



■ Helen Harden

Working with teaching assistants: case studies

In the previous two issues of EiS, members of the 11-19 Committee have discussed the role of teaching assistants (TAs) in supporting science lessons, and the opportunities available to TAs for further training. This third and final article will explore some real-life cases of teachers working with TAs.

The first article in this series, *Working with teaching assistants to support learning in secondary schools* (EiS June 2006), gives some very helpful advice and good examples of practice in working with TAs. One question still remains. If, due to a specific special educational need, a student has been awarded funding, a TA is paid for out of this and allocated specifically to that student. Is it, then, reasonable to expect the TA to carry out many of the activities described in the June article? For example:

- 'The TA may support the teacher in welcoming and settling students.'
- '...they [the TAs] can support the teacher by organising, checking or distributing resources to support quick transition to the next task.'
- 'TAs can remind students to keep safety glasses on eyes and help pick up any inappropriate behaviour.'

The real-life partnerships described in this current article have been chosen to explore this issue further. Names have been changed for reasons of confidentiality.

The questions answered by the teachers are based on the self-evaluation 'points to consider', listed in the June article.

Case 1: spreading support

Mr H, a teacher with 6 years' experience, works with Mr C, the teaching assistant allocated to Adam, a Year 10 student in set 1. Adam needs a wheelchair to move around the school. Adam is accompanied by Mr C in all lessons.

Case 1: Questions and Answers

- Q.** How much lesson time is the TA passively listening to you along with the class?
A. Not often. Adam is quite capable of listening, so Mr C often encourages one or two other members of the class (one of whom has behavioural difficulties) to focus.
- Q.** How many students in the class does the TA interact with?
A. Almost all of them. He is well known as he is in most of their lessons. Even though this is a top set, the students seem to value some extra support and encouragement.
- Q.** Does the TA actively scan the room for off-task behaviour and safety?
A. Yes. If written work is in progress, which Adam can get on with, Mr C will help keep everyone on task. During practicals Mr C must work with Adam both for health and safety reasons and simply to facilitate the practical. For this reason Mr C is not actively scanning the room for any potentially dangerous situations. That being said, he would always intervene if he did notice something.
- Q.** Have you ever asked your TA for advice?
A. Yes. I have to check to ensure that every practical is accessible to Adam.
- Q.** Has the TA ever received any science training?
A. Yes but not as a teaching assistant. Mr C studied science subjects at school and previously had a science based job.

Discussion of Case 1

As this TA is employed to support a specific student he seems to have a very clear idea about exactly what support Adam needs. Meanwhile, by not providing support where not needed (e.g. during written work) he is able to help many other students, without depriving Adam of the support he is entitled to. The responses to the self-evaluation questionnaire are very positive. However, this does not mean that there are no issues that could be developed further, in particular the TA's role in assessment for learning. The TA is inadvertently discovering what individual students can do or understand but this information is not being noted down and so the information is not reaching the teacher. To a certain extent this may be what the students want. By talking to Mr C they can clarify anything they are not sure about without having to admit to the teacher that they do not understand.

Perhaps, to progress, the teacher and TA should discuss how this information could be shared more effectively. For example, the teacher could suggest that Mr C make an effort to target specific students each week and make good use of the trust students have in him. Alternatively, Mr C could be asked to provide feedback on the teaching of a challenging topic in terms of student understanding.

Case 2: a more demanding pupil

Miss P, a teacher in her first year of teaching, is working with Mrs A, the teaching assistant allocated to Charlotte, a year 8 student in set 5 out of 6 (level 4/5).

Charlotte is visually impaired. She is accompanied by her TA in all lessons. She has some sight, she can read very large print and can distinguish light and dark when moving around. She sometimes has difficulties socialising with her peers due to difficulties in seeing facial expressions.

Case 2: Questions and Answers

Q. How much lesson time is the TA passively listening to you along with the class?
A. Quite a lot.

Q. How many students in the class does the TA interact with?
A. Charlotte plus the girls she sits with.

Q. Does the TA actively scan the room for off-task behaviour and safety?
A. No. In fact she avoids having anything to do with any incidents. There are a number of students in the class with behavioural difficulties.

Q. Have you ever asked your TA for advice?
A. Yes. I often need to find out how we can make practicals more accessible for Charlotte.

Q. Has the TA ever received any science training?
A. No. This would be a good idea, as she seems to lack confidence in the subject.

Discussion of Case 2

What strikes you first in this case is the lack of an effective partnership between teacher and TA. Both TA and teacher seem to lack confidence, the former in her science knowledge and the latter in working with another adult in the classroom.

On the other hand, perhaps the fact that Charlotte needs such a lot of support makes this a more difficult situation than in Case 1. Is the TA in a position to offer any support other than to Charlotte? She cannot *support the teacher in welcoming and settling students* as during this time she is helping Charlotte sort out the right equipment for the lesson.

Neither can she *support the teacher by organising, checking or distributing resources to support quick transition to the next task*, as she is needed by Charlotte to help during reading and writing tasks.

How could this situation be improved? The TA obviously needs access to some science specific training. In the meantime the teacher could provide more guidance. By sharing schemes of work or teaching resources, such as a textbook, in advance, the TA could be better prepared and thus more confident. The teacher may need to be more assertive with regard to health and safety. Whilst the TA must obviously be supervising Charlotte during practicals, she must also understand her responsibilities should she observe any unsafe situation amongst the rest of the class. It would seem part of her professional responsibilities to *remind students to keep safety glasses on*.

If Mrs A is unable to offer support to other students, there may be a case for

requesting an additional, more general, TA to support a group.

Case 3: A dyslexia department

In some schools, teams of TAs (and sometimes specialist teachers) support groups of students with specific needs both in and out of the classroom. A description of such a department is included below.

The dyslexia department employs about 4 full time teacher equivalents, trained in dyslexia teaching, maths and English. The dyslexic students go to the department for up to 4 x 35 minute lessons per week, usually instead of modern foreign languages. The department co-ordinates the work of TAs who support dyslexic pupils (and others with specific learning needs) and inducts all new staff in ways of supporting dyslexic students in lessons. The department provides whole school INSET on various learning issues and writes a comprehensive booklet at the start of each year giving details on every student, with spelling and reading ages, verbal and non verbal scores, together with notes on those who have specific learning needs.

No simple answer

Cases 1 and 2 illustrate why the question regarding the role of TAs allocated to individual students has no simple answer. It would seem to depend on the specific needs of the student involved. In the case of Charlotte, she needs support in almost all aspects of the science lesson. It is therefore difficult and perhaps unreasonable to expect her allocated teaching assistant to support the class and teacher in other ways.

In Case 1, where Adam's needs were very specific but not all encompassing, the teaching assistant was able to use his own initiative to contribute greatly to the progress of many other students in the class.

The team of TAs in Case 3 offer training and support to the whole staff or to new staff as part of the induction process. The science department could consider offering some training in return, to help the TAs understand the specific needs in the context of the science laboratory. The article *Teaching Assistants – training and professional development* (EiS September 2006) highlights the lack of science specific training available to teaching assistants. The Mathematics and Science HLTA training is welcome news indeed, but it will not help the TAs in the cases described in this article whose expertise lies in the understanding of the specific needs of the students they support. As science teachers, we need to decide whether to wait until suitable training becomes available or to take the initiative ourselves and offer training to our TAs. Some science departments already include a TA representative in any whole department INSET. We could also encourage TAs lacking confidence in science to learn from the lessons they are in.

A teacher worked with a TA who supported a hearing impaired student. The TA had to listen attentively to the lesson so she could help explain any parts that the student had not picked up using the radio microphone and lip reading. One lesson she exclaimed '*I never did get chemistry at school but I get it now.*' At the end of the year she actually expressed a humorous desire to take the GCSE paper as she felt she had learnt so much from attending the lessons. This was obviously a moment of great professional satisfaction for the teacher. It does also show that we can ourselves contribute to furthering the understanding of our dedicated teaching assistants. This will enable them to support us better, and most importantly to support overall student learning.

Further reading

Sample, K. (2006) Teaching assistants in science, pages 118-122 in *ASE Guide to Secondary Science Education* ed. Wood-Robinson, V. Hatfield: ASE

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