

More than washing up paint pots!

Estelle Tarry and Anna Cox discuss the role and growing importance of the teaching assistant

The role of the class assistant in international schools has dramatically changed over the past decade or so. No longer are class assistants found cutting, sticking, washing up paint pots, putting up displays and standing next to a photocopier! They are now rightly regarded as teaching assistants (TAs), with a valuable contribution to make to teaching and learning in diverse international contexts. Research carried out on behalf of the Council of British International Schools (COBIS) in 2011 identified the role of teaching assistants being seen significantly in terms of supporting the child, supporting the teacher, supporting the curriculum, supporting the school and supporting the local community.

Teaching assistants are now considered as valued members of the international school community. They work closely with the teacher, contributing to the setting of learning objectives (informed by their knowledge of the children); preparing relevant and accessible learning materials; working with particular groups of pupils and with individual children, supporting their social, emotional and academic needs. This contemporary view of the teaching assistant acknowledges the contribution that they make to individual children's development and learning and the contribution they make to the life of the wider school community.

However although teachers are encouraged to develop professionally there is little opportunity and support given

to the professional development of the TA working in international schools. As a result we have planned, organised and delivered, with the support of COBIS, Teaching Assistants International Conferences at St. Georges, Rome, in February 2012 and at the British School of Paris, in February 2013. During these two conferences the TAs involved had opportunities to discuss teaching and learning strategies to meet the needs of individual learners, to think about effective classroom management and had the chance to discuss shared issues that arise being a TA working in international schools with children and teachers from diverse cultural and language backgrounds. One of the most valued opportunities was being able to network and share experiences with other TAs in a similar situation and who sometimes felt isolated in the international school and out of contact with their peers.

Following the success of the first conference and positive feedback from Headteachers in international schools we have developed the first University Certificate for Teaching Assistants in an International Context (CTAIC), level 4, which is validated by the University of Northampton. This certificate is designed to meet the particular needs of TAs working in primary settings in international schools. The certificate does not focus on any one specific curriculum model, for example the Primary Years Programme (PYP) of



TAs busy preparing for lessons – their role is becoming increasingly important in the classroom



A maths session at St Georges School, Rome

the International Baccalaureate, the National Curriculum of England and Wales (NC), the American Curriculum or the International Primary Curriculum (IPC). It addresses key areas common to a range of curricula models; the focus is to increase teaching assistants' understanding of intercultural learning contexts and to develop skills and confidence in learning and teaching in such contexts, in order to support children in international schools. In addition it also encourages the TAs to develop a positive learning environment for students of different language backgrounds and mobile students in transition, the latter group being one of the growing parts of international school communities.

The pilot school, St Georges School, Rome, which started the CTAIC programme at the end of last year, has a bank of TAs with various backgrounds and experiences. A cohort of these TAs have successfully completed a number of assignments from the three modules that comprise the certificate. These have included a poster on their role as a TA, an individual child case study, a portfolio of evidence reflecting on their own practice and a maths game to support diverse learners. The programme has given them the opportunity to celebrate their work as TAs and to critically review elements of their practice in a positive and supportive learning environment. For example the issue of children's dependency on the TA, the possibility that children withdrawn from the class for targeted support are missing the mainstream curriculum, the challenge of children missing whole class socialisation due to specific support and the possible stereotyping of the teachers and the child (Blatchford, 2012) have all been explored and experiences shared.

A second school, the British School of Bucharest, Romania, began the CTAIC programme in April 2013. Currently there is one cohort with their second cohort of TAs due to start in October 2013.

Supported by the delivery of the CTAIC programme and with the support of a range of international practitioners and COBIS, a new book on teaching assistants working in international schools is being produced for publication this year. It will promote and highlight the role of the international school TA, giving practical help, strategies and activities that TAs will find useful and inspiring. It will include case studies of TAs working in international schools,

highlighting the diversity of TAs and their role in supporting children's learning and social well-being across a variety of contexts. These include case studies of TAs from Moscow, Spain, Luxembourg, Germany, and Indonesia. As well as providing a resource for TAs in international schools the book seeks to inspire teachers to work in diverse ways with TAs to utilise the skills and knowledge that they bring to the international classroom. The practice of those working in nursery and early years is examined through to transition to secondary schooling. Subject-focused chapters provide current perspectives on children's learning and can be used to scaffold effective staff development.

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TAs at the British School of Bucharest