

The Significance of Formal Planning in the Teacher/Teaching Assistant Partnership

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> Aim

To investigate the significance of formal planning between teacher and teaching assistant prior to or during the support process.

> Dimensions of this Case Study

This research was carried out in a mixed comprehensive school with 1150 students on roll. Three partnerships were identified. A partnership included one teacher and one teaching assistant working together in the classroom. A Year 7 Mathematics class, a Year 7 English class and a Year 8 Science class were the focus for this study. There were 23 students in each class.

Each teacher and teaching assistant in the three partnerships was interviewed. A group of six students from each class was also interviewed. Data was collected from class observation and the diary notes of each teaching assistant.

> Summary of Findings for this Case Study

- Formal (timetabled) planning between teacher and teaching assistant prior to lessons was difficult to manage in school at the time of the research and was thought, by both the teachers and the teaching assistants, to be a secondary concern.
- The communication of learning targets from teacher to teaching assistant prior to or at the start of each lesson was an essential working practice.
- The relationship between the teacher and teaching assistant was found to be crucial and was most effective as a learning aid to students when:
 - roles and responsibilities of both the teacher and teaching assistant were established and understood by both teacher and teaching assistant at an initial meeting before they started working together;
 - both partners were proactive rather than reactive;
 - the teaching assistants observed, understood and responded to the teacher's management practices; and
 - there was ongoing dialogue, discussion and direction between teacher and teaching assistant.

Context

The motivation for this research was the desire to improve the teaching and learning of students with special educational needs (SEN).

Most students with SEN were setted according to ability in the core subjects and were usually supported in class by a teaching assistant. It was essential to us that this resource was used to enhance the learning of the students.

The teaching assistants were following an accredited training course which was extending their skills but we also realised that the work of the teacher and teaching assistant could be considered together. Teachers usually welcomed guidance when working with a second adult in the classroom.

Little of the published research into the role of the teaching assistant in the classroom has concentrated on the essential nature of the teacher/teaching assistant partnership and in particular the planning necessary within that partnership. It is acknowledged however, that there can be other organisational arrangements within schools, such as the allocation of assistants to subject departments, which may overcome some of the planning issues.

The findings of recent research commissioned by the DfEE (1999) documented the

“... consistent lack of planning time with teachers; a key factor that can reduce the effectiveness of learning support assistants (teaching assistants)”.

Resource levels in our school mean that teachers teach 22 out of 25 periods weekly and teaching assistants are not well paid and work in class virtually 100% of the time. Under these conditions planning between teacher and teaching assistant was unmanageable both during and after the school day.

Two typical comments from teachers were

“We just don’t have time to sit down and go through what we are going to do each lesson” and

“We all know what we ought to be doing but we also know there is not time so sometimes we have to take the next best option”

As a result the teachers concerned in the research

welcomed the chance to explore the situation.

We also had to take into account the funding issues related to students with SEN. The money assigned to students with SEN was largely used to fund teaching assistants therefore it was essential that this resource was used as creatively and effectively as possible to benefit the students.

Research Questions

Three questions were the focus of this research.

- Is formal planning, between the teacher and teaching assistant, prior to the lessons necessary to improve the learning of students with SEN?
- What sort of planning by teacher and teaching assistant has an impact on the learning of students with SEN?
- What are the issues that arise and need attention in the planning process?

It was hoped that from our research a model for learning support could be designed to show that essential planning could be a manageable process when teacher and teaching assistant worked as a team.

The Research Methodology

Each partnership of teacher and teaching assistant met together at the beginning of the term to discuss their proposed way of working and agree roles and responsibilities within the partnership. I received feedback from these meetings.

I interviewed each teaching assistant after the initial meeting and each teacher and teaching assistant separately at the end of the term to discuss the way the partnership had worked.

I interviewed six students from each class towards the end of term.

Progress of the six students towards the literacy and/or numeracy targets on their individual education plans (IEPs) was monitored.

I made classroom observations of the partnerships at work in the classrooms during the study period.

Each teaching assistant kept a reflective log book.

The initial planning meetings, although structured

into the research from the outset, were difficult to schedule because of the constraints of time and availability of personnel. No direction was given as to the format of this planning session and it was left to the individuals concerned to talk about issues they felt to be important. No other planning time was proposed; it was left to the individual partnerships to be creative about their communication.

Data analysis at the beginning of the project

At the start of the project the teachers and teaching assistants raised the following points in the initial formal planning sessions. They have been listed according to the time spent discussing each issue:

- communication of learning targets;
- communication of tasks;
- classroom management;
- teaching methodology;
- differentiation;
- individual students;
- the teaching assistant role;
- discipline;
- independence of students; and
- planning time.

Data analysis at the end of the project

The necessity of planning

The main finding was that formal planning was not considered the most important factor in effective classroom support, as the following quotes show.

"Planning is technically a problem; in reality it is not. We do not have time to sit down and plan but we have a constant dialogue – when we see each other in the staff room, corridor, the whole time there is some sort of dialogue going on about students: students with difficulties, what they are doing in other lessons, their previous lessons, etc."

"At the beginning it was difficult for teachers to accept they were to give even more time to planning. Pre-planning is only a small part of it. It is the observation and the learning and the rapport you get with the teacher and the students that make it (learning) effective."

These two comments from teaching assistants emphasised the importance of the teacher/teaching assistant relationship rather than agreed formal planning. Teachers' comments also supported this:

"A look or word from her or me can change the course of the lesson. We have a good partnership. If it was not so good we would not work so well in the class and maybe we would have to spend more time out of the lesson".



Figure 1. Here the teaching assistant works with the individual student while the teacher works with the whole class. These roles can be reversed.

There appeared to be three elements necessary for this relationship to work successfully:

- a constant dialogue during the lesson between teacher and teaching assistant;
- discussion that continued between lessons; and
- direction, given by the teacher, that was clear for both partners.

The teaching assistant by observation and "mirroring" was able to support the students by working in a similar way to the teacher. When a climate of security and consistency prevailed there were no 'surprises'.

What sort of planning had an impact on students' learning?

Informal planning while working together was essential. The teaching assistants were united in the fact that they needed to know the learning targets for the students. In fact the communication of learning targets to both the students and the teaching assistant at the start of the lesson was

recognised as the most essential factor by both teachers and teaching assistants. If the teaching assistants were unaware of these they could not support the students as effectively with their learning. In some cases forward planning could be wasted because the teacher needed to change the lesson at the last moment depending on circumstances. The Science, Maths and English teachers supported this view.

Other key topics for informal planning were:

- designing and structuring of tasks;
- identifying a satisfactory way of working; and
- understanding by the teaching assistant both of the teacher's management practices and the needs and learning styles of the individual students.

Evidence of learning gain

This evidence was obtained from the teachers' and students' comments; teaching assistant diaries; and the progress the students had made towards their IEP targets. The effective practice of the teacher/teaching assistant partnership was felt to be a contributory factor.

Classroom observation and the other data sources provided evidence that:

- pupils' basic skill levels in numeracy and literacy had improved;
- some students with SEN had become increasingly able to answer more questions with confidence and were not afraid to answer incorrectly;
- it was possible to monitor the attainment of all students more closely;
- those students experiencing particular difficulties were supported with appropriate strategies;
- more students were enabled to start their tasks promptly; and
- students became more independent in their learning.

What issues arose and needed attention in the planning process?

The issues related to formal planning that arose during the research included the question of time, although this was not perceived as an insurmountable problem. Where there was a good relationship between the teacher and the teaching assistant, informal planning was inherent in the on-going dialogue and discussion that occurred naturally.

A professional relationship was vital where the teaching assistant was respected and treated as a partner in the classroom. The scaffolding necessary to support this good relationship became the focus of attention, rather than the demand for more time.

Within these successful relationships there existed practices that were proactive rather than reactive. The prevention of difficulties and barriers to learning was always more effective than dealing with the problems as they arose.

Finally teachers and teaching assistants felt that they both needed a clear understanding of learning support policies within the school, and an awareness of each other's roles and responsibilities.

Recommendations

We have found that the following strategies are effective in this school and they may be applicable to other schools.

- The teacher and teaching assistant have a clear understanding of their own roles and responsibilities and those of their partner.
- Learning targets are communicated to the teaching assistant prior to the lesson or at the very latest at the start of each lesson.
- In effective partnerships, teaching assistants closely observe the teacher's way of working; their classroom management strategies and their teaching methodology which they then reflect in their own work with the students.
- Dialogue and discussion are ongoing between teachers and teaching assistants before, during and after lessons, whenever possible.
- The teacher provides a range of tasks for students with SEN.
- An initial planning session is set aside prior to a teacher and a teaching assistant working together to establish the foundations of their partnership.
- The teachers and teaching assistants are aware of the need to be proactive rather than reactive in their practices e.g. by anticipating difficulties before they arise.



Figure 2. The Science Lesson

Further Reading

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