

New Partnerships for Learning: investigating relationships between Teachers and Teaching Assistants

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Abstract

Over recent decades there has been pressure on schools and teachers, in England, to transform teachers' working practice by advocating an improved role for teaching assistants. In reforming the workforce, the government also intended to support schools in building the momentum for change, whilst raising standards of pupil achievement and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning.

After briefly outlining national policy the paper describes the collaboration between Roehampton University, London, and Surrey 4S regarding a three-year training and research project. The project was supported by the European Social Fund and named 'New Partnerships for Learning'. The paper focuses on the first two years and reports on the relationships between teachers and teaching assistants. The research has implications for teachers and leaders in schools regarding the personal skills and attributes required to enhance an effective professional relationship. It also has significance for the development of training programmes arising from the changing nature of the relationship.

Key words: workforce reform, CPD, teaching assistants, working relationships

Introduction

Remodelling is a great opportunity to support the professionalism of teachers and support staff. It is about ensuring that time of all staff is focused on what will add most value to pupils. David Miliband, Minister for Schools Standards (2004)

Over recent decades there has been pressure on schools, in England, to relate what pupils learned more closely to the multiple expectations of an increasingly pluralistic, urban and technological society. Schools have had to respond to a combination of social and technical developments; changes in employment legislation; a plethora of government initiatives; and new models of learning and pupil assessment.

During their second term of office the Labour government in England introduced an education reform agenda to raise standards of pupil achievement. It had four strands:

- encouraging more graduates into teaching;
- reviewing the training, development and support of teachers;
- providing a professional career pathway for all support staff; and
- widening participation to allow access to higher education for groups of individuals that otherwise would not have attended university.

For many years schools have included in their workforce, adults other than teachers. These adults undertake a range of tasks vital to the efficiency of the school community. This project only focuses on adults who have a direct impact on learning. Different nomenclature exists for those working in this position (Bedford and Jackson, 2004; Kerry, 2005); in this paper we are using the term ‘teaching assistants’.

Studies undertaken by Price Waterhouse Cooper (2001) commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES); Menter et al (2002); Jackson, Bedford and Peat (2003) and the National Remodelling Team (NRT, 2004a) identified the following as issues which were likely to impact on the delivery of the reform agenda:

- teachers leaving the profession because of excessive workload;
- non-teaching activities taking over 30% of a teacher’s working week;
- poor work/life balance;
- 45% of teachers due to retire in less than 15 years’ time;
- 30% of teachers leaving in their first 5 years;
- limited professional development for support staff;
- teacher shortages in a number of key subjects;
- changing views of pedagogy;
- assessment aims changing to emphasise accountability;
- limited collaboration within and between schools.

Remodelling the workforce was seen as a way of providing a solution to the identified problems. Indeed, since 1998 workforce remodelling had been gaining momentum in England with the government issuing circular 2/98 *Reducing the bureaucracy in schools*.

One of the key objectives of the DfES legislation *Time for Standards: Reforming the School Workforce* (2002a) was to transform the working practice of teachers by removing a number of administrative tasks from their role, see table 1, and set an agenda to develop a career pathway for teaching assistants and administrators.

Collecting money	Producing staff lists	Collating pupil reports	ICT trouble shooting and minor repairs	Minuting meetings
Chasing invoices	Record-keeping and filing	Administering work experience	Commissioning new ICT equipment	Co-ordinating and submitting bids
Bulk photocopying	Classroom display	Administering examinations	Ordering supplies and equipment	Seeking advice and giving personal advice
Copy typing	Analysing attendance figures	Invigilating examinations	Stocktaking	Managing pupil data
Producing standard letters	Processing examination results	Administering teacher cover	Cataloguing, preparing, issuing and maintaining equipment and materials	Inputting pupil data

Table I Administrative tasks to be given to teaching assistants

In addition it outlined four key areas, which were intended to:

- enable schools to recruit more support staff;
- introduce a new framework for the teacher-support staff relationship;
- improve training, qualifications and career progression opportunities and promote development of higher level roles;
- support headteachers and governors in managing the change and deploying the support staff effectively.

The intention of the government in England was to use this legislation to support schools in building the momentum for change whilst raising standards of pupil achievement. As a result the numbers of teaching assistants have increased by 110% since 1992 and in 2005 they now represent 25% of the school workforce (Staley, 2005). Many schools created change teams linked to the Local Authority Remodelling Adviser, however, the government did not put in place specific training programmes to support teachers working with teaching assistants in a new partnership.

The National Remodelling Team (NRT) was established by the DfES in April 2003 within the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) to promote and progress the Government's workforce remodelling agenda by supporting schools in the changes required. The NRT have trained Local Education Authority personnel and school leaders and have identified remodelling as different from other school initiatives (NRT, 2004, p.3). In 2005 the NRT were relocated to the Training and Development Agency in London.

Throughout the recent government publications (DfES 2002b, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c) and subsequent papers (NRT, 2004a) the focus was on 'remodelling' as a means of relieving the stress on teachers. A more holistic approach might have been to consider the potential contribution of all employees within a school, such as administrators, technicians, teaching assistants to the learning of students. Finding an appropriate title for these staff continues to be a key issue; many of the phrases in current usage carry negative connotations such as 'support staff', 'adults other than teachers' or 'non-teaching staff'. Some countries, for example, the USA, Portugal and the Czech Republic, use the term 'paraprofessionals' (Kerry and Kerry 2002).

The programme for remodelling the workforce in education was as a result of a National Workforce Agreement, January 2003, supported by the majority of the school based professional associations. The implementation was staged in three phases. Parallel initiatives to those in education can be seen in other government workforce reform, for example 'Agenda for Change' in the National Health Service.

'New Partnerships for Learning'

VT Four S, the business unit of Surrey Local Education Authority, commissioned Roehampton University to collaborate with them on a project entitled 'New Partnerships for Learning' (NPfL), intended to transform classroom practice. An initial research and development team was established comprising senior staff from Primary, Secondary and Special schools in Surrey, an educational psychologist, consultants from 4S and academic staff from Roehampton University. The three-year project (2003 – 2006), funded by the European Social Fund (ESF), is centred on the delivery of a professional development programme to equip teachers with the skills needed to work effectively in partnership with teaching assistants. The content of the programme was

informed by the results of initial research conducted by members of the project team mainly through questionnaires and interviews.

The programme that emerged was designed to enable teachers to explore the management processes and the skills needed to work in effective partnerships with teaching assistants in the class setting. It comprised two twilight sessions and three full days during which time issues such as cultural change, management systems and role development were addressed, together with an occupational personality assessment of each delegate. The mode of delivery included an independent inter-sessional enquiry which was presented during the last session. Participants were offered the opportunity to take part in the next stage of the research.

The programme was delivered by members of the research group in addition to VT Four S consultants. Programme evaluations and inter-sessional projects informed further developments. Concurrently research on the impact of the development programme on working partnerships and the identification of new modes of working developed.

‘New Partnerships for Learning’ research project

Year one of the NPfL project was spent in setting up the training programme, undertaking an initial literature review and devising the research methodology. The analysis of the literature revealed a number of themes, specifically:

- a concern that both teachers and teaching assistants had difficulty in defining or interpreting from government what the new role might be for teaching assistants (Quicke, 2003 and Watkinson, 2004);
- teachers were fearful that the changing relationship might be a threat to their professional integrity: either because it might be perceived that teaching was so easy that anyone could do it with some practice, or government was implying that teachers were no longer capable of fulfilling a teaching role unaided (Muijs, 2003);
- the identification that employees including teachers find it difficult to abdicate responsibility even if a substitute is well qualified, because it may be perceived as a weakness (Watkinson, 2004);
- there were no exemplars of what a successful partnership looks like (Watkinson, 2004);
- there was a lack of training for teachers to work with other adults in a learning situation (Edmond, 2003);
- there was insufficient non-contact time provided for teachers and teaching assistants to plan together and consider strategies (Dixon, 2003);
- career intentions of teaching assistants are many and varied and a teacher needs to be clear about their aspirations (Quicke, 2003);
- the pay differential between teachers and teaching assistants is so unequal it is an uneasy term for any partnership (Quicke, 2003).

Andrew Howes, in his review of the National Agreement, claims that the documents ‘are clear about the relationship between teachers and support staff: it is characterised as one of leadership and management’ (2003, p.148). This comment is one that is often found in the literature relating to teaching assistants, and is about teachers leading and managing the situation rather than focusing on the partnership aspects of adults working together in the learning environment. One of the key findings in the research conducted by Jackson and Bedford (2005) was that

remodelling the workforce was about reducing teacher bureaucracy rather than recognising the professionalism of teaching assistants and other adults in schools.

During year two, initial research activity was conducted using quantitative and qualitative methods. The teachers undertaking the training programme formed the initial research sample. All participants were issued with a questionnaire during their first training session that aimed to gather information on the current organisational policies and practices in using teaching assistants in Surrey schools. The questionnaire consists of five sections using structured questions requiring open-ended answers. These sections covered school and participant details; the role of teaching assistants in the school; an analysis of the participant's training and development needs; an analysis of the training and development needs of the participant's teaching assistants and finally their school's organisational policies and practices. A total of 56 questionnaires were distributed during the first four courses with 53 returns giving a 95% response rate. This paper draws on these responses.

Of the 53 respondents, a total of 41 (77%) agreed to take part in further research, either through a one-to-one interview with a member of the research team in their own school or by participating in a focus group. The purpose of conducting interviews was to follow up issues that were indicated on the questionnaires and gather more in-depth, qualitative information relating to the working partnership between teacher and teaching assistant. Eighteen semi-structured interviews have been conducted from a representative sample of all school phases. The interviews focused on two key areas: seeking participant's opinion on the extent to which teachers and teaching assistants work in partnership in their own school; and a discussion of the participant's individual research project.

Research Findings – questionnaire responses

Of the participants who completed the questionnaires, their current position and number of years of teaching experience can be seen as below (Figs 1 and 2). The high proportion of participants who work as Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) may be explained by the fact that they have traditionally worked with teaching assistants in schools. One teaching assistant attended the course, although the activity was aimed at teachers who work with teaching assistants.

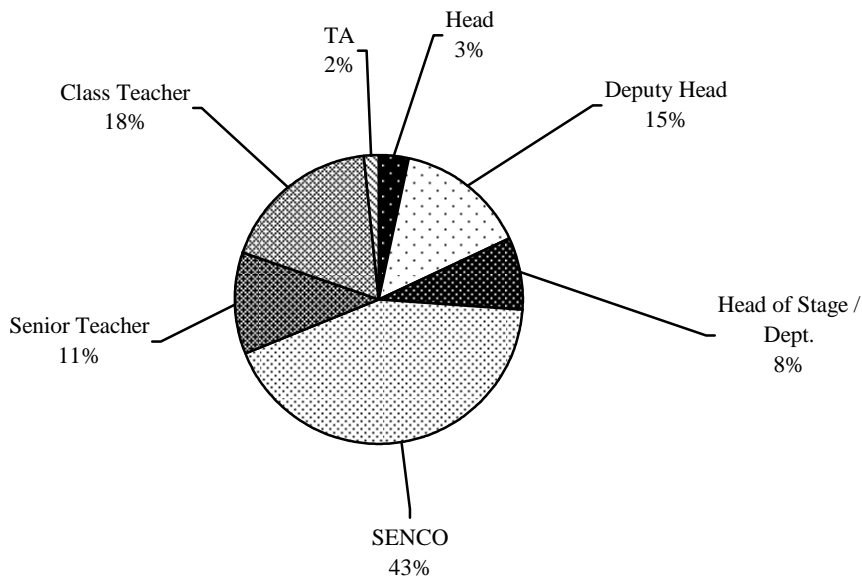


Figure 1: Current professional status of respondent

The length of experience of the participants was wide ranging as demonstrated in figure 2 below.

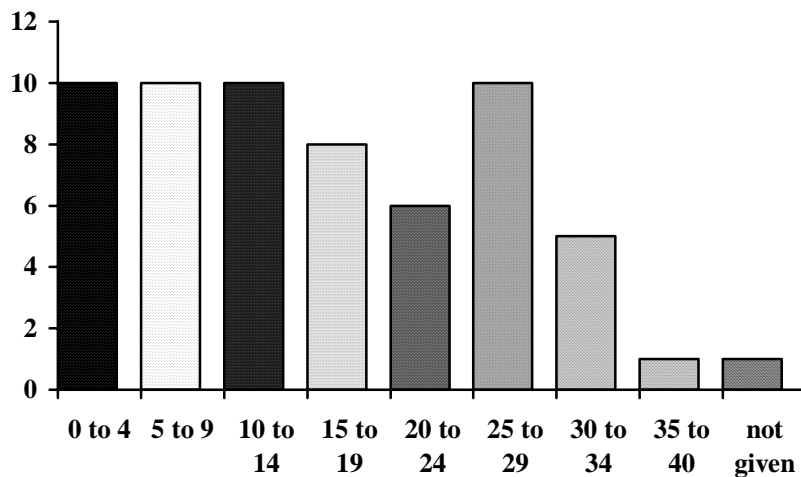


Figure 2: Number of years' teaching experience

The majority of teachers (86%) had a primary background, with 5% coming from secondary and 9% from special schools.

Teachers were asked what personal skills and attributes they and their teaching assistants needed for the relationship to work well. Figure 3 shows the results from the teachers' perspective and Figure 4 indicates the results given by the teachers for teaching assistants.

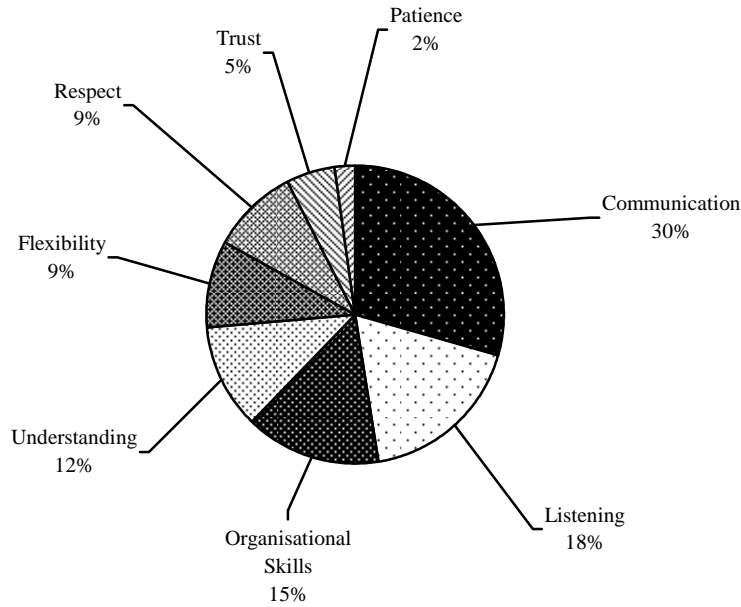


Figure 3: What skills and/or personal attributes do teachers need to enhance an effective working relationship with teaching assistants?

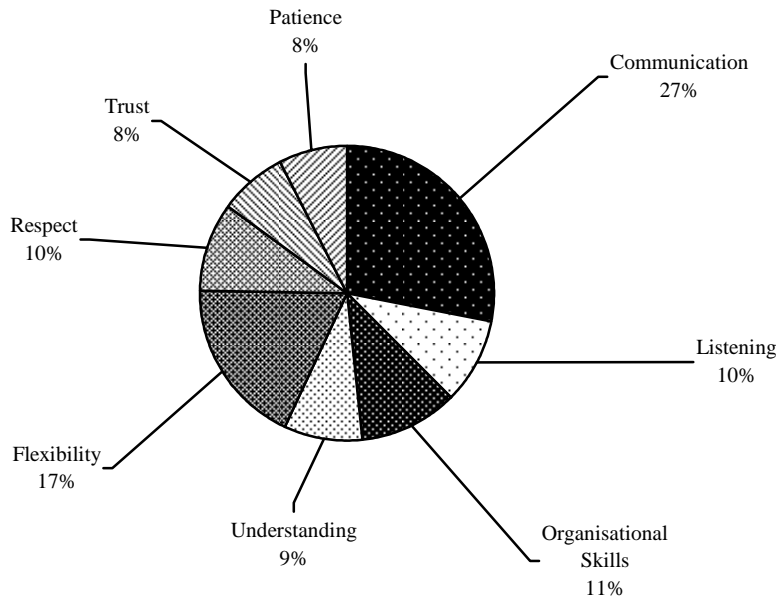


Figure 4: What skills and/or personal attributes do teaching assistants need to enhance an effective working relationship with teachers?

To ensure an effective partnership between teachers and teaching assistants, respondents were clear about the need for institutional policies or guidelines on the teacher/teaching assistant partnership. They identified the importance of defining the roles of teaching assistants in specific policies such as Teaching and Learning, Behaviour and documents such as the staff handbook.

Indeed, other research (Sharpe, 2005) has recorded that, with a small number of significant exceptions, there was little evidence to show that teaching assistants ‘were being accorded status as partners in the education of the children’ (p.3).

Respondents to the questionnaire were asked to identify the key recommendations they would make to their Headteacher or Chair of Governors to enhance the way teachers and teaching assistants work together, the key findings are shown in table II.

Paid time in school hours for planning and liaison	45%
Shared training opportunities	12%
Cultural change in the school to value the role of TAs	12%
Funded enhanced pay scale for TAs	8%
More clearly defined roles for TAs	8%
Take time to review and develop what’s going on	6%
Performance management for TAs	4%
Risk assessment for TAs in classrooms	4%
TAs should not be allowed to take classes on their own	1%

NB Some respondents identified more than one recommendation.

Table II: Key recommendations to enhance the way teachers and TAs work together

In the schools represented, 18% of teachers said no teaching assistants were applying for Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) status, awarded to teaching assistants after an assessment indicating achievement against performance indicators. 16% said one of their teaching assistants was applying, and 39% said that two teaching assistants were going to. 11% identified that between 4 and 7 teaching assistants in their schools were applying which seems a significant number.

When respondents were asked if teaching assistants were given the opportunity to participate in the school’s performance management scheme, 75% replied positively, while 9% reported that their teaching assistants had an abridged scheme, 5% stated that teaching assistants did not participate, and 11% of the respondents were not aware of the involvement of teaching assistants.

When asked if they had any further development needs, 41% of the respondents said no. Surprisingly only 16% of the teachers asked for joint training with teaching assistants to work in partnership in the classroom, and 7% expected the NPfL programme to meet any needs they had. Other development areas identified by individuals included time management, timetabling skills, general management skills, performance management training, coaching skills, information about HLTA status and counselling skills.

Research findings – Interview responses

For the purpose of presenting the findings key themes were identified, these were issues mentioned by 50% or more of the respondents.

Two main themes emerged from the respondents in respect of the personal attributes common for both teachers and teaching assistants. Firstly, of those interviewed, 95% made comments related to relationships needed for team working, and secondly, half of all respondents commented on the need for communication skills.

Team working focussed on both the interpersonal relationship between two adults and the relationships required for professional working. A number of comments focussed on the two-way dialogue needed to ensure sharing of ideas and trusting each other to say what does and does not work well. Comments were made about the importance of understanding and respecting each other's role and having confidence in each other, and having clear mutual expectations of what they required from pupils. Flexibility was also mentioned four times, relating to changing plans to meet unexpected needs and to differentiate tasks. Communication skills included both good interpersonal communication skills and the willingness to share information and ideas.

In respect to respondents' views of skills required by teachers, comments overwhelmingly focussed on aspects of their professional role. A number of leadership skills were identified such as effective delegation and enabling autonomy, and the ability to reward and celebrate success. Other leadership skills concerned effective organisation and management; such as the need for comprehensive planning and preparation and good time management. Respondents highlighted the view that the teacher has responsibility for all pupils and that therefore the teaching assistants should not be expected to have the sole charge of the SEN pupils they are working with, as is often the case. Five respondents mentioned the importance of teachers understanding and respecting the role of teaching assistants, and one interviewee mentioned the need to accept that all teachers should be working with a teaching assistant.

In contrast, when identifying attributes required by teaching assistants, there was considerably greater emphasis on personal characteristics such as the ability to take the initiative and be proactive (mentioned by four respondents), to be punctual, open-minded and conscientiousness. A certain level of education, good standard of writing and knowledge of a subject were identified as prerequisite by three interviewees. Skills identified included the ability to plan, manage time and manage behaviour. They also included aspects of the professional role such as being alert and sensitive to the needs of the teacher, particularly with respect to the role and development needs of newly qualified teachers.

A four-scale rating was used to quantify the extent to which teachers and teaching assistants currently have the characteristics prerequisite to the partnership identified as above. It was clear that teaching assistants, with a score of 3.06, were perceived to have the required characteristics to a greater degree than teachers who scored at 2.76.

Four key themes, communication, school culture, training and resources, emerged from the question relating to the conditions within the school system needed for effective teacher/teaching assistant working partnerships.

A total of 50% of respondents mentioned how communication within the system was essential for effective partnerships. This was divided into communication generally about what is happening in the school (7 respondents), and an agreement about, and communication of, the roles of teaching assistants (5 respondents). Four respondents stated that communication in school could be supported by teaching assistants having access to whole staff briefings/meetings, policies, and pigeon holes in the staffroom. One interviewee highlighted the importance of ensuring that part-time staff also receive all information.

The second theme, related to the culture of social inclusion and team working within the school, was mentioned by 56% of the interviewees. Here, again, there were comments relating to the need for mutual respect and ensuring that teaching assistants are treated as full members of the school and have access to all facilities.

The next theme, mentioned by 61% of respondents, related to professional training and development. Good practice was considered to be a commitment to training for teachers and teaching assistants, both individually and together, as well as whole school training. One respondent mentioned the idea of providing a crèche to support the whole school training session.

The final theme identified was resources, with the greatest need being for time for liaison and planning. This was mentioned by 83%, who focused in particular on the need to have protected time set aside. Other resource issues mentioned included enhanced pay for teaching assistants, money for performance management and an increase in teaching assistants throughout the school. Four respondents mentioned the need for additional physical space outside the classroom for storage and a meeting place.

Again using the rating scale, respondents were asked to consider the extent to which the supportive school conditions mentioned were currently in place in their school. There was considerable variation in responses of interviewees. For the purpose of this analysis the ratings have been averaged for each school. The scores for individual schools ranged from 1.25 to 3.5, with an average of 2.42, noticeably lower than the average rating identifying prerequisite characteristics for the teaching partnership.

When responding to the third question enquiring about school plans for developing the partnership in the coming year, answers were varied. Two key themes emerged, these were closely related to the themes each identified by 44% of respondents as exemplifying good practice, namely training and induction, and planning and communication. They stated training and induction plans should be monitored; with teaching assistants themselves identifying training needs, with induction for new teaching assistants. In respect of planning and communication, they included ensuring that teaching assistants attended school staff meetings which were scheduled at a convenient time, developing shared planning time and having information about the children and lesson plans. In addition to these key themes, there was a wide range of other plans and recommendations offered. These included developing a handbook for teaching assistants, appraisal/performance management system for teaching assistants and ideas to support them in the implementation of Preparation, Planning and Assessment (PPA) time.

Using the rating scale, respondents were asked how high a priority these plans mentioned above were in comparison with other demands on their school over the next year. The response was positive, with an average score of 3.04. It should be noted, as this will have had a marginal effect on the above finding, that one respondent rated the priority as 'not at all', because it was not in their recently published school development plan and the school had 'a lot of other priorities'. A similar level of optimism was expressed about their confidence that plans and recommendations would be put into place over the next year (3.25), although this was tempered by warnings about possible financial constraints and resistance from class teachers.

Emergent issues from the research to date

Critical analysis of the results from the questionnaires and interviews has focussed on four main areas: school organisational culture, systems in place in schools, skills and understanding of staff, and personal relationships in the school. It should be borne in mind that 86% of the respondents were from the primary phase.

The New Partnerships for Learning development programme is about encouraging new and effective partnerships for learning with the emphasis on teachers and senior leaders in schools taking the initiative. In creating a new organisational culture, there is a clear perception by teachers that much depended on the leadership skills and the interest in workforce remodelling shown by the Headteacher and their commitment to embracing change and challenging resistance. Over the period of the research, comments increasingly focused on specific working practices; for example whether teaching assistants should be used to cover for the government agreed planning, preparation and assessment time for teachers and; more recently, plans to use teaching assistants to run after school clubs for the recently initiated extended school day.

However, recognition of support staff and their role in learning was seen as critical. Where there was an acceptance of learning partnerships in schools between teacher/pupil, teaching assistant/pupil and teacher/teaching assistant then respondents felt confident that plans would be implemented. It was reported the renaming of teaching assistants 'Assistant Teachers' had a positive impact in the school of one respondent. There was less consistency with regard to HLTA status and much of the uncertainty around applications for this status centred on political sensitivities and affordability. A recurring comment was the concern about possible resistance to the changes from existing staff, although most respondents felt that progress was being made in their school.

Much good practice centred on the need for systems; induction for teachers and teaching assistants, teaching assistant handbooks, and a commitment to teaching assistant participation in all school activities. A total of 45% of the teachers said their most important recommendation would be for paid time to liaise and plan work together, and this was reinforced in every one of the interviews.

Delegates to the training programme stated that a high proportion of their teaching assistants participated in performance management. This finding is in tension with research by Sharpe (2005, p.20) which found limited evidence of 'performance management systems and supervision ...with only one TA in the group describing a comprehensive system of performance management...[or a] policy which fully took into account the role of the TA in the school'.

In many cases the teachers agreed that their teaching assistants needed very similar skills and attributes to themselves, and that opportunities for joint training and development in areas such as behaviour management were critical to their relationship. Delegates identified the need for openness and flexibility on the part of both teachers and teaching assistants, and willingness for both to relinquish part of their role to their partner. They expressed the need for teaching assistants to be willing to take initiative and show commitment to professionalism.

No participant identified that they had received training in working with other adults to improve learning as part of their initial teacher training, although these issues had been considered by a number of staff with Advanced Diplomas and MAs.

Perhaps the most important, but least tangible, issue was related to personal relationships in the school; notably staff attitudes and commitment to equality and recognition. All participants in the research consistently reaffirmed the importance of showing that all members of the school are valued. Mutual trust and respect for each other's role was seen as vital – often built through shared training that clarified each role in the partnership.

By looking at these emergent issues we are considering a model that indicates what effective partnerships might look like and how the identified elements inter-relate.

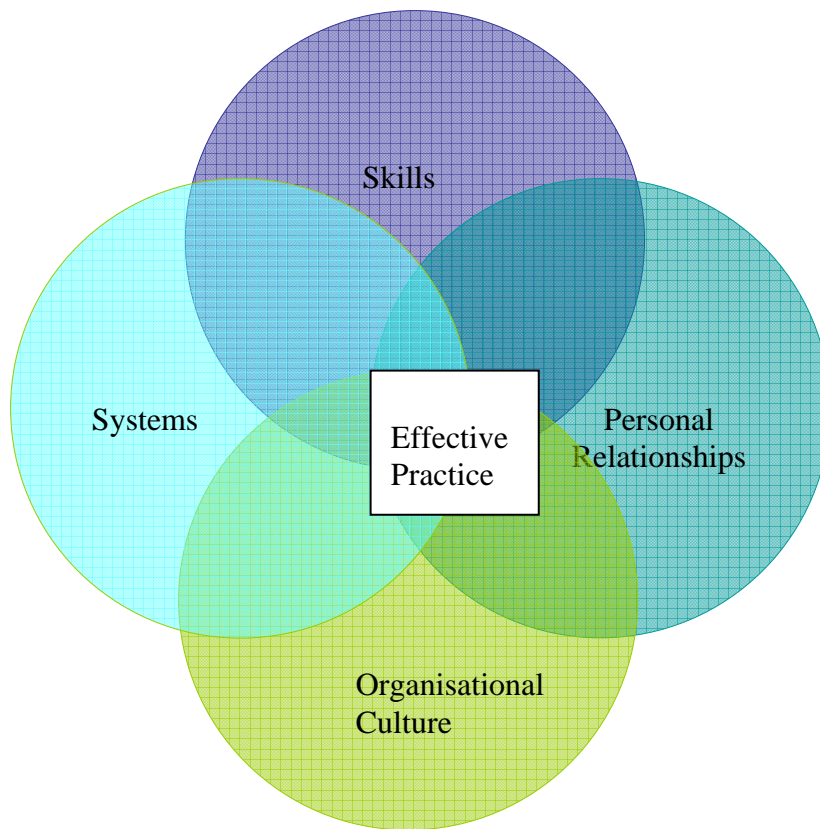


Figure 5: model of effective partnerships

Looking forward to the final phase of the research

During year three, a series of focus groups will be facilitated by members of the research team to explore further the issues raised by the questionnaires and interviews. These will include focus groups specifically drawn from secondary and special schools, whose participation has been under represented in the research to date. Specific areas of investigation will include provision for performance management, partnership between teaching assistants and teachers, issues surrounding Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) status and school priorities for improvement. These will be analysed and will form part of a further paper.

Following the detailed evaluation of the training programme, a revised NPfL programme will run from the autumn term and a specialist training session for secondary schools is also planned. The opportunity to gain accreditation for participating in the programme with a Certificate in Professional Development at HE1 or HE3 level and the possibility of Masters level accreditation is being explored by Roehampton University.

Each interviewer from the research team will follow up their interviewees from groups 1-4 by telephone in the spring term of 2006. This will allow the NPfL participants to reflect on how the plans they made in their schools following attendance on the development programme have been implemented.

A very positive outcome of the NPfL training programme has been the completion of an investigation in the participants' schools into issues around the use of teaching assistants. A full analysis of these projects will be undertaken by the research team in the spring term of 2006 and these will be published, with the permission of the participants, on an NPfL website to enable good practice to be shared.

Concluding comments

This paper outlines the second year of a three-year project. The final year will be critical to the project as the intention of the research team is to have in place models for effective practice based on research.

By the end of the academic year 2005-2006 it is anticipated that 200 teachers will have received training in the New Partnerships for Learning programme, which has evolved from a collaborative approach between Surrey Schools Support Service (4S) and Roehampton University. This collaboration in the development programme and the research project will hopefully be mirrored in schools across Surrey as new partnerships for learning develop between teachers and teaching assistants. However, the extent to which this may be considered an equal partnership is an area that will benefit from further research and it is anticipated that NPfL will, in future, be extended so that the voices of the teaching assistants may also be heard.

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