



The OFSTED view of teaching assistants

It is obvious from the OFSTED report, *Teaching Assistants in Primary Schools: An Evaluation of the Quality and Impact of their Work* (2002), that inspectors feel that teaching assistants have a very important part to play in schools and deserve to be valued as essential professional colleagues. Now, as implementation of the National Workload Agreement gains momentum and issues such as teachers' planning, preparation and assessment time (PPA) come to the fore, teaching assistants have an even more crucial role to play.

OFSTED's main findings include:

- Teachers value having the support of another skilled adult in the classroom.
- The quality of teaching is better in lessons supported by a teaching assistant.
- Many teaching assistants have been trained in literacy and numeracy,

which is having a positive effect on how they are able to support these subjects.

- Career progression for teaching assistants is now being developed.
- Many schools are recognising that teaching assistants are valuable members of the professional team and are including them in performance management procedures.
- Teaching assistants often have an influential pastoral role within schools and can provide children with continuity between classes and teachers.

It is very good news that your skills and your impact on teaching and learning are being recognised by schools and OFSTED. However, the report also suggests issues that many schools are still failing to address adequately. You should be aware of what your school is doing to tackle these problem areas.

For example, is your school:

- structuring your role so as to successfully integrate three potentially conflicting areas of work:
 - traditional, practical support for teachers
 - support for pupils' learning
 - clerical and administrative roles related to the 22 tasks?
- effectively evaluating the benefits of using teaching assistants so that your impact can be maximised?
- addressing the issue of teaching assistants' work patterns, which can often be too fragmented (for example, it may be valuable for teaching assistants to spend longer with individual children or in particular lessons)?

If these three areas are not being well managed in your school, teachers and pupils will not be able to experience the full benefits of the support that you can provide.

What do you need to know to do your job?

Teaching assistants are in a difficult position because they are asked by other professionals to do a very demanding job to a high professional standard without always having the appropriate training or adequate briefing. The latter is often a result of teachers being overworked; competing with the other demands made on them during a typical school day, the full and proper briefing of their teaching assistants is often compromised.

As part of research aimed at helping recently appointed teaching assistants, the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) asked a cross-section of teaching assistants what they felt were the knowledge and attitudes they needed in order to do their job successfully.

The responses were documented in *Classroom Assistants: Lessons from the Pilot Projects: Preliminary Report* (2001), and include:

- Establish your role in the classroom.
- Work with teachers to find out how best you can support learning.

- Watch how children are taught so that you can pick up tips.
- Access teachers' plans in order to plan your approach.
- Be yourself, and remember that teachers are human.
- Be adaptable and open.
- Use your initiative and work hard.
- Remember that you are an assistant and should not be expected to take any ultimate responsibility.
- Keep smiling.
- Develop a good rapport with the children and show that you are interested in them.
- Be willing to learn, including accepting positive criticism.

This may seem a formidable list, but everything on it is achievable. Indeed, most points concern attitudes and attributes that all teaching staff – teachers and teaching assistants, young and old, experienced and inexperienced – should be working to develop. Bearing in mind that the list represents what a group of teaching assistants thought they needed to do to be successful in their job, consider how it corresponds to your experience. Is there anything you would add?

Working with colleagues

The professional status newly available to teaching assistants brings with it the challenge of teachers giving greater recognition to their classroom colleagues. Working with teachers can be a minefield of egos, personality and status. For teaching and learning to be effective, however, there have to be good working relationships, as these have a positive influence on the smooth running of the school and the work going on in the classroom.

All professionals have the duty to work together with the least possible conflict. This may sound easy, but it is surprising how many adults do not have the interpersonal skills to take full advantage of working in a dynamic, productive team.



Ask yourself some questions

The most positive relationships with colleagues will occur when it is possible to:

- recognise that change is often both necessary and inevitable
- discuss ideas and change with colleagues
- listen to colleagues' points of view
- have a sense of humour
- be fair and just
- be enthusiastic and optimistic – no matter what happens
- be imaginative
- refuse to be complacent – enjoy everyone's successes
- be open-minded and supportive
- have faith in colleagues' abilities.

Are these attitudes promoted in your school? It can be challenging to demonstrate them all the time, but staff must keep in mind that having everyone pulling in the same direction will ultimately benefit both adults and children in the school.

Most teaching assistants will do a combination of four things. They will:

- support the **curriculum** by motivating children to work, encouraging independent learning and discussions, etc
- support **children** by working with individuals and groups, reinforcing behaviour strategies, providing pastoral care, etc
- support **teachers** by preparing resources, assisting with record keeping, setting up displays, etc
- support the **school** by working in line with school policy – taking part in INSET, performance management, cooperating to implement the Workload Agreement and PPA, etc.

This is a lot to achieve whilst keeping smiling and remaining energetic. It is worth taking the time to assess how you approach your role and whether the support you receive is adequate.

Below are some key questions that you could ask yourself. If your answer is 'No, I'm not encouraged to do that', 'No I'm not expected to do that' or 'No, I haven't been trained to do that', then you should think about what action needs to be taken by you, teachers and school managers.

- Do I develop high quality relationships with children and colleagues?
- Do I have a positive influence on children's behaviour?
- Do I help teachers with their planning?
- Do I work with:
 - individual children
 - groups of children
 - whole classes?
- Do I attend all the appropriate staff training that is available to me?
- Am I given time to read and familiarise myself with teachers' plans?
- Am I involved in evaluating lessons?
- Am I aware of the range of special educational needs in the classes I work with?
- Do I need any more training to work effectively with SEN children?
- Am I able to offer professional support to all my colleagues?



Don't underestimate your skills

Everyone who works in a school knows that good teaching assistants work hard, are self-motivated and often have considerable experience of working with children in the context of teaching and learning.

Your pay may not be as rewarding as it should be, but your new professional status should be having a positive impact on your job satisfaction, as well as bringing a clearer career route and a better pay structure. There is increasing recognition of the skills and professionalism of teaching assistants, and there are many routes available leading to further qualifications and skills, including NAPTA training, NVQ awards and HLTA qualifications.

It is important to remember, however, that good schools will also value the experience and skills that you can bring into school from outside. The opportunity to bring such skills into the classroom is likely to become more widespread as schools implement workforce remodelling.

From September 2005, all teachers will be entitled to spend ten per cent of their time on duties outside the classroom. This is what is meant by planning,

preparation and assessment time (PPA). Many schools are finding this difficult to achieve both financially and in terms of managing the school so that the quality of teaching and learning is not compromised.

How can you help? Well, one of the routes being explored by some schools is using parents and visiting 'experts' or 'instructors' to offer particular skills. Many teaching assistants have a wide range of skills that you might not think are useful in schools – but many of them will be.

Do you, for example, sew, knit, make models or do some other kind of craft? Are you a digital photography whizz-kid – or an all-round ICT expert? Do you sing in a choir or play in a sports team? Are you a good musician? Maybe you dance salsa, tap or disco, or run a keep-fit club. Perhaps you are a member of a theatre group, a top-notch cook, play chess, collect stamps or make pots.

If you have these or other useful skills, it is guaranteed that some children will also be interested – and highly likely that the PPA coordinator in your school will jump at the chance to use you.

Imagine a scenario in which two classes of 30 children are in the charge of a single teacher whilst the second teacher takes PPA time (which, incidentally, is approximately two hours each week). The teacher, supported by a couple of teaching assistants, including you, could run a brilliant afternoon combining music, art, drama, dance and ICT. The children would benefit from your skills, and you would be using your talents and hopefully enjoying the challenge!



The next **NAPTA News** will include:

- current news and updates
- a closer look at aspects of SEN
- advice on managing behaviour.

If you have any suggestions for future topics or questions, please email info@napta.org.uk