TAs JOIN *the* TEAM

UK EXPANDS ROLE OF TEACHING ASSISTANTS IN THE CLASSROOM

By Jill Morgan and Betty Y. Ashbaker

Teachers in the United Kingdom are often supported in the classroom by teaching assistants (TAs) — paraprofessionals whose roles have changed significantly in the last several years. The 2003 National Agreement: Raising Standards and Tackling Workload, known as the workforce remodeling initiative (DES, 2003), was designed to raise standards in schools in England and Wales by reducing unnecessary paperwork and bureaucracy for teachers. The National Agreement was intended to allow teachers to devote more time to teaching and learning, and at the same time open up more roles for teaching assistants to support teachers.

These changes have had an impact on classroom teachers and the leadership roles they play. UK government figures show that the number of support staff working in schools in England more than doubled between 1995 and 2005 (61,300 to 148,500) whereas the number of teachers increased by only 10% (399,000 to 440,000). Schools in

Wales currently employ at least 8,000 teaching assistants. A 2007 report by Estyn (the government inspectorate for schools in Wales) stated: "The significant increase in support staff numbers means that senior teachers find it time-consuming to organize and deploy these staff." This was — and remains — a very real concern, but the report offered the reassurance: "There is evidence that TAs who are suitably qualified and supervised will make a difference to pupil achievement." (In the UK, teaching assistant denotes school-based paraprofessionals and does not include college-level support.)

In the 1980s and 1990s in England and Wales, teaching assistants were considered nonteaching staff because their roles were essentially ancillary. Very few teaching assistants now have completely nonteaching roles, and many of them not only have teaching responsibilities, but some also have responsibility for supervising other teaching assistants. There are now many similarities between the work of teachers and teaching assistants, but there are also many differences — legal status being the most obvious, with the teacher having overall leadership responsibility for the classroom.

Historically, many teacher roles have had relatively little to do with their core area of expertise: teaching and learning. What the National Agreement achieved was to:
- Allocate every teacher one half-day per week of preparation, planning, and assessment time, in recognition of the essential nature of these aspects of teaching and learning;
- Allow teachers to delegate certain tasks to support staff, acknowledging that many classroom activities are important but not vital to student learning and can be performed equally well by support staff. The National Agreement specified 25 nonteaching tasks that could be delegated to teaching assistants. (See list at right.)

The law then allows for considerable delegation beyond the clerical/housekeeping tasks in terms of the new roles for teaching assistants introduced by the National Agreement. This has had a significant impact on how teaching assistants are seen within the education system, and on the ways in which they are deployed. In considering the topic of teacher leadership, it also highlights the role of the teacher as a leader of the classroom team.

In 2009, the UK government published the findings from a national survey of the characteristics, use, and impact of support staff in schools in England and Wales (Blatchford et al., 2009). Some key points related to the role of the teacher in leading teaching assistants:
- Only 6% of respondents reported that time was allocated for teachers and teaching assistants to meet; 33% of respondents reported that support staff were involved in some way in planning with teachers;

TASKS TEACHERS CAN DELEGATE TO TEACHING ASSISTANTS

- Collect money.
- Notify appropriate personnel about student absences.
- Photocopy.
- Type.
- Produce standard letters.
- Produce class lists.
- Keep and file records.
- Create classroom displays.
- Analyze attendance figures.
- Process exam results.
- Collate student reports.
- Supervise students on work experience.
- Administer examinations.
- Fill in for absent teachers.
- Troubleshoot instructional technology.
- Commission new instructional technology equipment.
- Order supplies and equipment.
- Take stock.
- Catalog, prepare, issue, or maintain equipment and materials.
- Take meeting minutes.
- Coordinate and submit bids.
- Seek and give personnel advice.
- Manage student data.
- Input student data.
- Proctor exams.

- Teachers used feedback given to them by support staff in only 24% of the schools; and
- Support staff expertise was gained through training in only 21% of responses; in 67% of responses, support staff expertise was experiential or provided via communication with the teacher.

Not surprisingly, Blatchford et al. (2009) commented that "a substantial component of all teacher training courses should involve ways of working successfully with support staff. This should recognize the reality that TAs are working in a pedagogical way with students, and consider in a systematic way the management of TA deployment in relation to managerial, pedagogical, and curriculum concerns" (p. 133).

Teachers may not feel that they are natural leaders,

or even feel that it is necessary to take the lead in the classroom or instructional team in a particularly assertive way. Conversely, there are many teachers who do take deliberate steps to build their classroom team and take them forward. We suggest the following questions to carefully consider this aspect of teacher leadership:

- Do I see myself as in charge and the teaching assistant as my subordinate, or are we partners in the teaching process?

- How much authority do I think my teaching assistant should have — complete freedom to use his or her own judgment, or does the TA always have to refer decisions to me?

- Do I see my teaching assistant as a person with a wide range of skills and assets, or as someone who can only be assigned a limited range of tasks because of a lack of qualifications or knowledge (Morgan & Ashbaker, 2011)?

The answers to these questions will have a direct influence on the way a teacher works with a teaching assistant.

There is some controversy over terminology in the UK about the teacher's role as a classroom leader. The term **supervision** tends to convey an overly close management style. The word **management** itself suggests line management or purely organizational responsibilities. Teachers are accustomed to managing behavior and learning, but typically children's behavior or learning, not that of adults. A more collegial term, suggesting an advisory role, is **mentor**. Whatever the term of preference, the nuances of all these terms are involved in leading a classroom team, which includes a responsibility to guide, monitor, and support the work of another person, generally one who is less qualified or experienced.

The 2003 National Agreement not only specified work regulations for support staff but required "a proper system of direction and supervision for them." The National Agreement paid a great deal of attention to ways in which teachers delegate responsibilities to teaching assistants, particularly as cover supervisors for their preparation, planning, and assessment time. (Cover supervisors are roughly equivalent to substitute teachers in the U.S.) Much less attention has been given to the requirement for a "proper system of direction and supervision" and what that really means.

Much of the literature relating to supervision of teaching assistants comes from the United States. Researchers in the U.S. have challenged teams to explore alternative supports that will increase teacher engagement time with students rather than delegating important instructional duties to teaching assistants

7 phases of classroom supervision for teaching assistants

1. Establish the supervisor and supervisee relationship.

2. Plan lessons and units with the teaching assistant.

3. Plan classroom observation strategy with the teaching assistant.

4. Analyze the teaching and learning process.

5. Plan a conference strategy.

6. Have a conference.

7. Resume planning.

Source: Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1993.

(Giangreco, 2003). Sergiovanni and Starratt (1993) have stated that supervision, if used correctly, can create powerful results in improving instruction. They define supervision as "face-to-face contact with teachers with the intent of improving instruction and increasing professional growth" (p. 203). One of the most important principles they identified was the mental and physical closeness between the supervisor and supervisee; close and frequent proximity was necessary to using a clinical supervision model. Learn more about the phases of classroom supervision at left.

Two decades earlier, Richard Weller (1971) referred to cycles of planning, observation, and "intensive intellectual analysis of teaching performance in the interest of rational modification" (p. 4). This referred to supervising teachers or student teachers rather than teaching assistants, but from about the mid-1980s, a number of scholars working with teaching assistants began to develop lists of supervisory activities that closely followed these models. Steckelberg and Vasa (1998) also identified specific issues that supervising teachers face, including:

1. Making daily assignments and scheduling activities.

2. Designing instruction for another adult to carry out.

3. Monitoring student progress and making instructional decisions when not present.

4. Providing corrective feedback to paraprofessionals (teaching assistants).

5. Developing and documenting on-the-job training.

6. Evaluating paraprofessional / teaching assistant performance.

7. Dealing with problems and differences.

The common theme from these educators is that supervision is intended to improve instruction. In addition, Weller's cycle and Sergiovanni and Starratt's recommendations both sound a lot like action research as they recommend repetition of the steps and activities, suggesting more than just casual lip-service. It is *intensive* analysis of teaching performance in order to improve the quality or effectiveness of that teaching. Here again, terminology can be problematic as performance suggests performance evaluation or appraisal, but Weller's phrase — "in the interest of rational modification" — offers comfort to teachers. They are not expected to make enormous changes overnight, or perform unreasonable feats of professional development. The important thing is to seek, as all good teachers do with their students, to make the small, incremental changes that constitute learning, and that eventually produce an expert — a

child who is a confident reader, a teacher who is perfecting his or her craft, but also a teaching assistant who understands the teaching process and can therefore be an able assistant to the teacher and to the children they are jointly responsible for.

Based on research in the UK, Vincett, Cremin, and Thomas (2005) refer to tensions in the classroom that prevent or at very least reduce the likelihood of effective collaborations between teachers and teaching assistants. These include:

- Teaching assistants' lack of training/knowledge of effective classroom practices;
- Teaching assistants' concern about their own status;
- The teacher's lack of knowledge of how best to work with teaching assistants; and
- Lack of time for teachers and teaching assistants to meet for joint planning.

To overcome these tensions, Vincett et al. offer three models for organizing classroom teams:

1. Room management

In this model, one of the adults is designated as the learning manager (working intensively with a small group or an individual) and the other the activity manager (providing a less intense level of supervision to the remainder of the class). This model helps counteract the tension of the teaching assistant's lack of knowledge about classroom practice as the teacher discusses strengths and weaknesses of teaching sessions, and provides on-the-job guidance and insights into effective practice.

2. Zoning

In this arrangement, the classroom is divided into zones or learning areas, and each adult has responsibility for particular zones. These may be based on existing arrangements of work tables, or could be smaller units separated physically by bookcases or other natural barriers. Zoning responsibilities can be changed at any time, as long as each adult recognizes the physical boundaries of his or her new responsibility. The teaching assistant's concern about status is counteracted by the teacher giving credence to the teaching assistant's views and showing the teaching assistant's opinion is valued.

3. Reflective teamwork

Whereas the other two models are based on the need for role clarity, with each adult working independently, reflective teamwork is designed to enhance planning, communication, and review. Here, teachers and teaching assistants sit together daily for about 15 minutes to review previous teaching sessions. First the teaching assistant and then the teacher identify two things that went well during a particular teaching session, as well as two things that could be improved. They use these reflections to plan for upcoming teaching sessions. Reflective teamwork overcomes the tensions listed above by counteracting the perceived lack of time for teachers and teaching assistants

to meet and plan. It also builds the teacher's knowledge of how best to work with teaching assistants.

Teachers are the leaders of the classroom team, with responsibility to ensure the team follows legal and ethical guidelines. UK government documentation states that teaching assistants should be systematically supervised. While it may be the responsibility of a school's senior management team to ensure that proper systems are in place, the reality is that the teacher works with the teaching assistant on a day-to-day basis, and therefore needs to take opportunities to provide leadership to the teaching assistant. As schools heavily rely on teaching assistants now more than ever, they can encourage teachers and teaching assistants to plan and conference to enhance instruction. But the good news is that teachers can take the lead to ensure that the classroom team functions most effectively to support children's learning.

REFERENCES

Blatchford, P., Bassett, P., Brown, P., Martin, C., Russell, A., & Webster, R. (2009, August). *Deployment and impact of support staff in schools.* London: Department for Children, Schools, and Families. Available at www.schoolsupportstaff.net/DISSpubs.html.

Department for Education and Skills. (2003, January). *Raising standards and tackling workload: A national agreement.* London: Author.

Estyn. (2007, March). *The impact of workforce remodelling on pupils' learning and raising standards.* Cardiff, Wales: Author.

Giangreco, M.F. (2003, October). Working with paraprofessionals. *Educational Leadership, 61*(2), 50-53.

Morgan, J. & Ashbaker, B.Y. (2011). Teachers supervising teaching assistants: Reflections from the United Kingdom. *DISES Newsletter, 21*(2), 4-6.

Sergiovanni, T. & Starratt, R. (1993). *Supervision: A redefinition* (5th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Steckelberg, A. & Vasa, S. (1998, March 31). *Preservice and inservice training programs to prepare teachers to supervise and work more effectively with paraprofessional personnel.* Paper presented at the meeting of the Council of Exceptional Children, Washington, DC.

Vincett, K., Cremin, H., & Thomas, G. (2005). *Teachers & assistants working together.* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Weller, R. (1971). *Verbal communication in instructional supervision.* New York: Teachers College Press.

•

Jill Morgan (jill.morgan@smu.ac.uk) is senior lecturer at Swansea Metropolitan University, Wales, United Kingdom. Betty Y. Ashbaker (betty_ashbaker@byu.edu) is associate professor of counseling psychology and special education at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. ■