Following the review of literature in the preceding article concerning the deployment of support staff, Hilary Cremin, Gary Thomas and Karen Vincett here focus attention on the classroom in their evaluation of three models of team organisation and planning for the work of teaching assistants - room management, zoning and reflective teamwork - in six primary classrooms. Readers will be interested in the detail of the methodological approach adopted and the general finding that all three models were evaluated positively by the participants.

Introduction

Teaching assistants are known by different names in different local authorities (general assistant, teaching assistant, learning support assistant) but their responsibilities are similar in each. They may be general assistants or employed to give help specifically to a child with a statement of special educational needs. Or they may be employed out of the school’s special needs budget to provide general assistance to teachers. There are now far more assistants than there were just ten years ago. Despite this, pay and conditions of service remain variable (Penn and McQuail, 1997; Hancock, Swann, Marr, Turner and Cable, 2002) as does access to training (see Hancock et al, 2002). Very little research has been carried out into the impact of different models for deploying teaching assistants; and training for teachers in how to use support remains illusive (Inglese, 1996). This article reports on findings from a research project commissioned by Essex LEA SENAPS (Special Educational Needs and Psychology Service), and carried out by researchers from CISER (Centre for Inclusive and Special Educational Needs Research) at Oxford Brookes University, to determine the effectiveness of three models for deploying assistants, namely room management, zoning and reflective teamwork, in six primary schools in Essex. More research is needed in these areas, but it is hoped that these initial findings may stimulate further discussion about how assistants are deployed in classrooms at a time when numbers are expanding rapidly.

Background

There have been major expansions in the numbers of teaching assistants (TAs) in recent years. From 1992 to 1996 there was a 56 per cent increase in the volume of education support staff in primary schools in England, and the period 1992 to 2000 saw a 112 per cent increase. The great majority of these staff were classroom assistants (DfEE, 1997a; 2000). In 2000 there were 68,694 full-time equivalent support staff working in mainstream and special schools in England, this representing one full-time support staff member for every 2.7 teachers.

Research into the work of assistants has been small scale and has tended to describe at classroom level what assistants do (for example, Thomas, 1987; 1991; 1992; Thomas, Walker and Webb, 1998; Clayton, 1993; Moyles and Suschitzky, 1997). Recent work on assistants’ roles in inclusion has demonstrated the importance of the skilled coordination and management of their work for effective inclusive practice (Thomas, Walker and Webb, 1998).

Despite uncertainty about how teaching assistants actually work to support the teacher, key policy papers and reports are clear about the benefits of assistants, and they have recommended further increases in numbers and enhancement of training opportunities. Barber and Brighouse (1992), for example, have suggested an expansion in numbers and a
greater involvement in teaching and learning, and the Dearing Report (DfEE, 1997b) recommends the development of a new qualification for teaching assistants.

In relation to special educational needs and inclusion, the Green Paper (DfEE, 1997c) suggested that there was a need for:

- a framework of good practice for LEAs and schools to follow
- an expectation that LEAs would make available accredited training for assistants
- nationally devised modules for all teaching assistant training courses within an NVQ framework.

Although the rhetoric for additional support is strong, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the ways in which support works in classrooms. There is widespread acceptance of the central role which support assistants play in meeting children’s special needs, yet few commentators have given thought to the changes which might occur when these extra people move into the classroom and how their potential contribution might be maximised.

An important finding in this respect is that the presence of extra people in class does not automatically improve the situation for the children: having assistants in the class does not generally free the teacher for more time with pupils but rather results in the ‘host’ teacher spending more of her time without pupils (see, for example, DeVault, Harnischfeger and Wiley, 1977; McBrien and Weightman, 1980; Thomas, 1992).

Support is more difficult to achieve than one might anticipate and it is the knowledge that this is the case, in tandem with the recent large increases in numbers of TAs, that has stimulated the work which has led to this article. There are many ways of thinking about classroom organisation in relation to support staff. The most common is for teachers to give assistants responsibility for particular children, but other possibilities (linked to the models being reported on here) include:

- people have different responsibilities for different tasks in the classroom (room management)
- people have different areas of the classroom to concentrate on (zoning)
- teachers and assistants work together more effectively as a team (reflective team-working).

The models

The following models were developed, evaluated and reported on as part of the research in hand.

Room management

Room management involves people who are working in the classroom taking on different roles. The exact arrangement of those roles will depend on the needs of the class and the number of people available to help. It is not prescribed whether the teacher or the teaching assistant takes on either role. The ‘job descriptions’ of those roles are as follows:

**Individual helper:** the individual helper concentrates on working with an individual or group on a teaching activity for 5–15 minutes. So in an hour it should be possible to arrange between four and 12 individual/group teaching sessions.

**Activity manager:** the activity manager concentrates on the rest of the class, who will normally be arranged in groups of between four and eight. S/he will quickly move around keeping them busy and occupied.

**Mover (where applicable):** the mover may fetch and move equipment etc., deal with all interruptions to routine, e.g. spillages, visitors, in order to keep the activity manager and individual helper free from distraction.

In more detail, before the session the activity manager organises a variety of tasks/activities for each group. The group/individual helper has a list or rota of children/groups and has everything necessary to work independently from the activity manager. During the session the activity manager ensures that each group member has appropriate materials/books/equipment, quickly prompts children to start working if necessary, supervises use of shared materials, moves around the groups to praise children who are busy, gives feedback on work, and redirects group members who are not busy, helping them to keep them ‘on task’. The individual helper asks each child/group on the list to come and work. They work with them on an activity which should be no longer than 15 minutes.

**Zoning**

Zoning is a very simple way of organising a classroom where there is more than one adult involved in teaching and organising the class. The idea behind zoning is that clarity – about who is doing what – is provided by clear definition as to where in the classroom different people are working. Thus, one person will be responsible, for example, for groups A, B, C and D while another will be responsible for groups E and F. Zoning requires teachers and assistants to consider together:

- Will the grouped zones comprise the same children as normally sit in these places, or will there be a rearrangement for the purpose of the session?
- What will be the balance of the groups? 4/2? 5/1? 3/3?
- What will be the balance of the groups to the teacher/assistant? Will the teacher take the larger group while the assistant takes the smaller group?
- Will the children with special needs be placed in groups being overseen by the assistant?
Reflective teamwork

The reflective teamwork model aims to use skills of reflective teamwork (underpinned by humanistic psychology) to support the work of pairs of teachers and assistants. The assistant and teacher pair works for at least one session per week using this approach, with 15 minutes of structured planning time per session. They are given brief training to improve their teamworking skills in areas such as:

- active listening
- ‘ground rules’, to include avoiding put-downs, destructive criticism and interrupting
- empathetic understanding
- accepting alternative perspectives
- using non-judgemental language
- assertiveness
- questioning techniques
- giving feedback positively
- problem-solving approaches
- recognising and valuing progress.

This enables them to use the following structure for short-term planning and evaluating sessions where they work together. This model can be used on its own to improve communication and reflective practice or in conjunction with either of the other two (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflective teamwork: structure for 15-minute meeting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Review previous session</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Minutes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plan next session</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Minutes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. The reflective teamwork model

The schools

The six schools – two working on each model – were identified from the Essex inclusive schools project; these schools receiving extra funding from the DIES via the LEA to look at an element of inclusive practice within their schools. Each school was asked to identify one class to be actively involved in the research. All work was with Years 2 and 3.

The training

The teacher and assistant pair from each school received half a day’s training on the relevant model. This was followed up three weeks later on another half day which provided the participants with an opportunity to clarify issues that had arisen and to problem-solve. It was also an opportunity for the schools to hear about how the other school in the pair had put the model into practice, since each school adapted the model slightly to fit their own teaching style and pupil needs. The final day of training was held at the end of the intervention period and was attended by all schools.

Intervention

Each school was asked to implement its model for a period of six weeks and to introduce the required model for one session each week. They were asked to implement the model during the group work part of the Literacy Hour. The intervention period began immediately after the training had finished.

Data collection

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected relating to the research questions the evaluation study was designed to answer.

Quantitative data

Data were collected in relation to the level of engagement of all the pupils in the six classes and therefore provided data to answer the first research question, which was:
What is the effect of room management, zoning and reflective teamwork on the engagement of pupils within the Literacy Hour?

In this study, it was decided to use a tightly structured observation and to focus on pupil engagement – referring to the extent that pupils were on task during any teaching period.

A pre-intervention measure of the level of engagement of all the pupils in the six classes was obtained by videoing all the pupils in each of the six classes. Each of the six classes was videoed during the group work part of the Literacy Hour, before the teachers and assistants were provided with any training on the intervention models. Each classroom was then videoed again following a six-week period of implementing the models.

Videos were then analysed for each pupil to determine his or her level of engagement, every ten seconds for a period of ten minutes, during the group work 20 minutes of the Literacy Hour.

Mean engagement levels for each pupil were obtained and a repeated measures design used, comparing each pupil with him/herself before and after the intervention.

Qualitative data

Qualitative data were collected on the perceptions of the teachers and assistants in relation to joint planning, teamwork and role clarity and how the intervention was different to their previous practice. This was in order to respond to the second research question, namely:

What is the effect of these different models on the teamwork, effective planning and role clarity for the teachers and assistants?

This was obtained using semi-structured interviews and focus groups, which are described below.

Semi-structured interviews

A substantial source of data for the research questions listed above was a set of semi-structured interviews with the six teachers and six assistants at the schools. All six teachers and five of the six assistants were interviewed individually, one assistant being unavailable due to illness. This provided an opportunity to obtain views which may be different from those expressed in the focus groups. The interviews were conducted at the end of the period of intervention of the models.

All parties in the research programme were aware from the outset that this data was to be collected and used to evaluate the effects of the three interventions. It was agreed that findings would be reported anonymously, that is no reference to names of individuals or schools would be made in the subsequent publication.

In summary the following data were collected during the interviews:

- information on how the principles outlined at the training sessions were put into practice in the classroom
- views on how the intervention affected team-working, planning arrangements and role clarity of the class teachers and assistants
- reflections on how the model was different from their usual practice.

The interview questions reflect the aims listed above.

1. How did you put into practice the principles that were outlined in the training sessions?
2. How did the intervention affect your planning?
3. How did the intervention affect team-working with your assistant or class teacher?
4. How was the model different to your usual practice?
5. What has the effect been on the pupils?
6. What were the positives?
7. What were the negatives?

The additional question for the teacher was:

8. What was the effect of the intervention on the assistant?

Focus group methodology

Focus group methodology was used in this research in addition to the individual interviews to ascertain the views of teachers and assistants. It was thought that the use of these two different methodologies might show up different issues, given that the focus group would enable teachers and assistants to meet and exchange views. There is an increasing use of focus groups to explore the opinions, knowledge, perceptions and concerns of individuals with regard to a particular topic (Krueger, 1994).

The focus group typically involves six to ten individuals who have some knowledge of a topic. The group discussion is led by a moderator who guides participants through a series of open-ended questions. Advantages are that this methodology enables participants to develop their ideas creatively as they hear the views of others and, possibly, that the result of the group is more than would have been obtained by individual interviews. Disadvantages include the tendency to conform to the group view and that less confident individuals may not contribute.

In this study three initial focus groups were conducted and were comprised of the staff from the two schools implementing the same model, that is either room management, zoning or reflective teamwork.
• focus group one: class teachers and assistants operating reflective teamwork
• focus group two: class teachers and assistants operating room management
• focus group three: class teachers and assistants operating zoning

These focus groups therefore comprised four participants from schools and were jointly facilitated by the authors. The areas explored in the focus groups were broadly the same as those in the individual interviews, namely:
• information on how the principles outlined at the training sessions were put into practice in the classroom
• views on how the intervention affected team-working, planning arrangements and role clarity of the class teachers and assistants
• reflections on how this was different from their usual practice

Prior to coming along to the focus group, each school was given the above list and asked to prepare a ten-minute input on how the intervention was progressing in the school. Each teacher and assistant pair was then invited to do a short presentation on how the intervention was progressing. This was followed by a general discussion of the issues, using the above list as prompts.

At the end of the intervention period and once the final videos had been filmed a further meeting was held of all six schools. This was used as a further focus group to collect documentary evidence. Teachers and assistants were asked to keep documentary records to show how the interventions were implemented – this included planning sheets for the Literacy Hour and planning sheets for zoning and room management. The team-work group were asked to keep brief notes of their meetings.

Findings

Observational analysis

A summary of the repeated-measures studies are given in table 2, which shows the mean degree of change between the baseline engagement for each child and the post-intervention engagement figures. The level of significance is also shown. The table shows that in all classes there were significant improvements in children’s engagement between the baseline and experimental conditions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Mean change (baseline-experimental)</th>
<th>P(T&lt;=t)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Room management (school G)</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Room management (school M)</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
<td>0.0004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoning (school T)</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>0.0286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoning (school B)</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>0.0046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective teamwork (school C)</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>0.0298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective teamwork (school L)</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>0.0113</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Changes in engagement between baseline and implementation

Qualitative data analysis

The findings of the analysis of the qualitative data (interviews and focus groups) are reported here.

Room management

School G

In school G the assistant was given the role of activity manager. She enjoyed this role, although she felt uncomfortable at first ‘taking charge’ of the class whilst the teacher was in the room. She felt that the children stayed on task, but that they lacked her ‘personal attention’.

The teacher in school G was doubtful about the value of the approach from the outset. Her main concern was to avoid the activity manager being responsible for too many children. She therefore decided that the helper should work only with groups, not with individual pupils. She was also concerned about melding the approach with the Literacy Strategy, although in practice there were several points of consonance, with the role of the group helper being similar to the role of the teacher in the standard Literacy Hour format. Indeed, an advantage that became apparent as the room management research progressed was that the group helper was able to concentrate on the target group with few interruptions.

Other problems encountered by the teacher in school G were the time involved in producing detailed planning sheets and the rise in noise level when she was focusing her attention on one group. By the end of week two she had established a programme of ‘visiting’ (cf. ‘roaming’ from zoning) groups:

I felt that each time I visited a group I could talk about an additional aspect of their task and set them a further task and extend the original task a bit at a time. They then had time to carry out what we discussed before I came back to them. The ‘visiting’ seemed to set a
timetable by which they had to have completed or at least started the extension task... I preferred this way of doing literacy: I think that the learning targets are achieved better this way.

Another problem encountered involved teacher’s and children’s perceptions of the role of the teaching assistant.

From my point of view, the role of the activity manager is the most contentious one. If an assistant assumes this role, then surely it is asking far too much of her for her to take on responsibility for the learning of this number of children. If the teacher assumes this role, then it would seem that circulating around the classroom prompting individual children and offering praise is far removed from the role of the teacher in the National Literacy Strategy.

School M

The teacher in school M felt that children got the hang of room management very quickly, and that it led to more groups of children receiving support and guidance. In particular, she felt that children were more responsive to support from the assistant, and that these processes encouraged them to respect and value her guidance more. Room management encouraged independence in the children, with children of lower ability benefiting from not being seen as the only group in receipt of additional support. Room management also systematised the ‘teaching’ element, enabling greater communication and shared understanding between the teacher and the assistant through more detailed planning. The teacher felt encouraged to reflect more on: ‘how I supported the special needs aspects of this increased team-working were the time through more detailed planning. The teacher felt encouraged to circle around the classroom, and that these processes encouraged the two adults to complement one another more. The negative aspects of this increased team-working were the time implications.

Zoning

School B

The assistant in school B described how the system evolved, as time was needed to arrive at best ways for configuring the groups. It took a week for a stable pattern of groups-to-staff to emerge. Questions arose around the demands of certain of the groups, and whether it was possible to manage two more demanding groups together. Once a system had been found, zones tended to take the same pattern each week, with some thought as to a different zoning pattern at the beginning of literacy sessions – to ensure that each group was heard on a regular basis.

The assistant felt empowered by the zoning process, and more effective as a result: ‘I found that zoning helped me feel more able to do things in the class without always asking the teacher, so I felt more responsible for my area and the children in it.’ Likewise the teacher felt that zoning ‘seemed a natural way to organise the classroom. It is easier to monitor pupils’ work and behaviour, and it utilises the TA more effectively.’

The children took a little time to understand the subtleties of zoning. At first the children went to whoever was available and had to be reminded of the new rules. To reinforce this system of working the assistant and the teacher decided to ‘roam’ between the tables, rather than being more static at one, and this seemed to solve the problem.

The teacher in school B generally felt that zoning was a successful strategy:

Zoning generally releases the teacher to get on with teaching one small group, whilst two other groups are being catered for, and the two other groups are working independently. It has meant that the poorer ones have been able to receive greater help.

The notion of ‘enforcing’ is an interesting one. The teacher noted that zoning may be particularly useful when extra people are coming into the class to help, such as parents. A parent, say, can be allocated a group, and the teacher can take the role of ‘enforcer’ to bring direction and discipline.

School T

Zoning was used here principally to enable mixed-ability teaching. The assistant felt that zoning was good for inclusion, since the less able children were integrated within the whole class, rather than being seen as a separate group. All children got attention more quickly, as fewer congregated around one adult – usually the teacher. This resulted in more children tending to be on task, with resulting improved behaviour.

The teacher in school T also felt that zoning successfully facilitated mixed-ability teaching, and that it worked best when the task was the same with differentiation by outcome/expectation. It helped those pupils who needed role models of more positive behaviour to learn from their peers, and enabled other children to begin to develop ‘helping skills’.

Zoning allowed a more even distribution of input from teacher/assistant. The less able were not as demanding, and benefited from being able to work more independently. There was less stress for the adults than when dealing exclusively with a group of less able children who are not always willing to cooperate.

The negative elements centred around the difficulties of providing differentiated learning activities successfully. The difference in children’s levels became more obvious in group reading and spelling.
Reflective Teamwork

School C

The first teacher/assistant pair felt that their relationship was already good before starting the intervention, but attributed an improvement in working practices during the intervention to the fact that their relationship had been strengthened. This, they felt, was due to the structure of reflective teamwork ‘forcing them’ to give each other quality listening time. They also felt that the reflective teamwork framework enabled them to problem-solve more effectively, with the result that improvements occurred in the identified group of pupils within the identified period.

An unexpected finding is that the teacher from school C appears to have applied her training and experiences of using this model to her work with pupils. Following her initial training, she used an increased amount of pair work with her class, saying that she had been reminded of the value of listening and peer support.

The teacher and assistant from this school felt that this model had empowered the assistant to use her insights and knowledge of the children to a greater degree. The teacher gave an example of the assistant putting pupils into pairs in ways that she would never have chosen. The teacher felt that the pairings worked because the assistant had more in-depth knowledge of the pupils’ personalities.

School L

A widening role for the assistant was noticed in school L almost as soon as reflective teamwork was used. The teacher noted that, within a few days of using this strategy, her planning with the assistant was enabling her to be more focused on the needs of individual pupils. Likewise the assistant found it helpful to be more involved in whole-class planning. Using the model made the teacher think more deeply about planning, and she adapted her teaching following conversations with the assistant. The teacher noted that quite often during the paired listening process, the assistant had said what the teacher wanted to say before she got her turn, showing that their thoughts and responses were more similar than many would expect given the differential in their training and professional status.

Discussion

The observational analysis and interview feedback both point to: a) substantial improvements being effected in working practice overall; and b) differences between the effects of the methods on children’s engagement in class.

It is worth speculating here on the reasons for the observed effects and differences between methods, given also the corroborative evidence coming from teachers’ and assistants’ comments.

The implementation of room management procedures appeared to produce the most significant increases in engagement (at p<.01 in both of the schools studied). The regime of change involved in room management is the most radical of all those in the models evaluated here, involving most organisational change with the greatest associated degree of planning, and it is perhaps to be expected that these greater changes would have the most significant effects. It should also be noted, though, that feedback from the participants was most critical about room management in terms of the time needed for planning: it was felt that the planning required could not be done without additional time allocation.

Zoning also effected significant changes in both schools, though the effects on individual children appeared to be more uneven than those emerging from the room management procedures. Zoning constitutes, in fact, a very simple change in organisational arrangements and it is perhaps to be expected that its effects overall would be less significant than those emerging from room management, without the pedagogical planning associated with the latter. However, it is worth noting that the greatest effects engendered from the zoning procedure appeared to be with those children who had the lowest baseline engagement. This was the case also for room management, and the implications of this are clear for inclusion: the use of these models appears to systematise the allocation of teacher and assistant time and attention to all children and seems to prevent a) certain children habitually avoiding attention, or the converse b) certain children becoming saturated with, and over-dependent on, support.

Although the reflective teamwork classes showed the lowest differences between baseline and intervention, it should be noted that the mean baseline engagement figures for the pupils in both of these classes were much higher than those in the room management and zoning classes (83 and 75 per cent, versus 64 to 70 per cent in those other classes). Allied to this, there were no children with very low baseline engagement figures in these classrooms, as there were in the other four classrooms. It should be noted also that the reflective teamwork participants were the most positive of all the groups in their interview feedback in terms of the benefits that they felt accrued for children. In addition, the reflective teamwork model appears to have helped to equalise the power relationships between the teachers and the assistants. An effect of this greater parity between the teachers and assistants using this planning process is that the assistants had increased feelings of empowerment and felt more able to contribute their skills and insights to the planning process. The process appears to have helped break down some of the belief that teachers are the only ‘experts’ and that the role of the assistant is to carry out instructions unthinkingly.

Potential future developments centre on a possible conjoining of these models. Thus one might employ what were taken to be the most effective or meaningful elements of room management, zoning and reflective teamwork and use them together in the training of teachers and assistants.
One of the unanticipated outcomes of this research is that the teachers and assistants found new definitions and ways of thinking around the notion of special needs, and adopted new ways of working with pupils designated as having special needs, and this followed at least in part from the fact that they were given ‘permission’ through this research to use a problem-solving approach. As policy continues to stress inclusion and the important potential contribution of teaching assistants to classroom life and children’s achievement, the methods evaluated here for organising teamwork with assistants appear to offer useful resources for schools in maximising that potential.

References


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