked to individual statements for children making contracts for assistants temporary and short-term. It became possible to support a wider range of pupil need when the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs was published (DFE 1994). The Code established that children with identifiable learning difficulties, but not requiring the level of support provided for by a statement, should have their needs recognised. This had a significant impact upon the number of teaching assistants employed to work in primary schools and has been perceived to have a positive effect on the work of primary school teachers and pupil learning (Ofsted 1995; HMI 2002).

The Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners (DfES 2004a) claims that the Primary Strategy will bring about a more personalised approach across the whole curriculum. Teachers' skills, it is suggested, will be developed to tailor teaching and learning to the needs of the individual child. The work of the teaching assistant is identified as 'supporting children's individual needs, in helping teachers use and interpret data, in managing behaviour, and in giving teachers time to plan and prepare lessons' (DfES 2004a: 5.42)

This is a short statement but it encompasses a great deal. Teaching assistants are to be involved in personalised learning as they continue to support individual children and their

needs. This is to include managing behaviour, interpretation of data and providing teachers with time for preparation. How will this be enacted in practice? In terms of managing behaviour, will it mean in the classroom, at lunch times, in the playground? When helping teachers to use and interpret data will this involve assisting with assessment, testing and recording achievement? Will giving teachers time to plan and prepare lessons involve taking whole classes as suggested in the Primary Strategy document? This chapter attempts to address some of these questions through considering issues in relation to curriculum enrichment, the views of children and issues for teachers.

Curriculum enrichment or a compromise of standards?

The role teaching assistants might play in curriculum enrichment was emphasised by Ofsted (2002) who noted that they contributed to both curricular quality and breadth in successful primary schools where they had received training linked to their responsibilities and been deployed to make the best use of their strengths. Ofsted found that usually, teaching assistants' time was used to support the literacy hours, mathematics or pupils with special needs. Hancock and Eyres (2004) argue that teaching assistants who support children with complex needs have long taken on a pedagogic role which often goes unrecognised. Teaching assistants, they suggest, have been assigned a 'remedial' role in the teaching of literacy and numeracy, as children in the lowest achievement quartile are often withdrawn from their classes or taught in small groups by the teaching assistant. They comment that the essential work teaching assistants do is barely visible in reports such as the evaluation of the implementation of the literacy and numeracy strategies (Earl *et al.* 2000, 2001, 2003).

Where teaching assistants regularly work with the same lower ability groups of children this can lead to a situation where SEN children rarely receive teaching and support from their class teacher (Ofsted 2002b; Webb and Vulliamy 2006). However, as Webb and Vulliamy's research indicates, where teachers have developed a heightened awareness of this

issue the needs and progress of all pupils can be monitored through regular exchange of groups with the teaching assistants.

Teaching assistants are seen as key in providing curriculum enrichment in the Primary Strategy. As well as freeing up time for teachers it is considered that they have a wealth of expertise that will help to keep the curriculum alive. Of the schools surveyed for the Primary Strategy document it is claimed that 96 per cent of schools use teaching assistants to work with individual pupils, 99 per cent to work with small groups and that one in ten of the schools surveyed (600 primary headteachers and deputy headteachers were polled) used teaching assistants to lead whole classes. Examples of creative use of teaching assistants are described as leading a knitting club and providing non-contact for the music co-ordinator to train an 80-piece orchestra. The case study states:

At Key stage 2, teaching assistants work with half the class whilst the teacher works with the rest of the class in the ICT suite. Those involved with the early years also take half classes for practical work in partnership with the teacher. The school also uses one member of support staff to do all the photocopying to reduce the administrative burdens of the teachers. The teaching assistants contribute to assessment procedures and deliver tests. They have also developed their own handbook which explains their role to parents. (DfES 2003b: 69)

The roles described above are all, no doubt, both valuable and helpful to the teachers in that particular school. The fact that the teaching assistants have developed their own handbook bears testimony to the ownership and confidence those teaching assistants felt about their job. However, there are more diverse and dynamic ways of using teaching assistants to personalise the curriculum alongside considering the implications for change in practice.

When discussing teaching assistant support in the mathematics curriculum, Cronin and Bold (2005) argue that assistants should be perceived as partners in teaching mathematics

to children. They suggest that confidence and enthusiasm for helping with mathematics support may vary among teaching assistants and this is the first key issue to address if the partnership is to be effective and productive in terms of children's learning. Attitudes of the teaching assistants towards mathematics may have been affected by their early learning experiences in the subject if they were taught through rote learning rather than understanding (Skemp 1989) and suffer from 'sum stress' (Fraser and Honeyford 2000). To help overcome the negative impact of such attitudes to the subject, Cronin and Bold (2005) argue that encouraging teaching assistants to discuss their own learning experiences and the ways they were taught mathematics results in a greater level of confidence when working with children in classrooms. They suggest the best way to do this is through shared planning and feedback.

Competence, or lack of it, in teaching mathematics and particularly some of the methods of calculation in the National Numeracy Strategy, may also prevent teachers and assistants from working together effectively as partners in this curriculum area. While this is a difficult area to resolve it can begin to be addressed, argue Cronin and Bold (2005), by sharing with teaching assistants the importance of making mathematical connections with children. Making explicit links between different aspects of mathematics and connections with other subject areas when planning work with teaching assistants can be a valuable aid towards developing competence. This does mean, though, that teachers have to be willing to share knowledge, expertise and new developments in teaching and learning with teaching assistants. Such a shared and collaborative way of working in the curriculum relies on good levels of communication supported by strong relationships among all levels of teaching staff in a primary school.

The involvement of teaching assistants in the Literacy Hour has provoked much discussion around the importance of their role in this key curriculum area. The third evaluation report of the strategies (Earl *et al.* 2003) identifies teaching assistants as playing an essential role through targeted interventions with children who are making slower progress

than their peers. Ofsted (2002) report that teaching assistants have a major role in intervention and catch-up programmes while Webb and Vulliamy (2006) suggest that teaching assistants are more confident and competent in teaching and supporting literacy because they have had much more training and have built up experience through taking booster classes. Hancock and Eyres (2004) argue that the value of teaching assistants in terms of improving children's performance has been greatly underrated and claim that the success of teaching assistants, particularly in booster classes, has contributed significantly to the numbers of children achieving the expected standards of literacy at the ages of seven and eleven.

ICT has a unique place in the primary curriculum, linked as it is to all subject areas, and as such, provides a key opportunity for imaginative ways of working in primary classrooms with children and teaching assistants (see Chapter 7). The interactive nature of ICT makes it a key tool in achieving the agenda for personalised learning. A study by Wegerif and Scrimshaw (1997) on the quality of children's talk when using ICT software revealed that talk and input from a teacher (or teaching assistant) would have greatly enhanced pupil understanding and use of the materials and their subsequent development in knowledge. As Ralston (2004) acknowledges, just because when using ICT, children appear to be performing technologically complex tasks, it does not necessarily mean they are learning anything important. ICT cannot in itself transform teaching and learning but the way that teachers collaborate with teaching assistants to plan stimulating and exciting use of technologies can.

How teachers work with teaching assistants across the range of curriculum subjects will have a considerable impact upon the way they are perceived by children. Even very young children will have views or opinions about the adults who work with them in their classrooms and yet despite a professional rhetoric on the importance of consulting children this rarely happens in practice (Hancock 2002). This is quite extraordinary as how enriched

or ‘alive’ a curriculum might be is often best judged by children.

Views of children

Views of children on the perceptions of adults in their classroom (Eyres *et al.* 2004: 155) show that children easily differentiate between their own class teacher and other adults and the roles and tasks they perform:

Barbara isn’t a proper teacher: she helps us, she doesn’t actually teach us. (Mark, Y6)

Well, Selma is just a helper and Krystel (class teacher) does more stuff. (Veronica, Y1)

He used to normally work in the lowest group because he just helps. (Sadia, Y4)

The views of these children indicate that teaching assistants are perceived in a variety of different ways both in terms of status and the different type of activities that they undertook. When planning for ways in which teaching assistants will be used in classrooms the views and perceptions of children have an important role to play. Consulting children’s views on a range of issues linked to their schooling has been explored by a number of researchers and writers (see Chapters 5 and 6). Children’s views can inform teachers about their teaching (Abdullah and Scaife 1997), give teachers feedback on how school is being experienced (Cullingford 1991) and act as partners in planning (Fajerman *et al.* 2000). The case for listening to children to bring meaning to the teaching of the literacy hour is cogently argued by Hancock and Mansfield (2002) who suggest that there is a growing tendency for teachers, and teaching assistants, to see themselves simply as ‘deliverers’ of a centrally organised curriculum. In a small-scale study a number of children were interviewed about the literacy hour and the latter also had opinions on the teaching styles of their teachers and teaching assistants. One eight-year-old girl had the following conversation.

Interviewer: So, you were saying that your teacher is different in the Literacy Hour?

Jackie: Yeah, she’s sort of different. She speaks different and moves around a lot - a bit like she’s worried or something.

Interviewer: Worried?

Jackie: It’s like she’s cross if we don’t do it right and don’t concentrate. She makes us concentrate, especially on the carpet, and kids muck around a lot. She talks too much

and goes over the same things too much. (Hancock and Mansfield 2002: 193-194). Hancock and Mansfield go on to explore how the plenary in the literacy hour could be used to invite children to comment on how successful the lesson has been and whether it could have been better. They suggest that teaching assistants are in a good position to facilitate feedback as they are usually assigned to a small group during this time.

The management of working patterns in a classroom is clearly evident to children and they are often well aware of the group that they have been assigned to (Doddington *et al.* 2002). Eyres *et al.* (2004) argue that children welcome the additional support they receive although they may be rather fuzzy about the different activities a teacher and a teaching assistant do and often regard teachers and assistants as doing very similar things:

Well, Miss McAngel is the actual teacher, teacher, teacher. She actually teaches us everything because she's just a teacher and teaches us everything. But, if you like, you've got another teacher, they teach us - pretty much they'd teach us everything but Miss McAngel would do different things with us - d'you know what I mean? - sort of, I can't put it into words really - but - can you help? [looking towards Tim, her friend]. (Lisette, Y6) (Eyres *et al.* 2004: 157-158).

Eyres' research concluded that where teaching assistants took on more teaching related activities children found it difficult to support the view that people with different job titles must be doing different things. They suggest that the introduction of the literacy hour and the numeracy strategy have led to blurring of the teacher/teaching assistant boundary. This blurring at the boundaries was not perceived as problematic by the children but what are the issues it raises for teachers?

Teacher issues

While there is no doubt that teaching assistants are welcomed as classroom support, some of the future roles outlined in the Primary Strategy (DfES 2003b) such as whole class teaching, even if carried out by those newly qualified as higher-level teaching assistants (DfES 2002b), have caused concern amongst teachers. The National Union of Teachers (2003) is quite clear

that a move to use support staff for whole class teaching would both compromise standards and the quality of education experienced by pupils. It is argued that teachers who have undergone rigorous inspection for a number of years would be ‘outraged’ at the suggestion that unqualified adults could do the job equally well. There is evidence in Webb and Vulliamy’s (2006) research that most headteachers and teachers would not wish teaching assistants to teach whole classes and they also identify some confusion around what ‘whole class’ teaching actually implies. For example, up to 50 per cent of teaching assistants claimed to provide whole class cover but most of these instances related to unplanned teacher absence or when a teacher was dealing with an incident elsewhere. Webb and Vulliamy provide an example of a teaching assistant who took a Year5/6 for art while the class teacher withdrew small groups to work on the computer. The head of the school was full of praise for the work of the teaching assistants but adamant that they should not take classes to release teachers. It would appear that the teaching assistant who taught art was not seen as fulfilling a whole class teaching role as the teacher was regarded as still in charge of the class even though teaching another subject. The class teacher had also planned the art lesson that was ‘delivered’ by the teaching assistant and headteachers and teachers clearly distinguished between teaching a lesson and delivering a lesson to whole classes. Many teachers disagreed entirely with teaching assistants teaching whole classes as they thought it devalued their profession:

When it comes to asking classroom assistants to teach – I do not agree. I think that devalues me as a teacher if a classroom assistant can come in and take my class without any training...We’re not being fair to the kids. These people do not have the skills and experience to teach in the way they should be taught, so we’re short-changing children when staff are off. It’s teaching on the cheap and we’re not being fair to them – they’re doing a teaching job, for half my salary and no, I can’t agree with that. It’s happening and it will happen more and more, but no, I can’t agree with that. (Y3 teacher, July

2005). (Webb and Vulliamy 2006: 78)

Other factors that constrain or promote collaborative working between teachers and teaching assistants can also be identified. For example, Jackson and Bedford (2005) identified a number of key themes in relation to workforce remodelling that included: lack of training for teachers and teaching assistants when working with other adults in a learning situation; lack of time for planning; teachers fearing a threat to their professional integrity; and the unclear nature of the terms of partnership and pay differential between teachers and teaching assistants. There appears to be little evidence, as yet, that using teaching assistants to assist with teaching tasks would reduce teacher workload and teacher stress. As Troman and Woods (2001) argue, teacher stress is often about feeling out of control in their personal and professional lives and that stress prevention is best achieved by handing control back and providing ‘buddy’ or mentoring support. Teachers in their study found that classroom assistants helped to relieve stress not because they took over some of the teaching tasks but because they became a friend to share things with as one of the teachers in their study explained:

I’ve got two classroom assistants (LSAs) who work with me but they’ve actually ended up being my closest friends as well. So we’ve got a good team there. And they’re the people that actually see me, and know when I’ve been overdoing things or when work is infringing on my social life. (Troman and Woods 2001: 105).

This teacher did not say that her stress was reduced because her workload was lessened and indeed there is evidence to suggest that having additional adults in the classroom actually increases workload as they have to manage and plan for several adults to work with children in different ways. Indeed, the areas that teachers have identified as creating excessive workload are bureaucracy and paper work, planning, government initiatives, unrealistic targets and discipline (Butt and Lance 2005).

Another issue was identified in Moran and Abbott’s (2002) study in learning support

encountered by teachers in Northern Ireland. One primary unit head stated:

Sometimes in the past, I must admit, I have felt, not threatened, but that she's overstepping the mark slightly. I had to deal with that at the time and it was very difficult to do. Without a doubt, she's inclined to do a thing for the child which I find very frustrating. I know that when I go back to the classroom (after the interview) that the maths I've set for the children will all be correct. I think she feels that I'm keeping an eye on her as opposed to the children, and that when she's left in charge, everything must be done perfectly. I would much rather she left the children to try themselves, and then I'd help them fix whatever mistakes they've made so they would understand better. It's always a problem when this happens because the children must have challenges. (Moran and Abbott 2002: 168)

Different understandings about how children learn caused this teacher concern as she worried that the children would not fully understand if they were spoon-fed the answers. There is a need for much stronger evidence about the impact of other adults on teaching and learning and reduction in teacher workload (NUT 2003). Given the variety of roles and tasks that teaching assistants have undertaken in the past (Hancock *et al.* 2001) it is not surprising that much research has concentrated on changes in classroom roles and the move from domestic help to providing curriculum support (Clayton 1993; Farrell *et al.* 1999; Eyres *et al.* 2004). Research into teaching assistants and the impact of increased numbers of adults in classrooms on children's attainment is an area that continues to require more in depth research as the paucity of available work that addresses these issues reveals (Welch *et al.* 1995; Roberts and Dyson 2002; Wilson *et al.* 2002; Vincett *et al.* 2005).

Research into how adults can be best utilised in classrooms has been addressed by Cremin *et al.* (2005) and Vincett *et al.* (2005) who evaluated three models of team organisation and planning for working with teaching assistants in relation to 'room management', 'zoning' and 'reflective teamwork'. Room management is about ensuring that

every adult has a clear role to occupy and function to perform; zoning is a system that works by organising a class into learning zones, usually structured by the placement of groups in the class; while reflective teamwork aims to improve planning and organisation through teamwork games and exercises and by implementing a regime of planning and reflection meetings. They worked with six primary and secondary schools, not to find out which was the most effective method as each has its own strengths, but to encourage the participating schools to adapt the models to their own contexts. While they consider their research provides a case for effective work with teaching assistants they are cautious at this stage in drawing more generalisable conclusions from their research.

As the range and variety of classroom roles and tasks that teaching assistants undertake increases, the question of training and further professional development for teaching assistants needs to be urgently addressed.

Conclusion

A number of key issues have emerged in this chapter that need further research and consideration by policy makers. The first centres around the ways in which teaching assistants are employed in classrooms to provide an enriched curriculum. The changing roles of teaching assistants may provide opportunities for developing stimulating and exciting activities in classrooms where teachers work in partnership in terms of both planning and teaching. Shared responsibilities imply shared knowledge and skills and the ways in which schools might support this have not yet been fully explored. A second consideration is the impact teaching assistants may have upon children's learning and achievement at KS2. Outcomes of the new workforce reforms and the impact upon children urgently require investigation. The third consideration is the changes to primary teacher practice and curriculum pedagogy that the workforce remodelling will bring and this will only emerge over a period of time. In all these areas the views of children should be an important feature in both research and decision-making.

The butterfly effect brought about by the employment and deployment of large

numbers of teaching assistants in primary schools is far reaching as can be seen from the research and issues discussed in this chapter. Just how positive that butterfly effect will be for teaching assistants, primary school teachers and children's learning and achievement in the future remains to be seen.