

TEACHER ASSISTANTS AND THEIR ROLES IN PRESCHOOLS: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR MALAYSIAN PRESCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The objective of the article is identifying who is a teacher assistant to create a conceptual framework on the need for deploying them to preschools. Preschools have existed all life long, and the population of preschoolers is always on the rise as the population of the country increases. As such, preschools have taken priority in any education system as a sound basic education forms the basis of creating excellent children in the future. Today preschool set ups have become lucrative business. Following this there is a dire need to provide the best education in every center. This can only be achieved if teacher pupil ratio is small and the classroom management is excellent. But this is not the case in many instances. Sometimes there are as many as 30 pupils in one class, as observed by the researcher herself. This becomes a nightmare to teachers. In order to combat this problem, teacher aides are available. They do most chores except teaching. This article, which forms the first in a series of four articles, looks at the existing state of teacher assistants' roles in other countries and puts forward the idea of providing teacher assistants in Malaysian preschools. The author envisages their role as an asset, yet some might argue they are a liability. Whatever the argument, the wellbeing of children takes priority and it is dependent on classroom management which is influenced by workload of teachers, quality of teaching, and the types of teachers.

KEYWORDS: Wellbeing of children, teacher assistants, classroom management, preschool, workload of teachers, quality of teaching

INTRODUCTION

Generally, preschool teachers today are seen to have many tasks on hand at one go. Children below the age of six are very motivated, vocal and have parents who have had at least basic primary or secondary education. As such, children are exposed to an energetic vocalized environment right from birth. The environment mentioned in this context does not take into consideration the economic status. If the economic status of a family is high, probably, young children from affluent families are more alert and their perspectives of things might be different from the non-affluent families, as the parents would have the sources to expose them to many places and get them the latest and best reading and play materials. Simultaneously, this opinion can be deferred as children from the outskirts are also vocal as observed by the researcher. Whatever it is, in line with that parents are sending their children to nurseries at the age of three (3) months. In that process nurseries and preschools are mushrooming much faster than mushrooms growing after rainy days. Directing from this angle, there is a great demand for nurseries and preschools. Many questions arise to which and what type of preschools are providing the best. Today running a preschool has become a business and a lucrative commodity especially for the private sector. The type of preschools depends on the management, curriculum and teachers too. Teachers embody the best schools.

As such, teachers play an important role in the preschools. In realizing the best performance of a preschool, demands from the management and the stakeholders are high. Thus, teachers' workload is quite high and demanding. If a preschool is to be accredited and given high ratings, then the output has to be incredibly good. The output referred here is the 'wellbeing of children'. One of the factors that affect this is the role of teachers and their classroom management. Look at the scenario below. In an observation the researcher did:

The teacher was teaching art and craft using sand.
The teacher was drawing faces with different emotions.
Since it was an outdoor activity, the pupils were very engrossed and many of them were changing the facial expressions. At least three pupils started redrawing different facial expressions, not mentioned by the teacher and three of them started running around their friends and started playing and throwing sand.
The teacher was unable to control the class, and he was actually struggling with the class control.

(A scene in a preschool in the outskirts of TanjongMalim)

Looking at the scenario, the researcher thought of what would it be if, there is someone who could be of assistance to the main teacher? Probing further into the issue of assistants in the class, the researcher embarked in finding out more about preschool assistants in the classroom. What exist today are pupil aides. There are many differences between my perspective of teacher assistants and pupil aides. Hence the objective of this article is to identify what is the job description of teacher assistants in general and then form a conceptual framework for a qualitative and a quantitative study on whether there is a need for teacher assistants in preschools in Malaysia.

TEACHER ASSISTANTS

Who are teacher assistants?

In Malaysia, in the early years, schools were not dependent on any aides as the function of the preschool was to teach basics in prewriting, pre-reading and pre-number skills. Estates used to provide crèches for children whose parents went to tap rubber trees at 5.30 in the morning. These children were looked after by '*ayamahs*' while their parents went to work. The researcher was also 'once upon a time' looked after by these '*aya amahs*'. It was a different scenario then. Children were fed and put to sleep and then it was play time. Following that, *amahs* became support aides in centers and in traditional preschools. Most of the aides jobs revolved around cleaning pots, utensils, cleaning and sweeping the classes, compound and corridors and taking pupils to toilet. Some tried to help by singing lullaby and nursery rhymes or songs to little children.

Reading through literatures worldwide, basically aides, or support staff in preschools are employed on full-time and part-time basis. Teacher assistants work in preschools and other childcare centers, elementary, middle, and high schools. These support staff are involved in technical jobs, some work as librarians, some as site managers, some as administrative and pastoral care workers, some as cleaners, some as caterers and some as dinner supervisors.

There are many schools of thought. Each school of thought and individual has different interpretations of who a teacher assistant is. Teacher assistants help to reinforce lessons. Teacher assistants review materials with pupils, do activities like reading and coloring in one-on-one or in small groups; enforce school and class rules to help teach students proper behavior. Teacher assistants are also involved in helping main teachers with recordkeeping, such as roll calling, attendance, checking on reasons for absenteeism and calculating formative and summative marks and grades. Others help teachers in preparatory work for the main teachers, like, they prepare reading and activity materials, set up equipment, such as switching on computers, projectors; supervise pupils in class, between classes, during lunch and recess, and on field trips. So, today, their job is multitasked and they work in unison. They cannot work in isolation from the preschool management.

Some work manuals indicate that teacher assistants help reinforce the lessons by working with individual pupils or small and sub groups of pupils, especially so in secondary schools. For example, they may help pupils master research skills by helping them find information from internet, for assignments and reports. Teacher assistants sometimes help teachers by checking simple arithmetic and spelling and homework, of little children.

Sometimes, children are lagging behind in grasping the correct phonetics and concepts and are in dire need of extra assistance, hence, teacher assistants work can with a main teacher to give the individual attention. They help with educational activities and language games. They also supervise the children at play and help with feeding and providing basic care.

Another part on the role of teacher assistants is to supervise students in classrooms, halls, cafeterias, school yards, and gymnasiums, or on field trips. Teacher assistants help to enforce administration policies and rules governing students. Their existence in schools, give teachers guaranteed time for planning, preparation and administration and helps to decrease their workload. Many researchers indicate teachers' lives have become easier with support staff in the school.

Some teacher assistants work in specific locations in the school. For example, some work in computer laboratories, teaching students how to use computers and helping them use software. Others work as recess or lunchroom attendants, supervising students during these times of the day.

Consideration for teacher assistants as assets or liabilities?

A workforce to be given status

Teacher assistants have many roles and are assigned many tasks from the time they punch in until it is time to punch out either in the afternoon or late in the evening. These helpers or paraeducators as they are sometimes referred to, seem to be an asset in a classroom or the school as a whole. Principals who are struggling with a high teacher turnover resort to getting teacher support on part time to support roles and give children stability.

"There is clear evidence that there is a positive effect on pupils' progress where teaching assistants are effectively trained to deliver specific support programs, alongside well-planned lessons". A research acknowledges. Generally the presence of teacher assistants has reduced a lot of workload on teachers. Reducing teachers working hours by creating new roles for support staff, had reduced teachers' stress levels. It has also improved discipline and raised the quality of teaching. On the other hand, there is less interaction with the teacher (Marley & Bloom, 2009).

Blatchford (2007) says that teacher assistants had an indirect effect on teaching, e.g. pupils had a more active form of interaction with the teacher and there was more individualized teacher attention. Without them, many schools would grind to a halt. In England, there are various types of teacher assistants, of varying grades, doing everything from photocopying to taking whole classes. In a longitudinal, mixed method and multi-informant design, involving questionnaires systematic observation found that the teacher assistant's role in KS2 is predominantly a direct one, in the sense of face-to-face interactions supporting certain pupils. In the same study, it was mentioned that they not only tame photocopiers and marshal paint pots, they also coax reluctant learners, calm the boisterous and tend to the academically weak. Two-thirds of teachers interviewed said they were satisfied with their teacher assistant performance, and the same proportion believed that, as a result, they are less stressed. Many teachers are extremely complimentary about the impact teacher assistants have on classroom behavior and overall classroom management. The impact of support staff has helped to have positive impact on pupils' performance in tests and assessments. Interestingly, there are indicators that teacher assistants who are trained for a specific task, such as literacy, can make a difference in the pupils' wellbeing.

Parents too play roles in being teacher assistants, success of using parents as assistants in secondary school. This is so in special needs classes. Some parents have given support in activities conducted in classes, example they sit in the canteen and sort out notes, or prepare teaching aids. They actively participate in preparing individual education plans. They do photocopying for the teachers and similar odd jobs.

Many assistants have been found to be born teachers, advocates for the child in behavior meetings, perceptive child protection representatives, or creative display presenters. We have a saying in our sports college: "There's no I in team." "There is, however, a TA." (Beddow, 2008).

Some teacher assistants have helped in organizing charity events and are able to calm pupils in traumatic situations. Sometimes pupils go to teacher assistants for assistance rather than their main teachers.

It is widely assumed that increasing the number of teaching assistants (TAs) in the classroom will be beneficial to children. But there are still significant gaps in knowledge about many.

In India, Andhra Pradesh has sanctioned creation of new 9569 School Assistants' posts including Telugu, Hindi and other subjects Kumar, (2012). Teacher assistants have reduced their clerical workload.

Even though they seem to be an asset, they also seem to be liabilities in the eyes of many. The existence of teacher assistants can cause tension in the school staff. Teachers can complain that their job is taken over by unskilled teacher assistants.

"Support staff was once a peripheral group, dispersed and isolated, interesting acid test as to the extent to which they are emerging as a body with a collective identity." said Dr. Howard Stevenson, deputy director of the Centre for Educational Research at Lincoln University. They have the clout to cause significant disruption.

Anyone can recognize the importance of teacher assistants, but some people might be sceptical and feel unhappy and threatened. Teachers would feel anxious and stressed and hence can lead to burnout. It can create insecurity and dissatisfaction among teachers in primary and secondary schools. Even though teacher assistants can reduce a lot of workload off the teachers, yet the teachers would feel that their professionalism is at stake. Too much meddling in the classroom management, could lead to complexities and uneasiness in the teachers work. This can lead to a unhealthy condition in the classroom climate.

Research by Blatchford, 2007 indicates there is no evidence that the presence of teacher assistants or any characteristic of teacher assistants had a measurable effect on pupil attainment. He argues that attention needs to be paid to what they call the pedagogical role of teacher assistants, so that they can be used effectively to help teachers and pupils, particularly in the context of the enhanced roles for teacher assistants.

In England, the Institute of Education, University of London in 2009, in a government funded five year study (Ward, 2011) found out that the pupils who had teacher assistants with them did worse off than who did not have. Pupils who received intensive help from teaching assistants made less progress than their classmates. The more attention students received from support staff, the worse their attainment in the core subjects of English, maths and science. According to the report, despite massive investment in swelling the numbers of support staff, there is still no evidence they help pupils achieve better results. Some other forms of complaints are related to their qualifications. According to some teachers, the teacher assistants do not know how to handle complex needs of children.

Unfortunately, the report contains this unforgiving line: "The more support pupils received, the less progress they made. Teacher assistants have a valuable role, but the way they have been deployed is holding pupils back. There's no substitute for a good teacher (Kelly, 2009).

Kelly (2009) continues to say that teacher assistants have a valuable role, but the way they have been deployed is holding pupils back. "It's a lot of money to pass the pencils," liberate teachers from routine clerical work and to hit numeracy and literacy targets, so has their cost. That is a lot for pencil-passing. Teachers felt that they needed more training on how to manage them.

From the research too it was found that not only did teacher assistants not help pupil attainment, in most cases they made matters worse. That is a pretty damning assessment and, at first glance, it seems counterintuitive. It becomes explicable when one looks at how teacher assistants are used. In class, teacher assistants are almost exclusively assigned to help struggling pupils. The more contact these pupils have with support staff, the less attention they receive from teachers. As most teacher assistants lack teaching or specialized qualifications, they concentrate on the pupil completing the task rather than understanding it - they provide, in the words of the authors, "alternative, rather than additional, support". It found weak pupils are being taught by weak teacher assistants. Even non-supported children fail to benefit. Their performance does not improve even as teacher assistants occupy their more challenged classmates. The support staff is not involved in pupil attainment. For those that are. Many teacher assistants have to pick up lessons on the hoof.

State of teacher assistants

According to literature, many teacher assistants or support staffs are exposed to high levels of risk that teaching assistants are exposed to high risk, violence or abuse at work. Nearly a third had encountered verbal abuse in the past 12 months, with a further 17.5 per cent the victims of violence, according to a study by Unison, the main union for school support staff in England (Marley, 2009). In an interview conducted by the study slightly more than seven per cent of those who responded said they had experienced violence so serious that they had required medical attention. 14 per cent said they knew a colleague who had needed medical attention following an assault. In total, there were 18,590 suspensions and 980 exclusions for pupils who had been violent against adults in primary, state and special schools in 2006-07.

A new perspective in teacher assistants in Malaysia

As discussed above, the perspective the researcher has on teacher assistants is that they should be working collaboratively with the main teachers to help in classroom management, including partial teaching and hence pave a way for the wellbeing of children.

DEFINITION

In most literature, teacher assistants are also called teacher aides, instructional aides, paraprofessionals, paraeducators and paraeducationists. There are many definitions given by many researchers. For the purpose of this article, a comprehensive definition propounded by the researcher, would be, teacher assistants are 'teachers' who possess some form of qualifications, of either gender, who would help in the running or the management of the classroom so that the children's 'wellbeing', i.e. their cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills are taken care effectively, so that they can proceed into Year One without any hitches.

Wellbeing of children

In the search for the meaning of wellbeing of children, the researcher found out that there are many writings on wellbeing. There is a great debate on the meaning of psychological and emotional wellbeing of children. Traditionally it refers to health issues. Positive and deficit indicators were used to measure a child's wellbeing. Currently, the measurement is focused on positive indicators in a conceptual approach that is explicitly strength-based.

Generally, emotional wellbeing is related to mental health. It refers to the achievement of expected developmental milestones and the establishment of effective coping skills secures attachments, and positive social relationships.

In this context of writing, the researcher has rewritten the meaning of wellbeing. The researcher refers to the social-emotional wellbeing of the child. The social-emotional wellbeing of child is interactive with the cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills the child acquires in the classroom and applies it in his own life in school and at home. The social – emotional wellbeing is also part of emotional intelligence of the child.

Conceptual framework for deploying teacher assistants in preschools

The social and emotional wellbeing of children is of utmost importance. From the literature reviews it can be envisaged that, teachers workload can bring about emotional wellbeing of children if teacher assistants are qualified and the class is well managed.

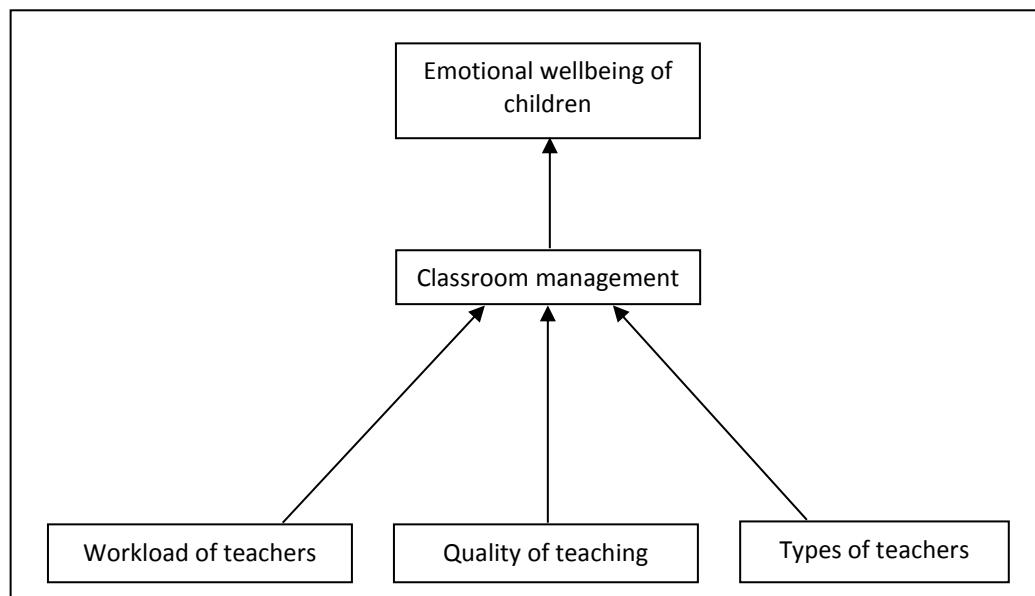


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for deploying teacher assistants to preschools

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Teaching is a combination of art and science. When the teacher is an artist, if a teacher assistant is there to 'brush up' and interpret the skills, the children's wellbeing would be further enhanced. Simultaneously, when the teacher is in a process of laying a foundation for numeracy skills, if a teacher assistant is there, the pupils will be enhanced cognitively to higher scales. Hence, the objective of this article is to form a framework of a series of study of the need for teacher assistants in preschools. Mixed methods can be employed to find the needs of teachers, principals and parents for teacher assistants in preschools. What is necessary is some of objectivity in managing the classrooms well with teacher teaching and not doing any other non-teaching jobs. There can be low and high level teaching assistants who are trained and paid reasonable wages. This would address the many problems teachers in preschools in Malaysia face.

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