

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Classroom assistants in primary schools: Employment and deployment

Other

How to cite:

Hancock, Roger; Swann, Will; Marr, Alan; Turner, Janet and Cable, Carrie (2002). Classroom assistants in primary schools: Employment and deployment. Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Swindon.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2005 W.R. Hancock

Version: [\[not recorded\]](#)

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/snDescription.asp?sn=5199>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's [data policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

The Open University

Faculty of Education and Language Studies

Centre for Curriculum and Teaching Studies

'Classroom assistants in primary schools: employment and deployment.'

ESRC funded project: R000237803

Roger Hancock, Will Swann,
Alan Marr, Janet Turner and Carrie Cable

Report prepared for a dissemination seminar

21st January 2002
Open University Conference Centre,
344-354 Gray's Inn Road, Kings Cross, London WC1 X8BP

The ESRC project team:

*Alan Marr, Research Fellow
Janet Turner, Freelance Researcher
Carrie Cable, Research Associate
Will Swann and Roger Hancock, Co-directors*

email: w.r.hancock@open.ac.uk Tel. 01908 652443

CONTENTS

	page
Executive summary	3
1. Background to the research study	6
2. Research strategy	6
3. Assistants in the study	8
4. Growth, variation and costs	10
5. Recruitment, conditions of service and pay	12
6. Patterns of deployment	16
7. Training	18
8. Assistants and teachers working together	20
9. Conclusion	25
References	27
Appendices	31

Executive Summary

The project used case study, survey, and analysis of Form 7 data to research the employment and deployment of classroom assistants in three English LEAs. Interviews were carried out with LEA personnel and union officers, questionnaires were sent to a stratified sample of 500 schools within the three LEAs, and case studies were conducted in five schools.

The main findings are as follows.

1. Distribution

A dramatic rise in employment of classroom assistants has brought about a change in the structure of the primary school workforce. However, notable variations were present in the number of assistants in the three LEAs, and assistants were variously distributed between individual schools. Additionally, the number of assistants employed by a school was loosely associated with its size and pupil need. Given the widespread recognition of the value of assistants, and the pressures on schools to perform well, this inequality of resource must be of concern.

2. Recruitment

Although teacher recruitment could be problematic, headteachers reported few difficulties recruiting assistants. The way in which assistant recruitment was managed varied considerably between the LEAs and their schools. However, many schools offered employment to assistants once they had become known, often as volunteer helpers. This process, although safe and convenient for schools, is of concern in terms of equal employment opportunities.

3. Conditions of service and pay

The great majority of assistants worked part-time with just 50 per cent on permanent contracts. Even at a time of government-funded increases, many assistants were still vulnerable to budget fluctuations - one in five headteachers reported a decrease in assistant numbers. Most assistants earned between £5 - £6 an hour and there was recognition that this was inadequate. The dilemma for schools, however, is whether to employ assistants on low pay or deny teachers and children the support they need.

4. Deployment

Most teachers had between 6 and 15 hours a week contact with assistants. There was high assistant involvement in the literacy and numeracy hours and low involvement in other areas of the curriculum. Assistant deployment could be complex and 'fragmented' with assistants supporting individuals and groups of children from a number of classes. This was aimed to spread the impact of a valued resource, however, it raises issues around the continuity of an assistant's experience with children.

5. Training

Although a considerable amount of training was on offer to assistants, the range and availability varied between LEAs and schools. Many assistants were not paid for attending staff meetings or school training sessions. One in ten assistants had themselves paid for recent training. This seemed very unfair given their low pay but reflected the pressures on school budgets. Although one-in-five assistants had applied for information to become a teacher, few had actually enrolled on a course. Family commitments were cited as a factor and assistants considered their own work to be important. Also, a teacher's responsibilities and workloads were seen as unattractive.

6. Role overlap with teachers

There was substantial evidence that many assistants were doing work done traditionally by teachers. For instance, 84% of teachers said assistants contributed to the assessment of children's work. Assistants did 'servicing' work that released teachers to teach but they were also sharing in the teaching. Assistants varied considerably in their classroom abilities. Some were confidently taking on teaching-related work; others were much less skilled. Teachers and assistants worked together and related to each other in a range of ways. The semi-independent roles that some assistants had taken on raised pressing questions related to responsibility.

Conclusion

A sea change has come about in the primary classroom workforce. Teachers have now welcomed assistants into their professional lives in ways that, at one time, would have been very controversial.

Official discourse, however, continues to under-acknowledge the contribution that assistants make in today's classrooms and conceptualises their contribution as an adjunct to the work of teachers rather than an integrated part. There is a lack of recognition of the extent to which teachers and assistants have become inter-dependent team colleagues.

Much is riding on the continued employment of classroom assistants. They are vital to government's notion of a 'deeper professionalism' whereby teachers are fully supported. They are part of a social regeneration process whereby local parents and others are encouraged back to work and, through helping children learn, re-engage with training and education themselves. There is the hope that some assistants will train to become qualified teachers. And there is the fact that teachers and children have come to rely on assistants as a very significant school resource.

Notwithstanding these important developments, the study highlights problems that need to be addressed. These include:

- the variability in the distribution of assistants and the need to standardise levels of resource, and, importantly, adapt them to identified pupil needs;
- the anomalous way in which most assistants are graded and paid as 'manual workers' even though many have taken on aspects of a teacher's role;

- the way in which many assistants are giving unpaid time to schools for staff meetings, lesson planning and training sessions;
- the way in which most assistants sometimes work with groups outside the classroom and the questions posed about pedagogy and legality;
- the need for an appraisal system to review assistant performance and training requirements and the creation of a linear career structure, apart from the 'long haul' to QTS;
- the use of an unregulated entry and recruitment process, which is understandably safe for schools, but which is not in the interest of equal employment practice and social inclusion.

Classroom assistants are highly valued by LEA and school personnel but they are a feminised and structurally marginalised group of workers. Like their counterparts in health and social services, they are liable to be taken for granted. The demands made on assistants by government and schools have been very considerable and they appear likely to increase as the proposed 'remodelling' of the teaching profession takes place. To what extent, therefore, can the education system continue to draw upon poorly paid mothers without there being a consequence for their family involvements and their continued willingness to give much to teachers and children in primary classrooms?

1. Background to the research study

Our study arose out of the Open University's involvement in providing a course for specialist teacher assistants and an interest in maximising the effectiveness of school-based training for assistants (see Loxley *et al.*, 1997; Swann & Loxley, 1998).

When fieldwork began in 1999, a cluster of studies related to assistants in primary schools reported on their findings (e.g. FAS, n.d. 1998?; Lee & Mawson, 1998; NUT, 1998; PAT, 1998; Smith *et al.*, 1999; Watkinson, 1999). The main themes highlighted by these included the need for:

- a) improved conditions of service and pay;
- b) clarity regarding the contributions of the various types of assistant;
- c) clarity about the difference between assistants and teachers;
- d) a greater recognition of the contribution that assistants make;
- e) more training courses and better access to training;
- f) national occupation standards for assistants;
- g) guidance to schools with regard to the use of support staff.

Since it came to power in 1997, the Labour Government has repeatedly emphasised the role of assistants as part of the workforce in schools (DfEE, 1997a; 1997b; 1998; DfES, 2001). In 1998, for instance, Tony Blair announced that £20m had been earmarked for the appointment of 20,000 additional classroom assistants mainly to help primary teachers implement the new literacy and numeracy hours (Blair, 1998). The late 1990s were therefore a time of an unprecedented growth in assistant numbers and significant developments in the way in which they were deployed to provide support to teachers and children in classrooms.

Our study aimed to examine the employment and deployment of assistants in three English LEAs and their schools at a time of considerable change. We wished to study the factors that were determining employment and deployment and to inform policy and practice.

Comment

- With regard to the above highlighted themes, in recent years, attention has been given to the provision of training courses for assistants (e), to national occupation standards (f) (see, LGNTO, 2001), and guidance on the employment of assistants has been sent to schools (g) (see, DfEE, 2000a). It can be argued, however, that much remains outstanding, particularly (a) 'conditions of service and pay', but also (c) 'clarity about teacher-assistant boundaries' and (d) 'recognition of the contribution that assistants make'.

2. Research strategy

The research strategy used a mixed methodology of interview, documentary analysis, case study and questionnaire survey.

There were three phases to data collection. First, there were case studies of three LEAs to establish their policy and decision making. One was an inner city authority, the

other two were large county LEAs [*Appendix 1, p. 31, contains short descriptions of each LEA*]. These case studies involved interviews with councillors, education officers, advisers and inspectors, an examination of relevant documentary evidence, and interviews with trade union representatives.

Secondly there was a questionnaire survey of assistants, teachers and headteachers. A stratified sample of 500 schools was drawn from the NFER's Register of Schools and 280 sets of questionnaires were sent to schools in LEA 1, 177 to schools in LEA 2, and 43 in LEA 3. Additionally, an analysis of Form 7 data (for 1999) was carried out for the three LEAs.

Each school received five questionnaires. One to be completed by the headteacher, two to be completed by two randomly selected assistants, and two to be completed by two teachers (selected by each of the responding assistants). The returns from LEA 3 were very low. This LEA was not, therefore, included in the survey phase as proposed although it is included in other respects. (*All questionnaire percentages reported in this paper therefore refer just to LEAs 1 and 2.*)

With regard to LEAs 1 and 2, the survey produced 275 questionnaires from assistants, 113 from teachers, and 133 from head teachers. The returned headteacher questionnaires gave a further data set regarding assistants and provided information on gender, age, ethnicity, contracts, salary and role.

Thirdly, five school case studies were carried out - three in LEA 1 and two in LEA 2. These were selected on the basis of providing a range of distinctive assistant practice. Data was collected through interviews with heads, teachers, assistants and parents and through observation of assistants and teachers at work.

Additionally, in LEA 3, interviews were carried out with headteachers and a number of teachers and assistants from two schools.

Comment

- At an early stage in the project, one of the approached LEAs felt it could not be involved in the study. An inspector explained, 'The sense of overload and imposition in schools is very high at present'. A replacement LEA was found. The poor questionnaire response from the 43 sampled schools in LEA 3 appeared to be related also to feelings of overload. David Hart, general secretary of the National Association of Headteachers, has referred to the 140 documents that were sent to schools by a 'hyperactive government' during a six-month period in 2000 (Dean & Thornton, 2001). It is our conclusion that school participation in research, and particularly questionnaire surveys, may have become problematic given the many external demands that are now being made on school staff.
- The research study has benefited from an ongoing association with a number of assistants. Assistants were included as members of the project's consultative group, were involved in the construction of the questionnaires, attended a project seminar on data analysis, and participated at a BERA Conference in 2000. Such contact has been essential for the research team's understanding of classroom practice at a time of rapid change.

3. Assistants in the study

In line with other studies of assistants in primary schools (e.g. LGNTO, 2000), the majority of assistants in the research were White UK women between the ages of 31 and 50 years [see Appendix 2, p. 32]. This finding referred to just LEAs 1 and 2 - two large 'county' authorities. If LEA 3, a city authority, had been included at the questionnaire survey there would have been a higher ethnic minority representation.

Studies have emphasised the way in which personal qualities have been of over-riding importance when schools appoint assistants (e.g. Clayton, 1990; Mortimore *et al.*, 1994). However, the majority of assistants in our study had O levels or GCSEs, a fifth had A levels, 1 in 20 had a degree, and 6 were qualified teachers. Additionally, many also had work-based qualifications related to the role of an assistant e.g. NNEB, BTEC, City & Guilds, Specialist Teacher Assistant, NVQ [see Appendix 3, p. 33].

Most assistants brought parenting skills and previous work experience to their roles. The majority had worked with pre-school children, half had been in administrative positions, and over one in ten had been involved in management. Appendix 4, p. 33, reveals the extent of this potential 'pool' of experience and skills. Timpson (1994), writing about employment inequalities in Canada, argues for greater recognition of the skills that women bring to the labour force, particularly when they return to work after a period of full-time motherhood (see also Hancock & Cable, 2000). Wilkes (cited in Cull, 1992, p. 219) suggests that 'life skills are qualifications'.

Some schools in our study were making inventive use of assistants with particular skills. For instance, in a case study school there was an assistant with responsibility for the school library. She had an English degree. She co-ordinated the work of a number of parent helpers, developed teaching materials to support plans drawn up by teachers, and carried out activities with children in the library to support classroom learning. (see 'Elaine', p. 36)

Many assistants had, at some point in their lives, left a job that gave them higher pay and, probably, higher status too. Pascall (1994) discusses the way in which women leave the paid labour market in order to take on child-care responsibilities, and the consequent effect that this has on career progression which is defined mainly in terms of male careers. A number of assistants in our school case studies, however, expressed a preference for their current work, even though the pay was low and there were unwanted fluctuations in their hours.

Where assistants came from an ethnic minority group (mainly in LEA 3), they might offer important additional language skills and cultural understandings and, possibly, play a bridging role between school and community (see Jowett *et al.*, 1991; Bastiani, 1997; Shah, 2001). However, previous experience is not necessarily good experience, and important knowledge may not be put to good use by schools (see Bird, 2001).

In terms of the main types of assistant within the sample of 275 (from LEAs 1 and 2), it is important not just to think in terms of the generic title 'classroom assistants' but to be aware of the distinctions that were made on returned questionnaires. These were as follows:

Table 1. Titles used by assistants in the study

Title used by assistants on returned questionnaires	%
classroom assistant	42%
non-teaching assistant ¹	18%
nursery nurse	12%
special support assistant	11%
learning support assistant	9%
SEN assistant	3%
specialist teacher assistant	2%
general assistant	2%
teaching assistant	1%
	100%

N=275 (LEAs 1 and 2)

Although just 2% (6) of assistants identified themselves a 'specialist teacher assistant', some 10% (27) of the respondents had been awarded the STA qualification.

At school level, the distinctions in Table 1 were not self-contained. There could be subtle changes in role and task with one assistant taking on several roles during a day or a week [see Appendix 5, p. 33]. In one case study school in LEA 2, the headteacher commented:

'So, we don't have special needs assistants. Every classroom assistant works with children with special needs, irrespective of how they are funded.' (May, 2000)

Forty per cent of assistants said they combined assistant work with other paid work in their schools. Many examples were given, for example, welfare assistant, administrative assistant, after-school co-ordinator, bursar, clerk to the governors, school crossing patrol, IT technician, lunchtime supervisor, and relief receptionist,

Within the five case study schools there were generic job descriptions for specific types of assistant but we found these to be interpreted variously at the level of an individual's role and deployment. Appendix 6, p. 34, contains six thumbnail sketches of a classroom assistant, special needs assistant, learning support assistant/mid-day meals supervisor, special support assistant, library assistant, and volunteer parent.

Comment

- Our research provides evidence to suggest that the 'qualification base' of assistants is developing as a result of increased training opportunities. (see Section 7. Training below)
- The small number of men who become assistants (1.1% in our study) [see Appendix 2, p. 32] is often explained by the low pay. This is doubtless a factor. However, part-time classroom assistant employment is often linked to a mother's childcare responsibilities and there

¹ Marland (2001a) writes of a 'muddled range of terms' and suggests that 'non-teaching staff' is offensive.

continues to be a widespread assumption that women do this. The one male assistant whom we interviewed [*see 'Alan', p. 34*] was unusual in his wish to study for a nursery nurse qualification. Penn & McQuail (1997) report that very few men want to make childcare a career. The feminisation of the assistant workforce needs to be considered alongside concerns that fewer men are now attracted to primary teaching (Smithers, 2002).

4. Growth, variation and costs

i) Growth

The growth in the number of assistants working in primary schools is now well known, even if the scale of this change rarely receives the attention it deserves. *Appendix 7, p. 38*, shows the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers and assistants in primary schools in England from 1992 to 2000.

Over this eight-year period, the number of FTE teachers increased by 3.3 per cent. But, in the same period, the number of 'education support staff'² increased by 111 per cent. The net result has been a dramatic shift in the composition of the primary classroom workforce during the 1990s. In 1992, assistants were 15.4 per cent of this workforce. By 2000, they had grown to 27.2 per cent, nearly doubling their relative size.

ii) Variation

Although the increase in the level of this resource is familiar, the extent of variation has not so far been studied. In order to do this, the study used Form 7 data returned by all primary schools in January 1999. The DfES Statistics Branch provided this to the project.

In terms of the national picture, our analysis revealed a mean of one assistant to 69.1 pupils but the range was extremely large [*see Appendix 8, p. 38*]. The LEA with the most favourable ratio (i.e. 37.2 pupils to one assistant) had more than three times the level of assistant resource of the LEA with the least favourable ratio (116.2 pupils to one assistant). This degree of variation was not present with pupil-teacher ratios.

To what extent do we find similar patterns when we compare schools within a given LEA? We found equally dramatic variations in the levels of assistant resource between schools in each of the three LEAs being studied, and again, these stood in marked contrast to the much narrower variation in pupil-teacher ratios [*see Appendix 9, p. 39*].

Our analysis showed that in the majority of schools (77 per cent) in our three LEAs, assistants made up between 10 and 30 per cent of the classroom workforce. In one sixth of schools, assistants made up 30 to 40 per cent of the workforce. There was a clear trend for schools in LEA 3 to use more assistants as a proportion of the classroom workforce. In one school they made up over half of the total.

² This includes nursery assistants, special needs support staff, minority ethnic support staff, librarians and other support staff based in primary classes.

How is such wide variation in pupil assistant ratio to be explained? One possibility is that some headteachers are choosing to appoint assistants rather than teachers. If this were so, we would expect schools with less favourable pupil-teacher ratios to have more favourable pupil-assistant ratios. In general, in our three LEAs, this was not case. However, it does not rule out the possibility that some individual headteachers have decided to opt for assistants rather than teachers (see 'Costs' below.)

iii) Assistants and pupil need

Assistants are employed to support groups of pupils with particular needs, most often those on the special needs register, those with statements, pupils with English as an additional language and pupils aged under five. An immediate question is whether the variations between schools in the number of assistants are associated with variations in the number of pupils in these groups. Our analysis in this area was suggestive rather than conclusive. However, our results do suggest that pupil need plays a part, but only a part, in explaining the variations between schools in the three LEAs in the level of assistant support available to teachers.

There were additional factors that contributed towards an explanation of the difference in the scale of assistant employment within each of three LEAs. LEA 3, for instance, had a very high percentage of children who were on the special educational needs register but who did not have statements. Following local government boundary changes and the creation of unitary authorities, LEA 1 had experienced a reduction in its Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant. Also, pupil mobility, related to seasonal employment, affected school roles. In both LEAs 1 and 2, poor transport could cause under-enrolment in isolated rural schools thus affecting staffing.

The study did not systematically research volunteer help in classrooms but many schools doubtless benefited from this (see 'Nicole', p. 37). Of the five case study schools, three were particularly well served by parent volunteers and this provided potential employees when paid work became available (see 'Recruitment' below). In a recent comprehensive survey LGNTO (2000) found a considerable volunteer force to be involved in schools. Clearly, this could lead to some schools employing fewer paid assistants.

We found some evidence that volunteers and those on work experience placements were being assigned some of the 'servicing' tasks that assistants would have done in the past.

iv) Costs

Schools varied considerably in their spending on assistants. For instance, in 1998/99 the spending from delegated budgets ranged from 0.1% to 13.6% (i.e. from £1,000 to £73,000). The mean was 5.6%. (Assistant costs - mainly for special support assistants - from central funds for the same period ranged from £308 to £40,000.)

The need to balance fluctuating budgets governed LEA employment policies and school decisions about assistant recruitment. LEA 1 had experienced an overspend in the area of special educational needs and was looking for ways of reducing the cost of statement support. One school employed younger teachers to enable money to be used for the continued employment of assistants.

Fifty-four per cent of headteachers said the number of assistants in their schools had increased during 1999/2000. This was attributed mainly to the literacy hour, to additional literacy support, to increases in the number of statements, to the numeracy hour, and to increased school rolls. One headteacher used her additional literacy support grant to maintain existing assistant numbers. She said:

'I just have to continue to juggle the figures and find money where I can. This £9,000 they (the government) put in this year was a saving grace.'

(October 2000)

One-in-five headteachers in LEAs 1 and 2 had experienced a reduction in assistants working in their schools. The main reasons given were budgetary pressures and fluctuations in the number of statements. Schools were experiencing these reductions one-year after government had announced there would be money for 20,000 new teaching assistants. The impression gained from the five school case studies was that budgets were tightly managed and assistant employment was uncertain.

Comment

- There must be concern about the extent to which the assistant resource - a resource which is so highly valued by schools and LEA personnel (see p. 23) - is unequally distributed between schools and only partly related to pupil need.
- If assistants are taking on some of the work that teachers have traditionally done (see Section 8), then there is a sense in which they are replacing teachers. For instance, following budget delegation to schools since the late 1980s, it seems that a lot of the work of LEA teacher support services has been taken on by assistants (see Lorenz, 1998; Adamson, 1999). Perhaps there is one sense in which assistants have replaced teachers. Following budget delegation to schools since the late 1980s, it seems that a lot of the work of LEA teacher support services has been taken on by assistants (see Lorenz, 1998; Adamson, 1999). Wallace (2001) mentions this in her study of assistants in Dorset. She suggests that a school may decide to increase the number of assistants rather than buy in the services of specialist teachers for children with special needs. Doubtless, the assistants in our study were very involved in 'remedial' support. For instance, 91% said they sometimes provide support by withdrawing children from the classroom, and 70 % were involved in additional literacy support.

5. Recruitment, conditions of service and pay

i) Recruitment

There were no significant recruitment difficulties reported by headteachers for all types of assistant, although staff in all three LEAs mentioned difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers. Additionally, assistants were found to be a fairly established workforce - 71% had worked in their present school for four or more years and a quarter for ten years or more.

For many schools (particularly in LEAs 1 and 2, but less so in LEA 3), recruiting assistants was a process whereby mothers became informally associated with the school. This was often as a volunteer - 87% confirmed that they had worked in a school as a

volunteer and 68% said volunteer work had led to paid work. Cull (1992) makes the point that voluntary work is viable only for those who can afford it.

One headteacher said, *'I have never had to "appoint" anyone!'* An assistant in LEA 1, talked about the way in which, as a parent volunteer, she began to cover for absent special support assistants before becoming employed herself.

There was, however, evidence of advertisements in LEA circulars and the local press. And there was evidence that some schools were looking for assistants with advanced skills and experience. Where such posts were advertised, they could attract considerable interest. One adviser from LEA 2 commented:

'We're usually hugely over subscribed. You can get anything up to eighty applicants for a vacancy.'
(April 1999)

Given the national pay scales that apply to nursery nurses, there was an indication that a school might employ classroom assistants because they could be paid less for doing similar work. This is a practice that is confirmed by the Professional Association for Teachers/Professional Association for Nursery Nurses. One nursery nurse expressed her concern:

'I am a nursery nurse who took the time to go to college and qualify to work with children. Therefore I regard myself and other nursery nurses as professional people. I feel classroom assistants are degrading our roles.'
(October, 2000)

In LEA 1, there was a shortage of school posts for qualified nursery nurses - as opposed to nursery nurse posts in pre-school settings. In one case study school, a qualified nursery nurse had reluctantly taken on a post as a classroom assistant with lower pay (see 'Andrea', p. 34). She did this in order to maintain her experience, particularly with the literacy and numeracy hours. She had applied for four nursery nurse posts in primary schools but there was strong competition with some 250 applicants in all.

ii) Conditions of service

Assistants worked a variety of hours. This ranged from one hour a week through to 36 hours, with a mean of 17 hours. In their study for Unison, Lee & Mawson (1998) reported a mean of 19 hours. Thus, a very high percentage of assistants worked part-time. For instance, for all primary schools in LEA 1 in 1999-2000, there were 1,184 assistants employed and just eight worked over 30 hours a week. *Appendix 10, p. 39*, shows the variety of part-time hours worked by the twenty-six assistants employed in one case study school.

A learning support assistant from LEA 2 wrote on her returned questionnaire:

'Last year, I worked 7.5 hours and the year before 22 hours per week. This year, after Christmas, I shall be doing 4 hours per week. Nothing is simple and even this complex questionnaire cannot reveal the complexities of this job!'
(October 2000)

For most assistants, continued employment relied on work with children with special needs, either with or without statements. If a statement was discontinued, or a child

with a statement left the school, the assistant might lose hours. This could then impact upon a number of children because many assistants worked with groups rather than one-to-one. [see 'Section 6. Patterns of deployment' below]

Half of the assistants in the study were on permanent contracts, just over a quarter had their contracts renewed annually, and 12% were on termly contracts. There was evidence that many assistants were vulnerable to school budget fluctuations. Those who had recently lost hours benefited from additional literacy support funding. Indeed, some might have been unemployed had it not been for this programme.

There were considerable fluctuations in assistant hours due, in the main, to variations in the number of statements and falling school rolls. As already stated, two fifths of assistants combined their classroom work with other paid roles in the school - particularly school meals supervision.

Nearly one in five also had other work outside school to supplement incomes. A range of additional work was done including:

- work with children e.g. home tutor, crèche leader, after-school club;
- work in shops e.g. bakery assistant, florist;
- home based work e.g. bed and breakfast, cleaning, book-keeping.

Just one in five assistants were in a union - mainly Unison. LEA 1 had a higher membership (at 26%) than LEA 2 (16%).

iii) Pay

The average hourly pay for assistants was between £5-£6, with just over one in twenty earning £7 to £9 an hour (mainly nursery nurses). A small number of assistants (14 in total) were earning under £4 an hour. One specialist teacher assistant in LEA 1 thought about her income of £380 month and commented: *'I think I could be as well off if I lived on benefits.'*

A number of those interviewed expressed concern about assistant pay. A deputy head commented:

'I think all classroom assistants are drastically underpaid. I think, in a lot of schools, they are undervalued. I think, we try our best to compensate for the lack of pay by the way that we value them. They are treated as professionals, we encourage training, we do the very best we can, but, in a sense, our hands are tied because we cannot pay them more.'
(April 1999)

For many assistants, holiday pay was incorporated in their hourly pay, but only for 39 weeks. Assistants with these pro rata conditions were not eligible for job seekers' allowance during the 13 weeks when they were not employed, nor could they claim working family tax credit to top up their incomes.

Each of the three LEAs had pay structures that gave some recognition to the roles that assistants might have in classrooms but the differential payments were small. LEA 3 had the most developed scale for primary support staff. It recognised, progressively,

their various roles and qualifications. It included, for instance, a grade for those who had gained a specialist teacher assistant certificate. This moved towards the starting salary of a newly qualified teacher [see Appendix 11, p. 39].

A number of school interviewees talked about offering assistants some form of compensation for their low pay, for instance:

'And so I am offering responsibility and I am not offering monetary rewards . . . We do offer training and that comes in all different forms. The school budget is paying for a specialist teacher assistant and the school secretary to take GCSE 'O' level. We have paid for modules of degree courses . . . and we're not able to give them huge pay packets but we are able to offer an ounce of training.'

(Headteacher, LEA 1, September 2000)

All three LEAs were in the throes of implementing Single Status³ grading reviews and intended to include assistants. Officers were of the opinion that they would not be able to require governing bodies to co-operate with their recommendations although they thought many would. Trade union opinion was less optimistic. Given the continued pressures on LEA and school budgets, it was felt that governors might not be able to pay more than they do at present, and that LEAs had an interest in being very cautious.

Comment

- An informal recruitment process is a safe arrangement in terms of schools knowing the personality and ability of a potential assistant. However, because it is women who have most day-to-day contact with their children's schools, it is a gendered employment practice. Our study of LEAs 1 and 2, and our experience of training assistants, tells us that this localised recruitment practice is not an effective way of recruiting a wide range of people from the community. In short, it favours white 'mature' (30 - 50 year old) women.
- Union membership is linked, in general, to a person's perception of their work as a potential career (Dunn, 2002). The low overall union membership for assistants may be explained by their lack of career opportunities, and by the way in which they are distributed in multiple workplaces thus making communication and collective action difficult. It may also be explained by the attachment that many assistants have to their schools. Given the continued use of an informal 'hiring' process, whereby many headteachers invite assistants to take on paid employment, this may cause an assistant to feel disloyal if she joined a union which could result in action about conditions of service and pay.
- With regard to the part-time nature of assistant work, a number of assistants in our case study schools wished for more hours - or, at least, more stability of hours worked. However, part-time work was also important to accommodate care-giving duties.
- The lack of stability in the employment of assistants is of considerable concern given that they work with children who most need consistency and stability in their school lives.

³ 'Single Status' refers to the process whereby a common set of employment terms and conditions are being created for 'manual' and 'white collar' workers with an aim to reducing inequalities.

6. Patterns of deployment

i) Support for teachers

Teachers received high amounts of support from assistants. Just over half said they worked with an assistant every day and most had between 6 and 15 hours a week contact with assistants.

Overall, taking LEAs 1 and 2 together, assistants were found to be spread throughout primary classes but with added numbers in Reception and Years 1 to 4.

When considered separately, LEA 1 had markedly fewer assistants in nurseries and additional numbers in Reception and Year 3. Whereas LEA 2 had a much higher number of assistants in nurseries, with additional numbers in Reception and Years 1 and 2 [*see Appendix 12, p. 40*]. This distribution is not easily explained. It is doubtless related to the incidence of children with special needs and statements and it probably shows a wish to give early support to children. Also, funding for additional literacy support would direct assistants towards Years 3 and 4, and 'booster sessions' for Key Stage 2 SATs might involve them in Years 5 and 6.

ii) Support for individuals and groups

There was high assistant involvement with individuals but also high involvement with groups of all sizes - up to 10 children, sometimes half the class and, periodically, the whole class (see Section 8. below). Watkinson (1999) also reports a tendency for assistants to work with large groups. With regard to the rationale for group support, one teacher in a case study school in LEA 1 said:

The teaching assistants are used so that they don't just support those with statements and special needs. They are there to support the whole of a group. (October, 2000)

This practice seemed driven by the wish to spread the deployment of a valued resource, and also by a commitment to inclusive teaching.

Where there was such a commitment, assistants were working, in effect, with very small classes of children and providing support for children with special needs in a 'holistic' way (see Levačić *et al.*, 2000; Shaw, 2001.). Sometimes holistic support was done within the classroom, but often elsewhere in the school given that 91% of assistants said they sometimes withdrew children.

iii) 'Fragmented' deployment

Some assistants were deployed in involved ways as the following comment reveals:

'The classroom assistants will take out small groups of children 2 to 3 times a week. They might be children with special needs in literacy hour, but they might not be. . . There are also other times like registration which are very very useful especially to the literacy programme because they have 10 minutes to give them a short sharp focused piece of work. And the advantage of this is that the children don't miss any other lessons. We also use assembly times like this.' (Teacher, September 2000)

This 'fragmentation' of deployment was based, again, on a wish to maximise the use of an important resource. However, some advisers felt this might have a detrimental effect on the quality of support provided as it could deny an assistant a long-term overview of children's progress. A further issue related to the way in which such short inputs might give very little opportunity for liaison with teachers and the development of assistant-teacher teams (see Thomas, 1991).

iv) Literacy and numeracy support

Most teachers were receiving a great deal of support from assistants in the literacy and numeracy hours. The implementation of these initiatives and the associated training had impacted considerably upon the working practices of teachers and assistants. There was much less assistant support for other curriculum areas [see *Appendix 13, p. 40*].

Our study suggests that assistants have been very important to the success of the literacy and numeracy strategies. We found they were often assigned to the children who were least able to respond to the recommended whole class pedagogy of the strategies.

Given the emphasis that the literacy strategy places on phonic understanding as an essential reading and spelling skill, assistants felt justified removing children from their classrooms to a quieter location. This was felt to be particularly important for those with attention difficulties, hearing impairment, and speech disorders.

Three recent evaluation reports of the literacy and numeracy strategies (see Ofsted, 2001a, 2001b; Earl *et al.*, 2001) give recognition to the role of assistants in the implementation of the strategies. However, our research leads us to conclude that the reports all under-estimate the actual contribution that assistants make.

Comment

- In terms of the way in which assistants were deployed, it was clear that priority was being given to the two curriculum areas - literacy and numeracy - that mattered most in terms of a school's measured performance. Earl *et al.* (2001), in their second annual report on the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, refer to 'collateral damage' to the wider primary curriculum (p. 83).
- With regard to assistants providing support for children with statements within a group learning context. Although this might be desirable in terms of inclusive practice and the effective use of limited resources, there are issues surrounding the possible 'drift' of resources away from an identified child. Also, if a statement is discontinued, or a child leaves the school, the wider group can lose out. The case study schools felt justified deploying assistants in such 'holistic ways' because there were many children who needed support, but there was recognition that some parents may feel unhappy about 'their child's resources' being deployed in a generalised way.
- Withdrawal removes assistants from the immediate oversight of teachers and they then carry de facto responsibility for managing the learning and behaviour of children. Mersh (2000) found that when assistants withdraw children, or have sole responsibility for a group within the class, teachers have difficulties monitoring their work. There are thus pedagogical and legal considerations that need addressing.

7. Training

i) Training opportunities

In 1997 the Green Paper 'Excellence for all children' (DfEE, 1997b) recognised that training opportunities for assistants needed to be improved. Our study found, overall, there were a range of training opportunities on offer to assistants in all three LEAs but provision was uneven, and there were issues related to course equivalence and quality control, and also assistant access to training.

There was assistant involvement in literacy and numeracy training, including additional literacy training. During 1999, just over 45% of the assistants in LEAs 1 and 2 were involved in literacy training and 35% in numeracy training. For many, these initiatives had given continued work and served to increase their involvement in teaching-related activities - particularly through the 'delivery' of additional literacy support. In the same year, 10% of assistants were involved in long courses of at least one year's duration.

ii) Teacher training

There was a belief, from LEA staff in the three LEAs, that primary schools can help foster social inclusion by encouraging local people to work as assistants. In response to the need to develop teacher recruitment and retention strategies (see TTA, 1997), LEAs had begun to look at ways of producing trained teachers from local communities who would, it was hoped, be committed to working in local schools - 'grow your own teacher' (Gibney & Kessler, 2001, p. 3). An officer from LEA 1 commented:

'I think it is important to us because we should be getting people from ethnic minorities and local people from the indigenous white working class community into teaching jobs.'
(March 1999)

All three LEAs had devised training 'pathways' that could lead to study for qualified teacher status. Our survey of LEAs 1 and 2 found nearly one in five assistants had applied for information to become a teacher, but few had followed this through to enrolment on courses. Family commitments were cited as a factor but, significantly, assistants considered their own work to be very important. Many assistants in the five case study schools thought a teacher's work and responsibilities were unattractive. A nursery nurse in LEA 1 captured a common response:

'Oh, I wouldn't. I am not interested in that at all really. I think because I haven't got the paperwork that teachers have, you know. I haven't got the ultimate responsibility to parents that they have, and doing annual reviews, and parents' consultations - all that sort of thing isn't my job, really. So I am lucky that I have got a job that I enjoy being with children, hopefully helping them to achieve without all the extra paperwork.'

(January 2001)

iii) Outcomes of training

There was high enthusiasm from assistants for continued professional learning. Ninety-three per cent said they were interested in further training. Teachers said the observed benefits of training for assistants included increased confidence and independence, a clearer understanding of the curriculum, greater insights into teaching

and supporting, involvement in planning, and increased understanding of the teacher's role. Assistants confirmed these outcomes but also emphasised increased job satisfaction and the feeling of being more valued by the school.

Just 19% of assistants said training had led to changes in their working practices, and only 6% said training had led to increased pay.

In the case study schools, we found there was disappointment from assistants that their newly acquired qualifications were not linked to an increase in pay - particularly with regard to the specialist teacher assistant (STA) qualification.

iv) Issues surrounding training

Despite the apparent increased availability of training, nearly half of assistants said they experienced difficulties attending courses. The difficulties most frequently mentioned were transport (LEAs 1 and 2 were large county authorities) and family commitments (38% of assistants said this affected their ability to take up training). One in ten assistants had paid for recent training themselves - this seemed most unreasonable, but it reflected the pressures on school budgets.

In terms of school-based learning and training, sixty-four per cent of assistants were invited to attend staff meetings (for which 10 % were paid) and seventy-nine per cent invited to staff training (for which half were paid). This high level of participation - significant in terms of the way that many assistants are now being socialised into school professional life - contrasts with the low level of involvement found eight years previously by Fletcher-Campbell (1992).

With regard to training that supports a teacher's ability to work closely with another adult in the classroom, one in five teachers said they had been involved in training to help them work with assistants. Sixty-five per cent of teachers indicated a need for more. There appears to have been an assumption that teachers and assistants (including volunteer parent helpers) can easily work together. It seems that teacher pre-service and in-service training has yet to catch up with the changes.

v) Monitoring the work of assistants

Generally, teachers took responsibility for monitoring assistants - 87% said they regularly did this. One teacher in LEA 1 explained how this was managed in her school:

I mean, I watch Doreen anyway because, when I'm on release, I've been out there, sort of seen her, but we do it informally so we don't put any pressure on them.

(September, 2000)

Headteachers and deputies were also involved in monitoring assistants, but less so. There was low assistant participation in formal appraisal. Just 24% of teachers said they involved assistants in an appraisal system. Given recent changes in assistants' responsibilities, this seemed unsatisfactory.

In terms of outsider interest in the work of assistants, teachers in LEAs 1 and 2 indicated that they were more likely to discuss an assistant's work with an Ofsted

inspector than with their school's LEA advisers. In recent years, Ofsted reports have increasingly contained references to the role and impact of assistants (see, for instance, Ofsted, 2001a; 2001b; 2001c).

Our school case studies suggested that assistants and teachers found it very difficult to find time for planning [see 'Alan', 'Usha', and 'Nicole' in Appendix 6. p. 34]. In our survey, nineteen per cent of assistants said they were given paid time for planning with teachers and 18% had time allocated for feedback about children's work. Bilton (2001), in a study of teaching assistants in Wokingham, writes:

Most communication takes place outside school hours, which is unpaid. Time is often snatched rather than planned. (Para. 3.4)

Comment

- Evidence that assistants were being included in staff meetings and training is important in terms of their inclusion as full staff members, their professional development and the development of co-working. However, it seems that many are not being paid for this extra level of work.
- Most assistants in our study were parents, so many had family commitments. These responsibilities impacted upon their ability to take on more paid work, engage with assistant training, or study for qualified teacher status. As mentioned in Section 5, it is important to remember that many assistants choose to work in primary schools because it fits in with their childcare, and, for some, elderly dependent care as well.

8. Assistants and teachers working together

i) Assistant responsibilities

The work that assistants do can be categorised in various ways. For instance, the Open University Specialist Teacher Assistant Course suggests:

- direct support for children's learning;
- support for the teacher;
- child care;
- clerical and administrative activities. (Swann & Hancock, 2000, p. 45)

And the DfEE's 'Teaching Assistant File' recommends:

- support for pupils;
- support for the teacher;
- support for the school;
- support for the curriculum. (DfEE, 2000b, para. 2.5)
-

Our research indicated that both of these frameworks usefully capture the reality of most assistants' day-to-day responsibilities. However, like others (e.g. Moyles & Suschitzky, 1997; Lee & Mawson, 1998) we can report that assistants are substantially

involved in direct support for pupils' curriculum learning and this constitutes 'a new configuration of tasks and responsibilities' (Kessler, 2001, p. 9).

We found assistants, and parent volunteers, were carrying out traditional classroom 'servicing' work that enables teachers to devote more time to 'higher order' professional tasks. As Estelle Morris writes, 'freeing teachers to do what they do best - teach.' (Morris, 2001, p.17). However, our data suggests that the most interesting aspect of the re-configuration lay with the way in which assistants had taken on work that would, at one time, been done only by a qualified teacher.

In LEAs 1 and 2, for instance, 84% of teachers said assistants contributed to the assessment of children's work and 76% of teachers said assistants were involved in recording children's progress.

One in five assistants reported that they sometimes worked with the whole class on their own - although this was often done within the supportive framework of an established classroom routine [*see Appendix 14, p. 41*].

In one case study school in LEA 1 there was flexibility of deployment for both assistants and teachers. This had led to a practice whereby confident assistants were sometimes deployed in classrooms to release teachers with particular subject skills so that they could teach elsewhere in the school.

One LEA Officer commented:

'Schools can't afford more teaching staff but they can afford more classroom assistants. And they are an entirely necessary part of the school. They couldn't be done without. And what they are employed to do in the class is now taking on teaching.'

(April 1999)

Our school case studies suggested that confident and trained assistants were operating in semi-independent, and at times, independent ways. This was particularly in evidence with literacy and numeracy work when assistants withdrew groups of children. There was thus a sense in which their work ran alongside the teacher's work as a 'supplementary academic service' (Leggatt, 1969, p. 182). This is reminiscent of a 1970s peripatetic remedial reading service when teachers visited schools and provided support for groups of children by withdrawing them from classrooms.

We noted how withdrawal left the teacher with a smaller and, arguably, more viable teaching group in the literacy and numeracy hours.

ii) Assistant practice and knowledge

There was evidence that assistants could gain practical insights and understandings that teachers did not have - 'case-specific knowledge' (Eraut, 1994, p. 10). This was especially so when assistants worked closely with children with special needs.

Also, there was evidence that some assistants might take the lead where teachers felt a lack of knowledge. In two of the case study schools this involved assistants providing ideas and specific curriculum content in the areas of art and design, cookery, ICT and

the use of Braille. 'Usha' (p. 35) and 'Elaine' (p. 36) also provide skills that were not easily found within their schools.

Moyles & Suschitzky (1997) draw attention to the 'escalation' of an assistant's role and express concern that too much might be expected of them. Our study did not find any professional sensitivity about assistants' more developed roles, nevertheless, there would seem to be a potential for this if they continue to take on more and more of a teacher's traditional work.

In one case study school in LEA 1, specialist teacher assistants (STAs) were very involved in shaping the nature of the boundary between teachers and assistants. The headteacher commented:

'I think we are moving further and further away . . . to them having much more responsibility. Now, there are huge issues. There are issues of the fact that sometimes these groups are withdrawn and they are not under the direct eyesight of teachers. That is quite a fairly new phenomenon. And, there is also the issue of pay, that these STAs are literally taking over parts of the work that the teacher used to do for very, very little financial reward.'
(September 2000)

Assistants undertook a wide range of work depending on their previous experience and skills, the training they had experienced, the teachers they collaborated with, and the level of their confidence. Some assistants seemed to have many skills that a teacher might have - particularly in terms of personal interactions with individual children, insights into special educational needs including understanding of behavioural difficulties, and the management of children's learning in small and medium sized groups. Others were clearly much less skilled in many respects.

iii) Assistant-teacher relationships

The unregulated way in which in which teacher-assistant practice has evolved has brought problems in terms of clear boundary definitions. However, within our case studies, ad hoc development had resulted in creativity with regard to the forms of collaboration to be found. Assistants and teachers worked together in a great variety of potentially fruitful ways.

We did not find evidence of the sort of collaboration difficulties identified by Thomas (1991). However, only a small number of school case studies were involved in our research and assistants may not have found it easy to raise this issue with us.

An adviser from LEA 2 felt there could be problems for a teacher's confidence if a 'strong' assistant were to be coupled with a 'weak' teacher. It seemed, however, that assistant-teacher team working was proving more successful than its forerunners i.e. team-teaching and support teaching. Perhaps the between-teacher 'territorial boundaries' that Bearn & Smith (1998) feel inhibit successful support teaching are less an issue with assistants and teachers because the onus is on the former to fit in.

Generally we found that headteachers, teachers and LEA personnel spoke very respectfully of assistants. One assistant, however, wrote on her returned questionnaire:

'It is quite a unique experience for a classroom assistant to be able to speak of their profession to an outside body. Although I am lucky with my school, I know a lot of assistants are not treated as well as I am or as they deserve.' (October 2000)

There was evidence from the school case studies, particularly where there was commitment to inclusive education, that assistants and teachers worked within a 'collaborative culture' (Tricoglus, 2000) in which there was high trust and mutual support. Here, there was a reduced sense of teachers directing or formally overseeing assistants - more a 'division of labour as an interaction' (Dewar & Clark, 1992, p. 119).

In a discussion about the concept of teachers as 'managers of learning', one nursery teacher described the integrated and informal nature of assistant-teacher practice in her school:

'... the teachers, in a way, co-ordinate the classroom assistants but we all work together. We all ask questions, we all stay around, and we always plan on certain days at certain times... If it changes we just talk to each other but there's nobody in overall charge of that... I think we manage all right. I think we manage between us.' (September 2000)

A number of teachers and assistants offered their thoughts about the differences between the two roles. The main themes that were mentioned included:

- the length of a teacher's initial training;
- the teacher's overall responsibility for the children and the classroom;
- the teacher's responsibility for the 'paperwork';
- the teacher's accountability to parents.

One teacher said:

'We (the teachers) have the overall responsibility for the children and they're following our plans. They're following our guidance. Although they are actually physically teaching children, they're not doing the planning. We're doing the planning, although they're interpreting it sometimes to individual children... but through me as it were.' (September 2000)

This teacher's words highlight the problem with the notion that teachers can plan lessons for assistants to supervise (see Morris, 2001b). Teaching and supporting are complex skills which often require on-the-spot adaptation in the face of the unfamiliar and unpredictable (see Thornton, 2001). The teacher in the above quotation reinforces this point when she talks about assistants 'interpreting it'. And, as already indicated, assistants often worked away from the teacher doing much, much more than simply overseeing a lesson.

iv) Do assistants add value to children's school learning?

Our research design did not specifically address this question, however, we found widespread belief that assistants are a good thing and a general wish to employ increasing numbers. For instance, a headteacher wrote:

'Primary teachers need an assistant in order to deliver the curriculum effectively.'

Notwithstanding such evidence, there is a need to know more about the specific impact of assistants on school learning. Surprisingly, research findings are not very positive. For instance, Hughes & Westgate (1997) concluded that assistants were not very effective 'talk-partners' with young children and tended to be 'teacherly'. Moyles & Suschitzky (1997) found that assistants could 'over-model' teachers, and also 'over-praise', 'over-talk' and 'over-direct' children. But the authors write, 'Where a good teacher was observed, so was a good classroom assistant' (p. 103).

More recently, Elliott *et al.* (2000), in their evaluation of volunteer reading intervention found, after three years, that reception-aged children failed to make greater progress than same-school controls. They caution against 'simplistic expectations' that additional adult support should lead necessarily to gains in children's reading.

It is important to remember, however, that there is considerable supportive evidence of the value of additional adult support for children's school learning.

Ofsted, for instance, praise teaching assistants, saying:

'It is often possible to identify clear progress made by a pupil or a group of pupils as a result of the support provided directly by the teaching assistants.'

(Ofsted, 2001a, para. 163).

The home-school literature provides much that is indicative of the benefits of 'non-professional' support for children's learning (e.g. Brooks *et al.*, 1996; Bastiani, 1997; Thomas, 1998; Shah, 2001). There is reason also to believe that children have much to say that is appreciative of their interactions with assistants and praising of the help they provide (see Hancock *et al.* 2001).

In our study, many teachers spoke of the many ways in which assistants supported them and children. The questionnaire for teachers contained a question on the main value of having assistants in the classroom. One hundred and ten teachers provided written responses to this question. Without exception, all wrote positively about their assistants. They referred to the way in which assistants gave them important personal support, but also the benefits that arose for children's learning, particularly when assistants worked closely with pupils experiencing behaviour and learning difficulties. One teacher wrote:

'A good classroom assistant is like having another teacher in the class.'

Another said:

'My teaching is more focused because the classroom assistant is working with one group. Able to move at a faster pace as the assistant can also explain, reinforce and support children. Significant contribution of assistant in raising standards.'

Within our case study schools a number of assistants mentioned ways in which their contribution to school life and learning extended beyond the classroom. For instance, one assistant was a cleaner before she became a classroom assistant. She mentioned

that she enjoyed cleaning because it enabled her to talk to children. And, many assistants were midday meal and playtime supervisors - roles that, in the least, require important group management skills. The latter, in particular, requires an understanding of children's play activities and games, a good sense of when adult intervention is required, and insights into the potential problems that can arise when many children are gathered together. Marland (2001b) asks:

'Why is the classroom so emphasised when important responsibilities for support are in other venues?' (para. 12, p. 7)

In some respects the situation with assistant involvement in children's learning is an echo of the time when teachers started to recruit parents to support children's school reading at home. Home-school reading, it can be argued, was driven as much by professional intuition as it was by hard evidence (see Tizard *et al.* 1982; Hannon & Jackson, 1987; Hancock & Gale, 1996).

Comment

- Government is actively promoting an overlap between the roles of teacher and assistant. 'Supporting the Teaching Assistant' (DfEE, 2000a) encourages teachers to allocate tasks to assistants that they themselves might have done in the past. The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL, 2000) similarly envisages a very developed role for learning support assistants. Can this be fair, when there is little discussion about conditions of service and pay, and career advancement, apart from progression to QTS?
- What is the nature of the knowledge that is needed to operate effectively in today's classrooms? Sometimes, it is said, a visitor to a classroom experiences difficulty distinguishing between teachers and assistants. Some experienced, trained and confident assistants are reluctant to take on teacher training because it would involve a great deal of time and further study. At classroom level, they feel they are doing much that a teacher is doing. However, the lack of qualification is seen as more important than the quality of an assistant's practice. To what extent can an assistant acquire professional knowledge and skill through working alongside a teacher? Should an assistant's informal, workplace learning be given more status and recognition in terms of progression through to QTS?
- The considerable responsibilities that some assistants have taken on raise pressing issues of responsibility and legality. In a climate of 'all hands on deck to raise standards', practice has run ahead of thinking and policy in this respect. Are parents aware of the extent to which many children are spending time away from teachers with support staff who are not qualified teachers?

9. Conclusion

A sea-change has come about in the primary classroom workforce since the NUT referred to 'disturbing evidence' of parent helpers hearing children read in school (NUT, 1979, p. 39). Teachers - under considerable pressure to improve standards - have bought assistants into their professional lives in ways that would have been highly controversial a few years ago.

The degree of assistant involvement in pupil learning in our study makes it inappropriate to think of classes of children in schools being taught by stand-alone teachers. Yet, curiously, much official discourse does not fully capture the extent of the staffing change (see, for instance, Earl *et al.*, 2000; and Morris, 2001a).

From our study we must conclude that there is under-acknowledgement of the contribution that assistants now make to children's school life and learning. This is so in terms of the way in they support children with perplexing learning difficulties and pressing behaviour needs, and their informal contribution to learning within the wider context of the school. There is a failure to recognise the extent to which teachers and assistants have become interdependent team workers.

There is an enormous amount riding on the continued employment of classroom assistants. They are vital to government's notion of a 'deeper professionalism' (Morris, 2001b). They are part of an intended social regeneration process whereby local people are encouraged back to work and, through helping children learn, re-engage with training and education themselves. There is the hope that some assistants will train to become qualified teachers. And there is the fact that teachers and children have come to rely on assistants as a very significant school resource.

Notwithstanding these important developments, we feel bound to highlight a number of problems. These include:

- the variability in the distribution of assistants and the need to standardise levels of resource, and, importantly, adapt them to identified pupil needs;
- the anomalous way in which most assistants are graded and paid as 'manual workers' even though many have taken on expanded roles and aspects of a teacher's traditional work;
- the way in which many assistants are giving unpaid time to schools for staff meetings, planning and training sessions;
- the way in which most assistants sometimes work with groups outside the classroom posing questions related to responsibility, pedagogy and legality;
- the need for an appraisal system to review assistant performance and training requirements and the creation a linear career structure, apart from the 'long haul' to QTS;
- the use of an unregulated entry and recruitment process, which is safe for schools but is not in the interest of equal employment practice and social inclusion (see Cattle, 2001).

Classroom assistants are highly valued by LEA and school personnel but they are a feminised and structurally marginalised group of workers (see Olsson, 1992; Evetts, 1994). Like their counterparts in health and social services, they have a strong sense of public service and they are therefore liable to be taken for granted.

The demands made on assistants by government and schools have been very considerable in terms of encouraging them to take on teaching-related duties. Such demands now appear likely to increase as the proposed 'remodelling' of the teaching profession takes place (see Morris, 2001b; Kelly, 2002). To what extent, therefore, can the education system continue to draw upon poorly paid mothers without there being a consequence for their family involvements and their continued willingness to give much to teachers and children in primary classrooms?

References

- Adamson, S. (1999) Review of the published literature on teaching assistants, Report for the DfEE Teaching Assistants Project, DfEE, London.
- ATL (Association of Teachers and Lecturers) (2000) *A class act: the role of learning support assistants in primary schools*, ATL-National Literacy Association, London.
- Bastiani, J. (1997) *Share: an evaluation of the pilot programme, September 1996-July 1997*, CEDC, Coventry.
- Bearn, A. and Smith, C. (1998) How learning support is perceived by mainstream colleagues, *Support for Learning*, Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 14-20.
- Bilton, H. (2001) *A review of teaching assistants in Wokingham*, unpublished paper, STAC Office, Faculty of Education and Language Studies, The Open University, Milton Keynes.
- Bird, E. (2001) *Mature entrants to teaching: a way forward?* Paper presented to the European Conference on Educational Research, 20th-23rd September 2000 University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland.
- Blair, T. (1998) Text of speech by Tony Blair at the Labour Party Annual Conference, Tuesday 29th September, Blackpool, issued by the Labour Party Conference 98 Media Office.
- Brooks, G., Gorman, T., Harman, J., Hutchison, D. and Wilkin, A. (1996) *Family Literacy Works: the NFER Evaluation of the Basic Skills Agency's Demonstration Programmes*, Basic Skills Agency, London.
- Cantle, T. (2001) *Community Cohesion: a report of the Independent Review Team*, Home Office, London. <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/>
- Clayton, T. (1990) Welfare assistants: are they equipped for their role? *Support for Learning*, Vol. 5, No. 4. pp. 193-198.
- Cull, M. (1992) Exploitation or empowerment? Women workers in voluntary welfare organisations, in S. Olsson, (ed) *The Gender Factor: women in New Zealand organisations*, The Dunmore press, New Zealand.
- Dean, C. & Thornton, K. (2001) 'Let us do our job in peace, say heads', TES, 1st June, p.4.
- Dewar, B. J. and Clark, J. M. (1992) The role of the paid non-professional nursing helper: a review of the literature, *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, Vol. 17, pp. 113-120.
- DfEE (Department for Education and Employment) (1997a) *Excellence in Schools* (CM3681), London, The Stationery Office.
- DfEE (Department for Education and Employment) (1997b) *Excellence for all Children: meeting Special Educational Needs* (CM 3785), London, The Stationery Office.
- DfEE (Department for Education and Employment) (1997c) *Statistics of Education, Schools in England*, London, DfEE.
- DfEE (Department for Education and Employment) (1998) *Teachers: meeting the challenge of change*, The Stationery Office, London.
- DfEE (Department for Education & Employment) (2000a) *Supporting the Assistant: a good practice guide*, DfEE, London.
- DfEE (Department for Education & Employment) (2000b) *The Teaching Assistant's File: induction training for teaching assistants*, DfEE, London.
- DfEE (Department for Education and Employment) (2000c) *Statistics of Education, Schools in England*, DfEE, London.
- DfES (Department for Education and Skills) (2001) *Schools: achieving success*, London, The Stationery Office.
- Dunn, M. (2002) Personal communication from Maggie Dunn, Senior National Officer, Unison Health Group.

- Earl, L. Levin, B., Leithwood, K., Fullan, M., Watson, N., *et al.* (2000) *Watching and Learning: OISE/UT evaluation of the implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, Summary: First Annual Report*, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, DfES Publications.
- Earl, L. Levin, B., Leithwood, K., Fullan, M., Watson, N., *et al.* (2001) *Watching and Learning 2: OISE/UT evaluation of the implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies*, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, DfES Publications.
- Elliott, J., Arthurs, J. and Williams, R. (2000) Volunteer support in the primary classroom: the long term impact of one initiative upon children's reading performance, *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 227-244.
- Eraut, M. (1994) *Developing Professional Knowledge and Competence*, The Falmer Press, London.
- Evetts, J. (ed) (1994) *Women and Career: themes and issues in advanced industrial societies*, Longman, London.
- FAS (Funding Agency for Schools) (n.d. 1998?) *The use of support staff in schools*, FAS, York.
- Fletcher-Campbell, F. (1992) 'How can we use an extra pair of hands?', *British Journal of Special Education*, Vol. 19, No. 4, pp. 141-143.
- Gibney, J. and Kessler, I. (2001) *Workplace learning and equal opportunities: the case of the UNISON-Tower Hamlets partnership scheme for teaching assistants*, unpublished paper, Templeton College, University of Oxford.
- Hancock, R. and Cable, C. (2000) *What do they bring to classrooms prior to training? Teaching assistants embarking on the Open University's Specialist Teacher Assistant Course*, unpublished BERA paper, Cardiff University.
- Hancock, R. and Gale, S. (1996) *Hackney PACT: reflecting on the experience of promoting home reading programmes*, in S. Wolfendale and K. Topping, *Family Involvement in Literacy: effective partnerships in education*, Cassell, London.
- Hancock, R., Turner, J., Cable, C. and Eyres, I. (2001) *Children's perceptions of teaching assistants: role, responsibilities and contribution to school life and learning*, unpublished paper, BERA Annual Conference, Leeds University.
- Hannon, P. and Jackson, A. (1987) *The Belfield Reading Project Final Report*, Belfield Community Council-National Children's Bureau, London.
- Hughes, M. and Westgate, D. (1997) *Assistants as talk-partners in early years classrooms: some issues of support and development*, *Educational Review*, Vol. 49, No. 1, pp. 5-12.
- Jowett, S., Baginsky, M. and MacDonald, M. (1991) *Building Bridges: parental involvement in schools*, NFER-Nelson, Windsor.
- Kelly, J. (2002) *School pay anger amid plans for 'super-heads'*, *Financial Times (London)* January 5th, p. 5.
- Kessler, I. (2001) *Workplace learning and equal opportunities: the case of the Unison-Tower Hamlets partnership scheme for teaching assistants*, unpublished paper, Templeton College, Oxford.
- Lee, B. and Mawson, C. (1998) *Survey of Classroom Assistants*, NFER/UNISON, London.
- Leggatt, T. (1969) *The use of non-professionals in large-city systems*, in D. Street (ed), *Innovation in Mass Education*, John Wiley & Sons, London.
- Levačić, R., Glover, D. and Crawford, M. (2000) *The resourcing of literacy at Key Stage 1: a report of the findings from a survey of headteachers*, unpublished paper, Centre for Educational Policy and Management, The Open University, Milton Keynes.

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

LGNTO (Local Government National Training Organisation) (2001) *Teaching/classroom assistants: national occupational standards*, LGNTO, London.

Lorenz, S. (1998) *Effective in-class Support*, David Fulton, London.

Loxley, A., Swann, W. and Bhatti, G. (1997) *Tales from beyond the sand tray: exploring the role and work of classroom assistants through in-service training*, Paper presented to the British Educational Research Association Conference, University of York, UK.

Marland, M. (2001a) *Unsung heroes*, Report (October), Magazine of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, London.

Marland, M. (2001b) *Schools, national policies, and local co-ordination: report to the Local Government Association following a review of 'Schools: building on success'*, Report 1, LGA, London.

Mersh, I. (2000) *Supporting children's acquisition of language and literacy: an investigation into the work of classroom assistants in mainstream primary schools*, unpublished EdD dissertation, The Open University, Milton Keynes.

Morris, E. (2001a) 'Para-teachers' to the rescue, *TES*, 23rd November, p. 17.

Morris, E. (2001b) *Professionalism and trust*, pamphlet accompanying a speech to the Social Market Foundation, DfES, London.

Mortimore, P., Mortimore, J. with Thomas, H. (1994) *Managing Associate Staff: Innovation in Primary and Secondary Schools*, Paul Chapman, London.

Moyles, J. with Suschitzky, W. (1997) *Jills of All Trades? Classroom Assistants in KS1 Classes*, ATL, London.

NUT (National Association of Teachers) (1979) *Primary questions: the NUT response to the HMI primary survey*, NUT, London.

NUT (National Association of Teachers) (1998) *Associate staff support for teachers*, NUT, London.

Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) (2001a) *The national literacy strategy: the third year*, (HMI 332), Ofsted, London.

Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) (2001b) *The national numeracy strategy: the second year*, (HMI 333), Ofsted, London.

Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) (2001c) *Standards and Quality in Education 1998/99*, Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools, The Stationery Office, London.

Olsson, S. (ed) (1992) *The Gender Factor: women in New Zealand organisations*, The Dunmore press, New Zealand.

Pascall, G. (1994) *Women in professional careers: social policy developments*, in J. Evetts (ed) *Women and Career: themes and issues in advanced industrial societies*, Longman, London.

PAT (Professional Association of Teachers) (1998) *The invisible professionals: nursery nurses working in schools*, PAT, Derby.

Penn, H. and McQuail, S. (1997) *Childcare as a gendered occupation*, DfEE, London.

Shah, M. (2001) *Working with Parents*, Heinemann, Oxford.

Shaw, L. (2001) *Learning supporters and inclusion*, Centre for Studies in Inclusive Education, Bristol.

Smithers, R. (2002) *Schools are short of male staff, admits minister*, *The Guardian*, January 8th, p. 8.

Smith, K., Kenner, C. and Barton-Hide, D. (1999) *Career ladder for classroom assistants*, School of Education, University of Southampton.

- Swann, W. and Hancock, R. (2000) Study Topic 1: Being a classroom assistant, Specialist Teacher Assistant Course (EYC660/E660), The Open University, Milton Keynes.
- Swann, W. and Loxley, A. (1998) The impact of school-based training on classroom assistants in primary schools, *Research Papers in Education*, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 141-160.
- Thornton, K. (2001) 'Young teachers want action - not theories', *TES*, 13th April, p. 5.
- Timpson, A. M. (1994) The politics of employment inequality in Canada: gender and the public sector, in J. Evetts (ed) *Women and Career: themes and issues in advanced industrial societies*, Longman, London.
- Tizard, J., Schofield, W. and Hewison, J. (1982) Collaboration between teachers and parents in assisting children's reading, *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 52, pp. 1-15.
- TTA (Teacher Training Agency) (1997) A new teacher recruitment strategy, TTA, London.
- Thomas, A. (1998) *Educating Children at Home*, Cassell, London.
- Thomas, G. (1991) Defining role in the new classroom teams, *Educational Research* Vol. 33, No. 3, Winter, pp. 186-198.
- Tricoglus, G. (2000) Teacher planning in the development of collaborative cultures, *Education 3-13*, March, pp. 22-28.
- Wallace, S. (2001) The government's expectations for learning support assistants are unrealistic in comparison to the training and support provided, Unpublished dissertation, Advance Diploma in Child Education, Weymouth College, Dorset.
- Watkinson, A. (1999) The use and deployment of teaching assistants in Essex primary schools in the summer of 1998, Education Research Digest, Essex County Council Learning Services

Appendices

Appendix 1. Brief descriptions of each LEA

LEA 1 is a large county authority of considerable urbanisation but set mainly within a rural landscape. The population in 1996 was 1.4 million. In the north of the authority, economic activity is dominated by tourism and service industries, although there are important port facilities. The centre has large manufacturing companies. The east, a one-time industrial zone, has been restructured and re-aligned, and the west is predominantly rural. Economically, the area is falling behind the rest of the UK, in part because of a poor investment record.

Unemployment disproportionately affects the four areas of the LEA. There is almost full employment in the north but considerable unemployment in the east and centre with much part-time, low paid work. Four of the wards in the east rank in the top 100 most deprived areas in the UK. In April 1998, the creation of two new unitary authorities took two deprived areas out of County Council control. The largest ethnic group is White UK with much smaller numbers of Pakistani, Indian, Black Caribbean, Black African, Bangladeshi and Chinese.

Despite its large size, aspects of the education service continues to be run centrally from County Hall, although there is devolution of administration through the north, south and east regional offices. Local decision-making is strong. For instance, the northern region alone retains the eleven plus examination. The LEA's Education Development Plan for 1999 to 2002 highlighted: the rapid improvement in schools in difficulty; the improvement of school leadership and management; improvement in the quality of teaching and learning; improvement in the use of ICT; enhancing the achievement of pupils with special educational needs, and promoting inclusion.

There are 502 primary, 31 special and 89 secondary schools. In 1999 there were 1,184 assistants working in a variety of roles in the LEA, the great majority of whom were part-time.

LEA 2 is a rural authority dominated by agriculture with market towns and villages. And yet less than 4% of people work in farming. There are no large areas of urbanisation but there is a growth of new housing and industrialisation around some towns and villages. Increases in population are creating a demand for houses. Eighteen per cent of workers are employed in manufacturing, 20% in the distributive trades and 9% in banking and financial services. The majority of the population is white with very small percentages of ethnic minority groups - mainly, Indian, Black and Chinese. Communities are scattered and public transport limited. Eighty per cent of households own at least one car. The LEA is concerned by the way government administers the Standard Spending Assessment. It feels that schools and early years provision in sparsely populated areas are under-funded by the formulae used.

In 1997, the LEA's Strategic Educational Development Plan emphasised the need to: raise levels of achievement; compensate for disadvantage; promote community involvement; and foster lifelong learning. The Plan highlights the expansion of nursery education in the authority in order to facilitate access and overcome problems of community isolation presented by geography. However, some parents continue to experience difficulties getting children to nursery provision and they therefore remain at home until they are of school age. Some nurseries are not filling their available places.

There are 256 primary schools in the county with 75 middle and secondary schools and 10 special schools. The LEA contains three geographical areas, each with its own way of organising the education of pupils. There are different approaches to the way in which children access schooling initially, in the way children transfer from one sector to another, and in the funding of provision. In 1999 there were 1,800 assistants working in a variety of roles in the LEA (i.e. equivalent to 1,200 full-time posts).

LEA 3 is an inner city authority historically well placed to play an important role in the wider economy of the UK. Banking and financial services, advertising and the media have recently replaced the traditional commercial and industrial life of the area. However, companies do not rely on local labour because such skills are not easily found in local communities. The authority is designated one of the top ten most deprived areas in the UK. The incidence of homelessness, over-crowding, ill health and unemployment is well above national averages. The largest ethnic group is White UK, closely followed by Bangladeshi, with much smaller numbers of Irish, Black Caribbean, Black African, Indian, Pakistani, Chinese, and Asian.

In providing an educational service, the LEA has to take into account of a high level of need. Thirty-six per cent of the population has no formal education and literacy needs, at 28%, are more than twice the national average. Fifty-eight per cent of primary children have free school meals - twice the national average - and 62% of primary children are learning English as an additional language. Given these needs, the Standard Spending Assessment is one of the highest in the country. The authority also receives funding from other sources, for instance, from the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant, the Single Regeneration Budget and Excellence in Cities.

In 1998 the Education Development Plan, amongst other things, placed great importance on social cohesion and inclusion, highlighted the need to recruit and retain headteachers and teachers, and stressed the need to raise expectations at all levels. There are 75 primary, 8 special and 16 secondary schools in the LEA. Seventy-four languages other than English are spoken in primary schools and some 60% of pupils do not speak English as their first language. In 1999, there were just over 1,000 assistants working in the authority's primary and secondary schools.

Appendix 2. Profile of Assistants in LEAs 1 and 2 (from the headteacher questionnaire data set)

Profile category	N	%
Gender		
Male	7	1.1
Female	628	98.9
Total	635	100
Age		
under 25	25	3.9
26 - 30	35	5.4
31 - 35	67	10.5
36 - 40	161	25.1
41 - 45	191	29.8
46 - 50	86	13.4
over 50	76	11.9
Total	641	100
Ethnicity		
Black Caribbean	3	0.4
Black UK	1	0.1
South Asian	8	1.2
Asian - other	1	0.1
White UK	660	97.2
White non-UK	6	1
Total	679	100

Appendix 3. Formal educational qualifications of assistants
(LEAs 1 and 2)

Qualification	%
O Level	63%
CSE Grade 2-5	37%
CSE Grade 1	31%
RSA	27%
A Level	20%
GCSE A-C	17%
NNEB	15%
BTEC	13%
City & Guilds	13%
Specialist Teacher Assistant(STA)	10%
NVQ (levels 1 -3)	7%
GCSE D-G	5%
Degree	5%
HNC	2%
Qualified Teacher Status	2%
No formal qualifications	8%

(N=275)

Appendix 4. Assistants' life and work experiences
(LEAs 1 and 2)

Type of experience	%
Parenting	91%
Nursery/child-minder/playgroup	84%
Administrative/secretarial	53%
Shop work	34%
Youth-worker	27%
Other experience of working with children	22%
Other work experience	17%
Catering/food industry	16%
Factory/production	13%
Care-worker	12%
Management	12%
Professional	12%
Social services	10%

(N=275)

Appendix 5. Roles, year groups and hours of one assistant in one week

Role	Year Group	Hours
Learning support assistant	Year 4	3 hours
Classroom assistant	Year 4	1 hour
Learning support assistant	Year 5	3 hours
Classroom assistant	Year 5	1 hour
Learning support assistant	Year 6	3 hours
Classroom assistant	Year 6	1 hour
Administrative assistant	NA	7 hours
Total hours		19 hours

Appendix 6. Six assistants

1. Andrea (classroom assistant)

Andrea began by working in a playgroup when her children were young and then applied to become a Special Support Assistant (SSA) with the LEA central service for children with special educational needs. She was allocated to schools to work with children on a one-to-one basis to cover for SSAs on long term sick leave. Then she applied to become a general classroom assistant in a school in her local area which is where she is working now.

She has two children of her own both of whom attend the school she is currently working in although she doesn't actually work in the same classes as her children. She does the job because she enjoys working with children in the school environment and it fits in with her lifestyle, her children and her family. She is happy with her current position, including her current rate of pay of approximately £4,300 pa. because she believes that she is gaining experience which will be useful to her in the future. Previously she worked in the retail trade for a number of years.

She started doing the BTEC Nursery Nurse course when she began to work at a playgroup and finished the course before she began her current job. She prefers to work with school age pupils but has not been able to find a job as a Nursery Nurse with this age group so has taken the job of a classroom assistant instead. Her salary is that of a classroom assistant which is lower than that of a nursery nurse. She has not done any other training yet.

She works for 20 hours a week and her time is split between two classes. She supports groups of children in two Year 4 classes during the literacy and numeracy lessons, is involved in the ALS (additional literacy support) scheme and carries out a range of other tasks including mounting wall displays, checking records of the reading books children take home, and photocopying.

The Year 4 children are placed in two bands for literacy and numeracy and she works with the lower ability bands. In the numeracy lessons she stays in the classroom, helps to maintain pupil discipline and moves from table to table to support the children's learning. During the direct teaching session in the literacy hour she checks the children's reading books and during the group work time she takes a group of eight children out of the classroom to work in another area. She usually works with children classed as of average or lower ability.

She plans with the teacher what she is going to do for the next week and who she is going to work with on the preceding Friday. She discusses any issues that arise from her work with children with the teachers at break or lunchtime but is not involved in any formal record keeping.

She would like to pursue further education and perhaps do a degree and become a teacher but is not prepared to do so until her youngest child is older because she doesn't want to have to make arrangements for after school care or travel far away from her home. She also believes that the experience she is gaining gives her an insight into the school's expectations and will enable her to help her own children.

2. Alan (Special Needs Assistant)

Alan entered this area of work by responding to an advertisement and began by doing a 17 week course which involved three days a week of study at college and two days a week work placement in a school. Towards the end of the course he applied for a job in a local school and was appointed to his present position as a special needs assistant providing one-to-one support for two children with autism.

He is married and has three children of his own and has always liked kids. His mother worked in a nursery. Previously he worked as a solicitor's clerk and then as a station assistant for a transport company. After he left his last job he tried to move back into office work but found it difficult to get a position.

He works for 22 hours a week from Tuesday to Friday and is currently doing an NVQ Nursery Nurse course on Mondays. He earns approximately £5,000 a year, which is considerably less than he earned before. However, he says he is happier than he has been for a long time and really enjoys working with the children and staff and in the school. Only one of his children is of school age but goes to another school because she had already started there before he began his current job.

He works with one child in the mornings and another in the afternoons either individually or when they are working with groups of other children. Most of the support is provided in class. In the morning he supports in the literacy and numeracy lessons and in the afternoons with whatever subjects are being studied. He sees his job as ensuring that the children have understood what they need to do, keeping them on task and occasionally enabling the children to have 'time out' when a situation has become too stressful. He has worked with one child to help him develop his speech and communication skills. He also provides care for the children at break or lunchtimes and ensures their safety.

He doesn't attend lesson-planning meetings but listens to the teacher's instructions alongside the children he supports. He does attend review meetings for the children he focuses on and makes an input into these. He feeds back to the class teacher everyday so that she is aware of issues and can pass on the information to other support staff and the children's parents. He will feed back information about any other children he has worked with during a session. He also asks the teacher for suggestions when he feels an approach he is using is not working.

He didn't do any particular courses on autism before he began working with the children but has since done two courses in this aspect of special educational needs. He feels the courses were useful in providing ideas and in suggesting suitable resources to use but believes that he has learnt a lot from working with the children.

He's not sure what he will do after he gains the nursery nurse qualification but would like to stay in this area of work but make some progress in terms of pay and responsibilities. He's thought about teaching but doesn't think that he would like to have to cope with all the planning, paperwork and 'hassles' of being a teacher.

3. Usha (learning support assistant/midday meals supervisor)

After leaving school Usha went to college for a year and then began working in a crèche where she gained experience of working with young children. After leaving the crèche she went to work as a volunteer at her old primary school. Then she applied for and was appointed to a position as primary helper in another local school. After a year she left to get married. A few years later she applied for a position as a special needs assistant at the same school and took up a part-time post to support a bilingual pupil who had special educational needs. Her position involved her in supporting the pupil and communicating with the parents in their first language. The child had a physical disability in addition to other needs and she found the work quite stressful as it involved a lot of lifting. The parents decided to move the child to a special school and she then applied for a position as a classroom assistant in the same school.

She is married and has one child of her own who attends the school she is working in. Her husband works in the service industry but is currently unemployed.

She works for sixteen and a quarter hours a week from 9.00 am to 12.30 pm as a learning support assistant and then as a midday meals supervisor from 12.30 to 1.30pm. She is paid approximately £447 a month. She feels that she is learning at the same time as the children and thinks that the teaching is very different from when she was at school. She enjoys her work and is happy with the way things are at the moment because she feels her family comes first and the work fits in well around it.

She works with two Year 6 classes every morning and supports the children in numeracy lessons. The children are grouped according to ability and she tends to work with the lower ability groups although she will support all the children when necessary. She is occasionally asked to focus on a specific child who is having difficulties in concentrating and staying on task and sees her role then as 'a prompter'. Most of her time is spent supporting children in the classroom but occasionally she will take groups out for specific activities or if they need to focus on a task. She feels that building relationships with pupils is crucial so that they are clear about her expectations and so that she can support them effectively. She mainly uses English to support the children's understanding but will use their first language when appropriate.

The class teacher prepares weekly and daily plans for the assistants and it is Usha's responsibility to look at these, check the strategy framework documents, ask questions, make suggestions and do any necessary preparation. The daily plan is also written on the board. There are no formal planning or feedback meetings. The assistants do provide feedback on children's reading through comments on their reading record sheets.

When she was first appointed to her current post she did a locally organised induction course and she has also attended numeracy training, a course about disabilities and a first aid course.

She isn't sure about what she wants to do in the future. She would love to be a teacher but feels that a teaching course would put her under too much pressure especially with her family responsibilities. She is considering doing a nursery nurse course but doesn't want to do anything with too much coursework. She feels that LSAs play an important role in children's lives, part social worker, part teacher, and that their contribution is not always recognised.

4. Amanda (special support assistant)

Amanda started as a cleaner in the school where she now works and then became a midday meals supervisor. She loved working in the school and working with the children and approached the head about a position as a primary helper or classroom assistant. The head suggested that she consider a position as a special support assistant when one came up and she was appointed to that role where she worked on a one-to-one basis with children with special educational needs.

She comes from a family of seven children where she was the only girl and shared bringing up her brothers with her mother who was a single parent. She has two grown-up children and she is a grandmother. She lives locally and likes the atmosphere in the school and feels familiar with the environment, the children and the staff. She really enjoys talking to children and working with them.

She works full-time from 8.45am to 3.30pm (about 32 hours a week) and as a STA she attends planning and assessment meetings and staff meetings. She earns £14,000 a year since she became a STA.

She attends the pre-school briefing session with the rest of the staff and then helps the teacher set up the classroom for the session. During registration she usually reads with one or two children. Her time is split between two Year 2 classes and the days are organised so that she can support children in both classes during the literacy hour some days and the numeracy lesson other days. She sits with the children and listens to the teacher during the direct teaching parts of the lessons and then works with a group during the group work sessions. The teacher selects the groups for her to work with and she works across the ability range.

She changes classes at break-time, sometimes doing a break duty or helping the teacher to set up the classroom for the session. Three days a week she works with Year 3 children providing additional literacy support from 12.00 to 12.30pm. In the afternoons she works in one of the classrooms supporting children with science, art, music, RE or whatever is the focus for the afternoon. She sees her role as listening to the teacher's instructions and following what the teacher has set but also using her initiative to collect and organise resources and to offer appropriate support to children in carrying out activities. She feels that her experience of working with the same age group in previous years is important in helping her to predict what children's needs will be and how she can best support them.

She attends planning sessions with the two Year 2 teachers and makes an occasional input although she feels that the teachers already have a good idea of what they are going to do. What she is required to record and feedback varies from teacher to teacher. Her feedback is usually verbal but she has completed record sheets detailing how individual children have performed in activities she has been asked to carry out with them. She also attends literacy and numeracy assessment meetings for individual children and contributes her observations and suggestions.

She's been on lots of courses including a 'Return to Learn' course and a Specialist Teacher Assistant course. She found the STA course challenging but she has no plans to become a teacher because she doesn't want the 'aggravation' of further study or the job itself. Although she feels that she provides important support for children's learning she sees the main differences in her role and that of the teacher in terms of the teacher's responsibility for tracking the needs of all the children in the class and the paperwork the teacher has to do.

5. Elaine (library assistant)

Elaine began work as a parent helper in her child's school when he started in reception. With another parent helper she got involved in establishing a library in the school, under the guidance of a teacher who hadn't enough time to do this. She met with the LEA librarian, organised book fairs and bought books for the library. Then the school decided to appoint a person for ten hours a week to run the library and she was asked to apply for the post. Next she was asked to do five hours a week with a boy with special educational needs and then ten hours as a general classroom assistant. Currently she is working twenty hours a week in the library.

She has two children, one of whom is in the same school and one who is at secondary school. She loves being with children, watching them learn and discovering things for themselves and feels that she has a good relationship with them. Her husband's work, which included shift work, and her childcare responsibilities prevented her from working outside school hours or studying when the children were younger but at the time she was happy with the situation. Now she would like to earn a reasonable wage because her current wage is so low that she has to supplement it with state benefits.

Elaine's current role involves buying books, cataloguing and shelving them, helping children to choose books, supervising the children in the library, issuing books and managing the paperwork. She works with a team of parent volunteers and co-ordinates a timetable of adults who work in the library and a timetable for class visits to the library. She works to a teacher who has responsibility for the library but this year, due to the teacher's absence, she is negotiating directly with the teaching staff. She collects resources and develops teaching materials to support the teaching plans drawn up by the teachers and then carries out activities with the children in the library to support the work in the classroom and to extend and enhance the children's experiences.

She feels that she has led and driven the library initiative to an extent, enjoys what she has done and achieved and is committed to doing things to the best of her ability. At the same time she feels frustrated and exploited in her current situation while recognising that it is very much of her own choosing. She feels that some of the staff are prepared to leave her to get on with things and haven't responded to her suggestions for activities at all. She provides guidance and advice to the parent volunteers and teaching assistants on preparing resources and displays.

Elaine has done two years of an Early Years degree and was planning to be a teacher but didn't complete her degree studies because she got married. She plans to finish her degree now that the children are older but is concerned about organising her time as a single parent and about the finance needed to study the course. She thinks it will take her at least three years to complete.

6. Nicole (volunteer parent)

Nicole works as a volunteer in her children's school and is a parent governor. She doesn't work in the same classes as her children. She offered to come into school just after her second child started in reception because she wanted to be involved in her children's school and it fitted in with caring for them out of school hours. At one stage she explored the possibility of home learning for her eldest child for medical reasons but decided that this wasn't necessary and feels that the social side of school life is important for children. Both her sister and her nephew had specific learning difficulties and as a result she had become interested in special educational needs.

She is married with two children. Her husband is a town and country planner and they enjoy a reasonable standard of living. She was a nurse before she had children but they have made a conscious decision to live on one salary with Nicole caring for the children and not taking up paid employment. She feels that both she and her husband have had to contend with quite a lot of pressure from peer group and colleagues for her to return to paid employment but they have strong beliefs and are convinced about the life style they have chosen. She really likes the ethos of the school and feels that this is more important than how children perform academically.

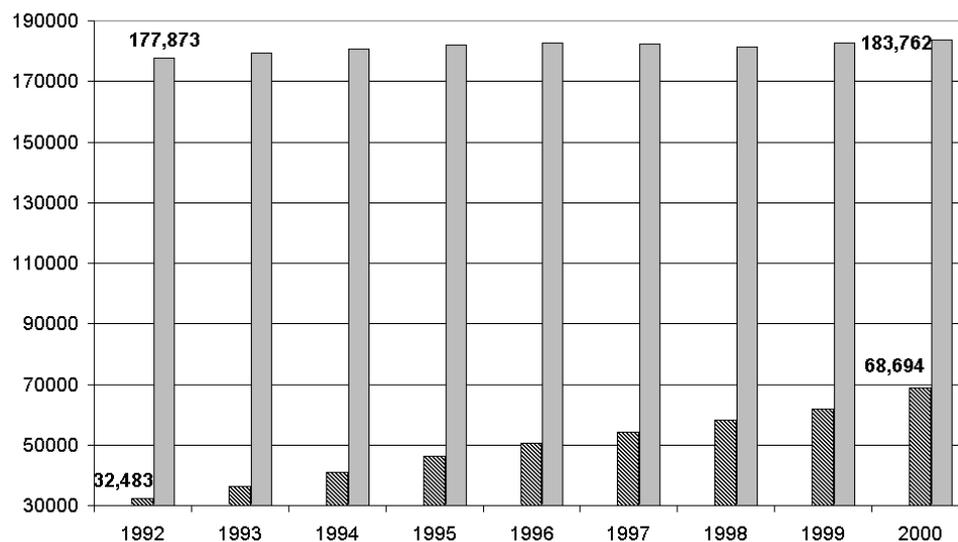
She comes into school three mornings a week and does whatever she is asked to do. At the moment she reads and talks to two children with special needs for half an hour and then works with a group of six children in a Year 2 classroom. She supports children during the literacy hour and the mathematics lesson. During the direct teaching time she will sit with the children, keep them listening and prompt them when necessary. During the group work times she plays a game with the children, does word recognition exercises or helps them with the activities set by the teacher. She usually works with the lower ability children but sometimes there is a teaching assistant in the class to work generally with the children or on a one-to-one basis. Other volunteers work in the class at other times.

She doesn't have any planning time with the teacher but listens to the instructions with the children and then asks for clarification if she needs it. The teacher also makes suggestions to her about how to carry out tasks and support children's learning. She feeds back orally to the teacher at the end of the lesson on how the children have done or writes comments on their worksheets for the teacher to see. She feels that the children are very aware of who is and is not a teacher and that this can lead to discipline problems. If children misbehave she refers them to the teacher who reinforces how they should behave with her.

She decided to become a governor because of her interest in the school, education and the community and because she wanted to be able to have an input into discussions and decision making. She is concerned that some parents do not appear to be interested in their children's education or feel that the responsibility rests with the school. She is also concerned that some parents don't come into school to speak to staff because they are afraid to do so or perhaps because of their own negative experiences of schooling. She tries to encourage other parents to go into the school and to volunteer but has met with some resistance because she is perceived as an advocate for the school by some parents.

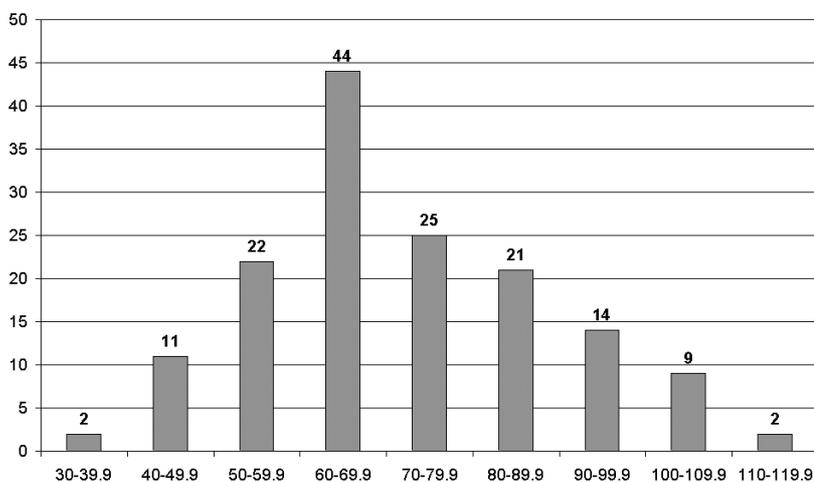
She has had training in child protection, is sensitive to issues children may raise and reports concerns to the headteacher. She has attended a number of courses as a governor and one on reading. She likes the flexibility of volunteering, being a governor and other voluntary work that she is involved in and, as she doesn't need the money, she feels that funds that might be paid to her can be used to employ other teaching assistants instead.

Appendix 7. Full time equivalent teachers and education support staff, primary schools, England.



Source: DfEE Statistics of Education, Schools in England, 1997 and 2000

Appendix 8. Pupil-assistant ratios by LEA, England



Source: Form 7, January 1999

Appendix 9. Variations in pupil-assistant ratio and pupil-teacher ratio in the three target LEAs

	LEA 1	LEA 2	LEA 3
Number of schools	505	256	75
	Pupil-assistant ratio (PAR)		
Median PAR	84.6	76.5	42.8
PAR inter-quartile range	58.8	45.2	19.8
	Pupil-teacher ratio (PTR)		
Median PTR	24.0	21.6	20.7
PTR inter-quartile range	3.8	4.1	3.7

Source: Form 7, January 1999

Appendix 10. The hours of assistants in one school (LEA 2)

Type of assistant	Number	Total hours per week
Nursery nurses	6	4 x 25 hours 1 x 20 hours 1 x 17.5 hours
Special Support Assistants	11	2 x 25 hours 1 x 20 hours 1 x 19.5 hours 1 x 17.5 hours 1 x 15 hours 1 x 14 hours 4 x 10 hours
Classroom assistants	9	7 x 20 hours 2 x 10 hours
Totals	26	453.50 hours

Appendix 11. The pay of assistants and midday meals supervisors in LEA 3 (as at 1999)

Job Title	Scale	Point	Salary
Primary Helper	1	6	£9,252
General Attendant	1	8	9,876
Learning Support Assistant	1	8	9,876
Midday Meals Supervisor	1	8	9,876
Senior Midday meals Supervisor	5	24	15,696
Teacher Assistant	3	14-17	11,838 - 12,663
Specialist Teacher Assistant (STA)	5	22-25	14,766- 16,194

Appendix 12. Hours worked by assistants per week

Year Group	LEA 1	LEA 2	Total
	(hours)	(hours)	(hours)
Nursery	118.8	514.5	633.3
Reception	1077.8	1034.2	2,112.0
Year 1	555.5	1024.3	1,579.8
Year 2	570.1	837.6	1,407.7
Year 3	651.2	914.1	1,565.3
Year 4	597.6	697.6	1,295.2
Year 5	484.6	448.2	932.8
Year 6	361.6	367.4	729.0
Total	4,417.2	5,837.9	10,255.1
Mean no. of hours worked	16.12	16.97	

(LEA1, N=274) (LEA2 N=344)

Appendix 13. Curriculum support for teachers by assistants (LEAs 1 and 2)
(Percentage of teachers who received more than 2 hours
subject support each week)

Subject	%
Literacy hour	71%
Numeracy hour	52%
English	20%
Science	15%
Art	12%
Maths	6%
PE	5%
ICT	3%
Geography	3%
D&T	3%
RE	2%
History	2%
Music	2%

Appendix 14. Examples of activities carried out by assistants when they take the whole class (as identified by teachers in LEAs 1 and 2)

Administration
'Brings in class pm. Takes register.'
'Sees pupils out at the end of the day.'
'She takes the register with the whole class.'
Language & literacy
'Circle time - story telling.'
'Takes the class for a story.'
'Short activities usually involving speaking & listening activities.'
'Reads a story one session (10 mins) a week.'
'Phonics input, story.'
'Story, show & tell, speaking & listening.'
'Reads to the class whilst I'm in the room.'
'Story time - teacher devised activities.'
'Will occasionally take story/manage the children if teacher hears readers/is detained.'
'Work on phonics, reading stories, story telling, rhymes & songs. Short activities to release me to work with individual children,'
Play, music and ICT
'Sets up structured play activities.'
'Singing.'
'ICT demonstration, use of CD-roms and programmes etc.'
Maths/numeracy
'She does mental maths sessions with whole class.'
'Number intro.' (<i>in the numeracy hour</i>)
Emergencies/special occasions
'Takes over in an emergency.'
'Only in unusual situations i.e. if I need to resolve a problem with a child then she will "occupy" the class. I am always in the classroom.'
'Story and rhymes - only if I am detained by a parent or have to specifically work with/assess a child - very rare.'
'Supervise & maintain discipline and continuity when I am called to the phone etc.'
'Sometimes the CA introduces the lesson or works with some of the class if I have to take a small group out of the classroom.'