

The teacher - learning support assistant role

Barbara Lund,
Bispham High School Arts College,
Blackpool

> Aim

To examine the effectiveness of the teacher – learning support assistant (LSA) role in assisting pupils with special educational needs to access an appropriately differentiated mainstream curriculum.

> Dimensions of this Case Study

The research was carried out in a mainstream Girls High School. Fifteen subject teachers, all with experience of working with LSAs, were surveyed by questionnaire. A further 2 teachers, both LSAs working in the school and 10 pupils on the SEN register were interviewed.

Three of the 10 pupils were at Stage 5 of the Code of Practice with statements of special educational need, to address their learning difficulties. Seven pupils were at Stage 3 and of these pupils, 2 had learning difficulties and 5 had emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD).

> Summary of Findings for this Case Study

- Collaboration between the teacher and LSA ensured that their different areas of expertise were used effectively. This proved to be important to them in supporting each other when working with students with challenging behaviour.
- Effective collaboration depended on the teacher and LSA overcoming the differences each perceived about the other's role and responsibilities.
- To facilitate participation and inclusion for all students, collaborative teaching, related to the learning styles of the students, needed to be developed between the subject teacher and the LSA. In the case of students with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD), approaches based solely on behavioural objectives did not support effective instruction.
- The additional support given by LSAs gave students greater autonomy and the confidence to learn. This supported the process of teaching and learning, particularly for students with EBD.
- The LSAs improved the quality of learning for students with learning difficulties by ensuring those students understood and made sense of the subject. In order to do this effectively they needed to build up their own knowledge base within a subject or faculty.
- The pupils welcomed the additional support in the classroom, observing that it speeded up lessons. The speed with which help was obtained in the classroom proved to be crucial in keeping pupils on task, particularly those with learning or behavioural difficulties.

Background

The DfEE Green Paper (1998) 'Teachers meeting the challenge of change' recognised that teaching assistants were playing an increasingly important role in schools on tasks such as literacy support and helping pupils with special educational needs (SEN). The need to analyse how teachers could use other people working effectively alongside them was also identified.

A Programme for Action (DfEE 1998) 'Meeting Special Educational Needs', accepted that to improve education fundamentally for children with SEN and to maximise their achievements there was a need to develop the knowledge and skills of a range of educational professionals, including LSAs. In particular there was a need to:

- clarify the appropriate role of the LSA in different circumstances;
- identify core skills and competencies;
- give examples of effective deployment of LSAs in the classroom and as members of the wider school team.

Methodology

Quantitative and qualitative research methods were used. Questionnaires were sent out to teachers and then analysed. Two teachers (one an NQT), both LSAs and 10 pupils were interviewed. Classroom observations of the types of differentiated activities subject teachers were asking LSAs to support also formed part of the study.

Findings

Teachers' perceptions

Teachers used the LSAs as a key organisational strategy to facilitate the pedagogical aspect of the teaching and learning process for pupils, identified by the teacher. It gave the teachers the opportunity to differentiate work by task, outcome, learning activities, pace and dialogue for the identified children and sometimes for other children in the class.

The subject teachers used the LSAs to incorporate into the lesson, work and activities which they felt would be difficult to organise or manage in a whole

class situation, due to the behaviour or learning needs of individual students.

They identified several patterns of LSA deployment in the classroom. LSAs worked with individual pupils or small groups, depending on the subject and the teacher and also on the ability and flexibility of the LSA, e.g. it gave some teachers the freedom to do more challenging practical work.

Liaison between teachers and LSAs was felt by 58% of the teachers to be good but most teachers said that LSAs could be used more effectively if there was time for joint planning.

The LSAs needed guidance and support from the subject teachers.

Some teachers involved LSAs in lesson planning.

Teachers felt that pupil monitoring was a shared responsibility.

LSAs' perceptions

The key issue for LSAs was the lack of specific training for their role in supporting the teacher in the management of pupil behaviour.

The LSAs had to adopt a 'flexible role' in relation to the number of students in a teaching group with special educational needs and the types of task for which they were expected to provide support.

The LSAs were frustrated because they felt, and the teachers agreed, that LSAs could be more effective if time was available for joint planning with teachers.

The LSAs felt the need to build up their own knowledge base within a subject.

The LSAs would welcome training in:

- differentiation as a pedagogical process;
- basic assessment techniques to assess the current level of ability and learning needs of the pupils with whom they worked.

LSAs felt they supported pupils with EBD by reinforcing the classroom rules.

LSAs did not feel confident enough to initiate discussions with teachers about joint planning.

LSAs felt that pupil monitoring was primarily the responsibility of the teachers.

The LSAs felt that the more experienced teachers were able to differentiate to a greater extent and deploy the LSAs more effectively in the classroom than their less experienced colleagues.

Pupils' perceptions

Most pupils interviewed saw the LSA as someone who helped with work, some recognised the behaviour management role of the LSA and a few pupils said that lessons were more fun with the LSA.

The majority of pupils could ask for help if it was needed but one pupil always waited for the help to come to her.

Pupils in KS4 were sometimes embarrassed about needing help and had developed alternative strategies such as asking their peers.

The types of help needed and the types of lessons where students might need help varied with the strengths and weaknesses of the individual students.

One Year 8 student reflected that in some subjects her behaviour deteriorated and that she needed help in those lessons.

Eight of the ten students welcomed the additional support provided by having 2 members of staff in the classroom, observing that it speeded up lessons, made the classroom quieter and more supportive. They felt better and observed that other pupils also received help, not just those with SEN.

One pupil said that her enjoyment of the lesson was dependent on whether or not she liked the teacher or the LSA.

In only one case were negative comments received.

All students highlighted the LSA's role in enabling them to understand the content of the lesson and support their written responses to it.

More than half the students interviewed mentioned basic literacy and numeracy as being subjects in which they would welcome extra help.

Points of agreement between teachers, LSAs and pupils

In-class support from the LSA helped the classroom management of pupils' behavioural problems.

Support from the LSA enabled pupils to make academic progress in lessons.

The role of the LSA was ambiguous due to different 'classroom cultures' and the range of individual special educational needs being supported by LSAs.

Classroom observations

LSAs were observed promoting the learning of individual students by using teaching as scaffolding leading to independent working. The LSAs achieved this by:

- reading;
- explaining;
- helping;
- repeating;
- undertaking 'hands on' working; and
- sitting with individual or groups of students.

Conclusions

The key themes to be drawn from the responses of teachers, LSAs and pupils allowed the teachers and the LSAs to focus on their own professional practice. It also enabled pupils to focus on the teacher/ LSA role as an aid to their own learning.

Given the training needs of the LSAs there may be a case to argue for faculty based assistants to allow them to develop this subject expertise.

Joint planning between teachers and LSAs would appear to be a good starting point to improve the effective utilisation of LSAs in the classrooms.

Positive interactions between the pupils and the teacher or LSA needed to be planned for through analysis of individual teaching and learning styles, reinforcing the case for joint planning.

Further reading

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Contact

Barbara Lund, Bispham High School, Bispham Road, Blackpool , FY2 ONH

www.teach-tta.gov.uk

Publication number 147/8-00

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