

JO BRIGHOUSE

Home truths



IT'S HOMEWORK day and I survey the red plastic box with a familiar sinking feeling. I know exactly what will be in there: 23 exercise books (out of a possible 30) in various states of disrepair, containing two sheets, many filled in with red biro or purple glittery gel pen. At the bottom of the box will be a pristine book, bursting with exquisite handwriting, illustrations and sheets of "extra research".

Then there are the missing books. Six of these will appear only after an energetic teacher-led campaign. One, like everything else its owner takes out of the classroom, will have disappeared forever.

For many primary teachers, homework is a headache that is completely out of proportion to any benefits it brings. I'm not talking about asking children to read or to practise their times tables – those are no-brainers. But to devise homework that is meaningful, interesting and will extend a child's learning is no mean feat. Put simply, if the task is easy enough for a child to do without any help, it's probably not teaching them anything. And if it's too difficult, it ends up being done by the parents, often after tears have been shed and tempers frayed.

"Homework for primary-aged children is a waste of time", a headteacher once told me. "If they've worked hard in school all day, they deserve the evening off. And if they haven't worked at school, they won't work at home."

One of my new pupils comes in every day with her reading diary unsigned. "Can no one at home hear you read?" I asked her once.

"No," she told me. "My dad works nights and my mum's too busy with the baby twins."

"She's right," the teaching assistant told me. "Her mum speaks no English, so she couldn't help her even if she had the time."

This is precisely the reason why I don't believe in wasting time and energy castigating children whose homework isn't up to scratch – once they leave the classroom, the playing field tilts. You can't compare a piece of work completed at a quiet kitchen table with a home tutor to one from a child who had to ask you to borrow a pen.

And yet, some parents judge the quality of a primary education entirely on the homework doled out and refuse to believe in the true brilliance of a school until their child is coming home with a Sats paper a night and a spelling list that includes

If they've worked hard in school all day, they deserve the evening off

the word pterodactyl. making dodecahedrons out of matchsticks with your child, then all power to you.

If you're the sort of parent who has the time or inclination to spend your evenings practising subordinate clauses and making dodecahedrons out of matchsticks with your child, then all power to you. If, on the other hand, you're the sort of parent who reads with your child and helps them to learn their times tables but wishes us dead when we ask them to make a multi-pitched musical instrument out of household objects by Monday then you can rest assured you're still doing a great job.

Jo Brighouse is a primary school teacher in the Midlands

SUPPORT STAFF

Teaching assistant role must evolve or die, schools told

Use TAs effectively or risk losing them, researchers warn

HELEN WARD

THE MAJORITY of schools are failing to make the best use of teaching assistants, despite the \$4.4 billion spent each year on employing them, according to research.

When properly deployed and trained, TAs can provide a "significant" boost to learning, says a new report from the Education Endowment Fund (EEF). But using them as substitute teachers has little impact on attainment, it finds.

The report, published today, says that support staff should be used to "supplement, rather than replace, the teacher" by overseeing one-to-one and small-group work and encouraging pupils to develop independent learning skills.

The EEF is also funding a \$5 million campaign in West and South Yorkshire to change how TAs are used.

The number of TAs has grown exponentially since the role was expanded in 2003 in an effort to ease teachers' workload. Between 2000 and 2013, numbers trebled from 79,000 full-time equivalent posts to 243,700. The EEF estimates that nurseries and primary schools in England now have more TAs than they do teachers.

But concerns that this expansion has not improved pupil attainment have been growing since a study published in 2009 concluded that the more support pupils received from TAs over a year, the less progress they made (bit.ly/SupportStaffStudy).



UNLOCKING POTENTIAL: Teaching assistants can be very effective

ALAMY

The five-year research project, led by the Institute of Education in London, found that TAs tended to work with low-attaining pupils in a well-intentioned bid to give those pupils more adult attention. However, children often ended up being denied time with their teacher and spoon-fed answers by support staff.

Jonathan Sharples, a senior researcher at the EEF who co-authored the new guidance (which will be available at educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk), said there was little evidence that the deployment of TAs had evolved over the past six years.

"We have to break the idea of using a teaching assistant for long periods of informal support for low-attaining and often high-need pupils," he told *TES*. "I think most teachers intuitively recognise that. There are real signs that some schools are using TAs in a much more structured way and those schools are seeing an impact, but they are the minority."

He added that there was strong evidence that TAs working one-to-one or with small groups of pupils to give intensive support for as little as 30 minutes a week could help pupils to make an additional three to four months' progress over a year.

The EEF guidance, which is aimed at headteachers, suggests that teachers and TAs should take turns to work with different groups of pupils. TAs could also demonstrate the equipment to be used in a lesson while the teacher is talking, it adds.

But without action to ensure that TAs were used more effectively, their role could be under threat, Dr Sharples said.

"I think that the widespread use of teaching assistants could be at risk if something is not done. They can make a significant difference; the report is about unlocking their potential."

Jon Richards, national secretary for education and children's services at Unison, said that many of the public sector union's members were "pushed into roles they are not trained to do" and frequently missed out on CPD.

'Teaching assistants don't just sit around'

Andrew Truby, pictured, headteacher of St Thomas of Canterbury School in Sheffield, says teaching assistants are used to run



"pre-learning" activities before lessons at the primary. "We have children coming in at 8.30am for extra sessions in a maths programme, which the teaching assistants have been trained to give. That has had a massive impact," he says.

"We have some special educational needs teaching assistants who work with children with complex needs. We don't have teaching assistants just sitting around watching teachers teach.

"We also have a couple of TAs who make sure every classroom is well organised and stunning, with high-quality displays, so that children's jaws drop when they walk in."

"There is increasing quality research that shows well-trained teaching assistants can make a positive difference," he added. "We need to share more best practice about how they are trained and deployed, as it is in no one's interest to neglect the training needs of teaching assistants."

A TA at a Manchester secondary, who did not want to be named, said the role had become more prominent in her school but some teachers were not sure how to make the best use of support staff.

"I do love this job," she added. "I thought about being a teacher, but after seeing the pressure they are under to tick boxes, I was put off a little bit. Some people do this as just a job, just for a bit of money. But I think it is more than that: it's a vocation. It's about benefiting the students involved."

We have to break the idea of using a teaching assistant for long periods of informal support

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