

# Classroom Assistants in Renfrewshire: Voices, Growth and Impact



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This report describes the impact of, and issues raised by, a pilot project to provide high quality training for Classroom Assistants working with children in primary schools. It identifies successful features and details the systemic changes required to address the future professional development needs, ensure strategic deployment in schools and a career pathway for this important group of education workers.

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## CLASSROOM ASSISTANTS IN RENFREWSHIRE

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This evaluative research study describes and appraises the impact of a pilot project to provide high quality training for Classroom Assistants in Renfrewshire. The project was the result of a partnership between Renfrewshire Council and the University of Strathclyde. It was part of the *Scottish Attainment Challenge* programme, designed to raise attainment and reduce the poverty related attainment gap. Funding was provided by the Scottish Government as part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

In addition to generating information about the impact of the pilot project and about Classroom Assistants' professional development requirements, the study generated information about how Classroom Assistants are deployed in schools and the kinds of knowledge they have about children, how this is accessed and utilised, how it can be enhanced and the systemic changes that could ensure most effective deployment and use of Classroom Assistants.

The evidence of this study suggests that Classroom Assistants can, and in many cases do, make an important contribution to raising attainment, reducing the attainment gap between richer and poorer children and ensuring their emotional and social wellbeing. It identifies that the following factors would further enhance the impact of Classroom Assistants:

- **Classroom Assistants both want and need regular opportunities for professional development so that they are fully prepared for their role in the classroom.**

There was overwhelming evidence that Classroom Assistant training is worth further investment and has the potential to impact on both pupil attainment and wellbeing. The pilot project designed a training course to increase knowledge and prompt reflective, responsive approaches to working with children and young people. The Classroom Assistants particularly appreciated aspects of the course that were theoretically informed, grounded in practice, linked to current issues and to the specific classroom context of their work.

One outcome from training was that Classroom Assistants improved their understanding of the social and cultural basis of learning whilst deepening their knowledge of how children learn, what they need to learn, what can be difficult and what adults can do to help. A second outcome was that Classroom Assistants developed more reflective and responsive approaches to working with children. A third outcome was that they developed a shared language with teachers. The Classroom Assistants reported that these outcomes led to more meaningful conversations with children and teachers, greater job satisfaction and less anxiety. They were more confident, responsive, innovative and effective in their work with children.

- **Schools need to consider, and articulate, their strategy to make the best use of Classroom Assistants.**

The evidence of this study suggests variation between schools, and between teachers in the same school, in how Classroom Assistants are deployed. Different school circumstances and employment conditions mean some variation is inevitable, but there is scope for central advice from Renfrewshire Council to maximise the impact that Classroom Assistants make on pupil attainment and wellbeing. Effective deployment will require open conversations about the relative value of the different kinds of tasks Classroom Assistants do. A focus on Classroom Assistants' work supporting pupils in class and the playground is likely to be important.

Timetabling Classroom Assistants' work to focus their efforts on particular classes and groups for time-limited periods would maximise their impact. The work pattern needs to provide some continuity for children and be focused across a range of attainment groups, with time for Classroom Assistants to clarify teacher expectations for activities. The deployment of the Classroom Assistant needs to feature in teachers' planning, be linked to attainment or wellbeing outcomes and be monitored by school management teams. Teachers need to regularly seek feedback about how individual children are coping and provide the Classroom Assistant with specific advice.

Almost all Classroom Assistants undertake administrative and resource preparation duties. School managers and teachers should consider whether all tasks are really necessary and whenever possible ensure:

- classroom displays are created by/with children to enhance their learning and ownership of the classroom;
- that time-consuming tasks such as laminating are actually necessary;
- that Classroom Assistants are not required to make resources that could be bought more cheaply or created by children as part of the lesson.

Regular meetings with the SMT or Head Teacher and with other Classroom Assistants would help to keep everyone up to date, share good practice and address common challenges.

Many Renfrewshire Council schools have begun to consider these issues. Some schools do not always require the Classroom Assistant to work with those children experiencing most difficulty and others have reduced the time devoted to laminating notices or making resources. Following advice about creating calm learning environments so that children can focus, some schools have re-evaluated the kinds of displays they create. All these developments free-up time for Classroom Assistants to work with children.

- **Renfrewshire Council, the Regional Improvement Collaboratives and Scottish Government need to work together to articulate a wider development strategy and career progression pathways for Classroom Assistants.**

Currently there is no promotion pathway for Classroom Assistants in Scotland. This 'flat' structure results in a limited range of development courses and no material advantage for those who undertake professional development. No academic courses to enhance Classroom Assistant work (e.g. HNC, HND, BA degree) are currently offered in Renfrewshire or its surrounding areas and only a limited range of school-based courses (mostly First Aid and Child Protection) are available. Yet we found evidence of a clear desire from many Classroom Assistants to access wider opportunities for personal and career development, particularly opportunities related to the work they do with children in class. Renfrewshire Council and the Scottish Government should consider the moral, economic and professional case for providing a career progression pathway for Classroom Assistants and for identifying, and making it easy for Classroom Assistants to access, a range of professional development opportunities.

The evidence-base for this study is a survey of the 27 Classroom Assistants who participated in the pilot project. The survey explored their experiences of the pilot project course and their work in schools. It was followed by 26 semi-structured interviews about how the course dovetailed with the requirements of their job, which content and design features were most valuable to them, and why, and any changes they felt would improve the impact of their work. We also analysed the written diaries that these Classroom Assistants completed during the course. The information from Classroom Assistants was triangulated with information from interviews conducted with Head Teachers, Renfrewshire Council Officers and pupils.

## INTRODUCTION

The Scottish Attainment Challenge provided the context for this study of the impact of Classroom Assistants. The study built on the work of the *Renfrewshire Literacy Approach*, *Dive into Writing* and the *Numeracy and Mathematics Approach*, which are all being embedded into Renfrewshire Council schools. The study had three aims:

- To produce well-motivated and highly trained Classroom Assistants who understand the aims of the curriculum, and how to promote the development of Literacy, Numeracy and Health and Wellbeing in all children but particularly those from economically disadvantaged homes.
- To produce a prototype way of working that can be scaled-up by identifying those aspects of course design and content that most benefit the personal and professional development of Classroom Assistants in the Scottish context.
- To identify the systemic issues at national, council, school and class level that would contribute to making the work of Classroom Assistants effective for Renfrewshire's children and satisfying for the Classroom Assistant.

## RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Classroom Assistants and Additional Support Needs Assistants (ASNAs) often have substantial contact with children, some of whom struggle with the social aspects of school, language, Literacy or Numeracy. Research<sup>1</sup> shows that they amass considerable knowledge about children, observing them in class, the playground and often the local community and that, although such knowledge clearly could be useful, it is often not drawn-on by teaching staff or school managers. Studies<sup>2</sup> show that the contribution of well trained and well-integrated assistants can make a positive difference to attainment as long as they are deployed in certain ways and their efforts with children are focused and supported.

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<sup>1</sup> Webster, R., Blatchford, P., Bassett, P., Brown, P., Martin, C., & Russell, A. (2011). The wider pedagogical role of teaching assistants. *School Leadership and Management*, 31(1), 3-20.; Blatchford, P., Russell, A., & Webster, R. (2012). *Reassessing the impact of teaching assistants: How research challenges practice and policy*. Routledge.

<sup>2</sup> Blatchford, P., Russell, A., & Webster, R. (2012). *Reassessing the impact of teaching assistants: How research challenges practice and policy*. Routledge.



The career progression opportunities for Classroom Assistants in Scotland are markedly different from their counterparts in England, where the work has different levels of demand, each linked to particular remuneration and courses or qualifications. The 'flat' structure of Classroom Assistant work in Scotland has resulted in a situation where they have no opportunity for promotion<sup>3</sup> and there is no financial incentive for undertaking development courses. Consequently in Scotland, academic and work-based opportunities for Classroom Assistants to develop their knowledge and skills in working responsively with children are rare, despite this being a significant area of their work.

The lack of a career structure for Classroom Assistants has resulted in wide variation in the mix of tasks that Classroom Assistants perform, both across schools and across classes in the same school. Their remit may include supporting the administrative and preparation needs of the school/class, creating and organising resources and display materials, being the school's first aider, running 'nurture' groups and story clubs, supervising children at lunch and break-time and supporting children's learning. What they actually do is left to the school context and the teachers' and Head Teachers' priorities and vision. Further variation has been introduced because PEF-funded Classroom Assistants must work directly with children all the time. This means they work to a different timetable to other CAs, taking their break periods at different times, and it can have knock-on effects for the balance of workload of other Classroom Assistants and for wider communication and teamwork within the school.

Past research studies<sup>4</sup> have found that effective Classroom Assistant deployment in working with children requires good liaison with the class teacher so that the Classroom Assistant knows the aims and learning outcomes required of activities and has a clear understanding of the concepts, skills and dispositions to be developed in particular children. In terms of deployment when working with children in class, research in England<sup>5</sup> indicates that effective Classroom Assistant work needs to be focused on intentionally selected pupils to build the positive relationships that allow a Classroom Assistant to help the pupils make links between school learning, class activities and the pupils' out-of-school lives. The recommendation in England is firmly that "TAs should not be used as an informal teaching

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<sup>3</sup> Gilbert, K., Warhurst, C., Nickson, D., Hurrell, S. & Commander, J. (2012) New initiative, old problem: Classroom assistants and the under-valuation of women's work, *Industrial Relations Journal*, 48(1), 22–37

<sup>4</sup> Blatchford, P. (2014). Support staff: the role and effective deployment of teaching assistants in schools in England and Wales [IOE Research Briefing N° 88]

<sup>5</sup> Sharples, J., Webster, R., & Blatchford, P. (2015). Making best use of teaching assistants: guidance report

resource for low-attaining pupils”<sup>6</sup>. The pattern of deployment needs to offer regular contact with the pupils (2 - 3 times per week) and be for a sustained period (8 - 20 weeks)<sup>7</sup>. The Classroom Assistants need high quality training, structured work environments with good on-going support, feedback and discussion to aid their own development. They need to focus on asking meta-cognitive questions, and school systems need to harness their knowledge in ways that help teachers to track pupil progress using short-scale ‘cycles’ of evidence of impact and intervention<sup>8 9</sup>.

However, many of the recent research studies in England are premised exclusively or mainly on the use of ‘scripted interventions’, where Classroom Assistants are provided with a ‘teaching script’ aligned to a particular teaching programme or resource which guides their interactions with the pupil group. We know that randomised controlled trials on such approaches have identified some more and some less effective intervention scripts and training programmes but ‘scripted programmes’ do not chime with Scotland’s focus on promoting responsive, emotionally warm and intellectually engaging interactions for pupils, particularly important for those experiencing poverty. We therefore worked to design and implement a training course that takes account of the key principles that previously-researched programmes showing ‘proven impact’ adopted, but to deliver it locally with a course structure that encouraged the Classroom Assistants to embed their learning in the workplace in ways that are imaginative and that deepen understandings.

## **Research Questions**

The practical focus of the research was a course devised to support Classroom Assistants in developing their understanding and knowledge for working with children in class. We devised the following research questions to evaluate the course and explore the wider deployment and staff development needs of Classroom Assistants in Renfrewshire:

1. What kind of knowledge is useful to Classroom Assistants and how can professional development be delivered at scale to impact on their work?

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<sup>6</sup> Sharples, J., Webster, R., & Blatchford, P. (2015). Making best use of teaching assistants: guidance report. P. 4

<sup>7</sup> Sharples, J., Webster, R., & Blatchford, P. (2015). Making best use of teaching assistants: guidance report.

<sup>8</sup> Slavin, R. E. (2013). Effective programmes in reading and mathematics: lessons from the Best Evidence Encyclopaedia. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 24(4), 383-391.

<sup>9</sup> Webster, R., Russell, A., & Blatchford, P. (2015). *Maximising the impact of teaching assistants: Guidance for school leaders and teachers*. Routledge.

2. What are the systemic obstacles to increasing the impact of Classroom Assistants in Scotland and how might these be overcome?
3. How do Classroom assistants perceive their impact on children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Course Design and Development***

The training course was designed, developed and trialled by University of Strathclyde academics. It took account of previous research on professional learning, and of Classroom Assistant impact. Key features of the course structure, content and delivery were:

- course delivery was by a knowledgeable team with experience of staff development, of teaching, child development, Literacy and Numeracy research and of Renfrewshire's policies;
- a 'long, thin' course structure, allowing time for knowledge to be applied, to grow and to develop into nuanced, grounded understandings;
- a focus on useful theoretical knowledge to underpin the kinds of practical tasks and activities that Classroom Assistants do on a daily basis with children;
- a requirement that course participants use the knowledge in their context of practice, write about its impact and discuss it with others on the course;
- an emphasis on reflection about one's own learning, noting multiple connections between the course and observations and actions in school and impact on specific children;
- networking and collaboration through sharing experiences, practices and understandings;
- practical, active and discursive learning activities;
- intellectually demanding and emotionally and socially inviting course delivery.

Head Teachers of fourteen schools serving the greatest number of children affected by poverty were asked to nominate Classroom Assistants for a place on the course. The training sessions took place from August 2017 to February 2018. Twenty-seven Classroom

Assistants completed the course. Each session lasted 1.5 - 2.0 hours. Eleven participants were new in post and sixteen were experienced, having been in post from two to eighteen years. All were female.

Course participants undertook a range of tasks and activities during the sessions and in school, and they kept a diary about their observations, thoughts and work in relation to each of the specific themes covered in training sessions. The participants worked in groups during the course and in teams to design a presentation of their learning and development. Course content was underpinned by the *Three Domains* model of learning (Figure 1), developed by the University of Strathclyde and used to structure professional knowledge in both the Renfrewshire Literacy and Numeracy and Mathematics approaches.

Two initial sessions addressed fundamental issues around the impact of cultural capital, social identity, well-being and the development of a growth mindset. The influence of these on individual learners was explored. Subsequent sessions addressed aspects of Literacy, including supporting reading and writing, comprehension and storytelling. Further sessions focused on the development of Numeracy and the Stages of Early Arithmetical Learning (SEAL). Final sessions explored ideas around the medium of play and active learning at all stages of the primary school.

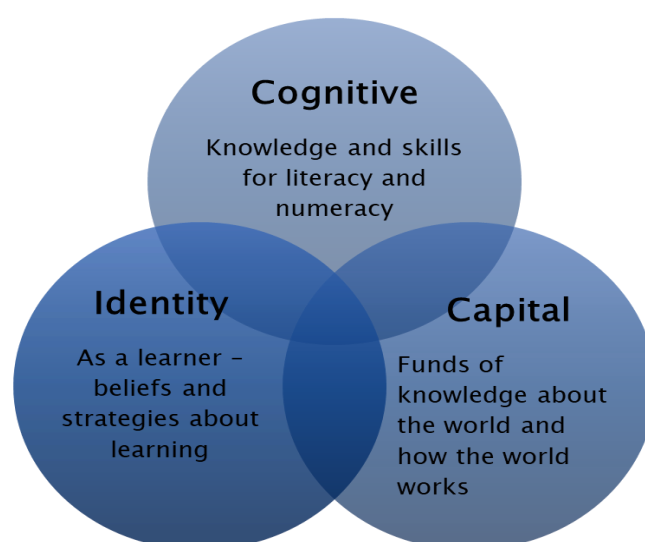


Figure 1: Strathclyde 3 Domain model

## ***Data Collection***

Qualitative data was collected from the Classroom Assistants through: questionnaires containing a mixture of open-ended and closed (Likert-scale) questions; semi-structured interviews to explore their responses in more detail; and a content analysis of the weekly diaries they kept with reflections on the tasks and the course content. This qualitative data served two functions: it allowed us to generate data to evaluate the design and impact of the course, assess the value of individual sessions and tasks and how well these dovetailed with the practical work that Classroom Assistants do in schools. It also allowed us to gather more general data on the work and aspirations of Classroom Assistants, how they were deployed in school and their views of how they could be more effectively deployed to raise attainment.

We visited all fourteen schools involved in the project and interviewed the Head Teachers. Discussions highlighted the Head Teacher expectations and feedback received from participating staff. Head Teachers were also asked about in-school communication systems and to identify key issues around the work and deployment of Classroom Assistants in school.

We interviewed the Renfrewshire Council Development Officers for Literacy and Numeracy and Mathematics to find out about their perceptions of course quality and impact.

Finally, Renfrewshire Council Development Officers visited schools and recorded children's views about the ways in which Classroom Assistants offer support. This small sample provided a snapshot of children's perceptions of Classroom Assistants.

The semi-structured interview data, the open survey questions and the diaries from the Classroom Assistants were subjected to thematic open coding organised around the key research questions for the project. These were then triangulated with data from the Head Teachers and Council Officers. This process enabled us to create a thematic analysis of the pertinent issues that captured the synergies and differences within and across the different groups. (Classroom Assistants, Head Teachers, Development Officers and children)

## **FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

The vast majority of Classroom Assistants in Scotland are women, they work part-time and are among the poorest paid of those working in education. There have been only a limited number of research studies exploring their role and the impact of their work on children's development and learning. Their voice is rarely heard although they have a valuable contribution to make to the challenge of raising attainment.

The findings reported here include a significant number of direct quotations from the Classroom Assistants. This is a deliberate strategy to ensure their voices are an integral part of this report. They have interesting and worthwhile things to say about their own learning, their role and how they support children. Their views and insight might provide a new perspective for those with responsibility for improving learning in Renfrewshire schools. This will be explored further in the analysis section.

Other voices can be heard too. Head Teachers, Development Officers and children also provided a range of views and useful perspectives on the role and impact of Classroom Assistants in primary schools.

### **Analysis of Course Features: Design and Content**

A significant proportion of the interview and survey comments concerned the course design and content. Comments clustered around expectations of the course; the content of the course; the follow-up tasks; the reflective diary, and the networks it established between participants.

#### **Expectations & Needs in Relation to the Course**

The Classroom Assistants had a range of expectations at the start of the course. Training and development had not been a strong feature of the professional landscape for Classroom Assistants and the lack of familiarity allowed worries to escalate. Some Classroom Assistants did not realise how or why they had been chosen and worried that they were selected because they were under-performing.

The Development Officer for Literacy had circulated all course details to Head Teachers, but in many instances this had not been fully passed-on to Classroom Assistants. She

suggested that this had an initial impact on confidence but that professional development deserved significant emphasis in future:

*'We need to communicate that these people are worth investing in- it needs to be about communicating that. We haven't done enough before and need to place huge emphasis on their professional development within the Attainment Challenge workstreams. It's about showing that with Classroom Asistants - there's lots done for class teachers. It needs to be part of a bigger plan.'*

The lack of communication about course content and duration was raised by a number of Classroom Assistants and resulted in some having quite low expectations of the course. When asked what her expectations were, one respondent said:

*'Honestly-none. No course descriptor was given to us, but I hoped to gain some insight into schemes in Literacy and Maths and perhaps in challenging behaviour.'* While another stated; *'I didn't realise there were as many sessions so I only expected some basic guidance on supporting Literacy.'*

However, most Classroom Assistants had positive expectations of the course, although several admitted to feeling a little nervous. One Classroom Assistant with 17 years experience said:

*'I thought I might learn new skills and strategies, and that happened.'*

A newly appointed Classroom Assistant admitted that while she did not have any preconcieved expectations about the training, she hoped that *'any training would be beneficial to my job as it was a new experience.'*

Once the course started, Classroom Assistants appreciated that it was not simply pitched towards generic aspects of learning but assumed a level of intellectual demand, agency and capability:

*'My expectation of the training was for it to be pretty basic on day-to-day tasks. I had no idea it would be so specific and involved. I realised early on that we were being guided towards a very well planned, up-to-date learning method to assist teachers and children with very identified and tested strategies.'*

The lack of training opportunities for Classroom Assistants to learn how to work with children in classes was a strong theme. Both newly appointed and more experienced Classroom Assistants described being 'thrown into' the job with very little preparation. A frequent comment from those who had been in post for a long time was that they had not experienced any courses to develop their understanding of the classwork they do with children, and although they appreciated the input now, many felt they could have benefitted from this kind of input when they first started.

This was confirmed by the Head Teacher interviews. A common sentiment from the Head Teachers was that regular opportunities for staff development were provided for other staff but that there was 'a bit of a vacuum' in training for Classroom Assistants. One Head Teacher portrayed the lack of opportunities for Classroom Assistants as a moral issue:

*'If we employ them then we have a duty to make sure the person is au-fait with strategies, approaches and current thinking.'*

Head Teachers generally had clear expectations for the training programmes. They wanted Classroom Assistants to know about Council approaches and 'the bigger picture' of how to help develop knowledge and understanding. Most Head Teachers hoped it would enthuse and motivate Classroom Assistants and that it would help to develop commonality of language, understanding of approaches and encourage similar uses of strategies. Meeting and sharing knowledge with other Classroom Assistants was also seen as useful:

*'The key issue is getting people upskilled enough. They need training. They need to know how best to push and challenge children. They need to see the fine balance needed when offering support. Not giving children too much help - just the right amount that they become independent learners.'*

### **Course Content Matters**

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive about the general structure and content of the course. The data suggests that there were no areas of the course content that were not useful.

Classroom Assistants were asked which aspects of course content they found most beneficial. Their answers ranged from practical strategies to more theoretical underpinning ideas that informed general understandings about children's identity as learners and the



social and cultural factors which impact on attainment. The top five most beneficial aspects of the course are identified in Table 1:

Aspect	Response Example
Social and cultural factors	<i>Finding out about cultural capital means I now stop and think about children's home life and experiences.</i>
Strategies to support reading and writing	<i>I am using a range of strategies now - teachers have commented on how well children are doing. Children's awareness of strategies is growing.</i>
Strategies to support comprehension	<i>I now have many useful strategies to draw upon when supporting comprehension.</i>
The development of numeracy and SEAL	<i>The number sessions were interesting. I hate maths. Resources only seem to be used for children who are struggling but I spoke to the teacher and more concrete materials are now used in class.</i>
Taking a playful approach	<i>I now view play in school in a new light. I already have experience of working in a play-based environment, however I have learned a lot about how to help children to self-motivate and self-regulate during play.</i>

Table 1: Typical responses about the top five most beneficial aspects

### **Practical Application: Grounded, Nuanced Understandings**

A key design feature of the course was that participants had a practical task to carry out during the week that followed each session, and they wrote about this in their diaries. Activities made links between new knowledge/understanding and their everyday practices:

*'I enjoyed having to reflect on the training and how the knowledge was transferred to my work in the classroom.'*

*'Just by doing the activities - it gives you a wee shot of being in their [the children's] shoes. Working with others in the group, I found no two people were the same - we all took different things from each experience. It's the same for the children. It's good to hear each other's feedback - you think about it more.'*

Grounded, nuanced knowledge emerged from discursive and practical course activities, and the practical tasks which applied the core ideas of the course content. This helped to ensure that understandings were 'fleshed out' and that they generated a new kind of conversation with teachers. Such conversations matter because they help further embed

understandings, provide the potential for understandings to grow further, both through discussion and increased opportunities for application:

*'The tasks helped put learning into practice - this is so important as if you don't do that, you go away and forget about it. I talked to teachers more about strategies, this has led to being given more responsibility.'*

### **The Diary Task: Reflective Practice**

Another key design feature of the course was asking the Classroom Assistants to keep a diary in which they wrote about the tasks they had carried out, their observations of the children, and reflected on the connections with the ideas that had been discussed on the course. These diary entries were discussed as part of the course sessions and were read by the course leaders. Most Classroom Assistants identified the diary tasks as the most personally demanding aspect of the course. For many, being required to describe their practice in writing and to gradually take a more reflective approach was a new and challenging experience:

*'Putting it down on paper was hard. I know I do my job every day and I do it automatically. Writing the diary got easier as we got on. I didn't know if it was what you wanted at the start and I worried about that, then I got to the stage of thinking that it was about what I was doing and what the children were saying to me. That has been a growth mindset point for me.'*

*'In the beginning I found the diary tasks quite challenging. I struggled to write it down. I didn't know how to express my understanding of different activities on paper. Later on, it became much more clear and easy and I know what my learning intentions are.'*

Writing about one's own experience is a skill in itself, and writing in thoughtful and reflective ways is never easy. This took time to learn:

*'I loved the activities in the training course. The diary tasks were pretty hard. I knew what I wanted to say but couldn't transfer it onto the paper. I know what I could have done better, and I'm trying to writing in a reflective way.'*

It also took time for participants to realise that there was no 'perfect' diary entry, but that the diary was a tool to help them remember and further develop their understanding:

*'Putting my experiences into words - writing it down was hard. I kept thinking at the start, 'Am I doing this right?' As it went on, and the more we understood about the diary, the writing got easier. I was growing into it. Transferring ideas from my head to the pen. When I hear kids saying 'I don't know how to put that down', I know how they feel. I say that to them.'*

*'Writing was hard but the writing tasks did help me understand and summarise the session. When I was doing it, I was reading over it and when I was putting it down I was thinking of the links with the course. It put the ideas into reality and the reality onto the ideas.'*

### **Learning From and With Other Classroom Assistants**

Almost all the Classroom Assistants explained that talking and sharing ideas with their peers was one of the important benefits of the training programme. They said they valued meeting others because they found it useful hearing about what others were doing and getting feedback on their own work. They believed sharing good ideas and good practice to be most beneficial:

*'It was really interesting to have spent time with Classroom Assistants from other schools. I hear about how they work. They all get used differently. When we fed back from tasks, you could see how people had done them, which gave ideas, and you could see what they had picked up.'*

Learning from others was an ongoing theme and the longitudinal nature of the training programme allowed a supportive atmosphere to develop. During discussions and activities, the course participants frequently talked about the benefits of meeting other Classroom Assistants:

*'It brought together our individual experiences and the discussions we had as a group and let us take back new ideas into our schools.'*

The effect of working and learning with others was noted by Council Development Officers, who highlighted the wider, affective, benefits:

*'If you have great relationships with colleagues it has a definite impact on happiness in the workplace. They developed great trust in each other and in the trainers.'*

## ***Analysis of Course Impact***

We analysed the interview and questionnaire data to determine the kinds of impact that the course had on Classroom Assistants and on their work, and how the Classroom Assistants characterised these changes. The analysis showed a wide range of impacts on Classroom Assistants' knowledge, on their networks, confidence, interactions and relationships with pupils and their motivation. This data was triangulated with the Head Teacher data, Renfrewshire Council Officer data and with the pupil interview data.

### **Growth in Confidence**

All the course participants stated that their confidence had improved as a result of the training. This sentiment was also regularly expressed during training sessions and noted in the course leader's notes about the sessions. The growth in confidence was a strong theme in the Classroom Assistant questionnaire responses and during individual Classroom Assistant interviews. Confidence is important because it affects how people feel about themselves, how they feel about their job, and their agency within the job. The links between self-confidence, motivation and performance have been explored by academics over several decades, drawing on Bandura's theory of self-efficacy<sup>10</sup>. At the start of the course, confidence and expectations for a significant number of the Classroom Assistants were both rather low:

*'I was a bit worried. Thought it might be boring but it wasn't. I thoroughly enjoyed it and have grown in confidence.'*

The knowledge provided by the course had a positive impact on the confidence of both experienced Classroom Assistants and those who were new to the job. A classroom assistant who was new to the job wrote:

*'I have loved this course! Coming in to a new role can be terrifying but this has given me lots of confidence.'*

A more experienced Classroom Assistant told us:

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<sup>10</sup> Bandura, A. (1982). Self-efficacy mechanism in human agency. *American psychologist*, 37(2), 122.

*'This is the first course I've had for 15 years. If I'd had this when I started I'd have felt more confident.'*

For some Classroom Assistants there was evidence that increased confidence resulted from application of the ideas during their normal work with children in class. It was important that they could see the link between the course content and their work in schools, but for some, seeing the links took time:

*'Initially you think you are not using it [what you learned] until you realise that you actually are! I feel more confident in the strategies.'*

Hearing about the experiences - good and bad - of other Classroom Assistants was also important for developing confidence:

*'I have thoroughly enjoyed being part of this pilot course for Classroom Assistants. It has helped me on my personal growth journey. It was also lovely to get the chance to interact with other colleagues on the course, helping me gain more confidence.'*

For some Classroom Assistants, understanding the purpose of using 'open ended' activities with children and the different kinds of learning they supported, made them more willing to 'have a go' at more playful and open-ended activities when they took groups in class, because they knew what kinds of outcome they were looking for. A newly appointed Classroom Assistant talked about a recent experience of supporting comprehension through discussion and drama. She stated:

*'I would have felt foolish or constrained before but this [training] has confirmed my own feelings and built confidence with new knowledge and understanding.'*

Some more experienced Classroom Assistants, also highlighted the positive impact on their personal confidence and their role:

*'Being reminded of the strategies I already use and learning new ones which I now use on a daily basis has helped build my confidence in my own ability to assist learners attain their potential in all aspects of their learning, including language/literacy.'*

Growth in confidence was recognised by Head Teachers. Almost all described individual staff as now having more confidence and a desire to learn more and share their learning. The Head Teachers in their interviews also felt that the Classroom Assistants had become more confident and agentic as a result of the course. It was mentioned in almost all interviews:

*'I think it has helped with their confidence about what they can do within the classroom.'*

*'All [the] content has been useful but what's been so good is the lift in confidence and Classroom Assistants wanting to learn more.'*

Development Officers too noticed significant difference in the confidence levels of Classroom Assistants and highlighted the impact of this growth. The Development Officer for Numeracy and Mathematics had noticed this difference during course sessions and also when Classroom Assistants attended additional local authority training. She noted that Classroom Assistants from the course stood out when participating in Renfrewshire SEAL training sessions. They had confidence to speak out and were very confident in their ability to share their own opinions, thoughts and ideas:

*'From beginning to end, the change in confidence is phenomenal. Growing confidence helped them to make links to practice and gave them a great sense of worth.'*

The Development Officer for Literacy provided a similar example of how Classroom Assistant growth in confidence was reflected in other training opportunities. At a recent Dive into Writing training event, Classroom Assistants in attendance stood out in comparison to other much less active participants:

*'When I see the people and the professionals they've turned into - it's incredible.'*

### **Growth in Knowledge and Understanding**

Confidence does not develop in a vacuum. Much of the new confidence that participants and their managers reported linked to increased knowledge and understanding of how children learn, what can be difficult for children, and how adults can help. That the course targeted learning in specific curriculum content areas was seen as especially valuable because this is the context of the support work that Classroom Assistants do with children.

Of course, some (but not all) Classroom Assistants had attended school-based professional development, but many felt the kind of content knowledge they needed was not always addressed by sessions designed for teachers:

*'I felt pleased that at long last I was going to get training focused on attainment. Previously, most were on nurture. There are limited opportunities for courses although I have joined in-service training [designed for teachers] sometimes but this is not always relevant. I've had one or two days training in twelve years. I was looking forward to the sessions and quite excited. I wanted a chance to meet other Classroom Assistants.'*

Classroom Assistants completed a self-evaluation grid to determine any growth in knowledge and skills during the training course, and if so, by how much. They did this by indicating the depth of their own knowledge and understanding for each of the eleven training themes at the start and end of the training course using a four-point Likert scale (1 = Limited knowledge; 2 = Basic level; 3 = Good level; 4 = Very good level). The results are summarised in Table 2:

Training Theme	Mean Scores		
	Before Training	After Training	Change
You as a Learner	2.4	3.5	1.1
Three Domains and Promotion of a Growth Mindset	2.3	3.6	1.3
Oral Language, Vocabulary and Conversational Skills	2.6	3.7	1.1
Supporting Young Readers	2.2	3.7	1.5
Supporting Comprehension	1.5	3.5	2.0
Supporting Vulnerable Storytellers	2.4	3.6	1.3
Supporting Writers	2.0	3.4	1.4
Transcription Skills	2.2	3.5	1.3
The Development of Numeracy Concepts	2.2	3.4	1.2
The Development of Numeracy - SEAL Maths	2.0	3.4	1.4
The Child as a Learner - A Playful Approach	2.4	3.7	1.3

Table 2: Self-assessed changes in knowledge & understanding before and after the training course

Overall, 25 of the 27 participants identified an increase of one to two points across each of the eleven areas of input by the end of the course. Of those who did not, one participant believed her level of knowledge and understanding to have been mostly very good at the start due to significant experience and therefore recorded less movement between grades and one participant did not complete the exercise.

As might be expected, the eleven newly appointed participants rated themselves as level one (limited) or level two (basic knowledge) in most or all areas prior to training. All graded their knowledge and skills to be at level three (good) or level four (very good) at the conclusion of training.

Fifteen of the sixteen participants with more than two years' experience also identified growth in knowledge and skills. Ten of these gauged their level as basic for many or all areas before training and at a good or very good level after training. The remainder judged their initial level as being mostly good at the start and mostly very good on completion. Even where knowledge was good, the course helped develop a common language for talking about learning:

*'I've worked as a Classroom Assistant for 17 years. On the form I put I had good knowledge at the start - before the course - because I'd been doing it for so long. But I didn't know the names for things. I kind of knew the reasons for doing things.'*

Even those who brought extensive experience of working as a Classroom Assistant realised that there was scope for deeper curricular understanding. This scope came from the course content and from discussion with other Classroom Assistants about how they applied practices in their own schools:

*'I've been able to take something from every aspect of the course. The whole thing has been beneficial. The course let us discuss ideas and share information. You might think 'I know that. I've done all that' but there's always something else in there to understand about it. The course has made my outlook different.'*

The interviews from Head Teachers expressed a high level of satisfaction with the content and impact of the course. It was perceived to make sense and link well to the Classroom Assistants' work in school:



*'The programme has given Classroom Assistants in-depth knowledge and understanding.'*

They felt the longitudinal structure of the course allowed complex ideas time to 'cook', and allowed them to be revisited in a 'learning spiral' that further deepened understanding. A similar view was held by Development Officers, who perceived the content of the pilot course as a positive 'starting point' for continuous development:

*'This has been a really positive programme. All Classroom Assistants need the course as minimal training then extra, building on this, linked to attainment. Continuing development is needed. We need the same programme and to build on from this. We need to notice, invest, develop and extend Classroom Assistants. Would like to see some of the current cohort involved in presenting next year's sessions. People listen more to peers.'*

*'We have to invest in Classroom Assistants. There are fantastic examples from this course of how you can 'grow people' in knowledge and in confidence.'*

Deeper knowledge and understanding has an impact on how Classroom Assistants work as part of the school team, how they feel about their work, and those with whom they work. One Classroom Assistant noted:

*'This training has benefitted Classroom Assistants and made them feel valued. It has verified that they are doing a good job. I think everyone who has done this course is happier now. It is making a difference here. It means they go back to school and bring knowledge to the table. This is better for the children and leads to more effective co-working.'*

### **Impact on Curriculum Work with Children**

Improving knowledge and understanding can only be said to be truly powerful when it prompts participants to change what they do when working with children. Every participant was able to identify specific aspects of course content that proved particularly beneficial and had an impact on practice:

*'I liked the reading sessions. I'm more aware of strategies and put them into place a lot more. I don't jump in - I give the children time to think. I also explain that if you get it wrong, it's ok. Some children are frightened of getting it wrong. They'll say 'I*

*don't know' but now when I suggest a strategy, the child will have a go. I now see a difference in confidence - they're more willing to have a go.'*

*'I am trying to use active learning, trying not to ask too many questions and giving more waiting time. This has made a difference to practice. I am putting more thought into how to support to make a bigger difference and to tailor it more individually.'*

*'Even with 17 years' experience, I like hearing the different ways people work and the way they did things for reading and spelling. I liked trying different ways other people used. Like, in supporting writing, I'm taking more time to discuss it beforehand. In the class they [the children] talk about it but now when I take them out in a group I keep them talking and telling me about it until they are quite confident about what they are going to write. I'm not putting ideas into their head, but I keep on asking them questions and showing I'm interested.'*

Head Teachers had noticed a difference in how Classroom Assistants were interacting with children and some noted the Classroom Assistants' thinking and questioning had developed as a result of participation in the course and that this was *'making a difference'*. The improved depth and breadth of Classroom Assistant knowledge was seen to be helping Classroom Assistants to understand children's needs:

*'Staff are more enthused, knowledgeable and have a better skill level. It's the best course I've ever seen for Classroom Assistants. Every Classroom Assistant should be on it.'*

*'Classroom Assistants are thinking more about their role when working with the children. They are feeling better about their work - showing a more positive upbeat approach.'*

### **Impact on Children's Wellbeing**

The commitment of Classroom Assistants to their role and their emotional warmth towards the children was evident to trainers and local authority Development Officers throughout the training. On-going observations, group discussions and tasks provided evidence of caring, empathetic and relationship-based approaches:

*'I've worked hard on building positive relationships - even challenging children want to come now [to work with me].'*

*'I'm trying to make it all more enjoyable. A child I was working with needed a lot of help and is now much more confident. He has started reading at first level and is actually now asking 'Can we go out and read now?'*

Many Head Teachers commented on the nurturing and caring approach of Classroom Assistants in schools, and the excellent relationships they establish with children. In particular, the way in which some very experienced Classroom Assistants have built strong, positive relationships with children over a number of years was highlighted. We heard about children coming back to visit a Classroom Assistant well into secondary - up to S4. As one Head Teacher explained:

*'Classroom Assistants have worked with some individuals and groups for a long time and have built strong relationships with the children over a number of years.'*

Children too made many positive comments about their relationships with Classroom Assistants. They showed awareness and appreciation of the caring approach of Classroom Assistants in their schools. They frequently used words such as 'friendly', 'helpful', 'funny', 'kind' and 'nice' when asked to describe their Classroom Assistant. One child described her Classroom Assistant as 'respectful'. Many said their Classroom Assistant makes them feel 'happy':

*'She makes me feel happy, excited, every time I see her I'm happy, I feel better and when she helps me I feel even much better.'*

The children greatly valued the emotional support given and believed this helped their confidence as learners:

*'I really like it when she helps us because it just it makes me feel more confident about myself.'*

*'When [CA] comes and helps me it feels like some relief because when I can't get an answer it's like I'm stressed.'*

*'It makes me feel more confident that she's around that there's more people to help me with the work.'*

Key themes explored in training sessions focused on understanding needs and building relationships with children as individuals. The initial sessions addressed cultural capital, social identity, emotional well-being and the development of a growth mindset. Evidence from both the Classroom Assistant and Head Teacher interviews suggests that this new knowledge and understanding has had a significant influence on how Classroom Assistants view children. One Head Teacher admitted to being a little surprised when a Classroom Assistant had spoken knowledgeably to her about a child's cultural capital but agreed that this was a positive development. Many Classroom Assistants explained that these ideas gave them new insights into children, and some explained that it gave them insights into their own learning:

*'It was good to find out about cultural capital - our school is in a deprived area. Previously I might have thought that children were being lazy but cultural capital has shown me that this is not always the case. It's given me a new way of thinking. I try to have understanding of children's experiences.'*

*'Cultural capital was something I spent lots of time thinking about and I look at children as individuals now and spend time thinking about it. There are differences [between children,] but they are all important. Sometimes the ones doing okay are overlooked. They need interest and praise too. You have to teach them how to do it but you also have to teach them why. It's fascinating.'*

*'I think when we were doing the growth mindset it really spoke to me. I was in a fixed mindset and it helped me because it changed my thinking. I do say 'I can't do that' and I hear children say it. So now I say 'you can'. It's changed my outlook and my approach in the classroom. For years you do the same thing and then this course comes and you say that's something different and you do things differently. You have to.'*

Similarly, the interview data showed that the focus given to being a good listener and on the development of skills for active listening was valuable and had an impact on Classroom Assistants' relationships with children:

*'When a child is wanting to talk to me I listen to them until they have finished talking and take the time to be a good listener and I have found they are more likely to approach me if something is troubling them.'*

*'The course has helped because now I know I am getting across to the children. As a Classroom Assistant, children will tell us things in the playground that they wouldn't tell other staff, and some will follow you around. I find children are happy when you walk into the class. They say 'Can you help?'*

*'I listen more. There is a wee boy in P7 who never really said much, he's always very quiet. You missed him under the radar. I made sure I said hello every day to him. A few weeks ago, he was quite upset and he wanted to talk to me. I said I'll go inside and be in the snug and he came and found me. I was thinking I was going to get a disclosure thing, but he was worried about high school. He wouldn't make friends, get his head flushed down the toilet, teachers would shout and he couldn't cope with that. It was really weighing on his mind. He didn't want to worry his mum.'*

*'I listen more to the children. I never had time before. I look at them more. I make time to listen to them especially in the playground when they all want to speak to you. Children need that if they don't get it at home.'*

*'The session we did on open questions really changed what I do. That was great. I have a wee girl doing the word-wall and no one does any reading with her, but I let her talk because she needs that conversation.'*

### **Impact on Children's Attainment**

It is impossible to separate out the impact of a Classroom Assistant on attainment from that of the teacher, the resources or wider school effects because they always work as part of a school team. The local authority Development Officers had a clear understanding of the impact issues and potential:

*'It will absolutely benefit children to have another known adult in class who can effectively support their learning. It's difficult to measure the precise impact but I don't see how it wouldn't be positive. The Classroom Assistants have a greater understanding about how they can best help learning. You can't really support learning effectively if you don't know how learning happens.'*

Group discussions during the course and individual interviews with the researcher provide evidence that most Classroom Assistants are aware of local authority and school efforts to improve attainment, promote wellbeing and narrow the gaps associated with poverty. A

degree of vision was demonstrated regarding their role in this, particularly those in PEF funded posts, although some suggested that a more concise and relevant job description would better reflect the focus they are expected to have on raising attainment.

There was awareness of the time and process required to achieve significant change, and a growing understanding of the range of complex social, cultural and educational factors which impact on children's attainment. Most Classroom Assistants articulated feelings of responsibility and all expressed a commitment to being as effective as possible in the collective effort within Renfrewshire to increase attainment:

*'I have to [help] improve attainment, but I can't see that immediately.... I was frightened about failing, about not raising attainment because it wasn't happening instantly, I couldn't see it. But this is a longer thing. So, before I'd maybe feel a bit more frightened about working with those who weren't going to get it instantly. It's complicated and hard to measure. But now I am seeing progress. Sometimes it's baby steps then they can run with it. You can see the [children's] mindset at the start. 'I can't do this', and you can change that and they can fix things that are wrong. The more they start to realise they can do it. I love it when they sit up straight because they want to come with me. Getting that extra time and help. It makes a difference. It's effective when they have that entitlement that this person is listening to me and helping me work out how to do it.'*

Some, very experienced Classroom Assistants, were able to reflect on the difference they make based on feedback from parents of children who had moved on to secondary school:

*'I had a boy who's now in in secondary and his mum says I made a difference. That's what this job is about.'*

Some Classroom Assistants have initiated or been involved in new initiatives within school to support children's learning and attainment, using ideas linked to the course:

*'At school, we have created a new Story Club area. The children attend in the mornings and after school. We aim to support children's interests, imagination, comprehension and vocabulary. Also, to support wider learning, for children to become more confident socially and hopefully develop a love of stories which may lead on to being better readers.'*

Local authority Development Officers believe Classroom Assistants have a valuable role in the collective effort to narrow the gaps associated with poverty. However, they suggest that the impact of the pilot course on practice will take time to be embedded:

*'It can take time for [the classroom assistant's] learning to permeate through to children although some children could very clearly articulate the work of the Classroom Assistants both in terms of their nurturing/pastoral role and specific support.'*

The Development Officers filmed children from all fourteen schools talking about their Classroom Assistants. This video evidence shows children's responses reflecting both the 'caring, nurturing' role of the Classroom Assistant to promote wellbeing *and* the role of 'supporting learning' emphasised as part of the Attainment Challenge. Some children described how support from a Classroom Assistant made learning enjoyable and accessible:

*'It's really fun when [CA] helps us with our times-tables because she make it all into like a fun game thing.'*

Children gave many examples of how Classroom Assistants help with their learning and while this evidence is subjective in nature, it suggests children believe their work had improved as a result of support given:

*'She is a good Classroom Assistant because she..she helps everyone, she knows what she's doing, she helps...she's really smart with everything. The last time I did maths with her I..I think I actually got better and more smart by it and that's why I'm happy now she was helping me.'*

*'When [CA] helps me I feel good that I might.. I'm gonna improve with my Language or Maths.'*

*'Every time I'm stuck she always comes and helps me and its wonderful and I always feel great.'*

*'I feel very happy because then I'm not stuck and I don't have to sit do nothing for a certain time.'*

*'She helps me if I'm writing a story in class and I don't know how to spell certain words she'll give me little hints to spell them. When [CA] helps you in class when you're stuck it*

*feels really good because you could have been stuck on that one till the end of it but she can come and help you.'*

Many Classroom Assistants considered the lengthy nature and content of the pilot training programme to have allowed them to explore and reflect in some depth, on their role and the impact they might have:

*'Most Classroom Assistants I know have had very little or no training for years and I feel this is a huge waste of resources as many Classroom Assistants have a huge range of experiences/skills that they don't get to develop. This course has gone some way to addressing this issue but only a few of us have been lucky enough to attend.'*

*'I think it has made me more aware of job role and the job you do on a daily basis. This course has opened up my eyes to the importance of the job and the impact you can have on children.'*

### **Better Communication With Teachers**

One major theme which emerged from the evidence was that Classroom Assistants felt they were now *'speaking the same language'* as teachers and other educational professionals. It was a term was often heard in the group discussions during the course. Participants suggested that the course content had helped them to understand key educational approaches, strategies and terms:

*'The learning strategies were really helpful because I didn't know anything about that. Now I'm talking the same language. The teacher says 'do x' and I know what that is.'*

*'Lots of times the teachers are using new resources.... but as a Classroom Assistant you don't have a clue what they are about. There's no system for telling us and you don't always recognise the vocabulary they use when they do tell you. Sometimes we are on an in-service day and you as a Classroom Assistant don't know what, for example, GIRFEC is. They do tell you but it's very quick and you never get a chance to take it in and make sense of it. You need to realise the implications. When they are using this terminology, you can be really lost.'*



Even experienced Classroom Assistants appreciated opportunities to really get to understand the terminology used in schools and what it meant for their work with children:

*'I've worked as a Classroom Assistant for 16 years. My hopes were to be able to understand the terminology the teachers use and know what they are expecting from me so I feel confident.'*

*'I thought the training was a good idea because you didn't understand a lot about what teachers were saying. I'd think; 'What does that mean?' Teachers go on courses but we don't.'*

Several Head Teachers also felt that the course had helped to develop a shared language and understanding of specific strategies:

*'We got three new Classroom Assistants and expected the training to give them a basic grounding. It exceeded expectations. They are linking in a lot more to the language of literacy and have more confidence. Showing more initiative and are able to work with groups independently. There hasn't been such an in-depth course before.'*

*'Both said they really enjoyed the way the course was designed - the focus on shared language, strategies and commonalities. Their confidence has grown in new skills and in relation to existing skills. This is a great step forward.'*

*'It's about not speaking a different language, now all are speaking the same language'*

Evidence also indicated however, that as knowledge increased, Classroom Assistants were better able to communicate concisely and confidently with class teachers. They talked about being more willing to offer ideas, being more sure about their ideas and being able to back-up and explain ideas because what they had learned on the course validated their suggestions. Several Classroom Assistants indicated that they were happier to approach a teacher to clarify a task or approach:

*'The communications are quite short, but this course has prompted me to cultivate relationships more with the teachers. Having a focus for the communication and a period of conversations was useful.'*

*'I've been discussing the children more since we started this course. I feel more confident to discuss them with the class teacher. Usually I raise the issues, but the teacher will then talk about something and will raise things with me.'*

*'I felt more confident to exchange the ideas with the teacher and me being more confident helps the children. I can actually discuss a child with the teacher and be a bit of an advocate. I'd say "What about this, or that".'*

For some Classroom Assistants understanding the language of learning in school not only validated the idea of providing feedback to teachers, but also the idea of sharing the purpose of activities with the children:

*'Everyone is busy in schools so I make sure I give really succinct feedback on the child. I always do that now. I say it right away. I prioritise that, rather than thinking 'They'll be too busy'. I also share more with the children. I tell them what we are aiming for and how it relates to last time.'*

## **Analysis of Systemic Issues**

Several themes that emerged from the analysis of the interview and survey data spoke to the wider context of Classroom Assistants' work. In this section we report those issues that relate to the wider national, local authority and school systems that, if acted upon, could enhance the impact of the Classroom Assistants's work on children's attainment and wellbeing and ensure that they play a full part in contributing to narrowing the gaps between children from low income families and their better off peers.

### **Ambiguity About the Role of The Classroom Assistant**

In the past, the responsibilities that Classroom Assistants in Scotland have in relation to working with children, and consequently the knowledge they require for this, has been unclear. One Head Teacher expressed some initial concern that offering Classroom Assistants a course that focused on their classwork with children might lead them to 'overstep the mark' and go beyond the expected role of a Classroom Assistant:

*'At first I had a wee bit of concern - I jarred at the term 'professional learning'. Classroom Assistants are paid such a low wage, are we asking them to do too much?'*

Following discussions with the Classroom Assistants however, the Head Teacher acknowledged that all her Classroom Assistants needed this kind of input. The Classroom Assistants told her that their understanding and confidence has grown and they felt more empowered to help children. Although the feeling of discomfort expressed by this Head Teacher is not uncommon, it is increasingly challenged as Classroom Assistants are funded by Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Fund money to work specifically with children.

For other senior staff in schools, advancing the knowledge and understanding of Classroom Assistants was simply essential in order to create a 'joined up' experience for children:

*'Classroom Assistants need to have a knowledge and understanding [of the curriculum and pedagogies] so they can appreciate the strategy the teacher is using and know how best to work with the class teacher to support these approaches. Without that knowledge and understanding they might use something that could contradict or adversely affect what the teacher is trying to do to support learning.'*

### **Deployment of Classroom Assistants**

We were interested in how Classroom Assistants were deployed. We analysed the diary entries where Classroom Assistants were asked to keep a record of their activities, and explored the issue of deployment in their semi-structured interviews. We then asked the Head Teachers and Council Officers about those issues that emerged most strongly from our analysis and invited them to raise other issues that were important to them. This section details the issues that were raised.

### **Allocation of Classroom Assistants to Schools**

The value of the Classroom Assistant role was recognised by all Head Teachers but many believed that the impact on children was limited by insufficient numbers of Classroom Assistants in schools. The allocation of Classroom Assistants to schools seems to vary widely. Concerns were raised about the differences in ratios of Classroom Assistants to children, with one school, for example, having only 2 FTE classroom assistants for over 450 children. Some Head Teachers noted that schools had more Classroom Assistant input in the past and it was suggested that some schools lost out when a new model of allocation was introduced. However, interrogating this was outside the remit of the project:

*'They have an important role in supporting children and pastoral support. We don't have what we require.'*

*'We would like more Classroom Assistant time and input. Children's emotional well-being and mental health are big issues and require support. Relationships are another key aspect. Classroom Assistants can build good relationships with children.'*

*'The school has 3 FTE Classroom Assistants. One of these is PEF funded. number of hours overall has been cut. It's got to be workable.'*

### **Allocation of Classroom Assistants to Classes in a School**

One deployment issue was about the number of classes a Classroom Assistant covered, and the time spent in each class. This seems a basic issue, but one that has repercussions for the quality of relationships, both with the children and with the teachers. Classroom Assistants are not involved in choosing the classes in which they work and had little comment to make about this issue. It was clearly understood to be the responsibility of the School Management Team. Differences between schools could indicate that different schools have different needs, but also that aspects of the Classroom Assistant role are interpreted differently across establishments. In all instances, decisions about deployment were taken by the Head Teacher and/or Depute Head Teacher. Almost all Head Teachers stated that deployment to particular classes is firmly focused on the needs of individual pupils and groups:

*'We make decisions about deployment based on data about children - both qualitative and quantitative. We also take account of children's backgrounds and barriers to learning. It's very clear about who and what support is for. Some classes get more Classroom Assistant time than others, based on need.'*

*'The DHT makes decisions about deployment of Classroom Assistants based on children's needs; learning, behavioural, emotional and health needs. These are the children that take most of the Classroom Assistants' time. this involves being right beside them.'*

Two Head Teachers took decisions based on a broader range of issues including class structure and size, vulnerable children, NQTs and the skills of individual Classroom Assistants:

*'A strong focus is on supporting children. DHT is pupil support co-ordinator. All Classroom Assistants do reading with children from 9.00-9.30 each morning, working with individual children. Then try and split evenly among classes but taking account of size, needs, NQTs who might need a little support. No admin is done in the morning. Teachers organise admin tasks in the afternoon as required.'*

*'Decisions about deployment are also based on child/adult interaction - the relationship between them. We try to plug in to the particular strengths of the individual Classroom Assistant.'*

Another two Head Teachers asked class teachers to 'bid' for Classroom Assistant time:

*'Teachers are asked to bid - they need to identify who needs support, the tasks required and whether for an individual or small group.'*

Others focused on using Classroom Assistants to support an area of development within the school or class:

*'A current focus is on the role of Classroom Assistant in monitoring and supporting writing. They have been deployed to do this. Beyond that, it's the needs of children-identifying who needs support.'*

An issue that was raised by some Head Teachers and the Renfrewshire Council Officers, but not by the Classroom Assistants themselves was which pupil groups teachers selected to work with the Classroom Assistant. Where this was raised, it was to argue that the Classroom Assistant should not always be allocated to those groups of children who struggle the most. Those children who find learning harder should have more contact with the teacher rather than less. Partly this is in response to research in England which found that children who struggle to learn had less contact with the teacher because they spent so much time with Teaching Assistants<sup>11</sup>. One interviewee told us:

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<sup>11</sup> Webster, R., Russell, A., & Blatchford, P. (2015). Maximising the Impact of Teaching Assistants: Guidance for School Leaders and Teachers. Routledge.

*'Classroom Assistants are used to support individuals/ small groups. They are often supporting struggling children. This is an issue. Maybe more focus on working with the wider class so the teacher can spend more time with children who need most help. Also, they could help with the issue of supporting and extending very high attaining children who need more challenge. We need to talk with schools to help them look at who classroom assistants work with in future.'*

Indeed, some Head Teachers talked about the need for children who require support to have more access to the class teacher and to ensure that the children with the highest level of need were not given *'the least qualified staff'*. This influenced decisions about how Classroom Assistants were deployed:

*'A tracking meeting is held at the end of each term to look at children who require intervention. Teachers identify greatest need and who they are going to focus on. Classroom Assistants mainly work with middle groups so teachers can work with those who need it most.'*

*'Classroom Assistants tend to work with the most able children or other groups so teachers can work with the least able children. This has made a difference to early stages.'*

### **Different Roles In School**

There were big differences in the roles that the Classroom Assistant performed across the schools but equally big differences in their roles within a school. Again, some of these differences could reflect the specific needs of different classes and teachers and the skill-sets of individual Classroom Assistants. However, some Classroom Assistants believed it arose from a lack of consistency in the interpretation of their role across teachers within a school:

*'There is little consistency or guidance about what exactly the role of a Classroom Assistant should be and it varies widely for staff members.'*

Head Teachers also demonstrated awareness of this and noted that some teachers need to further develop their understanding of the classroom assistant role:

*'There's a bit of work to be done there.'*

The Development Officer who interviewed the children suggested that children's comments reflected differences in how Classroom Assistants were used in particular schools:

*'Some [children] quickly veered towards playground and first aid while others were able to say how the Classroom Assistant helped their learning. This might reflect use [of classroom assistants]. Some children gave comments which began 'I feel more confident...' 'I feel more capable...' 'I feel smarter...'*

Some Classroom Assistants suggested that roles were evolving to become more specific and targeted, a change driven by PEF funding and the focus on raising attainment:

*'I'm PEF so most of my time is in class. I have very little resource work. I am now feeding back [about how children cope with tasks] more now but this depends on the teacher. Nobody really knew what my role was at first - which children to target. It is now much more specific.'*

*'I'm lucky. We have a great HT. Our line manager and HT say I'm a new resource and we need to work out how to get the best from it. They listen to us.... (example given). It needs to be a constant conversation. We are allowed to think. We are going to do a family learning programme and we are doing a story club. We are timetabled and we know when we have to be in class. Some teachers are better prepared than others. Some just want us to do resources, some not so much. But as my confidence grows I will find ways to tackle that and I know I'll be supported to do that. Our timetables are evolving. They've changed them three times to make better use of us. This course has required them to reallocate my resourcing slot so that I'm not losing time with the children.'*

*'I am actually with them [the children] all the time now because of this PEF 'ideal' role so I've gone into doing more learning support with the teacher. Previously I was doing resources, changing children who had accidents. Your break is at a different time from the kids, so you lose time there.'*

*'I have been employed from PEF and so have been timetabled with the max class contact. This means I don't get breaks at classroom assistant time, which makes it harder to 'belong'. Everyone has been very welcoming and I now feel a bit more on top of my tasks so can start to feel that I'm making a difference.'*

### **Workload, Range and Balance of Work**

Classroom Assistants have a heavy workload and undertake a wide range of tasks. Analysis of the diary and interview evidence showed that Classroom Assistants could work with up to eleven classes in a week and several worked with three different classes each day. Most Classroom Assistants supported individual children and small groups with Literacy and Numeracy within class but a significant number also worked for short periods on their own with individuals and groups in other parts of the school. In several schools, Classroom Assistants are also committed to nurture groups and to providing specific targeted support to children. Because they see the targeted support children for short periods and are often not working in their classes, the support inevitably involves using decontextualised resources such as 'Toe by Toe'.

Almost all Classroom Assistants did playground supervision. Some also covered lunch breaks and/or breakfast clubs. They were often the 'first port of call' for first aid. Balancing time in class with other duties and time for preparation were both identified as issues:

*'At school I do the friendship group [nurture group]. I'm the photographer, first aider, if anyone needs [something] I do that. If the office needs manned, I do that. I'm seldom in class. In my friendship group I can be called 3 times for first aid. The other first aider is the DHT and they call for me first. I've had broken bones, ruptured spleen, bumped heads. Yesterday I had 6 injuries. I get called for some silly things. Some days I'm not in class at all - the teachers get me mounting work, making resources. I cover 11 classes a week. Yesterday I wasn't in class at all though. I'm in 3 classes a day but don't get to them all. I never leave on time.'*

*'My timetable jumps around. I'm in 8 classrooms and on Fridays I run the ICT during golden time. I run reading groups, help with writing support, I love my P5 reading group and the teacher makes sure he sends out as many different groups as he can.'*

*'My friendship [nurture] group is important and quite emotional. The children have needs but I don't get any preparation time. I have a folder and guidelines. It lasts for 12 weeks. There are materials you have to get ready. We go through the feelings and emotions with them, then we do games. 'If this was to happen in the playground how would you sort it?' The children have anger issues so I need to listen but I'm having to read the book as I go along too because there's no*



*preparation time. The teachers get McCrone time but we don't get any time to prepare. You get quite a lot that is personal. I love it but need a bit of time.'*

*'When you are split between lots of classes, you don't have any flexibility because you know time is up. I do all the 'Toe by Toe' because there is no continuity for the kids. You can tell the class teacher what is happening etc. That has helped.'*

Some Classroom Assistants believed they spent less time working directly with children than others and suggested that in such circumstances having more regular contact with smaller numbers of children over a sustained period would have greater impact:

*'Time is a constant issue. Sometimes I just don't get allocated enough time with teachers, children or management. me, being part of the same class is the most effective - an hour a week does not seem to have the same impact on the child.'*

Head Teachers acknowledged the wide range of tasks carried out by Classroom Assistants. Many said that their schools now place emphasis on working with children in the classroom and that assistance is primarily focused on supporting Literacy and Numeracy. They told us:

*'It's crucial that they are working directly with children.'*

It was clear from the evidence that different teachers use the Classroom Assistant in different ways. We wondered if this was due to their initial teacher training, but this does not seem to be the case:

*'The school used their PEF money and bought in additional support teachers for working with children. In [one class] I've had a maths group once. [A probationer] doesn't want me in there. ... I said I know it's difficult so give me some children to work with. So recently that's been happening. [Another probationer] uses me all the time to work with children though. We play board games around addition and subtraction. Sometimes [another teacher] will use me for writing. In the morning I work with a group and in the afternoon, it is photocopying. In [another class], I have a struggling maths group.'*

### ***Tipping the Balance of Tasks***

Many Classroom Assistants questioned the validity of some tasks they were told to do. In some cases, too much time was spent doing things for a whole class that children could do themselves in just a few minutes:

*'I don't feel Classroom Assistants are used the way they should be. For example, last week [a] teacher asked for [a resource preparation task] for a project. It took 2 hours. The children themselves could have done this and it would only have taken them a few minutes each.'*

*'Sometimes we get asked to do a lot of useless tasks which waste valuable class time - photocopying, laminating etc. Some tasks children could do themselves.'*

In other cases, it was clear that a general cost-benefit analysis of the amount of time Classroom Assistants spend making resources and performing classroom administration and clerical tasks would be helpful. When we asked what would help classroom assistants be more effective in their role, almost all identified these areas as ones where time could be saved to release them to do more work with children:

*'I do get to work with individuals or groups. I was [working with children on an activity] and the Head Teacher saw and said I was doing brilliant. We're getting a Renfrewshire Council visit on Monday and we have all new boards, so I've spent the past 3 weeks doing displays. Last week's homework for the course - the one on play - I couldn't do because I was just laminating and doing boards.'*

*'I spend much more time photocopying and laminating than others. Maybe 3 days a week.'*

*'[We need] ...less focus on creating resources for displays. [The culture is] everything has to be laminated, but it doesn't. The displays are right up to the ceiling and the children can't take it all in. Some are reminders and some are good work, but if there is so much stuff, children can't see it. It doesn't need to be laminated. I spend almost 2/3 of my time doing laminating and displays. [In one class, I made resources but we could have bought them in for exactly the same cost of materials]. Now another class want them. I spoke to the DHT and said it was ... time that I wasn't working with the children. I can order [resources] like these. Another time ... I was cutting up bits of paper, and we could have used Post-its.'*

*'You do a lot of displays. I love doing it but it takes probably about 25% of my time doing photocopying, banners, display, laminating etc.'*

One experienced Classroom Assistant said that she had noticed a change in how her time was used:

*'Classroom Assistants are not used like they used to be. Less time now is spent with poorer readers. More time now is spent on resource work - mounting pictures etc.'*

Head Teachers were asked about the amount of time some Classroom Assistants spent on administration and clerical duties. Many described trying to address this issue, to move away from the administration and resource-production roles to get a better weighting between classroom assistants supporting children directly and the necessary administrative duties required by the school or teacher. They saw this as important to reduce the demands on Classroom Assistants. Some schools have identified 2 - 3 short slots per week for administration tasks, with additional requests being negotiated with the teachers *'on an either/ or basis. For example, work with the group or do laminating - not both.'* In other instances, teachers put requests in a notebook in the Classroom Assistant base. Evidence points towards giving administrative tasks less priority but Head Teachers indicated that getting the right balance can be problematic:

*'Admin is kept to a minimum. Teachers do a lot of their own prep work. Classroom Assistants do some. Classroom Assistants have a base and designated times on a Friday morning for admin. Large amounts of photocopying are sent to the Document Solutions Centre.'*

*'Admin tasks are also required but these are given low priority. Sometimes time for admin is given during INSET days allowing tasks to be done in advance. This depends on training topics - as support staff are linked into training where appropriate.'*

A few Head Teachers declared an intention to raise the issues and devise a system that was more transparently linked to the school's priorities:

*'There is a tricky balance between support and admin. I want to get a better balance. I will speak to Classroom Assistants to see if they think the balance is right.'*

However, other Head Teachers perceived the key role of the Classroom Assistant to be about supporting teachers and the preparation and class administration tasks were considered to be an important aspect of that:

*'We also need to be aware that Classroom Assistants are there to support teachers. Most teachers got a morning and an afternoon slot. There is a balance between support and admin roles. Morning slots mainly support teaching. Afternoon slots are a mixture of support and admin duties. There is a separate block of time for [Classroom Assistants to carry out] school duties for teachers - Classroom Assistants do laminating, photocopying, displays etc.'*

*'The Classroom Assistants have a nurturing role - they are there to support needs and to facilitate teacher to work. This involves having an administrative role.'*

An increase in ASNA and PEF posts may also be impacting on the amount of time that other Classroom Assistants are required to carry out admin duties. Previously all support staff would share duties. The new job remit for ASNAs requires them to be with the children for all of their working hours, so the responsibility for other, more general tasks lies solely with Classroom Assistants. This issue was raised by several Head Teachers:

*'ASN assistants must be with children for all working hours, so Classroom Assistants are required to undertake the practical tasks; admin and clerical. Time is identified for this in their timetable. Focus is given to pupil support rather than admin, but this is sometimes required.'*

The Classroom Assistants however, do not see any major differences between their own role and that of an ASNA. They believe the jobs to be very similar, with few differences at practice level:

*'There needs to be a better distinction between the work/job description for Classroom Assistants and ASNAs. Often, we [Classroom Assistants] are doing very similar jobs but for inferior wages, and many of us do tasks that should technically should be done only by ASNAs.'*

Evidence suggests that this has resulted in some Classroom Assistants having less job satisfaction:

*'I felt more fulfilled years ago. I felt like I made a difference. There were lots of Classroom Assistants and you had more time in class. You were more familiar with teachers, children and routines. We are very appreciated now but there is not as much job satisfaction. The impact of PEF and ASNAs - they do what I used to do but for more money. When the money has run out, will I be expected to pick up this role again?'*

The evidence from Classroom Assistants, the Development Officers and the Head Teachers suggests that currently the role and remit of a Classroom Assistant is in a state of flux in Scotland. The introduction of new kinds of Classroom Assistant - ASNAs and PEF-funded Classroom Assistants - and the range of views about what a Classroom Assistant role involves suggests that it might be helpful for school SMTs, Classroom Assistants, teachers and perhaps the local authority to have a wider conversation about how Classroom Assistant work is perceived. This is clearly a time of real workforce change and a wider conversation would maximise both the efficiency and effectiveness of Classroom Assistant work. This was recognised by the council Development Officers:

*'Training is ... only effective if what's learnt can be applied. Schools need guidance on how Classroom Assistants are used. [We need to say] 'Here's what good practice might look like' would be really valuable.'*

### **Management and Communication Systems**

Across even this small cohort, there were stark differences in how Classroom Assistants felt supported by the SMT and teachers with whom they work, with some getting regular discussions about their own workload and development needs, and others having only very irregular conversations.

### **Management Meetings in School**

A cornerstone of active, open management is having regular opportunities to talk. Many issues were raised in relation to planned opportunities for Classroom Assistants to interact with school managers and class teachers. Classroom Assistants do important work and have a different perspective on children and on school life, so it is important that internal management systems ensure they have a voice and that it is listened to.

Head Teachers were asked about the systems in place to ensure effective communication with Classroom Assistants. Formal systems for communication were in place in most schools, however approaches varied and there are clearly some large differences in practice across the schools. The majority of monthly/termly meetings held were not specifically for Classroom Assistants but for all support staff. The agendas mainly addressed practical and operational matters. Almost all Head Teachers stated that meetings provided a two-way process for communication and encouraged staff to contribute to the agenda. The frequency of meetings varied between schools and is summarised in Table 4 (below). In most cases, meetings with either the Head Teacher or Depute Head Teacher were planned regularly but some Head Teachers reported that these did not always take place because of staffing or organisational issues.

The Head Teacher interviews made it clear that the practical difficulties of organising formal meeting times for Classroom Assistants when some are part-time or have little flexibility because they are juggling a number of minimum-wage jobs, are not to be underestimated. One told us:

*‘Scheduling is a nightmare as staff work on different days.’*

Frequency of meetings	Number of schools
Weekly	1
Fortnightly	1
4-6 weekly	4
Termly	3
Monthly and each term	1
Weekly and each term	1
No formal meeting in place as yet	3

Table 4: Frequency of meetings between classroom assistants and SMT in a school

Head Teachers did identify a range of wider approaches to support communication with Classroom Assistants. Almost all highlighted an ‘open door’ approach allowing staff to raise issues as these arose. Some referred to the use of notebooks or whiteboards to ensure written information was shared. In some instances, Classroom Assistants were invited to full staff meetings or given a copy of the minutes. Only one Head Teacher referred to organising Personal Development and Review meetings for Classroom Assistants.

How involved the Classroom Assistants were in school decisions seemed to vary, depending on the school. One Classroom Assistant told us of recent changes in their involvement:

*'This Head Teacher has changed how Classroom Assistants are used so now we are included in the discussions around the school plan, in preparing for inspection, all sorts of things.'*

### **Meetings with Teachers and Other Classroom Assistants**

There were no formal structures or opportunities in any of the fourteen schools, for Classroom Assistants to meet together or to meet with classroom teachers. All Head Teachers described contact between Classroom Assistants and class teachers as being informal and ad hoc:

*'Communication between teachers and Classroom Assistants often depends on the goodwill of both. Some teachers and Classroom Assistants meet together to plan at break times. Most often, communication between them is 'on the hoof.'*

Two Head Teachers did not see this as problematic because staff had developed strong relationships and were able to communicate well on an informal basis:

*'Discussions between class teachers and Classroom Assistants is informal and ad hoc. This works well because both Classroom Assistants are so experienced.'*

*'Both Classroom Assistants are good at speaking to class teachers. They have everyone's timetable so know when teachers are available.'*

Most Head Teachers acknowledged that improved communication would be beneficial but saw that it entailed many strategic difficulties. Any system needed to be sustainable and working hours, time-pressed staff and having different breaks for Classroom Assistants and teachers were identified as key barriers to organising regular opportunities for shared communication and planning:

*'Going forward it might be possible to meet staff after school. I feel there is more potential to help the children.'*

Other Head Teachers felt that establishing communication was less about meetings and more about the wider ethos of the school and the individual dispositions of staff:

*'There are good relationships between class teachers and Classroom Assistants. Communication depends on class teacher's approach. This can involve Classroom Assistants observing lessons and feeding back as required after session.'*

Many Head Teachers, however, were aware of the communication issues and were exploring ways to take it forward. Some are trying to have Classroom Assistants working with the same children and same classes to simplify communication channels and minimise the opportunities for miscommunication.

Almost all the Classroom Assistants we interviewed identified the lack of adequate time to talk to class teachers as an on-going concern in their school settings. The Classroom Assistants had an acute understanding of teacher workload and of the operational issues which make it difficult to identify a regular planning time. However, two-way communication is essential for children's progress. The Classroom Assistants valued talk with teachers for three reasons:

- to ensure they understood what mattered about the activities for particular children;
- to give feedback on how children had coped with activities;
- to understand more deeply, for themselves, the wider learning and curricular issues.

Almost all Classroom Assistants identified the need to have clear explanations of what was required in relation to children's learning, including the strategies and approaches to be used:

*'Teachers need to communicate and give clearer explanations with their expectations of what's to be learned and the strategies they would like to be used.'*

*'We need better communication with clearer explanations and expectations given on the use of strategies for specific children's needs in order to allow them to attain their potential and time for feedback and discussion of next steps in learning.'*

Classroom Assistants also wanted the opportunity to feedback to the teacher and to share ideas:



*'The Classroom Assistants also need time to give the feedback or it is lost. That's why I try to do that straight away before I forget. Classroom Assistant needs to be an extension of the teacher, not just someone else to do stuff for.'*

Where there are no formal arrangements for Classroom Assistants to liaise with teachers, the relationship between the Classroom Assistant and the teacher obviously becomes more crucial. Sometimes talking to teachers in school was problematic because the Classroom Assistant herself was new. A set consultation time - even if it were only 5-10 minutes - would clearly help this situation:

*'The hardest part was working with colleagues [in school] – I didn't know any of them so that was quite hard. The [course] task aspects asked me to talk to class teachers but they are so busy and I felt like I was imposing on them and taking their personal time.'*

Classroom Assistants want to help children as effectively as they can, and the teacher is the obvious person to provide such tailored advice. The Classroom Assistants told us that teachers differed in their willingness to engage in this kind of professional dialogue. A further problem when liaison is assumed or left to an informal arrangement, is that it can mean that some teachers do not immediately recognise its importance:

*'I don't get many opportunities to talk to teachers about strategies. Opportunities to discuss depends on individual teachers. Some are quite willing others just want you to sit with children.'*

Both the Classroom assistants and the SMTs agreed that communication between the Classroom Assistant and the class teacher was important. However, the SMTs tended to have a more sanguine view of how much, and how effectively, such communication happened. Formal arrangements for Classroom Assistant - teacher communication send a powerful message about the importance and value of such communication. This may be particularly important given the current state of flux in the Classroom Assistants' remit and the different understandings teachers hold about the Classroom Assistant role. Effective communication between teachers, Classroom Assistants and other support staff should be viewed as an essential feature of good practice and one which is vital to promoting and supporting children's learning and attainment. Addressing the barriers may be problematic, but creative and innovative approaches should be developed to overcome such obstacles to communication wherever possible.

### **Staff Development**

All Classroom Assistants expressed a need for continued training and development. They found this pilot course to be extremely beneficial and wanted this mark the start of a new, progressive approach to meeting their support and training needs. The Development Officers were unambiguous about the wide benefits of providing high quality staff development:

*'There's been great self-growth as well as development in learning and understanding. I think we've proven that you can achieve great things when you get the right context for training and the right people in to deliver it.'*

Two themes emerged from the interviews with the Classroom Assistants about their training needs: one related to the pilot project work in schools and one relating to wider training opportunities.

Classroom Assistants reported big differences in their experiences of how effectively their schools supported their personal and professional development on this course. This was particularly noticeable in the number of conversations that Classroom Assistants had with teachers and SMT about the course. Some Classroom Assistants reported that they received a good level of interest and support from school staff:

*'The HT always asks how it is going and so do the teachers. They ask is there anything they can help me with.'*

However, other Classroom Assistants expressed disappointment that few teachers and SMT were sufficiently interested to ask how their course was progressing. For some Classroom Assistants this lack of interest meant that they were given no practical support to do the course-related tasks:

*'The Head Teacher has never asked how the course is going. I don't get time to do the work in school. They have sent me on the course but don't give me time to do anything from it. The teachers don't really have time. They know I'm on a course because I can't do my playground duty but they don't ask. Even the Head Teacher doesn't ask.'*

The uneven pattern of support was confirmed by the Head Teacher interviews. Some Head Teachers had sought regular feedback from their Classroom Assistants about the training

course. Most Head Teachers had at least a single meeting with staff in preparation for their own interview with the project research team. A few had not yet managed to have any discussions with their Classroom Assistants about the course.

In some schools, differences may have been simply a matter of personal style. In other schools particular staff were obviously designated to manage Classroom Assistants and this led to less involvement by the Head Teacher and more interest and support from the designated SMT member:

*'The Depute Head Teacher is very supportive but I have little contact with the Head Teacher but recently received a 'Well done' email. The Depute Head Teacher has provided a lot of resources but we've had no time to talk about the course.'*

### **Support to Embed Learning in the Workplace**

Evidence highlights that Classroom Assistants appreciated the importance of making links between new knowledge, understanding and skills, and embedding these in everyday practice. The main obstacles to supporting this kind of development were identified as the lack of opportunities for the Classroom Assistants to share the course content and their learning experiences with teachers and other school staff; having adequate time made available to complete course tasks and; the need for increased partnership and team-working. Where teachers and SMTs gained an understanding of the nature and requirements of the course, Classroom Assistants were given time to carry out training tasks and further opportunities to apply the ideas. This benefitted both the Classroom Assistants and the school.

Sharing learning experiences helps to maximise the impact of staff development by linking the course content to a particular context of practice. An important mechanism for embedding learning in the workplace is talking informally and formally with workplace-based colleagues. Conversation both enhances the professional impact of a course and helps to build a sense of being part of a team.

Almost all Classroom Assistants wanted to share their learning with others in their school setting. Indeed, a few Classroom Assistants had been given a formal opportunity to do so by Head Teachers, for example, at staff meetings. Most Classroom Assistants had made an effort to talk with other support staff about the training course on an informal basis and

had shared training notes and handouts. Many Classroom Assistants found it hard to find time to talk with teachers and Head Teachers about their course, or what they had learned:

*'What did I find challenging? Mostly the requests for me to plan with my teacher colleagues - it doesn't seem how my school really operates. Teachers were busy during class time and I didn't want to take up any of their personal time. Still, I did feel more confident speaking with teachers if it was only for a few minutes.'*

Many Classroom Assistants suggested that teachers should also be more aware of course content for the highly practical reason that it may have implications for the range and type of tasks they could do to assist teachers in the classroom:

*'I think we should be sharing what's on this course with teachers and with other Classroom Assistants. I feel Classroom Assistants are greatly underused. If all Classroom Assistants were more confident and knowledgeable then they are more likely to share their ideas.'*

A high proportion of Classroom Assistants reported difficulty in finding time to complete diary activities and other tasks associated with the course. Most said they had to complete diary tasks at home. In addition, some were unable to complete the required activities such as developing story-telling skills, within school because opportunities to do so were not made available to them. There are some indications that this was primarily due to a lack of communication between Classroom Assistants and school staff. One Classroom Assistant reported that when she discussed tasks with the Head Teacher, time was made available for her to carry out the work. Others acknowledged that they had not raised the issue with school staff but had simply struggled on by themselves:

*'Maybe time could be allocated during the school week to allow for completion of tasks and gathering resources. It would have helped to have time during the school week to do some of the tasks. I'm doing the writing tasks at home, which is hectic. No one at school has asked if I need time for tasks and I feel they don't know how much we've done.'*

Staff development comes in many guises and support from school staff is important for a range of reasons. Clearly, people work well when they feel that they are making progress and find the challenges of their job personally satisfying rather than over-whelming, and

both formal and informal support is central to developing a mutually supportive school community:

*'Because I've been doing the job for a long time, I can see how the job has changed over the years. At first, I wasn't used in class at all. I was mostly photocopying, laminating, cutting up things. I wasn't used with children. At the start I didn't know how to use a computer and a lot of work then was the Classroom Assistants doing stuff on the computer. I felt I couldn't do the job. My mindset about my ability to do it was fixed. Then I did a local course, which helped a bit, but the teachers helped too. They took time to explain to me. Now I'm in class all the time, right through from P1 - P7. Before I couldn't do the older children - probably because I was more confident and experienced with younger children. I didn't know if I had the knowledge. This course has shown me I do have the knowledge.'*

Many wanted the opportunity to meet with other Classroom Assistants and to participate in training tailored specifically for Classroom Assistants. Currently, most Classroom Assistants attend at least some school in-service days but it was fairly common for them to say: *'[this] is not always relevant for us.'* This view was supported by evidence from several Head Teachers who identified that Classroom Assistants are included in school in-service *'where appropriate'*. Many Classroom Assistants indicated that they spend some in-service days carrying out display work or catching up on administrative and class preparation tasks:

*'We need more courses and professional development. This [course] is a prime example of how much we have learned. Things change all the time, and when new things come in we need to know about them.'*

Linked to the concept of continuing training and skill development, many Classroom Assistants raised the lack of a career pathway. Recent evidence specifies that a small number of Classroom Assistants go on to teacher training at university, including two Classroom Assistants from the current training cohort, but most do not have either the necessary qualifications or the desire to follow this path. Most Classroom Assistants did however articulate a need for some type of career structure and opportunities to increase their salary:

*'I'd like a career pathway like down south where Teaching Assistants get observed as part of their training and periodically through their career and are expected to take qualifications and courses, then higher level TA grade if you are judged to be*

*good at that. There is a scale within each level. A higher-level Teaching Assistant is on £19K. I'm on £11K and I've been doing it for 16 yrs.'*

Some Classroom Assistants believed that such a career pathway might lead to feeling more valued and increased recognition of their role by authorities at local and national levels:

*'I'd like more recognition by the authorities. If I didn't have a husband I couldn't live on the wages. A career pathway would be good, we got nothing from doing the compulsory SVQ. For the nature of the job, you don't stop and the money is dreadful.'*

*'I feel well respected by teachers and valued. The only time I don't feel valued is when I open my payslip!'*

Classroom Assistants are a group of workers with distinct training and development needs. Active interest and support from Head Teachers and Teachers will help them apply their training to the work they do. The lack of any career structure, fluid work patterns, lack of time for meetings and paucity of training opportunities in the past means that some SMT and teachers are less than fully aware of their role in supporting the Classroom Assistant, or the kinds of support that would be helpful. Helpful support would include showing a constructive interest in the detail of the Classroom Assistant's learning and their course, providing time and opportunities to undertake specific course activities, and tailoring work to utilise and build on emerging interests, knowledge and skills. Classroom Assistants value opportunities to meet other Classroom Assistants, within and across schools, to discuss common issues and share practices. They would welcome a career structure linked to distinct areas of competence and work foci. This would undoubtedly facilitate wider professional awareness of their skills, knowledge, competencies and development needs.

### **The Future: Partnership and Team Working**

Observational and recorded evidence suggests that as their confidence and knowledge developed, Classroom Assistants placed increased emphasis on the need for class teachers to better understand the potential role of the Classroom Assistant and to develop a partnership approach to children's learning:

*'There is room for more of a partnership. Time and attitudes make it challenging - it's about wanting and creating change. Teachers maybe don't realise the support they could have.'*

The Classroom Assistants suggested that a partnership approach would require them to have more information about current approaches and schemes that teachers were using, rather than *'working blind'*. This was a point often made in group discussions during training sessions. For example, when discussing Aiden Chambers' 'Three Sharings' model for supporting comprehension, most Classroom Assistants initially believed this was new knowledge. However, as the session unfolded, many realised this approach was currently being used in their schools. Discussion indicated that a significant number of Classroom Assistants had not been aware that this was a specific approach, were not clear about its purpose or how they could support this model when working with individuals or small groups.

Classroom Assistants also highlighted the benefits of understanding the learning needs of individual children and of how they might support the teacher's learning objectives:

*'We need to be more involved with the teachers to know what the issues are with children, what it's really important for the child to be learning. A few meetings – every couple of weeks to talk about specific children would help.'*

*'We can be trusted to know some children's personal aims and issues. When children are obviously having problems, you don't know what the plan is for them, or what they have to do. We can be trusted with information, and if we knew more it would help us to know how to respond to children if we are working with them... We have lots of children with real problems, but you are just guessing about what those might be or how you could help.'*

A significant number of Classroom Assistants suggested that the lack of formal communication channels had an impact on their ability to carry out allocated tasks and activities for the course and provided very support for making links between course content and their practice. Many Classroom Assistants found it hard to find time to talk with teachers and Head Teachers about their course, or what they had learned:

*'What did I find challenging? Mostly the requests for me to plan with my teacher colleagues - it doesn't seem how my school really operates. Teachers were busy during class time and I didn't want to take up any of their personal time. Still, I did feel more confident speaking with teachers, even if it was only for a few minutes.'*

## **POINTS FOR DISCUSSION**

### ***Deployment and the Nature of Work***

#### ***Local Authority, Regional Improvement Collaboratives & Government***

- Is the current job description of Classroom Assistants and other support posts in schools fit for purpose? How could it be refined to better-fit with government priorities?

#### ***Schools and Teachers:***

- How strategic is the current deployment to enable Classroom Assistants to make an impact on children's wellbeing and attainment in the school?
- How can we maximise the time for Classroom Assistants to work with children? Which display and resourcing tasks may be unnecessary?
- How much variability is there across the school in how different teachers use Classroom Assistants? Why and how can this be addressed?
- What monitoring arrangements are in place to ensure that Classroom Assistants are well used?
- How do we ensure that Classroom Assistants have a voice in these conversations?

### ***Training and On-going Development***

#### ***Local Authority, Regional Improvement Collaboratives & Government***

- What capacity exists in the schools, local authority or the Regional Improvement Collaborative to develop a qualification route and career structure for Classroom Assistants?
- Is there a case for prompting a national conversation about the remit and job description of Classroom Assistants in the Scottish system?

#### ***Schools and Teachers:***

- How do we raise school staff awareness of their role in helping Classroom Assistants embed their learning in ways that make a difference to children?
- What are the opportunities for Classroom Assistants to share knowledge with other support staff and class teachers? How can these be enhanced?
- What are the induction and ongoing training and development arrangements to equip Classroom Assistants for their role in the classroom? How are the current in-



service days, the links across schools and with other support staff used to develop staff? Could they be used more effectively?

- How do we ensure that Classroom Assistants have a voice in these conversations?

## ***Communication and Partnership***

### ***Schools and Teachers:***

- What does good partnership working between Classroom Assistants and teachers look like?
- How can we create regular, routine opportunities for Classroom Assistants to communicate with teachers about children?
- Are Senior Management Team meetings with Classroom Assistants sufficiently focused on development and systemic issues, or are they over-focused on low-level organisational arrangements?
- How do we ensure that Classroom Assistants have a voice in conversations about these matters?

## **FURTHER READING: LEARNING FROM OTHERS**

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