Working with a Teaching Assistant

# By Alec Murrell

When working with a TA, the relationship is key, along with a really clear focus – the children. Both things may sound obvious but when working with other people, maintaining a positive and honest relationship can be the foundation for so much good – between you, the partnership can have a great impact on your pupils’ wellbeing and their learning. The shared focus of the pupils might be something you take for granted but it’s really important to have that at the forefront of your minds. It makes all the interactions and interventions purposeful and has the added benefit of helping, if ever there is a challenge of difficulty (it’s not always easy preparing for and supporting children) then having the clear goal of doing everything for the children’s benefit can help overcome these.

So how does it work in practice?

 I saw my classroom TA as having 2 ‘dimensions’ of involvement – the direct support and the indirect support. In my upper KS2 class, it would work something like this.

At the start of the day, before the children came in, we would have a catch up where we could touch base over any children who needed support either for their learning or wellbeing. I could outline the day ahead and bring my TA up to speed with any change of plans for the day. We would always meet on a Monday to establish the timetable for the week but this would invariably change slightly. I wasn’t one for great long notes for my TA but I would always jot down the tasks for the day and talk about these. These conversations took place again at the end of the day, as a brief review – to consider how well things had gone and what changes might be needed before the following day. I wasn’t too formal about these. There was always a timetable for the week and we had a professional conversation based around that.

Direct support would typically be, right at the beginning of the day having an agreed set of pupils to take, one at a time, with their reading / home learning books. The opportunity to read / talk about their learning was also a great excuse for the TA to check in on the wellbeing of these particular children and just make sure they were feeling positive and ready to meet the challenges of the day.

In morning lessons (more often than not English and maths), direct support would be helping maintain the focus of either small groups or individuals in the whole class introduction – making sure they were asking the children questions to check for understanding along the way. For the group work, I would mix and match – and here, it can be dependent upon the skill set and experience of your TA – with the TA sometimes supporting a focus group and sometimes ‘circulating’ to support the class whilst I taught a focus group. I would keep this dynamic – it was pupil led - sometimes the children needed challenge, sometimes support.

The really important point here is that learners of all attainment levels have access to a mix of independent and supported working. It can be a real challenge to pitch tasks that enable independent learning at all attainment levels but it’s vital that no single group of learners always has an adult working with them – however much you are driven to give them support and want to help.

A similar model was used for the afternoons though I would always try and get my TA to check in on children who needed either a follow up from the previous day or that morning, or who needed some pre-teaching for the following day’s lessons. I would never underestimate the value of getting a TA to work through the vocabulary or basic principles of an up-coming lesson, so they felt more confident and had the cognitive ‘space’ to take part at a good pace. These episodes would be built into the afternoon and conducted in short sessions, so that children weren’t coming away from the afternoon’s main focus for too long. The time could also be used for specific interventions that groups or individuals needed.

That leaves the ‘indirect’ support. TAs with whom I’ve worked would probably tell you I liked to make the most of every minute of the day! The indirect support can be regarded by some as the more ‘secretarial’ or organisational aspects of the role but I wouldn’t want their importance to be diminished. During all those times where there might be a few minutes (I’m going to avoid using the word ‘spare’) – the transition times between lessons / assembly or before and after the children come in to the class, I’d be getting my TA to prepare books; to gather notes; mark tests; help with learning walls and displays; manage resources. All those jobs that need to be done but that can free up my time to review lesson plans, refine ideas, make changes in the light of previous learning or offer identified children some 1 to 1 support. It sometimes needs careful management as these tasks could be seen as having less value but here, the focus needs to be kept on the children and what’s going to squeeze the best out of the time at school.

Lastly, I would also ensure that any particular TA skills be being fully utilised, too. For example, one of my TAs was an MFL teacher and would teach the class whilst I supported. This brought about great positives in the way the children saw us working together as a team, providing them with better language learning than I could provide (!) but also ensuring that their purpose – and value – was clear.

In summary – the keys were having clarity over expectations (of us both); mutual respect and regular communication.

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# By Ellie Adjei

**How does your TA support in the classroom?**

In Primary, the role of the TA is diverse. An average day for my TA in our Upper KS2 class would start with some well-being check-ins during registration; talking to pupils who might have had a tricky weekend or evening so they could get their worries off their chests before their learning began.

During early work, my TA would then do some targeted Maths pre-teaching with identified pupils. This ensured those identified pupils had refreshed the skills required for the lesson. Pupils were selected based upon the previous days marking.

During my Maths input, my TA would scaffold and support an identified pair or individual. To do this, she would use a small flip chart and any practical manipulatives relevant to the lesson. During the independent work, my TA would circulate and check understanding while I worked with a focus group of pupils. During the plenary, my TA would work with an identified pupil/ group to rectify any identified barriers to achieving the learning objective e.g. a misconception or a process error.

This model would be used for our English lessons too, the only change being that I would often incorporate my TA into my input for English. For example, scribing for role on the wall, being a character for our hot-seating activity or selecting pupils to feed into our group writing while I scribed on the board. During the plenary, she would do some 1:1 editing with an identified pupil.

After lunch, my TA would support any pupils who needed mediation following lunchtime – this would ensure any lunchtime disagreements were quickly addressed and pupils felt satisfied that their thoughts had been heard. This meant a much smoother start to our afternoon learning.

The approach to afternoons learning changed depending on the subject. My TA had studied Art, so one day a week we would split the class in two: she would teach Art to half of the class while I taught half the class PE and then we would swap. Children loved these afternoons as they felt they had special dedicated time with us both. For Science, my TA would support with my input, for example: helping me to model how to set up investigations. We would then have two focus groups each to assess and support. Some afternoons were identified for targeted interventions linked to pupil targets. My TA would work with individuals and groups for no more than 20 minutes at a time on pre-planned interventions and would feedback to me at the end of the day so intervention groups could be adapted and refined.

**How do you prepare your TA for this?** *(i.e. communicating prior to the lesson what/who you would like them to work with?)*

At the end of every day, we would reflect together in terms of what had gone well and what we needed to improve and adapt. We would consider wellbeing for individual children; how plans might need to be adapted for the next day; which children to target for pre-teaching and intervention work. My TA would also identify any resources she might need for the next day and set these up or ask for my support if she needed it.

Each morning, we would have about 15 minutes together to set up resources, review the plans and share any relevant information ( e.g. messages from parents, messages from staff meetings etc).

Each week, I would also email my TA a copy of my plans and resources and I would review the diary with her for the forthcoming week so she knew if there was anything approaching that she might need to be aware of, such as Book week or Science week.

My TA was always welcome to attend Pupil Progress Meetings and medium-term panning meetings. This was optional but my TA always liked to be involved in these meetings and over time we both found it beneficial to have this open way of working. Her insights into progress meetings were invaluable as she had information about individual pupils that I didn’t. She also had brilliant ideas for planning: involving her in the medium term planning meeting for the following term meant we would draw upon her experience of the year group – for example, themes that had gone well previously, links between subjects that had worked well. It would also mean she was onboard with helping me to set up the learning environment ready for our new theme or topic which was a great help!

**What impact does this have on pupils?**

All of our conversations were focussed on moving learning forward and supporting pupil wellbeing. The reflections at the end of the day were particularly impactful and important for us. It meant that we could be far more targeted, and my TA was well prepared to run her interventions the next day.

Our open and honest relationship also meant that we could both give each other feedback on our teaching so over time we both refined and developed our practice which benefitted the class as a whole.

**How do you ensure all pupils get a similar amount of support from both you and your TA throughout the day/week?**

Adult support was always carefully planned around need – this sometimes meant that some children received more support than others. We did however ensure that all pupils had the chance to work with an adult in English and Maths each week. It’s difficult to monitor exactly how much time you both spend with each child per week let alone per day but by planning to work with identified pupils based upon need, you can usually ensure that everyone has been given some dedicated adult support during the week. It’s important to note that ‘need’ refers to whoever needs support to move forward to the next step – this does not always mean a lower achieving pupil or group. In changing your mindset about who needs support – everyone- you can ensure all pupils benefit from adult support throughout the week.