Increasing the impact of teaching assistants

Every year schools spend over two billion pounds on TAs, and they now make up about a quarter of the school workforce. Although TAs are key people in providing support to schools, research from the Institute of Education found that some schools may not always be getting good value from this investment.

There are several theories about why this might be happening.

1. Where the TA is allocated to sit with a lower-achieving group in class, those children will actually spend less time interacting with their teacher.
2. TAs tend to focus on task completion – making sure children finish a worksheet, for example – rather than on what they are learning.
3. Having a helpful adult supporting a child or group may make children dependent rather than independent.

Practical suggestions for increasing the impact of TAs

1. Look at how much time lower-achieving children spend with the teacher compared to the time spent with the TA. Consider altering the balance if needed.
2. Make sure any TA working with children in or out of class knows what the children are meant to be learning, as well as what they will be doing. Brief the TA beforehand about the learning objectives for the group or individual child.
3. Think about the training provided to TAs within your school. TAs should be able to access training in assessment for learning, just as you do.

Successful schools deploy TAs to deliver time-limited intervention programmes with targeted children, rather than general in-class support. They work with an individual child or a group for twenty to thirty minutes three or four times a week on a set programme that lasts for approximately six to twelve weeks.

Unless they have complex physical needs, children benefit most from these short sharp programmes that have a beginning and an end – rather than being attached to a TA forever.