

Help yourself



Teaching Assistants are the most expensive resource in our classrooms and yet often the most misunderstood, suggests Carol Frankl...

Often, secondary teachers are expected to know instinctively how to work with additional adults in the classroom without any discussion, prior training, or in many cases, allocated liaison time on a regular basis. TAs working effectively with teachers can support teaching and learning very effectively, but where there is little thought about the relationship, TA contributions can, in extreme circumstances, have a negative impact on the classroom and pupil progress. This is understandably detrimental in the secondary setting where exams and their subsequent results have a substantial affect on every student, especially in the SATs and GCSE years. The responsibility for ensuring effective teamwork between teachers and TAs ultimately lies with senior leaders to provide opportunities for joint training and support for classroom teams. In the classroom, however, all secondary teachers can take positive steps to maximise the effectiveness of TA support.

Shared strategies

Collaborative behaviour management goes a long way towards creating a productive learning classroom. Although it may not always appear to be so, spending time together planning the behaviour you want to see and practising your response to possible tricky situations that might arise in the classroom – with the emphasis on positive reinforcement and consistent verbal and non-verbal messages from teachers and TAs – is invariably time well spent. Despite their apparent maturity, secondary students feel safe when they know clearly what the boundaries are, and although some may challenge these, giving a consistent and calm response provides a clear message about your combined expectations. In short, shared use of agreed language and behaviour management techniques is very empowering for teachers, teaching assistants and students alike.

Effective collaboration happens when teachers' plans take account of the TA and specific tasks are assigned to each. This only works, though, if the plans are shared! TAs feel very frustrated if they do not know ahead of time what is expected of them in the lesson. When this is the case, TAs have to listen passively with the students to learn what is going to happen in that lesson and are unable to plan differentiated resources or alternative ways of presenting tasks. Sharing planning is most effective when it can be done face to face so that questions can be posed and answered. Emailing plans or accessing them on a server is also an option, but either way it is best practice to do so half



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termly for medium term plans and then a day or so before the lesson is due to take place. Remember that a TA may support in a number of lessons with a variety of teachers over a week, so the more notice you can give about the expected learning and the TA's role in achieving this, the better.

Team tactics

It is also good practice to share expectations around classroom rules and routines with clear decisions about which adult will work with which individual or groups of students. It is tempting to ask the TA to work with the least able pupils in the belief that their work will be easier to teach. This is untrue. Low achieving and SEN pupils offer some of the greatest challenges to teachers, not because of their behaviour necessarily, but because creative solutions have to be found to enable good quality access to the curriculum. So be creative, and allocate the adults in the classroom to groups of all abilities.

At The Southover Partnership School, a special school for students with autism and those with emotional, behavioural, learning and social difficulties, we aim to incorporate this best practice into our daily activities. As our classroom sizes are a lot smaller, and very often offer a teacher and a teaching assistant to just one student, we find it even more essential that they work hand-in-hand in order to promote the best possible outcomes for our pupils. With a little thought, discussion and sharing of information, TAs can be exceptionally helpful and effective in classes of one, two or forty.

Although it is more time – something of which we have very little these days – spent, when a seamless holistic approach to learning and teaching is achieved between the teacher and TA and this is what the students experience, you know you are teaching effectively and the young people are learning. In the long run this means less negative time spent on poor behaviour or on going over old lessons. Effective collaboration will undoubtedly achieve a marked increase in results, both behavioural and academic.