Loyne Learning Alliance

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Briefing 9
August 2014

Teaching Assistants encouraging independent learning

Context

In 2013, the Loyne, Coppice and Mossgate focused on the use of Lesson Study approach featured in the national primary strategy (DfES, 2008) as part of the Loyne Learning Alliance (LLA) programme of joint practice development (JPD). Emerging from the LLA action research JPD process and the Russell et al (2013) research on maximising the impact of Teaching Assistants (TAs) there was an interest in exploring features of the Lesson Study approach with TAs. Two schools, the Loyne and Red Marsh (see Briefing paper 10) undertook projects involving TAs in peer observation about aspects of the teaching and learning process.

Research questions and purpose

1. How do Teaching Assistants (TAs) currently encourage pupils to be independent in their learning?
2. How do Teaching Assistants (TAs) support learning using a modified version of the Lesson Study programme?
3. Does a Lesson Study approach influence Teaching Assistants (TAs) interaction with pupils and lead to increased independent learning?

Encouraging pupil independence is part of the inclusive teaching and learning ethos of the school. Gaining a greater awareness of current practice was intended to assist teachers when delegating work to TAs by informing them of possible factors that may help or hinder TAs in increasing pupils' independence. It was also expected that insights from TAs would help inform their future induction and professional development.

Project outline

The project began with a short training session delivered by the Assistant Head Teacher. The training provided an opportunity to share current thinking about independent learning, explain the 'Lesson Study' approach and what would be involved, including a discussion of observation proforma and research activities. Issues relating to levels of participation and confidentiality of the research were also discussed in the training. There was an opportunity for staff to ask questions during the training and afterwards. Following the training the project followed stages of an action research cycle of:

➢ **Action:** Pairs of TAs observed one another working with one or two pupils during a lesson, they engaged in peer to peer discussion based on their observations about ways in which the observed TA had tried to encourage independent learning;

➢ **Research:** Individual and paired interviews encouraging TAs to reflect on their experiences, interview with the Assistant Head to gather background information regarding school improvement links to independence, organisational practicalities of the project, and an initial questionnaire;

➢ **New Ideas:** Analysis of the initial questionnaire, observation proforma and interviews to identify key findings and inform further action and recommendations;

➢ **Future Action:** Dissemination of findings via briefing paper and discussion with senior leaders, teachers and Teaching Assistants.

Building on key messages from our previous research

The following features illustrate how this project used lessons learned from the Coaching and Lesson Study projects undertaken in 2013.

➢ *Having a clear focus helps to support the implementation process* – independent learning and involvement in first phase of all Higher Learning Teaching Assistants (HLTA) and Level 3 Teaching Assistants (TA 3).

➢ *Ensuring engagement benefits from whole school training and involvement of enthusiasts to minimise resistance* – participation in training was given to all HLTA and TA3 staff and while the majority were asked to engage in the process, participation in the research was optional.

➢ *Designating time for project activity is very important and helps to signal Senior Leaders value the project* – cover was arranged to ensure staff could participate and class teams would not be adversely affected. Despite this, unexpected absences or incidents requiring readjustment of TAs to respond to individual pupils' needs did impact on the opportunity for some pairs of TAs to debrief following their observation. The findings supports the need to build in additional time and flexibility when undertaking additional interventions.

The context of any project inevitably influences what may be possible and sometimes the practicalities of the situation mean it is not always practical to implement all ideas. For instance, enabling staff to choose who they would work with was a logistical challenge due to timetabling, however, where possible TAs working within the same Key Stage were paired together. As the TA feedback suggests, for some TAs the exchange of ideas was more effective when collaborating with someone working in a similar context or with pupils with whom they were both familiar.

Findings

Eighteen TAs completed an initial questionnaire that focused on past and present teaching experiences and views about their learners' capacity to learn independently. The nineteen statements included seven reversed statements which were expected to generate disagree type responses in order to avoid bias. There was no apparent pattern to the statements which individuals did not answer. Results are presented as a percentage of the answers given rather than the number of respondents.

Attitudes towards independent learning

Twenty eight percent of TAs felt that some pupils will not be able to learn independently, at this stage their answers were based on their own understanding of what independent learning looks like. Interviews following the observation of their peers highlighted that what constitutes independent learning varies enormously, according to pupils' age and ability.

The 29% who were not sure were more likely to indicate that the level of independent learning one might expect from a pupil depends on the context. All reported that paired interviews following feedback after the lesson observations provided a useful opportunity for unpacking the complexity and diversity of ways in which pupils independent learning can be supported.

No matter how hard I try, some pupils will not be able to learn independently (n=14)

■ Strongly Agree   ■ Agree   ■ Not Sure   ■ Disagree   ■ Strongly Disagree
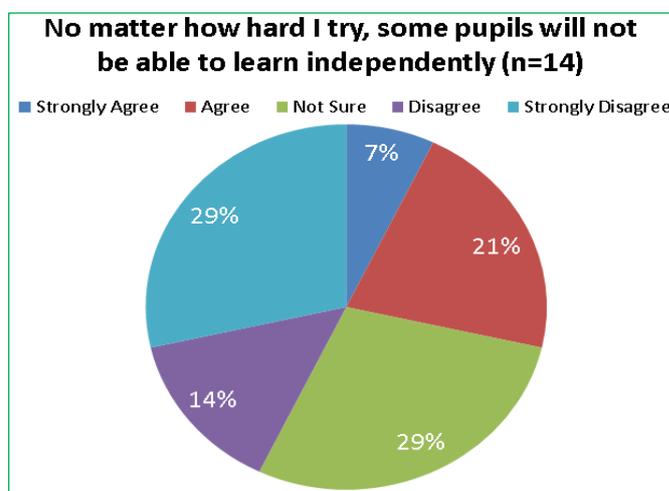
- 7%
- 21%
- 29%
- 14%
- 29%

Figure 1: TA views about their influence on pupil independence

Confidence in discussing independent learning

Some TAs were uncertain before undertaking the observation about 'doing it right', concern was expressed about observing as well as being observed and some were keen to provide the 'right answer'. The chance to observe someone working in a similar context or with whom they felt comfortable appeared to be less unsettling: *'I know Lucy, I know she wasn't judging me, we've worked together, if I hadn't worked with her I might have felt more uncomfortable'*. Teaching Assistants welcomed being able to focus on pupils' learning and viewed the experience as a refreshing opportunity to recognise details which they would have missed if they had not been observing their peers.

Overall there appeared to be greater confidence when talking to other TAs. A closer analysis of the responses suggests HLTAs and those who have worked with a greater variety of teachers were most confident when talking to teachers. Although 83% reported they were confident about teachers' instructions, fewer (72%) felt they received clear instructions about how to encourage independent learning.
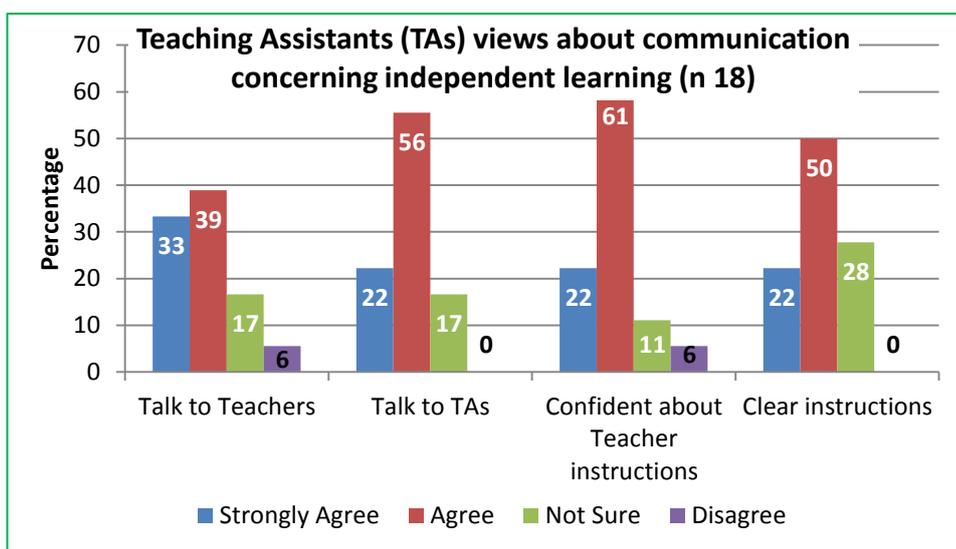

Figure 2: Talking and confidence about promoting independence

Twenty-eight percent of TAs were not sure if the instructions they received were clear, which maybe something the school needs to look at in the future. However, these initial views need to be treated with caution, as the interviews revealed that there were a number of practical challenges which can make it difficult to implement instructions that have been given, or which impact on the opportunity for teachers to offer guidance and outline their expectations for individual pupils. For example, the time available, the competing pressures to complete work and the working relationship between teacher and TA.

Influence of the teacher

It was evident from the TA descriptions of work with teachers, and confirmed by TAs who had experience of working with different teachers, that the promotion of independence varied from teacher to teacher. One TA commented: *'their way of teaching, some direct you more in the lesson, the lesson I was in was with [name of other TA] she just stands back and let them do [the activity] for themselves and see how they get on, … there was a sense of ownership. I think it depends on the [pupils] you've got, in some classes they couldn't do that much on their own. I noticed next steps with all the pupils, which you don't see with all the teachers'*. It would be interesting to talk to teachers about their expectations regarding independence and whether there is awareness amongst the teaching staff about the range of approaches. Whilst it is inevitable that there are differences, it may be useful to explore at times of transition how consistent expectations regarding independence can be maintained. Amongst the TAs there was general agreement that teachers listen and appreciate their views: *'they appreciate we might know the children a bit more, if they aren't sure of a [pupil], they will ask you, it's easier if they ask your opinion, so you don't have to go up to them and say what I think'*. There was some evidence to suggest that the power dynamic between a teacher and TA may discourage the less confident TAs from sharing concerns or offering feedback which might imply criticism.

As one explained: *'[it's] not always easy to tell the teacher, although they might be fine, I don't think it's time, its confidence on my hand'*. Building in opportunities for teachers to gather the views of their TAs and discuss expectations for individual pupils, or new strategies for encouraging independence is therefore recommended.

When asked, some TAs offered ideas for how teachers could help them to remember to encourage independence; it was clear from the observations and interviews that all TAs had a clear idea of what teaching and learning activities promoted independence. For example:

➢ Pupils moving round a carousel of activities, 'you could tell they would get used to it, and so you could see them getting on well – learning to be a bit more independent';

➢ Questioning techniques, *'the way you can question without giving the answer, little prompts, stand back and let them get on with it and then intervene'*;

➢ the school visual marking system, which supported TAs to mark work with pupils, *'… which sticker do you think you deserve, it's a way of them being involved [and] helps the pupils understand how they have worked themselves. … next steps, they could write in, lots of different stickers, time is not always conducive with that'*.

Despite this awareness there was also an acknowledgement that encouraging independence was not always a priority. One said: *I think it's helpful to be reminded of the strategies to use, if there was more [written] into lesson plans more emphasis on independent learning, you'd be more aware it is an aim'*.

Encouraging independent learning

Interviews revealed a range of ways in which TAs encouraged independent learning. As one explained: *'independent learning can cut across all areas of the curriculum can they learn to brush their hair, it's the ethos it's not just the academic side'* dfjhsdhf

Although the ways of encouraging independence have been grouped into six factors, how TAs reported on their observations or discussed the reasons for certain actions depended on the classroom as well as the individual pupil they with whom they were working. There was also acknowledgement that sometimes there were competing pressures to encouraging independence, for instance pressure of time or issues of health and safety. It was clear that TAs were aware of what would encourage independence even though it was not always possible to put this into practice due to competing priorities. For example, as one TA explained: *'sometimes there is a pressure, to have something in the book to show they've done something, so you might give them more prompts than they need, but if you waited a bit more they could do it on their own'*.

Classroom environment

The organisation of the classroom and accessibility of resources and equipment was identified as both helping and potentially hindering independence. Expectations of pupils needed to reflect their capabilities and the focus of the lesson, TAs gave a number of differentiated learning examples. For instance, for one pupil the TA may identify the resources they needed for a task e.g. paper, pencil, scissors; whereas for another pupil it was physically collecting the resources they needed. In some classrooms either for health and safety or reasons of space, resources might not be physically accessible which could restrict some of the opportunities for independence.

Learning from observation

Several TAs spoke about the benefits associated with the opportunity to step back and observe pupils' learning, especially when working in a group, they suggested it helped them to recognise the different ways pupils might respond to the same activity, as well as have time to think about how they might prompt or offer support. As one TA said: *'observing how [pupils] learn, it's fascinating they can do the same activity how they might do it differently, [pupils] with different disabilities, watching them helps you to make an activity for everyone regardless of the level'*. Another spoke about the difference in having time to observe during the Lesson Study and how this made them realise that: *'by observing a group task – when you are in there with them, you don't see the whole picture, whereas if you are an observer you could see more what they are getting from an activity'*.

Knowing the pupils

Knowing the pupils was mentioned by a number of TAs as important for encouraging independence, for example, some talked about the extent to which they used physical, gestural and verbal prompts, and others described *'scaffolding activities, … [initially] pupils copy you modelling [the action], building on it, and then gradually you take [scaffold] away of being able to do it on their own'*. It was suggested that it may be more challenging to encourage independence when working with pupils in a new or less familiar class. Time therefore needs to be assigned for teachers to brief TAs about expectations for individual pupils.

Time to reassure pupils

Time was identified as an important feature of independence, for instance, *'you might intervene when things need to be done, a sense of rushing, it's a matter of stepping back, but there is a time thing'*. Some TAs referred to the pressure they sometimes felt to be seen to be *'doing'*, this seemed to be more of a concern when working in a new class or with a teacher who they had not worked with before. According to Russell et al., (2013) such concern on the part of TAs may lead to pupils becoming dependent on support with activities they would otherwise be capable of achieving independently. As one TA said, it is important that *'you don't feel you need to be doing [all the time], it can look as if you are standing around. If I want a pupil to learn to [description of task] they need time to learn how to do it'*.

Responding to individual needs

TAs explained how it was often about *'getting the balance right'* with respect to the level of demand of the learning task; sometimes, *'the work is very easy they can get on with it, but they aren't learning anything, but if it's too hard then you need to step in'*. For some pupils this TA felt that *'it's a learned thing and so you have to say to them you can do this yourself';* this example of a level of challenge which Russell et al., (2013) report is not always present. There was also a need to differentiate the support and expectations of individual pupils depending on the lesson or subject. As one TA said: *'we do try and build independence in, Art, DT, … so we ask them, what are the things we need ,where will we find them, … it's a lot less in numeracy and literacy, we often get things out, I would be criticised if the resources aren't there'*.

Incentivising pupils

TAs reported a number of class based incentives such as house points which they could use to reward or help motivate pupils. Knowledge of the pupils and their interests was also used by TAs to devise resources to encourage pupils' learning, for example, one described how they: *'made them little diaries so they can learn to write independently, especially if they enjoy writing'*.

Other considerations

In addition to the six core factors there were a number of pertinent comments raised by the TAs which suggest that in this school there was an awareness of how their role and the situation may impact on pupils' independence, for instance:

➢ Staffing levels which can inadvertently mean *'you can be tempted to do too much for them, if you have more adults in the class'*, this was a concern noted by

➢ The similarities and differences of the TAs' approach and expectations to those of the pupils' parents and carers. For example, it may be easier at home for a parent or carer to do something which in the school context the pupils would be expected to do independently;

➢ Benefits of open communication between home and school which increases staff knowledge of the pupil and consequently adjust their expectations, *'sometimes the children have good and bad days, it's really good when parents communicate with you, so you set them lower challenge that day'*;

Summary

Within the school there are a range of effective strategies used by TAs to encourage pupils to be independent. The opportunity for TAs to observe their peers provided a valuable opportunity for individuals to gain insights into strategies used by their colleagues as well as gain feedback on their own practice. It is common that everyday practices can become taken for granted and the adapted lesson study process appears to have been successful in enabling experienced TA3 and HLTA to reflect on a core aspect of their role, that of encouraging pupil independence. Some talked about how they might apply ideas obtained from the Lesson Study process when working with other pupils.

The intervention suggests that providing time for TAs to observe each other and reflect on their own practice can be a valuable approach that allows for positive feedback which can help build confidence and enable peers to learn from one another. Recording their observations was something the majority found difficult due to time constraints, lack of experience in recording their observations or uncertainty about what was required. If a school wishes to make greater use of TAs as potentially experienced observers of pupils' learning then it would be worthwhile to pilot different training approaches such as evaluating prepared records about videos of teaching and learning, or use of different recording tools (see Briefing Paper 10 for use of 'what works well', and 'even better if'). It may be helpful to stagger the observations throughout the year to minimise the logistical challenges of releasing TAs. It would also seem useful to consider building in time for teachers and TAs to develop a shared understanding of strategies to use to encourage independence in a particular class, subject or for an individual pupil; this would be particularly helpful when pupils move classes. Overall, it is clear TAs benefit from the opportunity to reflect on how pupils learn and their observations can offer suggestions to support future practice within the school.

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