

The world of the primary school



About this free course

This free course is an adapted extract from the Open University course E103 *Learning and teaching in the primary years* www.open.ac.uk/courses/qualifications/details/e103?orig=q94.

This version of the content may include video, images and interactive content that may not be optimised for your device.

You can experience this free course as it was originally designed on OpenLearn, the home of free learning from The Open University –

www.open.edu/openlearn/education/the-world-the-primary-school/content-section-0

There you'll also be able to track your progress via your activity record, which you can use to demonstrate your learning.

Copyright © 2019 The Open University

Intellectual property

Unless otherwise stated, this resource is released under the terms of the Creative Commons Licence v4.0 http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/deed.en_GB. Within that The Open University interprets this licence in the following way:

www.open.edu/openlearn/about-openlearn/frequently-asked-questions-on-openlearn. Copyright and rights falling outside the terms of the Creative Commons Licence are retained or controlled by The Open University. Please read the full text before using any of the content.

We believe the primary barrier to accessing high-quality educational experiences is cost, which is why we aim to publish as much free content as possible under an open licence. If it proves difficult to release content under our preferred Creative Commons licence (e.g. because we can't afford or gain the clearances or find suitable alternatives), we will still release the materials for free under a personal end-user licence.

This is because the learning experience will always be the same high quality offering and that should always be seen as positive – even if at times the licensing is different to Creative Commons.

When using the content you must attribute us (The Open University) (the OU) and any identified author in accordance with the terms of the Creative Commons Licence.

The Acknowledgements section is used to list, amongst other things, third party (Proprietary), licensed content which is not subject to Creative Commons licensing. Proprietary content must be used (retained) intact and in context to the content at all times.

The Acknowledgements section is also used to bring to your attention any other Special Restrictions which may apply to the content. For example there may be times when the Creative Commons Non-Commercial Sharealike licence does not apply to any of the content even if owned by us (The Open University). In these instances, unless stated otherwise, the content may be used for personal and non-commercial use.

We have also identified as Proprietary other material included in the content which is not subject to Creative Commons Licence. These are OU logos, trading names and may extend to certain photographic and video images and sound recordings and any other material as may be brought to your attention.

Unauthorised use of any of the content may constitute a breach of the terms and conditions and/or intellectual property laws.

We reserve the right to alter, amend or bring to an end any terms and conditions provided here without notice.

All rights falling outside the terms of the Creative Commons licence are retained or controlled by The Open University.

Head of Intellectual Property, The Open University

Contents

Introduction	4
Learning Outcomes	5
1 Primary schools today	6
1.1 Reflecting on your own experiences of primary education	6
1.2 Fulbridge Academy	7
1.3 Curriculum frameworks	9
1.4 The school community	10
1.5 The wider context	11
2 Teaching assistants in primary education	12
2.1 Supporting teachers	12
2.2 Volunteers	13
2.3 Titles, duties and ways of working	14
2.4 Distinctive contributions	14
2.5 The primary school workforce in the United Kingdom	16
2.6 Support staff in Europe and beyond	17
3 Teaching assistant or assistant teacher?	18
3.1 What is the value of teaching assistants?	18
3.2 Children's and parents' views of teaching assistants	18
3.3 The evolving role of the teacher	20
4 Support in action	22
4.1 Focusing on practice	22
4.2 Assisting, supporting and teaching	23
5 Looking to the future	24
Conclusion	25
References	25
Acknowledgements	26

Introduction

Over the past few decades in the United Kingdom and in many countries around the world, an increasing number of practitioners other than class teachers have taken on a diverse range of roles and responsibilities in schools. In this free course, *The world of the primary school*, you will consider the nature of this expanding workforce in primary education. You will hear from teachers, support staff and children talking about their participation in the life of their schools. Primary schools (including those you are familiar with) vary greatly in many ways, including size, location, approach to children's education and the curriculum, and the nature of their pupil and staff groups. In particular, this course introduces a range of key people who make up a primary school community in the east of England. You will consider their perspectives in relation to your own experiences and ideas about primary schools.

This course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [E103 Learning and teaching in the primary years](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand the primary school as a community
- further consider the roles, responsibilities and experiences of the various participants in primary school life
- discuss what the wide diversity of the roles and responsibilities of its workforce tells us about the nature of primary education today
- reflect on personal experiences and ideas relating to primary education.

1 Primary schools today



Figure 1 A primary school is a community in which children and adults work together.

In this course we will be using the generic terms ‘primary school’, ‘primary years’ and ‘primary-aged children’ to refer to the education of children aged between 3 and 12 years. However, as in many other aspects of education, the range of terminology associated with the education of children in this age group is bewilderingly wide. Depending on where a child aged between 3 and 12 goes to school, the setting may have any of the following terms in its title (and this is by no means an exhaustive list): primary school, elementary school, infant school, junior school, middle school, all-through school. These terms describe the age group catered for by a particular school, but schools are characterised in other ways, too. These other categories might relate to how the schools are funded (e.g. private or government funded), their affiliation to religious or other charitable organisations, or a particular educational philosophy such as those developed by the Italian physician and educator Maria Montessori or the Austrian scientist and philosopher Rudolf Steiner.

1.1 Reflecting on your own experiences of primary education

What was the name of the primary school that you attended as a child? Does its name give any clues as to what the school was actually like? In the following activity we ask you to think in more detail about the characteristics and ‘feel’ of a primary school.

Activity 1 Characteristics of a primary school

Allow about 40 minutes

Think about a setting for primary aged children that you are familiar with. This could be the school that you (or your children) attended some time ago, the setting where you currently work or volunteer, or perhaps the setting that your own children attend. In the box below, write a sentence in response to each of the following questions to form a brief ‘pen portrait’ of the school you have been thinking about.

1. What is the school's location?
2. What are the buildings like?
3. What type of school is it (e.g. infant, junior, primary, elementary, middle)?
4. How many pupils are there?
5. What is the range of backgrounds of the pupils?
6. Does it feel like a happy place? If yes, why? If not, why not?
7. How do the teachers or other staff seem (e.g. busy, cheerful, anxious, stressed)?
8. How does the school interact with its surrounding community?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

In many countries around the world, primary education has been subjected to repeated changes in recent decades. Many of these changes have involved the introduction of national strategies and approaches that schools are required to follow. While this has led to greater homogeneity across schools within national education systems – in terms of teaching, assessment, the appearance of classrooms and the deployment of teaching assistants – this does not mean that primary schools are all the same. If you were to visit two schools of the same type, even within the same area and each with a similar intake of children, it is possible that you would experience two very different schools in terms of their 'feel'. If you were to compare your own time at primary school to what goes on in primary schools today, it is likely that there would be significant differences.

1.2 Fulbridge Academy

We now step inside a primary school in England to consider in some detail its approach to learning and teaching. Through the audio material, you will hear from some of the staff and children about what they do and what it feels like to be a member of the school community.

Fulbridge Academy is a large primary school in Peterborough, in the east of England. Many of its 700 pupils have recently arrived in the UK from a wide range of countries, including Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Spain, Portugal, Iran and Afghanistan. There are 130 members of staff working at the school. The high number of pupils from around the world who speak languages other than English reflects increasing global mobility, which is changing the nature of many primary schools in the UK, even those in remote areas. Immigration has been a significant factor influencing primary education in the UK in the first decades of the twenty-first century, owing largely to the free movement of people within the European Union (EU) as well as those outside the EU who are fleeing war or political persecution. Following the outcome of the June 2016 referendum for the UK to leave the EU, it seems likely that the volume and patterns of immigration into the UK will change in the next few years, but the opportunities and challenges for schools will remain for the foreseeable future.

The title 'academy' refers to a category of school within the English education system at the time of writing. The UK government website (www.gov.uk) provides the following definition:

Academies are publicly funded independent schools. Academies don't have to follow the national curriculum and can set their own term times. They still have to follow the same rules on admissions, special educational needs and exclusions as other state schools. Academies get money direct from the government, not the local council. They're run by an academy trust, which employs the staff. Some academies have sponsors such as businesses, universities, other schools, faith groups or voluntary groups. Sponsors are responsible for improving the performance of their schools.

(GOV.UK, 2014)

We have provided this definition as contextual information to place Fulbridge Academy at a particular point in history. Academies are a relatively recent introduction in England, and they may, with subsequent changes of government, be subject to different requirements or possibly replaced by another category of school. You may be familiar with a similarly changing educational landscape in your own area. The school at Fulbridge opened in 1935, originally as Fulbridge Council School. Since then it has changed its name and adapted and added to the school buildings a number of times, most recently in 2014. The school website (www.fulbridgeacademy.co.uk) sets out Fulbridge Academy's ethos and aims. At the time of writing, these are expressed as follows.

Unlocking potential

At the Fulbridge Academy we must ignite children's imagination and their active, willing and enthusiastic engagement in their learning ...

Our curriculum should enable children to encounter and begin to explore the wealth of human experience through induction into, and active engagement in, the different ways through which humans make sense of their world: intellectual, moral, spiritual, aesthetic, social, emotional and physical, through language, mathematics, science, the humanities, the arts, religion and other ways of knowing and understanding and act upon it.

Creative Thinking is at the heart of the Fulbridge approach to learning. We aspire for the children to explore, negotiate, discover, experiment, speculate, empathise, reflect, collaborate, cooperate, persevere, show initiative, and demonstrate leadership, teamwork, curiosity, flexibility, integrity and curiosity.

You may find that the ethos and aims on the school's website have changed since this course was written. This is because schools regularly review their policies and mission statements in response to changes in their local context and at government level. Statements such as this can be found in the prospectuses and websites of most schools today. It seems important, however, to consider who the intended audience is for these school 'visions' and how they are actually used. Are they written to inform prospective parents, for example, or to remind school staff of the principles intended to underpin their work at the school? If the latter, then how do you think this plays out in practice?

1.3 Curriculum frameworks

Fulbridge Academy states that its vision, aims and curriculum are based on the findings of the Cambridge Primary Review. This was an independent but influential indepth review of the primary curriculum and children's lives and learning in England, led by Robin Alexander at Cambridge University. A key recommendation of the review was that the curriculum for primary aged children should be one that 'guarantees children's entitlement to breadth, depth and balance, and to high standards in all areas of learning, not just the 3Rs, and combines a national framework with protected local elements; ensures that language, literacy and oracy are paramount' (Cambridge Primary Review, 2009, p. 22). The review recommended a framework for the curriculum that is not expressed in terms of the rigid subject areas of the National Curriculum (DfES, 1999), but instead is organised into eight 'domains':

- arts and creativity
- citizenship and ethics
- faith and belief
- language, oracy and literacy
- mathematics
- physical and emotional health
- place and time
- science and technology.

An important element of the review's recommendations was that 70 per cent of teaching time should be devoted to a nationally determined curriculum and the remaining 30 per cent given over to the 'community curriculum' (Cambridge Primary Review, 2009, p. 23). The final report by the Cambridge Primary Review was not adopted by the government, although its authors were able to share and discuss its findings with members of the ruling and opposition political parties. However, the freedoms afforded to schools taking on academy status in England has enabled a number of schools, including Fulbridge Academy, to develop their own curricula based on alternative frameworks such as those recommended by the Cambridge Primary Review. This represents a significant change from the previous requirement, whereby schools were obliged to adhere to the detailed and quite prescriptive national curriculum. It is an example of how political changes impact directly on what takes place in primary schools.

Allowing individual schools a degree of flexibility to develop a curriculum that meets the needs of their own pupils is an approach made explicit in the statutory curricula of a number of countries, including Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence:

The framework is less detailed and prescriptive than previous curriculum advice. It provides professional space for teachers and other staff to use in order to meet the varied needs of all children and young people.

(Education Scotland, n.d., p. 3)

The argument in favour of allowing schools the flexibility to tailor their own curricula may seem a compelling one. However, the independence allowed to academies in England as we write (in 2017) extends considerably further than freedom to adapt their curricula. Some commentators would argue that academies have created a market of competition that militates against a wider community of schools working supportively together.

A 2013 report by the Academies Commission on the impact of the academies programme in England was clear in stressing the need for collaboration across this national community of schools [which] should enable a balance to be struck between independence and interdependence, with the clear aim of serving children and young people well (Academies Commission, 2013, p. 5). The report made this point, having found that collaboration between academies was not always happening and that in ‘too many’ cases ‘the autonomy afforded to academies resulted in them demonstrating insufficient responsiveness to parents and the local community’ (p. 31).

Changes to education systems nearly always provoke passionate arguments from all sides. It therefore seems likely that the extent to which individual schools should be allowed the freedom to operate autonomously within a nation’s education system is likely to remain a topic of rigorous political debate well into the future. Spend a few minutes reflecting on where you stand in this debate.

1.4 The school community

In 2015 we visited Fulbridge Academy and met a range of adults and children at the school. In Activity 2 you will hear what they had to say about their involvement and experiences as participants in school life.

Activity 2 Learning and the school curriculum

Allow 45 minutes

In the following audio recording, you will hear from all the adults and children that we talked to at Fulbridge Academy. Listening to the recording will give you an overall sense of the school and the people who work and learn there. This audio is over 20 minutes in length, so you may find it helpful to listen to it in two or more segments. For example, you may wish to pause halfway through and jot down your thoughts at that point before listening to the rest of the recording.



Figure 2 Staff at Fulbridge Academy

Audio content is not available in this format.

Based on what you have just heard, write down your responses to the following questions.

1. What comes across as the most important characteristics of the school’s approach to the curriculum?
2. Who are the learners at the school?
3. In what ways is the impression given of Fulbridge Academy similar to or different from your own experiences of primary education or your expectations of what primary education should be like?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

A phrase from Iain Erskine, principal of Fulbridge Academy, that stood out for us was the desire to 'create an environment which makes you long for childhood ... which makes you truly want to learn and become learners'. This seems to be about making what excites, intrigues and motivates children the starting point for thinking about and planning the learning experiences that are provided for them, rather than starting with a prescribed curriculum and planning how to deliver it to the children. How does this compare with the kind of learning activities you experienced during your time at primary school?

We also found it significant that the school does not use textbooks or worksheets, and felt that this was about enabling the school to be fully responsive to the changing needs of its learners without being constrained by fixed resources – especially given the diverse make-up of its pupil intake. This ability to be responsive – to create a 'bespoke curriculum', to use Iain's words – is also characteristic of an approach that sees all members of the school community, adults as well as children, as learners. For the adults in the school, this involves being open to learn from each other, from parents, school governors, visiting professionals such as speech and language therapists, members of the wider community and, most important of all, the children themselves.

1.5 The wider context

Every school has its own, unique character, as Kim Walker says in the audio recording. However, as we have hinted at already, individual primary schools do not exist in a vacuum, and it is important to have some understanding of the wider context when thinking about the nature of a particular school and the way it functions. We have already briefly considered this wider context in terms of the global political situation and (more locally) how a school's curriculum can be shaped by government policy.

Another contextual factor, with considerable relevance to what you have heard about Fulbridge Academy, is the trend since the mid-1990s in the UK towards what Alan Dyson has labelled 'full service and extended schools' (Dyson, 2011, p. 179). Dyson describes how in England this has involved schools offering 'a menu of out-of-hours activities and childcare for students, support for families, opportunities for adult learning, and community access to school facilities' (p. 181). He cites examples of similar initiatives over the same period in Scotland, Australia, Canada, the Irish Republic, the Netherlands and South Africa. Catherine Simon describes how this has been part of 'a wider international movement towards community-orientated schooling, particularly in areas of disadvantage' (Simon, 2013, p. 20).

Teaching assistants (and adults other than qualified teachers), in addition to their work supporting children's learning in the classroom, have played a significant role in the provision of these 'extended services'. For the remainder of this course, we look at the growth of the primary school workforce and the involvement of other adults to support children's learning and development in primary schools.

2 Teaching assistants in primary education

Since first being introduced into schools in the 1960s as ‘aides’, ‘helpers’ and ‘auxiliaries’, teaching assistants have become central figures in supporting children’s learning in primary schools. In the UK, two factors in particular have been linked to the employment of teaching assistants in schools. First, the move towards inclusive education has resulted in the appointment of assistants who provide close support in mainstream classrooms to children with complex learning and behaviour needs. Second, the devolving of budgets to schools by local authorities and government has enabled headteachers to employ increasing numbers of teaching assistants as a cost-effective way of providing support to hard-pressed classroom teachers.

In England, ‘workforce remodelling’ (the term used to describe government initiatives since 2001 to address work–life issues for teachers) has brought about an even greater focus on the roles of the adults who work in schools, especially teaching assistants. Over this period, the roles carried out by adults other than teachers to support children’s learning and development in primary schools have continued to evolve.

2.1 Supporting teachers

Jean Ionta works as a pupil support assistant at St Patrick’s Primary School in Glasgow. ‘Pupil support assistant’ has been the preferred name for teaching assistants in Scotland. They often provide both specialist learning support and more general support to teachers. While filming at the school, we focused on Jean as she went about her work with children and staff. We put these aspects of her work together to give a sense of her day and the professional and personal skills she brings to her role.

Activity 3 A day in the life

Allow about 30 minutes

As you watch the following video, note how Jean goes about her work, how she describes it, and how others portray her contribution. Note in particular how she puts an emphasis on children’s social and personal development and her part in this. Jot down your thoughts in the box below.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video: Jean](#)



Provide your answer...

Discussion

Near the very end of the video, Jean states that she feels 'the children are relaxed with me'. This is a comment that appears to point to the many relationship-making opportunities that are shown in this video. Learning-support work fosters the making of relationships with children in a way that is perhaps not always possible for qualified teachers. They often need to stand back to adopt more of an 'overseeing' and leadership role for large groups of pupils. In their close work with children, teaching assistants can have important and different teaching opportunities. We would argue that, perhaps more than teachers, teaching assistants have openings to develop approaches that are 'intuitive' (Houssart, 2011) and 'nurturing' (Hancock, 2012).

2.2 Volunteers

When we think of the primary school workforce, it is important to remember that some of the adults who carry out support roles in schools are unpaid volunteers. Smith (2011) reported that, in January 2010, there were 126,300 full-time-equivalent teaching assistants employed in local-authority maintained nursery and primary schools in England. This comprises approximately half of the total number of teachers, but the way in which assistants are employed, often on part-time contracts, means that as 'bodies' they can equal the number of teachers in any one school.

Local authorities do not, in general, keep figures for volunteer staff, but a national survey of English primary, special and independent schools, conducted in 2000 (LGNT0, 2000), found that each school had an average of 8.5 (includes part-time) volunteer staff. This was admittedly some time ago, and from our impression of the numbers of volunteers who have studied on the OU's primary education modules, we think this has increased over

time. Clearly, volunteers are an important, if somewhat under acknowledged, resource in many schools.

2.3 Titles, duties and ways of working

There are a number of terms in current use to describe those who provide learning support to children in primary education around the world. It would be misleading to suggest that these terms describe the same roles and responsibilities. Rather, they relate to important role distinctions, and these distinctions are significant because they reflect the wide variety of work that assistants do.

Since the 1980s in the UK, many adults who support children's learning in schools have experienced a notable change in their day-to-day responsibilities. The concerted focus of government on literacy and numeracy has drawn many teaching assistants into 'teaching-related' duties – work that, at one time, only a qualified teacher would have done. Barbara Lee (2003, p. 27) notes the shift in terms of 'indirect support' (e.g. producing materials and managing resources) and 'direct support' (e.g. working with individual children and small groups). Further, teaching assistants and other support staff are often key contributors to the extended services, such as after-school clubs and home-school liaison activities, provided by schools.

Regardless of this shift in duties, tasks associated with the maintenance of the learning environment are still necessary, as they enable teaching and learning to take place. So it is relevant to ask who does this work if assistants are spending more time helping children to learn? You may have some insights into this. Perhaps one answer is that there is more sharing of maintenance tasks between teachers, paid support staff, volunteers and children.

2.4 Distinctive contributions

In Activity 3 you considered the various support roles of Jean Ionta, a pupil support assistant. Let us now consider in more detail the nature of the work that assistants do and the way they contribute to the totality of work in a classroom.

Job descriptions aim to capture the work that teaching assistants should do. The work may be categorised in terms of administrative duties, classroom resource preparation, and work with children. An interesting framework for thinking about roles, duties and the focus of support work was provided by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE, 2000a, para. 2.5), which suggested four levels of support for:

- pupils
- the teacher
- the school
- the curriculum.

You will consider the usefulness of this framework in the next activity.

Activity 4 Roles and responsibilities

Allow about 1 hour

Now read, [‘Ten titles and roles’ by Roger Hancock and Jennifer Colloby \(2013\)](#). It contains thumbnail sketches of the roles and responsibilities of ten learning support staff members.

Select one sketch that particularly interests you, and consider the extent to which the title and role described relate to the DfEE’s four-part framework. How far does the role you have focused on compare to your own or, if you do not currently work in learning support, your perception of the work of a teaching assistant? Make some notes in the box below.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

A factor that we have not yet mentioned but that impacts on the ways in which teaching assistants are deployed is their flexibility as a workforce. Many are employed on a part-time basis, often with short-term contracts. One classroom assistant told us, ‘My job description changes every term!’ Teaching assistants may be moved around in a school so that they can work with individuals and groups of children as and when the need arises. As you may know, in England the national literacy and numeracy strategies introduced a large number of ‘catch-up’ and ‘booster’ programmes for children who were not meeting expectations. Teaching assistants have been very much involved in these programmes, which require considerable flexibility on their part as they work with children across year groups.

2.5 The primary school workforce in the United Kingdom



Figure 3 Cindy Bhuhi, bilingual teaching assistant, Lee Infants School, Slough.

In the United Kingdom, the increase in the number of other adults working alongside teachers in primary classrooms was most marked between the mid-1990s and 2012. The seeds of this development were sown when, in the 1980s, support staff were employed to support the inclusion in mainstream classrooms of children with special educational needs. Teaching assistants (both then and now alternatively called ‘special needs assistants’, ‘learning support assistants’, ‘pupil support assistants’, and other similar titles) were recruited to provide individualised help for children.

A distinctive feature of the primary school workforce in the UK is that it is predominantly female. In 2013, 87 per cent of primary school teachers in the UK were female (World Bank, 2015), a similar percentage to that found in many countries around the world, although in a relatively small number of countries (mainly in Africa) male primary teachers are in the majority. In England, a government report found that, in November 2013, 92 per cent of teaching assistants were female (DfE, 2014, p. 6). This report did not distinguish between teaching assistants working in primary and secondary schools, but based on the students who have studied courses for teaching assistants at The Open University, the percentage of female teaching assistants in primary schools may be even greater.

As the effects of ‘workforce remodelling’ played out within the UK, the caring element of teachers’ roles was increasingly devolved to teaching assistants and other support staff. Speaking back in 2003, Heather Wakefield, head of local government liaison at the public service trade union UNISON at the time, emphasised the link between caring work in the public sector and the recruitment of a predominantly female workforce. She suggested that a woman’s role in the household and in the family was being ‘imported’ into the workplace where it is of value in a number of ways, not least in terms of a woman’s supporting and caring abilities (Wakefield, 2003). She also made the point that this kind of ‘caring work’ had traditionally been poorly paid and accorded low status by employers. From your own experience and knowledge of support roles in primary schools, how far do

you feel that the nature of this work and the status accorded to it as described by Wakefield, are still in evidence today?

2.6 Support staff in Europe and beyond

Teaching assistants and other related learning support staff work in many countries, including in Europe, the USA, Canada, Australia and Japan, and in the schools for children of British armed forces personnel posted overseas. As might be expected, however, the status and responsibilities attached to these support roles varies considerably between educational systems. For example, a team of researchers from The Open University led by Jonathan Rix, while visiting Japan and Italy as part of their review of international policy and practice in learning support, found that:

Within Japan, the roles of teachers and assistants were clearly adhered to, with teachers having responsibility for teaching and assistants providing non-teaching support. Within Italy, the qualification level required of teachers and support teachers was equivalent, creating the opportunity for shared responsibility.

(Rix et al., 2013, pp. 183–4)

Spend a few minutes considering your own knowledge or experience of learning support roles. Thinking of Japan and Italy as being at either end of a continuum, where do you feel the situations you are familiar with would fit in?

3 Teaching assistant or assistant teacher?

As we have indicated, volunteers often spend time in schools assisting teachers, and teaching assistants are sometimes employed without necessarily having any specific training (although, increasingly, once they start working in school, in-service training is provided for them). However, volunteers and salaried support staff often have relevant informal experience, transferable abilities and intuitive skills that can support the work they do in schools, and will help the learning and development of children, particularly in large classes.

3.1 What is the value of teaching assistants?

In 2009 a systematic review of research literature by Alison Alborz and colleagues found that teaching assistants who are trained and supported can have a positive impact on the development of basic literacy skills of individual or small groups of children, and that, in addition, “sensitive” TA support can facilitate pupil engagement in learning and social activities, with the class teacher and their peers’ (Alborz et al., 2009, p. 1).

However, there are contradictions in the research literature. A large-scale study by Blatchford et al. (2012) examined two aspects of the impact of teaching assistants:

1. the effects on teachers in terms of their workloads, job satisfaction, levels of stress, and their teaching
2. the effects on pupils in terms of their learning and behaviour, measures of positive approaches to learning, and their academic progress in English, mathematics and science.

As might be expected, given other research studies, the researchers found that teaching assistants had positive effects on teachers and their teaching. Surprisingly, however, they found a ‘negative relationship’ between teaching assistant support and pupils’ measured academic progress. We find this hard to believe.

The authors do not attribute blame to teaching assistants, however. They explain this finding by pointing to factors governing teaching assistants’ working contexts, the general lack of briefing that they receive, and the need for teachers to share their own, higher-order skills and knowledge. Nevertheless, our contacts with teaching assistants and their work over a long period suggests that the reality is more complex than this.

3.2 Children’s and parents’ views of teaching assistants

What do children and parents think of teaching assistants? Curiously little has been written about their perspectives. A small-scale study involving 78 primary-aged children in England (Eyres et al., 2004) showed that children can, when asked, differentiate between their own class teacher and other adults who work with them. However, the children reported a substantial overlap between the activities of teachers and teaching assistants. For instance, as Eyres et al. (2004) quote,

Eight-year-old Sarah said:

'Well, the helpers seem to help out and do what the teacher does and the teacher seems to mostly teach children. But sometimes the helpers teach children.'

Eleven-year-old Lisette speculated:

'Well, Miss McAngel is the actual teacher, teacher, teacher. She actually teaches us everything because she's just a teacher and she teaches us everything. But, if you like, you've got another teacher, they teach us – pretty much they'd teach us everything but Miss McAngel would do different things with us – d'you know what I mean? – sort of, I can't put it into words really – but – can you help? (looking towards Tim, her friend).'

(Eyres et al., 2004, pp. 157–8)

To a large extent, teachers and teaching assistants were seen by the children in this study as working in 'interdependent' ways, with each making a significant contribution to children's learning.

With regard to parents, a survey of parents' perceptions of assistants by two specialist teacher assistants working at Roche Community School in Cornwall (Strongman and Mansfield, 2004) found that most of the parents placed great value on the contribution of teaching assistants. As one parent wrote, 'They are of value as a backup for the teacher, as an extra pair of eyes in the classroom.' Another parent noted, 'A good assistant can be priceless in the classroom. With up to thirty-seven children in each class, how could a teacher do her job effectively without assistants?'

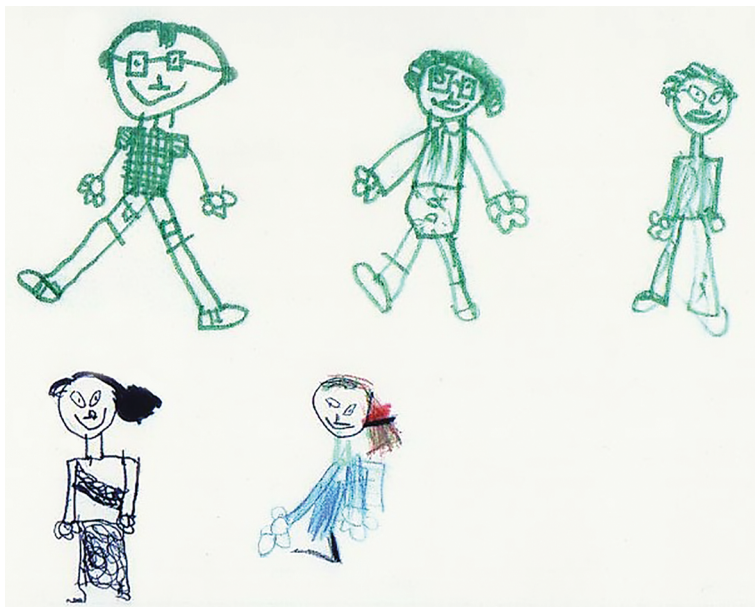


Figure 4 Soraya's drawing shows the range of adults who worked in her Year 2 classroom.

However, while these parents recognised the important role of assistants in their children's primary school, many also felt that there should be a clear distinction between the roles of teachers and teaching assistants. As one parent said, 'Teaching assistants should not "teach" the class, they should only assist the teacher.' The extent to which this linguistic distinction – between 'teaching' and 'assisting' – can be maintained in

classrooms when many teachers and teaching assistants are now working closely together in teams is open to question. When a teaching assistant 'assists' or 'supports' or 'helps' a child, there is always the possibility that the child will learn. Therefore, it could be said that the assistant has 'taught' that child, just as it could be said that parents teach their children many things, and children often teach each other.

Perhaps a more appropriate way of thinking about this is to say that teachers, as qualified professionals, hold the overall responsibility for what goes on in a classroom in terms of learning and teaching. Children, it seems, understand this. In the study by Eyres et al. (2004) a number of children were clear that the teachers in their classrooms were ultimately in charge. As 6-year-old Sam commented:

Well, Mrs Wilson and Mrs Georgio [both teaching assistants] don't tell us what to do. Mrs Watts [the teacher] tells us what to do.

(Eyres et al., 2004, p. 155)

However, the comments of Jessica Mason, teaching assistant at Fulbridge Academy, suggest that in some schools at least this distinction may have become less marked in the decade since Eyres et al. carried out their research, as the nature of the roles carried out by support staff has continued to evolve.

3.3 The evolving role of the teacher

The impact of the expanding contribution of teaching assistants and other support staff on the teacher's role has generally been recognised as being positive. It is worth acknowledging, however, that many teachers have had to make adjustments to their practice in order to work with teaching assistants as team colleagues. While many are able to make this adjustment, we do sometimes hear of teachers who find it hard to work well with another adult in a classroom context.



Figure 5 Adults working as a team to support pupils' learning.

Most teachers, if not all, would agree that teaching assistants and other support staff bring considerable benefits to the classroom and to school life more widely. However, while there is talk of these additional adults reducing teachers' workloads, the reality is not so straightforward. If teachers are to benefit from the experience and expertise that these colleagues can bring to the partnership, they need to find time to discuss and share ideas

on teaching and the curriculum. This is not unlike the role that teachers take on in their supervision of students on teaching practice, where co-planning, co-teaching and feedback form much of the early stages of their training.

4 Support in action

For some support staff, their role of supporting teaching and learning in the classroom may have evolved with time. Others may have been recruited to the role for a very specific purpose, for example to support a particular child identified as having special educational needs. Or perhaps they may lie somewhere in the middle, having started working as a teaching assistant just as the role was being reviewed and bearing witness to its expansion and development. We now focus with a degree of detail on the practice of teaching assistant Caroline Higham.

4.1 Focusing on practice



Figure 6 Caroline Higham

Caroline Higham is relatively new to the role of full-time teaching assistant. She has two children who were educated at the school where she is employed. Caroline would eventually like to be a qualified teacher; she is studying to complete a relevant degree on a part-time basis.

Over the few years that Caroline has been at the school, she has seen her working hours increased and the nature of her responsibilities expanded. She now has considerable responsibility for organising and maintaining the school's reading programme, and she works closely with the headteacher, who is responsible for this area of the curriculum. Caroline is involved in the refitting of the school's library and the purchase of new library books. She enjoys her associated responsibility for children's progress and attainment. She keeps records of the individual children she supports, and she updates these at the end of each school day and shares them with staff.

Caroline has gained many insights into the children's learning and the barriers to learning that they might experience. Parents often ask her for advice, so she has to judge when to pass their requests to teaching staff. In her own area in the school, where she sometimes works with individuals or small groups of children, the atmosphere is welcoming and there are stimulating displays on the walls.

Activity 5 Providing support

Allow about 50 minutes

Read, '[Support in a mathematics lesson](#)' by Jennifer Colloby (2013).

When you have read the extract, look at these recommendations put forward by Jonathan Sharples et al. (2014, p. 4):

- use teaching assistants to add value to what teachers do, not replace them
- use teaching assistants to help pupils develop independent learning skills and manage their own learning
- ensure that teaching assistants are fully prepared for their role in the classroom.

To what extent do you think each of these features is evident in Caroline's work as described in the reading? Note down your thoughts in the box below.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

We feel that the reading includes many examples of the first two recommendations, and that these are particularly evident in the way that Caroline acts unobtrusively to mediate between the children and what they are required to do in the lesson. In respect of the third point, we note that unlike many teaching assistants, Caroline is employed on a full-time basis, which enables her to engage in productive planning ahead of the lesson.

4.2 Assisting, supporting and teaching

The idea that teaching assistants 'assist' teachers and 'support' learning has been the official view of a teaching assistant's role for a long time, and many policymakers continue to regard their work in this way. Suggesting that teaching assistants teach children has been taboo, but this appears to be changing. In England and Wales, Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs) were originally meant to 'cover' lessons that were previously planned by teachers, but there is reason to think that many are teaching, not least because covering invariably involves interaction with children, and that potentially moves an adult into a teaching relationship (Hancock et al., 2010; Sendorek, 2009). Dillow (2010) suggests that teaching assistants are involved in jobs that 'look like teaching' (p. 8), as well as in more traditional assisting tasks. Blatchford et al. (2012) state that if teaching assistants have a 'direct pedagogical, instructional relationship with pupils' (p. 140), they are to all intents teaching.

Although, in theory, 'assisting' marks out a conceptual distinction between teachers and assistants, in practice this is very difficult to maintain. This is because the effect of what adults do with children in schools is, to a considerable degree, determined by children's reactions to the adults who work with them. Teaching is not something that can be done 'to' children; to be successful, it is an act that needs their involvement – something that is done 'with' them. Children are therefore always agents in the teaching enterprise. It therefore follows that a teaching assistant could conceivably, from a child's perspective, teach more effectively than a teacher.

5 Looking to the future

It would be a brave person who tries to predict the future in any area of work. However, in gathering resources for this course we have been in a position to obtain a good sense of how teachers, teaching assistants and other adults are currently working in primary schools across the UK and elsewhere. We are also in touch with a large number of teaching assistants studying courses with the Open University, and note how they write about their work. This provides us with an idea of how the role is continuing to develop and also how it might possibly change in the future.

We have heard from teachers at Fulbridge Academy about how their role extends considerably beyond what might be thought of as 'traditional' classroom teaching. We have also focused specifically on support staff as an example of how the primary school workforce in the United Kingdom has evolved. The research literature provides much evidence that additional adults in support roles have, increasingly, become involved in the work that teachers do. We would include here the following traditional teacher tasks:

- planning for children's learning
- teaching lessons
- evaluating and assessing learning
- teaching whole classes
- supporting children in managing their own behaviour
- liaising with parents about children and their learning
- managing and appraising staff.

Of course, not all support staff do all of these things. Some do some of them as well as other kinds of school work, such as the preparation of learning resources, playtime supervision, running after-school clubs and collating school records. At the time of writing this course, the extent of support staff involvement in qualified teachers' work seemed quite considerable. This can be regarded as a steady, albeit quietly implemented, development over time. However, it is possible only to speculate on how the primary school workforce might develop in the future. It seems likely that it will continue to change in response to government policy and other local and global factors, but the nature and pace of such change is difficult to predict.

Conclusion

One of the central aims of this free course, *The world of the primary school*, has been for you to reflect on your own experience of primary education and relate this to the wider context of learning and teaching in the primary years today. You have looked in particular at the roles, responsibilities and experiences of a range of staff at a particular primary school in England, and you have reflected on these in relation to your own ideas about primary education.

The nature of the workforce in primary schools in the UK has evolved since the final decades of the twentieth century, and so have the roles of support staff. In many countries, the workforce in primary schools is dominated by women, and there are good reasons why parents, in particular mothers, are attracted to working in support roles in schools. These support staff make a significant contribution to primary schools, and they bring valuable experience from their lives and previous work. Interestingly, too, the overlap between the roles of teachers and support staff has increased over time, and the distinctive contribution that support staff make in their own right has become more defined.

This course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [E103 Learning and teaching in the primary years](#).

References

- The Academies Commission (2013) 'Unleashing Greatness: Getting the best from an academised system' [Online]. Available at www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/unleashing-greatness.pdf (Accessed 13 July 2015).
- Alborz, A., Pearson, D., Farrell, P., and Howes, A. (2009) *The Impact of Adult Support Staff on Pupils and Mainstream Schools*, London, Institute of Education (EPPI Centre).
- Blatchford, P., Russell, A. and Webster, R. (2012) *Reassessing the Impact of Teaching Assistants: How Research Challenges Practice and Policy*, London, Routledge.
- The Cambridge Primary Review (2009) *Introducing the Cambridge Primary Review – Children, Their world, Their education* [Online] Cambridge, University of Cambridge/ Esmee Fairburn. Available at http://cprtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/CPR_revised_booklet.pdf (Accessed 16 June 2015).
- Department for Education (DfE) (2014) 'Teachers workload diary survey 2013' [Online]. Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/285941/DFE-RR316.pdf (Accessed 13 July 2015).
- Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) (2000) *The Teaching Assistant's File: Induction Training For Teaching Assistants*, DfEE, London.
- Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (1999) *The National Curriculum for England and Wales*, London, DfES.
- Dillow, C. (2010) *Supporting Stories: Being a Teaching Assistant*, Stoke-on-Trent, Trentham Books.
- Dyson, A. (2011) 'Full service and extended schools, disadvantage and social justice', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, vol. 41, no. 2, pp. 177–93.

Learning and Teaching Scotland (n.d.) *Curriculum for Excellence: Numeracy and Mathematics Experiences and Outcomes* [Online]. Available at www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/all_experiences_outcomes_tcm4-539562.pdf (Accessed 11 June 2015).

Eyres, I., Cable, C., Hancock, R. and Turner, J. (2004) ‘“Whoops, I forgot David”: children’s perceptions of the adults who work in their classrooms’, *Early Years*, vol. 24, no.2, pp. 149–162.

Hancock, R. (2012) ‘The pastoral pedagogy of teaching assistants’ in Cole, T., Daniels, H. and Visser, J. (eds) *The Routledge International Companion to Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, London, Routledge.

Hancock, R., Hall, T., Cable, C. and Eyres, I. (2010) ‘“They call me wonder woman”: the job jurisdictions and workplace learning of higher level teaching assistants’, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, vol. 40, no. 2, pp. 97–112.

Houssart, J. (2011) ‘“I can be quite intuitive”: teaching assistants on how they support primary mathematics’, *Proceedings of the British Society for Research into Learning Mathematics*, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 67–72.

Lee, B. (2003) ‘Teaching assistants in schools’, *Education Journal*, vol. 68, pp. 25–7.

Local Government National Training Organisation (LGNTO) (2000) *Survey of Education Support Staff and Volunteers in Nursery and Primary Schools*, London, LGNTO.

Rix, J., Sheehy, K., Fletcher-Campbell, F., Crisp, M. and Harper, A. (2013) *Continuum of Education Provision for Children with Special Educational Needs: Review of International Policies and Practices*, Trim, Co. Meath, National Council for Special Education.

Sendorek, R.J. (2009) ‘New professionals in the classroom? Higher Level Teaching Assistants in primary schools: from policy to practice’, unpublished EdD thesis, London, University of London, Institute of Education.

Sharples, J., Webster, R. and Blatchford, P. (2015) *Making Best Use of Teaching Assistants*, London, Education Endowment Foundation. Available online at https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/uploads/pdf/TA_Guidance_Report_Interactive.pdf (Accessed 13 July 2015).

Simon, C. (2013) ‘Extended schooling and community education: mapping the policy terrain’. *London Review of Education*, vol. 11, no.1, pp. 20–31.

Smith, L. (2011) Personal communication with Lisa Smith, Data Services Group, Department for Education, 16 February.

Strongman, M. and Mansfield, T. (2004) ‘Survey of parents’ perceptions of teaching assistants’, Unpublished study, Roche, Roche Community School.

Wakefield, H. (2003) ‘Public servants’, *Woman’s Hour*, London, BBC Radio 4, 15 November.

The World Bank (2015) ‘Primary education, teachers (% female)’ [Online] Available at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.TCHR.FE.ZS> (Accessed 13 July 2015).

Acknowledgements

This free course was written by Roger Hancock, Jennifer Colloby, Martin Crisp and Kim Walker.

Except for third party materials and otherwise stated in the acknowledgements section, this content is made available under a

[Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 Licence](#).

The material acknowledged below is Proprietary and used under licence (not subject to Creative Commons Licence). Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following sources for permission to reproduce material in this course:

Images

Course image: © BSIP SA / Alamy Stock Photo.

Figure 1: © Chris Haughton adapted with permission.

Illustrations

Figure 2: permission of Iain Erskine (headteacher, Fulbridge Academy), Jessica Mason (teaching assistant) Fulbridge Academy, Louise Chatterton (teacher) Fulbridge Academy, Helen Bath (Chair of Governors) Fulbridge Academy, Jean Hawksworth (teacher) Fulbridge Academy.

Every effort has been made to contact copyright owners. If any have been inadvertently overlooked, the publishers will be pleased to make the necessary arrangements at the first opportunity.

Don't miss out:

1. Join over 200,000 students, currently studying with The Open University –

<http://www.open.ac.uk/choose/ou/open-content>

2. Enjoyed this? Find out more about this topic or browse all our free course materials on OpenLearn – <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/>

3. Outside the UK? We have students in over a hundred countries studying online qualifications – <http://www.openuniversity.edu/> – including an MBA at our triple accredited Business School.