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Assistants put the TA in team

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Flushed with the success of my column on using parents as assistants in secondary school (well, three e-mails), I move on like an insatiable shark to the next group of people who can have an impact on achievement in the classroom.

I read that it is 10 years since teaching assistants first appeared. The Primary Review's Primary Workforce Management and Reform paper by Hilary Burgess of the Open University, reports that, while applauding assistants, teachers felt that they needed more training on how to manage them.

Hinchingbrooke School loves teaching assistants. Not only are they employed in supporting the learning of students with amanuensis, differentiation of materials, and targeting issues on individual education plans, but they are also of value to teachers, either prosaically photocopying resources on to coloured paper for the dyslexic pupils, or planning more accessible avenues for learning for their charges. This we know. However, they are also valued here for their desire to take a full role in the school.

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They help staff in both the isolation room and the inclusion room; they support Year 7 tutors with transition to secondary school; they supervise and quite often single-handedly run charity events; and they are more often than not the first port of call for pupils with child protection problems. My advice, then, is to ensure teaching assistants are valued and that teachers know well how to use them.

Invite a teaching assistant to your departmental or year group meeting, so that they feel part of your work; try hard to plan work with them; devise innovative ways of using their skills, whether in counselling, administration, or working with parents; and encourage them to push their boundaries. Many assistants, in my experience, are born teachers, advocates for the child in behaviour meetings, perceptive child protection representatives, or creative display presenters. We have a saying in our sports college: "There's no I in team." There is, however, a TA.

Di Beddow, Deputy head of Hinchingsbrooke School in Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire.

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