

Classroom Assistants in Scottish Primary Schools

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Since 1999 over two thousand 'classroom assistants' have been appointed, under a new Government programme, to work in Scottish primary schools supporting staff and pupils. This Spotlight highlights some of the interim findings of a national evaluation of the Classroom Assistants Initiative in Scotland. The research suggests that, whilst most people involved have been very satisfied with the impact of the Initiative so far, there have been some teething troubles and schools are having to consider new ways of working.

The Classroom Assistants Initiative is one of a package of Excellence Fund initiatives launched in Scotland in 1999 by the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED), which aims to raise standards throughout Scotland's schools. Over 2,000 assistants have already been appointed, and the aim is to increase this provision to 5,000 by March 2002.

The Initiative seeks to 'free up' teachers' time for teaching through the deployment of classroom assistants. These assistants carry out a range of practical and administrative tasks, and work under the direction of the class teacher in the supervision and support of pupils' learning.

A national evaluation of this Initiative is currently being undertaken by the Scottish Council for Research in Education for the SEED. The evaluation began in January 2000 with an analysis of education authorities' reports of their pilot programmes. This gave a national picture of the Initiative at the end of the pilot phase (Wilson *et al*, 2000).

Evaluation of the main phase of the Initiative began in Autumn 2000 when information was collected, by postal survey and classroom observation, from a national sample of education authorities and schools. This addresses three main questions:

- How are classroom assistants deployed?
- What do classroom assistants do?
- What is the impact on teachers and pupils?

It is findings from this stage of the research that are reported here. A repeat survey in 2001 (due to be reported in 2002) will look for differences over time in each of these areas.

HOW ARE CLASSROOM ASSISTANTS DEPLOYED?

The evaluation found that the majority of schools allocate their classroom assistants to more than one teacher, although some assistants, particularly in small schools, may

work with a single teacher. Some schools also allocate time for tasks, such as photocopying or playground supervision, which support staff and pupils across the school.

Decisions about allocation of classroom assistants depend, among other things, on the size of the school and the number of assistants. The following examples from two schools participating in the evaluation illustrate different approaches.

Working with all classes

In one school, where there was only one assistant, rigorous timetabling was used to enable all classes to have a share of her time. The classroom assistant explained her schedule as follows:

I have a timetable: three quarters of an hour, twice a week, for each class ... Because I have a timetable the teachers know when to expect me. The class teacher has a small notebook into which they write the things for me to do. It is very helpful.

A class teacher in this school commented that their main opportunity to talk with their assistant is at lunchtime. And pupils were aware that their class only received support for two sessions per week, but appreciated the help. One P3 girl reported that:

She [the classroom assistant] is not in class that often ... twice a week. She helps us when we get stuck ... In case you don't get it ... Today she helped me with the Stile game. She helped me with knowing what to do. She said do the opposites ... say it said 'up' you had to look for 'down'...

Working with one stage

A headteacher who allocated a classroom assistant to each stage for the duration of the school year explained the approach thus:

... long periods of time being settled, and getting to know the children and children knowing them well and respecting them, is making a difference in what can be achieved ... The

concept is that they will stay there, though there may be an opportunity to move around if they wish, rather than always be P1/2 assistants, for example.

Until recently this school had only one classroom assistant and the headteacher had found it much harder to allocate the assistant's time, or to see what difference she had made, "except against the teachers' stress level!"

As the example above suggests, there is some evidence that the nature of the classroom assistants' contribution changes as the amount of time spent with particular teachers and classes increases. In Autumn 2000 teachers who were receiving classroom assistant support were timetabled for amounts ranging from 30 or 40 minutes to more than 25 hours per week.



WHAT DO CLASSROOM ASSISTANTS DO?

Classroom assistants are undertaking a wide range of tasks, many within the classroom, but also elsewhere in the school. Out-of-class tasks may include those with an emphasis on care, such as playground supervision and first aid, and those with a more administrative emphasis, such as taking responsibility for a library or other resource area. Individual schools determine the balance of tasks, but the following example illustrates a typical range.

A typical example

This classroom assistant is timetabled to work in seven different classes. Teachers complete planning sheets, which indicate lesson type, activity and resources required. The assistant has time to prepare resources on Monday mornings, and on Thursday afternoons uses time not allocated for classwork for administration and preparing displays. She saw her role as being to:

- keep children on task
- consolidate learning
- read with small groups
- support activities in literacy and numeracy with an emphasis on practical application
- support ICT.

As she put it:

I seem to have been nominated computer expert. All the IT problems come to me. If computers fail I can fix about 60% myself, otherwise I send them off to IT.

She was also helping to organise a Book Evening, and took children in the minibus to play football with other schools.

Supporting learning as the major role

A clear finding at this stage of the evaluation was that the largest amount of classroom assistant time is directed to supporting learning within the classroom. There seems to be an expectation on the part of the majority of teachers, headteachers and classroom assistants that this is the main function of the post.

Despite, or perhaps because of, this shared expectation regarding the classroom assistant's role, a number of difficulties were reported. These were broadly concerned with time management, and the boundaries between teaching and support:

• **Need for planning time**

With this emphasis on supporting learning it is understandable that many teachers and classroom assistants would like more time together to plan. In many cases the assistant's contract hours did not allow for discussion before or after school. Some teachers describe 'snatched moments at break time', but other duties such as playground supervision may mean even this is not possible. Some schools have been experimenting with other approaches to making time available during the school day, using assembly times for meeting, or asking senior staff to cover for colleagues. One headteacher explained that:

[Time for meetings] has to be timetabled and by using DHT to cover classes eats into DHT's timetable, however benefits outweigh difficulties.

A number of teachers and classroom assistants noted concern over the effects of conflicting demands on the classroom assistants' time, and in particular, the classroom assistant being repeatedly called away at short notice from timetabled sessions. As one teacher explained:

My classroom assistant is frequently accompanying other classes on trips etc in my allocated slot. Therefore, tasks I had for him to do can't go ahead as planned.

• **Boundaries of the remit**

It was evident from the survey that, at this stage of the Initiative, the role of 'classroom assistant' is still evolving. While most respondents thought their job descriptions or remits were clear, some teachers and some assistants expressed uncertainty, particularly about the boundary between supporting and teaching.

One headteacher explained that it could be easier to set out clear boundaries for the classroom assistant's role with a relatively untrained person, whereas there may be a shadowy divide for those with prior experience, for example as nursery nurses. The classroom assistants at this school were described as not being afraid to ask 'Is this within my remit?' One had a background working in industry and had a different

perspective on being trained than is perhaps usual in education. She expected clear guidelines on what she should be doing. Whereas the headteacher felt that:

Schools, I think, tend to fudge some of that stuff [job descriptions]. Don't make it too explicit and too clear and 'don't ask and I won't tell' kind of stuff, if its going over the boundary. And sometimes it is a very difficult boundary, between teaching and supporting.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT ON TEACHERS AND PUPILS?

Teachers perceived that the biggest impact classroom assistants had on their use of time resulted from delegating to the assistants the preparation of classroom materials and resources. However, as mentioned above, this activity did not occupy the major part of classroom assistants' time. In this area, therefore, a small input – 'an extra pair of hands' – appears to make a substantial difference to teachers' perceptions of their workload.

Within the class, most classroom assistants work with groups of pupils or individuals, supporting them in a variety of reinforcement tasks and games. Their presence also frees teachers to give more attention to teaching individuals and groups while the assistant helps to keep others on task and resolve minor difficulties. Some teachers report that they therefore expect more from pupils and have increased enthusiasm for teaching.

There are, nonetheless, challenges to working together, among them the already mentioned lack of planning time, the extra work required to plan, and demands placed on the abilities of particular assistants.

However, teachers and headteachers believe that the Classroom Assistants Initiative has led to an improvement in pupils' participation in activities, in the range of learning experiences offered to them, and to a lesser extent in their motivation and behaviour. The following example illustrates one classroom assistant's impact on practical mathematics activities.

Supporting practical activities

The class teacher and the classroom assistant in one of the primary schools studied have been working together for two years. The classroom assistant supervises practical activities in mathematics with mixed ability groups. She rotates from group to group so that all have an opportunity to work with her. The classroom assistant is able to keep a group on task in a way that would be hard in a whole-class context. As the teacher explains:

We are timetabled for two consecutive days each week. When I work on practical work it is more rushed and not much time. Our classroom assistant can take her time on practical work and talk them through it more.

During the observation of a P5/6 class, the classroom assistant was working on weight with a small mixed ability group of three girls and one boy. Each child took a turn to estimate the weight of a different parcel and record this.

They then checked the object's weight on the scales. Pupils said:

... we were enjoying it. We were weighing ... Weighing boxes ... a little surprised [at the weights] ... Had to see if we got the exact weight of box ... on testing we were just about right.



Attainment

Many respondents think that the Classroom Assistants Initiative is already contributing to raising attainment, as one teacher's remarks illustrate:

I get more 'quality time' with individuals and groups ... She [the classroom assistant] certainly helps our time to flow ... I can say definitely, that because I am getting more time with individuals and groups, that we are getting through more, and in more depth, particularly with the poorer ability groups ... I'm certainly expecting the attainment targets to be met more quickly and perhaps more easily and comfortably ... She also provides motivation for the children. It's nice for them to have somebody other than just me, to work with and to read to.

However, concrete evidence of the impact of the Initiative on pupil attainment was hard to find at this early stage of the Initiative, and may continue to be in a climate of multiple policy initiatives all aimed at improving pupils' attainment.

EMER IN ISSUES

Different issues emerged from the schools with classroom assistants and those who had not yet been allocated assistants. In the latter case, schools were concerned that pupils were missing out. Schools *with* assistants on the other hand, experienced a number of specific difficulties. In particular, finding space for assistants, adjusting to the requirements of teamworking, and the training and support available for classroom assistants.

Finding space for classroom assistants

Despite the general success of the Initiative, some schools experienced practical difficulties in accommodating classroom assistants. Headteachers commented on difficulties arising from small classrooms and lack of space for working with groups, let alone finding 'a work area they can call their own'. The use of staggered breaktimes,

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as a way to manage staffroom overcrowding and provide playground cover, may isolate assistants from the other staff, with consequent effects on planning and teamworking. As one classroom assistant explained:

Due to playground duties I feel I miss a lot by not being in [the] staff room with other members of staff. You don't know what is going on.

On the other hand, playground duty was an opportunity for classroom assistants to develop their relationships with pupils.

Teamworking

Remarkably few problems in teamworking have emerged, despite the fact that headteachers and teachers have, to date, received limited support and advice on how to manage the Initiative, or how to involve classroom assistants in whole-school activities. The majority of class teachers with classroom assistants found it easy to work with them and appreciated their flexibility, competence and initiative. Classroom assistants were equally positive: good relationships with teaching staff were characterised by mutual respect, good communication, being made to feel a valued part of the team, and supportive teachers and headteachers.

However, these good relationships sometimes took time to develop, as one classroom assistant explained:

I feel teachers are gradually seeing the classroom assistant as an 'assistant'. At first they were embarrassed being helped, but now it is like a team.

Training and development

The amount of training available to classroom assistants seems to vary considerably. Most had received induction training from the school and/or authority, but many had received little subsequent support. Only about half of the assistants participated in planning meetings with teachers, and few were involved in whole-school development activities on a regular basis.

The expectation that most classroom assistants will spend a substantial proportion of their time supporting learning in class increases the need for them to have appropriate qualifications and training. The delay in providing support material for teachers may also mean that some have had unrealistic expectations of what a classroom assistant can be expected to undertake.

CONCLUSIONS

Classroom assistants are relieving teachers of routine tasks and providing extra support for pupils. Together these contributions are believed by many to have the potential to help raise pupil attainment.

However, tensions exist because of the wide remit and competing demands on classroom assistant time. Also, those schools and teachers not yet benefiting from classroom assistant support are concerned that their pupils are missing out. These factors need to be addressed in order to make the Initiative more effective. In addition, the findings at this stage of the evaluation suggest that in striving to find a balanced approach, authorities and schools may in particular wish to consider the following:

- prioritising and limiting the range of tasks that individual assistants undertake
- ensuring adequate time for teachers and assistants to plan and discuss activities
- providing continuing training and support for assistants and those working with them.

References

Wilson, V., Schlapp, U., Davidson, J. and Mongiello, A. (2001) *Classroom Assistants Implementation: Lessons from the pilot projects*. Research Report 102. Edinburgh: SCRE.

Further Reading

Lee, B. and Mawson, C. (1998) *Survey of Classroom Assistants*. Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research.

Moyles, J. and Suschitzky, W. (1997) *'Jills of All Trades? ...'* *Classroom Assistants in KS1 Classes*. London: Association of Teachers and Lecturers.

Notes

The full Interim Report of the Classroom Assistants Initiative national evaluation is available from SCRE. *An Extra Pair of Hands?* (authors: Ursula Schlapp, Valerie Wilson and Julia Davidson) is published as SCRE Research Report 104 (price £10.00). An Executive Summary is available on the SCRE website at www.scre.ac.uk/summary/rr104.html

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