to read and highlights the most important articles.

I found it hard to decide on a topic for my Action Research module. It is very important to choose a topic that you are really interested in because you are going to do so much research and think you need to choose an area that will continue to be a major part of your role. You might never have the opportunity again to invest this much time and effort into building up knowledge in a certain area.

My Action Research project was looking at literacy difficulties in Year 3 pupils who were functioning at a very low level. Once I started researching I was overwhelmed. Other SENCOs on my course said the same thing and eventually we realised it was time to stop researching, gather all our important ideas together and get writing!

The second module is about implementing change and involves the acquisition of different skills. The study of the management of change is important, as you need to understand how to go about implementing change. I often get enthused and excited by new ideas and want to try them out without thinking through things. This module helped me to think about all the implications of a change and to evaluate whether it is worthwhile.

For this module, I looked at ways of improving communication and collaboration between TAs and teachers in order to improve pupils’ learning outcomes. My original idea was to improve TA knowledge about teachers’ planning; however, after carrying out some research and interviewing TAs, it was clear that this did not appear to be a priority area for them. The TAs wanted more time to carry out their ever-increasing workload and particularly more time to talk about pupils with teachers. They felt they had a lot of knowledge of pupils but that often there was not enough time to discuss this with teachers. After a rethink, I set up an action plan to skill up TAs in assessment and next steps for learning and to involve them in half-termly pupil progress meetings.

When I submitted my essay on this I had done my research and interviews and made an action plan. I was hoping things would move on but I realised we were very much at the beginning of the process. In fact, things have moved on. We now have half-termly pupil progress meetings that include the TAs. These are sessions where we look in detail at the progress of all pupils but with a particular focus on SEN pupils and target group pupils and plan next steps and interventions. TAs are able to participate in these meetings and are developing more specific skills in looking at tracking grids, next steps in learning and gaps in pupil knowledge. It has also enabled the TAs to feel more valued as they can see how their hard work is part of the whole pupil progress cycle. The dialogue during the meetings also highlights to me what training the TAs need as a team.

Guidance

Despite being of different stages, both SENCOs were able to offer practical advice to those looking to undertake the National Award qualification.

> Read widely but start writing a plan and adding to the plan quite easily as it helps to focus your research.
> Keep notes of where you read important information as it is easy to lose track and is very time-consuming trying to remember where to find that vital piece of information.
> Make the most of meeting with a group of SENCOs regularly – share knowledge, network and build friendships.
> Discuss and assess the effectiveness of different interventions within your peer group.

Despite the added demands of undertaking a Master’s level qualification alongside their jobs, Fiona and Carol enjoyed their experiences. Both SENCOs highlighted that the critical reflection on their skills and organisation’s strengths and weaknesses led to overall improvements and a clarification of the key elements that make up the SENCO role. Interestingly, both SENCOs reaffirmed the view that however skilled they might become personally, improving provision for children with SEN and disabilities is a whole-school issue.

The role of TAs

The role of TAs is not clearly defined and there is little consensus about how their support is used. The fact that they have many titles, such as LSAs, TAs and co-educators, suggests there is a wide range of tasks undertaken which varies both from class to class and across schools. The DfEE guide ‘Supporting the Teaching Assistant’ – A good practice guide (2003) suggests the following four areas of TA work:

> Support for the school – being part of a team whose remit includes translating school policies into practice.
> Support for the curriculum – differentiating the curriculum, or becoming experts in a particular curriculum area.
> Support for the teacher – carrying out non-teaching tasks such as photocopying.
> Support for the pupil – on either an individual or group basis to support learning.

This helpful management guide develops all of these themes on the basis of the construction of an agreed and effective TA job description that is regularly reviewed through performance management. The ideal approach to managing and developing teaching assistants proves the way to good practice in the classroom. It is important that senior leaders debate the roles and responsibilities of both teachers and TAs to maximise the learning experiences of all children.

It is common practice in schools to deploy TAs with pupils with the greatest needs, to give them extra support and a ‘boost’. The reality, however, is often different, as the least able children work with the least qualified adults who may have very little training in child development and understanding how children learn.

A 2010 study by Peter Blatchford and colleagues found that most TAs have a predominantly instructional role with pupils, supporting low attaining pupils or those with SEN. There is a ‘shift towards’ TAs becoming the primary educators of these children.

Measuring TA effectiveness

The Institute of Education carried out the largest ever study of the impact of teaching assistants in the classroom. The study took place between 2003 and 2008 and consulted with 20,000 teachers. The report was published in 2009 as the ‘Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS)’ report (2009). Its findings are summarised below:

> Teaching assistants reduce teachers’ stress levels and improve classroom discipline.
> They do not boost pupils’ progress.
> TAs have a positive impact on pupils’ behaviour, pupils remain more on task when working with TAs and are more likely to receive one-to-one support.
> Secondary pupils are likely to be less disruptive and distractible. This means that teachers can spend more time with the rest of the class.

The study showed that primary and secondary pupils supported by TAs make less progress on average than those of similar ability, social class and gender who do not receive such assistance. In general, the more support they receive, the fewer gains they make.

The report stressed that this is not the responsibility of TAs. ‘Policy makers and school staff need to rethink the way TAs are used in the classroom and how they are prepared for the tasks teachers give them. This will help maximise their huge potential to help teachers and pupils.’

Barriers to effective working

Peter Blatchford, who led the DISS research, believes that one of the main barriers to TA effectiveness is that less than 25% of teachers have been trained to manage TAs, although more than 50% of teachers have TA support in their classrooms. Additionally, only 25% of the teachers surveyed – only one in 20 in secondary schools – have allocated planning or feedback time with TAs. If all adults in the classroom are to work effectively as a team to support pupils’ learning, a shared understanding of planning and TA deployment is vital.

A second major barrier is the tendency to allocate TAs to the most vulnerable pupils – those with the greatest learning or behaviour needs or pupils with autism. Despite many of the TA workforce being very experienced, competent, willing and hardworking, they will not have received any training in how to help children learn or develop from babies through childhood and adolescence to...
Adolescence. This understanding is critical to knowing what a pupil’s level is, how to assess it and when to move on.

Views of practitioners

In a follow-up study by Batchelor and colleagues in 2010 looking at the pedagogics role of TAs, the views of school leaders, teachers, SENCOs and local authority advisers were sought and they agreed the following:

- Where classes are taught in ability groups, the teacher should spend as much time with the lowest ability group as he/she does with others.
- The main focus of teachers’ whole-class teaching should be on Wave 2 – those who are not making expected progress.
- Reviews of pupil progress and TA deployment should be more frequent (for example, termly) and could be used as a proxy measure of TA effectiveness.
- Pupils should not be withdrawn from core lessons for TA-led interventions as pupils must have the opportunity to apply their learning from these interventions in whole-class settings.
- Teachers must take full responsibility for planning interventions and sharing and imparting their detailed plans to TAs. This responsibility should not be discharged to TAs.
- We must be appropriately trained and prepared to lead intervention sessions.

Effective management of TAs

Perhaps the most important feature of effective TA management is recognition that mutual respect between teacher and TA is essential. Effective collaboration and an understanding of the differing but equally important roles of all the adults in the classroom are the keys to ensuring effective teaching for pupils.

A commitment by senior managers to fund liaison time between teachers and TAs will ensure that the learning needs of all pupils will be kept in mind. The teacher is the classroom leader and manager of learning and is required to guide the support provided by TAs.

It is important to agree how behaviour will be managed in the classroom. If a TA is assigned an individual pupil to work with, what will their role be in maintaining good behaviour among the whole class? What sanctions can be given by TAs and have they been trained in the use of positive behaviour management strategies, particularly the use of positive language?

An agreed strategy for measuring pupil progress between teacher and TA is essential. An understanding of expected progress – two levels per Key Stage in Key Stages 1 and 2 and three levels across Key Stages 3 and 4 – is a prerequisite. TAs can then see how this is broken down to expected progress over each term. This framework makes sense of the bewildering and often subjective notion of ‘progress’. Alongside an explanation of how interventions are designed to improve pupil performance, this helps TAs to understand the broader picture of pupils’ learning and the part they perform.

Offering meaningful training and career progression to enable TAs to learn and apply knowledge about how children grow and learn is essential. There are many ways to enable TAs to enrol in NVQ level 2 and 3 training which complement practical experience in the classroom.

Finally, a regular TA team meeting chaired by the SENCO, subject leader or inclusion manager, where TAs have the opportunity to explore aspects of their work, learn from each other and consult an ‘expert’, is an effective way to support TAs. Ideally these meetings would be for half an hour weekly, or longer, each half term. They offer TAs the opportunity to reinforce and share their own good practice and refine the process of good collaborative working. Teachers, too, need the opportunity to explore effective models of working with and managing TAs to support pupils’ learning.

Teaching assistants are a wonderful resource in the classroom and across the school. Both teachers and teaching assistants deserve the best support possible to make these partnerships dynamic, resourceful and effective.

Further information

Deployment and Impact of Support Staff project by Peter Batchelor and colleagues, London Institute of Education (2009).


Should teaching assistants have a pedagogical role? Reasons following the DSS project by Rob Webster, Peter Batchelor and Anthony Russell (2010).

Carol Franki is founding and Managing Director of The Southover Partnership, an independent special needs organisation for children with behaviour, emotional, learning and social difficulties and autism. Carol has been delivering accredited training for SENCOs at the Institute of Education since 1999.

More resources


Nasen policy on support staff (requires members to log on) – www.nasen.org.uk/policy-documents/.

The SEN Handbook for Trained Teachers, NQTs and Teaching Assistants by Wendy Spooner (David Fulton/nasen, 2010).

Hill Top rides high

by Elaine Colquhoun and Sandra Cooper

An outstanding report from Ofsted prompted one special school to reflect on the elements of successful leadership

We have both served as Presidents of Nasen. Elaine is the Headteacher of Hill Top Specialist Arts College and Sandra is Deputy Headteacher of the same college. In March 2011 Ofsted judged our school as outstanding. So that other nasen members can benefit we are keen to report on how our involvement with nasen has enhanced leadership.

Hill Top Specialist Arts College caters for secondary age learners with moderate and severe learning difficulties, autism and complex needs. There are one hundred students from Year 7 to Year 14 and plans are to expand and extend further in opportunities in September 2011.

As reported in ‘Team talk’ in Special (March 2008) our participation with the chair of governors in a ‘Leading the School of the Future’ action research project, led by John West-Burnham with Gateshead Local Authority, inspired the staff and governors to take an innovative approach to school leadership and move towards a more strategic multi-agency approach focusing on Every Child Matters outcomes.

In 2006 our involvement was set among changes in policies and priorities – at national level ECM and the inclusion agenda, at regional level an SEN review and multi-agency working. The main change in the school was that five ECM teams were created, with staff, governors, parent governors and multi-agency representatives working in each. The teams contribute to the Self-evaluation Form and School Improvement Plan, then monitor and evaluate them, so the plans are very thorough and inclusive.

Elaine was seconded to Ofsted in 2008-09 and gained valuable experience at the School of the Providence, sharing the knowledge she had gathered with her colleagues at Hill Top.

The whole school is delighted with the report. It is a fantastic achievement and shows continued improvement from our last inspection in 2008. Hill Top is a happy school in which students do very well.

Nasen benefits

There is no doubt about the influence that working closely with nasen officials and its members has had on the quality of education for the pupils of Hill Top. We have had access to very high quality training in a wide variety of settings. We have both met a wide range of people from diverse settings. We have shared views, trained others and been very fortunate in being able to contact systems nationally and internationally.