

Restructuring in light of budget restraints: Optimise Teaching Assistants to maximise resources

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WE ARE IN THE MIDDLE of a time of great change. Not only with regard to the austere struggles of financial recovery, but also in terms of widespread educational change and SEN review. As an experienced Special Educational Needs Coordinator in a large mainstream secondary school, I have had the opportunity over the last decade to develop sustainable and creative support models against a backdrop of developing legislation and increased accountability. The basis from which my work developed is through having a clear inclusive philosophy (Morewood, 2008) and ensuring that structures allow for more sustainable models of support (Morewood, 2009a). As we face increasing cuts, not only in direct school funding but also in associated areas of support for vulnerable learners, it is essential that schools restructure models of support and intervention in order to optimise provision and maximise resources. The modern child is very different than those who were being educated 15 or so years ago (Petersen, 2010). We have more children surviving childbirth and living with associated medical and developmental difficulties. To this end, we need systems of support and intervention that meet this 'new child need'; and schools need to move away from traditional Teaching Assistant-heavy models of support.

Our multi-tiered support model was developed through necessity; lack of CAMHS professionals and poor access to centrally held therapeutic services. This constantly-evolving model positions us strongly when other schools are simply starting to think about how to bridge the gap in the funding-provision deficit of modern reality. It started nine years ago, when I felt strongly that there was a desperate need for onsite therapeutic support for some young people. One of the first appointments I made was that of a qualified psychotherapist. Being able to offer therapy sessions as part of an inclusive timetabled provision, link with families and groups in the community and also offer additional guidance and support to staff was an essential change. This was the start of our developing model, and the beginning of a move away from traditional 'in-class' support (Lorenz, 1998) into a proactive therapeutic model that saturated the whole school environment.

The success of this therapeutic support model was developed further with senior non-teaching staff – Strand Managers, taking lead roles for Communication and Interaction and Physical and Medical needs (Morewood, 2009b). This allowed designated staff to develop practical skills in relation to language and communication and fine and gross motor skills, and establish specific sessions, for example sessions for developing reciprocal language skills. These therapeutic group sessions form part of students' timetables and provide clear targets that extend into traditional lessons and the home. This supported the 'saturation effect' I developed when establishing our provision for students on the autism spectrum.

A crucial part of establishing this new model of support was staff training. Over the past four years regular sessions, offering specific strategies of support to develop whole-staff skill-sets and reinforce the pro-active work of the interventions, helped

make us ‘outstanding’ in supporting vulnerable learners (OFSTED inspection, 2008).

Another essential part of modernising provision was the need to embrace technology. We considered the ‘time-finance’ implications of specific technology and focused on need. To this end we regularly use a ‘text home’ system, to positively reinforce work done by students at school. This ensures that even students who are not able to remember work done earlier that day, have a positive interaction with parents/carers upon arrival from school. The main addition to our support is software that reads aloud any on screen text. Whereas previously large numbers of Teaching Assistants assisted during examinations, technicians now simply upload examination papers and modify the software. Students have the facility to play, pause, fast forward and rewind facilities with headphones. Initial evaluations of this are extremely positive.

Next steps include screening software and developing more cost-effective interventions for students with Specific Learning Needs. A member of staff is undertaking a Diploma in SpLD with a focus on developing effective support for students with specific learning and processing needs. Technology may well play a significant part within that.

As part of the saturation of our environment, we have developed peer support significantly, generating greater understanding. For example, training a maths teacher how to deliver more inclusive, autism-friendly lessons; working with the peer group to ensure those who work with individual students with needs on the spectrum understand the specific nature of the barriers faced; and helping the student understand and develop their own strategies. This is good inclusive sense: it reduces the need for Teaching Assistants and also educates peers and others in the community.

This is now being developed across the whole school, but originated from the creation of our bespoke Nurture Group three years ago, which establishes a personalised support model. The success of this extension of our proactive therapeutic model is outstanding, with some young people thriving within the mainstream school after being allowed to develop the skills of learning and participation within such a unique environment.

Ultimately, evolving models of support need to match individual institutions and environments. However, as we evaluate our systems and models of support, we see that the reduction in staff, coupled with an increased training and awareness programme saturating the school and supported by clear proactive therapeutic interventions, provides a more inclusive and less costly system.

References

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