A Teacher-Aide Programme in Action

Part II of 'Promoting Mental Health in School', which follows on from Part I in the December issue, is contributed by C. M. Hulbert, F. Wolstenholme and Dr. Israel Kolvin of the Human Development Unit, Newcastle University

In the December issue (Wolstenholme et al., 1976a) we have discussed the theoretical basis for introducing non-professionals into ordinary schools to work with disadvantaged or emotionally vulnerable children. In this article we shall describe the teacher-aide programme recently piloted in six schools in Newcastle upon Tyne. The teacher-aides were attached to the schools from January 1974 until July 1975. In order to determine the long term effects of the programme, pupils are being followed up until the spring of this year and these assessments will provide the basis for an evaluatory account to be presented within the next year.

Themes of the Teacher-Aide Programme
Introduction

The contributions of Cowen and his colleagues (1967; 1971; 1969) and Boxall (1973) proved invaluable in planning the Newcastle Teacher-Aide Programme, and helped us anticipate many problems.

In the Newcastle scheme we used non-professionals as teacher-aides to work in junior schools. Their essential task was to work with children who were psychologically 'at risk' as indicated by tests we listed in the September issue (Kolvin et al., 1976). Both teachers and teacher-aides were supported by the project team: a clinical psychologist (CMH) and a psychiatric social worker (FW). The aides' intervention was based on nurturing supplemented by behaviour shaping techniques.

I The nurturing component

The essence of the nurturing approach was to establish between the aide and child the type of interaction characteristic of a healthy mother-child relationship. Such an interaction involves the expression of warmth, interest and acceptance but it also includes the ability to be firm when necessary i.e. an ability to set limits.

The theoretical importance of compensatory nurturing for disadvantaged and deprived children has long been stressed. Cowen and his colleagues in Rochester, New York (1966; 1972) and Boxall in the United Kingdom have proposed that a helpful approach to the problems of disadvantaged children might be through school based compensatory nurture work in the early school years.

Boxall's work at Woodberry Down, mostly with West Indian school children, suggests that a 'nurturing' approach is a viable method for helping children to cope with, and adjust to, some of the demands of school life and the problems characteristic of multiple deprivation. Boxall suggests that such disadvantaged children cannot cope when they are suddenly catapulted into a more orderly and structured school situation. She argues that such children have not learned the personal controls necessary for behaving in a socially acceptable way and that the achievement of personal controls is inhibited by socially and psychologically disorganised home backgrounds. She bases her approach on the concept 'what a good mother does is right' and by studying the skills of mothers she attempted to define the processes by which socially important behaviours are acquired, such as the ability to wait, share, be cooperative, delay satisfaction and feel concern for others. From the results of her analysis she has tried systematically to build into her treatment programme these essential elements. Her workers start by concerning themselves more with what the child can actually achieve, (the development level reached by the child), rather than with age related expectations. Thus mother-child interactions which might be thought appropriate for younger children were important aspects of her scheme.

II The behaviour shaping component

This was a supplementary theme, in which complex behaviour is achieved through a learning sequence of small and progressive approximations to that behaviour. Boxall used this to encourage the acquisition of personal controls e.g. improving a child's tolerance in waiting for gratification as, for instance, in the sharing of food. In the Newcastle scheme our aims were similar. While a nurturing approach is essential to further the achievement of such long term aims as helping the child towards personal and social adjustment, it also aims at developing an intrinsic motivation towards learning. There are in addition the important short term goals of helping the child to adapt to the demands of the school and classroom by developing healthy relationships with peers and adults and coping better with stress. Such goals are facilitated by improving the classroom atmosphere, by increasing the frequency of acceptable behaviour and by decreasing the frequency of inappropriate behaviour.

Many educationists would challenge the long held maxim that learning is its own reward (Montessori, 1964; Hodges, 1972). However, forms of external reward are inherent in every teaching situation. Not even the simplest exchanges between teacher and child are free from the reinforcing influences of gaze, tone, and gesture (Brophy, 1972; Pines, 1967). When appropriate reinforcement is used in a systematic manner it can help achieve desired changes in social behaviour and classroom learning.

Perhaps the best accounts of the efficacy of such techniques are provided by Becker et al. (1967) and Madsen et al. (1968), who introduced experimentally controlled changes in the teacher's behaviour, which were followed by changes in the child's behaviour. The teachers implemented classroom rules, offered praise and approval of appropriate behaviour and ignored inappropriate behaviour. The researchers found that the introduction of rules did not appreciably reduce the frequency of inappropriate behaviour and that ignoring inappropriate behaviour (which teachers found unpleasant) produced inconclusive results. In contrast, praise for appropriate behaviour was the key technique for improving classroom management. Many other sources have also indicated that contingent praise is an essential part of successful classroom management (Broden et al., 1970; Dickenson, 1968; Hall et al., 1968).

Operant conditioning procedures, to complement the nurturing component, were employed by both teachers and aides, under the guidance of the project team. Such programmes were

tailored to the needs of individual children and in relation to total classroom management.

Selection of the aides

A single advertisement for aides in a local newspaper attracted 120 replies. Our experience in Newcastle is therefore in keeping with that of Cowen in the United States, namely that there are large untapped resources in the community with the potential to help children in distress.

To help us in selecting suitable staff we had available the criteria outlined by Cowen et al., (1971). They looked for applicants with warmth and an interest in people, who had successfully reared their own children. The supporting criteria were the talent, interest and time to be involved in socially useful activities, evidence of a liking of children, a flexible approach to child rearing, freedom from any emotional complaints and an appreciation and acceptance that the successful candidate would accept a secondary role in the classroom.

Our criteria, which were broadly similar, are listed below. They are not in any order of importance but indicate those characteristics we considered essential in prospective teacher-aides:

(1) Personality: adequate degrees of those therapeutic qualities identified by Truax and Carkhuff (1967), namely, warmth, empathy and genuineness. In addition we sought evidence of stability and maturity.

(2) Experience of positive family functioning: including an ability to cope successfully with the normal problems of child rearing; a flexible approach to child handling; an active interest in their own children's needs and the support and encouragement of their own family in undertaking this kind of work.

(3) Experience of positive community functioning: including indications of being the kind of person to whom others come with their problems; an ability to be discreet and respect the confidences of others; evidence of enthusiasm for, and experience of, working with children.

There were other important pointers which were taken into consideration — the applicants' ability to appreciate the day-to-day difficulties which confront school staff; their acceptance of the idea of supervision and training; working class origins in that the applicants, or their parents, were not too far removed in occupational class from the community in which they were to work. Whilst this last point is still controversial, some studies suggest that an individual who has experienced a working class environment is likely to be able to understand and deal more sympathetically and effectively with problems experienced in such environments (Grosser et al., 1969; Riessman and Popper, 1968). A fuller description of the teacher-aide characteristics will be presented elsewhere (Wolstenholme et al., in preparation).

Screening by selection panel

The selection panel consisted of the authors (a psychiatrist, a social worker and a clinical psychologist) and two educationists (the headteacher of the school to which the aide would be attached and a senior representative of the local education authority). Initial screening, on the basis of application and references, reduced the number so that we eventually interviewed for each of the seven available posts seven to ten candidates. Contrary to our expectations the decision about whom to appoint was unanimous in every case despite diverging views about selection criteria between the project team and educationists. It is important to identify those particular qualities which led to selection and these will be presented in a later paper (Wolstenholme et al., in preparation).

The role of the traditional classroom aide/auxiliary in British schools has, with the exception of NNEB trained staff, previously been perceived as mainly that of a domestic helper. The Scottish Education Department has conducted research into the duties of auxiliaries and they suggest that, apart from the domestic duties, auxiliaries could undertake additional functions (Duthie, 1970; Kennedy and Duthie, 1975).

The scheme in action

The role of the teacher-aide

By contrast, the teacher-aides in the Newcastle Project were involved more fully with the management and care of the child. Their rôle can be seen in terms of six main, and often overlapping, functions. We carefully took into consideration the aides' 'natural' way of relating to children, which we regarded as very important and which should remain, for the most part, unhindered. The functions were:

(a) to develop with the 'target' children (and sometimes with other children in the class) relationships which fulfil their assumed needs for nurturing, adopting both a maternal role and supplying the 'vital ingredients' of warmth, security and firmness;

(b) to provide the target children with an additional warm and supportive figure who, it was hoped, would constitute a model for them;

(c) to aid the teacher in helping individual children experiencing difficulties or asking for help with a task. These are essentially non-teaching duties which Duthie (1970) describes as 'supervision duties', examples being 'checking that the pupils are following their work cards in order; . . . helping pupils with minor problems in the use of material';

(d) to help the target children with their behavioural difficulties by use of behavioural shaping;

(e) to help the teacher in the domestic running of the classroom, preparation of craft and educational material, first aid, and so on. Duthie describes these as 'housekeeping duties' since 'they comprise those duties which have to do with the day-to-day running of the non-educational aspects of the school;'

(f) in addition to working under the teacher in the classroom, to spend time with the children, either individually or in small groups, outside the classroom, engaged in discussion, project work, and craftwork (and any other activity which would provide the children with additional encouragement and support).

Training the teacher-aides

Again, we were able to benefit from the Rochester experience. We had available to us the Rochester training manual, which had been prepared as a resource for their teacher-aides. We abbreviated, modified and selected from it according to our needs and added a section on behaviour modification. Like Cowen we offered this as a resource to be used as a broad guide, rather than as a 'book of rules'.

A 15-hour seminar course was also provided. The course covered such areas as:

(i) a review of the aims and methods of our programme which includes the philosophy of the preventive approach;

(ii) the employment of non-professionals in mental health work;

(iii) the school — implications of working within a school, the school structure and types of communications;
(iv) handling of disturbed children — this included an account of the broad types of problem behaviour encountered in childhood and discussion of their management and also the principles of behaviour modification. (It is important to emphasise that these management themes were broached at an introductory level, as we were wanting to promote and not inhibit the aides' own natural way of relating to and managing children);
(v) behaviour — the essential principles of observing and describing behaviour were discussed (necessary because the aides were expected to keep a diary and record events);
(vi) the contentious subject of confidentiality, emphasising that frank exchanges of information, which are often necessary in such work, should remain confidential to the helping team.

A videotape recording of adult-child interaction provided the focus for two three-hour discussions on child management, and later there were informal discussions (for about three hours) focussing on individual children with whom the aides were working. After this introductory course at the Research Department the aides were gradually introduced into the classrooms over a two-week period. A fortnight later the class teachers met as a group for two three-hour sessions to discuss similar topics but with particular emphasis on the behaviour shaping element.

By consensus of opinion the teachers elected for the aides to work for the second half of the school day only as this was a time when less formal teaching activities were undertaken.

Teacher-involvement — introducing the programme in ordinary schools

As the teacher-aide programme was part of a larger experimental preventive mental health programme, the seven classes in this part of the scheme were chosen randomly and consequently the teaching staff were not volunteers. The approach to the schools about the teacher-aide programme was initially made through the headteachers, who then introduced the idea to those teachers whom we hoped to involve. From then on the project staff met with the teachers concerned and discussed more fully the implications and functions of the aide. In the beginning anxieties were felt by all involved: for example, the possibility of the aides seeing themselves, or being seen, as able to function autonomously or of usurping the authority of the class teacher, of the children not knowing who was in charge of the class, and about educational content of the aides' tasks. Many of these anxieties were openly discussed before the scheme started in the schools. For instance, it was agreed that it would prove impossible for every task to be completely free of educational content but such content was to be kept at a minimum and entirely at the teacher's discretion.

The introduction of the aides to the classroom was staggered throughout the six experimental schools for practical reasons and during this period the introductory seminar course for teachers mentioned above was held. It was stressed, at this time, that no one could foresee all the possible problems and, as the scheme was evolving, a number of operational decisions would have to be made. Hence, a certain amount of flexibility was required of each teacher/aide pair. Liaison between project staff and each teacher/aide pair was arranged on a regular fortnightly basis, in the form of discussions on the management of individual children and emergent problems about the project in general. It was stressed that the project team was available between these times, if required, and we found that the aides consulted us more than the teachers. During the project period, teachers were asked to meet as a group at least once a term to discuss problems, and to share ideas. The project team would have liked these meetings to occur more frequently but timetabling problems prevented this.

The daily duties of the aides and how they worked obviously varied. Each aide kept a diary and we include two extracts from different diaries to indicate some aspects of their work.

Extract I

'Maureen always used to avert her eyes when I smiled at her, now she gives a quick smile back then immediately looks away. A pity she is absent from school so often as I seem to get back to square one in gaining her confidence. She comes quietly to ask if I'll hold her hand to the library on a Monday.

'She will request help for spellings, reading, etc. only after I have made the first approach to her.

'She appears to be friendly with another girl in the class; I suspect it may be that Maureen always has sweets for play time, but at least she is with someone in the playground and not on her own.

'Mrs M. (teacher) will praise Maureen for any effort shown and tells her to come and show me her good work. Once Maureen is praised for something she goes back to her desk and proceeds to continue her work but is soon back to show what else she has done. It is apparent she is delighted.'

Extract II

'Waited for children to go along to classroom, chat with children as we go. Headmaster wanted a word with the teacher. Looked after the children, talking to them until the teacher came to take them into classroom.

'Teacher gave them a lesson about Canada; I had brought Canadian coins for the children to examine. As soon as teacher had finished explaining what she wanted from the children I started to help children with their lessons, mainly in the way of helping them to find the answers themselves by talking to them and leading them to find the answers; sharpened a pencil for one child who was having trouble. Helped children with spellings and work generally. At all times helping the target children with encouragement and whichever way they needed help, i.e. spellings, finding answers, etc. Very busy period until break.

'2.45 pm. Teacher finished story she wanted children to write about. 3 pm. Took Alan along to another teacher's room to work quietly. Seemed to settle and quiet him and he worked quite well. Colin came along about 3.20 pm and both boys worked until 3.30 pm. Assembly in the hall at this time, helped all the children to get into line and marched into hall to see older children receive swimming certificates. Took children back to classrooms for them to get their coats and to see them off home. A large number of children always kiss me when they leave.'

Parental involvement

To complement the school based work, a parallel parental scheme was organised at a later stage. This had three basic aims. The first was to describe more fully the work of the teacher-aide programme to the parents of the target children. The second was to provide guidance and support to parents in coping with the problems of disadvantage and the third was to

recruit parents to attend group sessions which were organised in their local school. At group meetings, mothers were given an opportunity to discuss with teacher and teacher-aide their children's behaviour and progress. In addition, themes common to all parents were raised and discussed. As a playgroup was simultaneously organised, mothers were able to observe their children at play.

Because of the lack of sufficient project staff to visit mothers, the parent programme was severely restricted in achieving its objectives. However, all parents were visited at home at least once and 40 per cent of mothers attended at least one of the three groups' meetings. Nevertheless, this attendance was higher than is usually reported in the work with disadvantaged families (Chilman, 1973).

Some practical problems

(a) Divided authority and dual loyalties

Initially, all the project teachers expressed understandable anxieties about having an additional person in their classroom. Cowen and Zax (1969) met with similar problems and their solution was to modify the approach and remove the aides from the classroom. Cowen states 'neither children nor adults were certain who was really in charge of the class. Some teachers felt that the aide got to play the role of all-caring, all-giving mother while the teacher was forced to be the disciplinarian.' Such potential problems were discussed with the headteachers, teachers, and teacher-aides before the programme started. The project team stressed the importance of the aides' responses being consistent with those of the teachers in any particular situation.

(b) Communication problems

In the Rochester research inadequate communication led to both misunderstanding and frustration. Regular fortnightly discussions with teacher and aide, each lasting from 30 to 60 minutes, helped to keep such problems to a minimum. In keeping with our own impressions, the teachers and aides would have preferred more frequent meetings.

(c) Teacher volunteers versus teacher recruits

It is worth re-emphasising that the teachers involved were not volunteers. After an initial discussion about the programme only one teacher felt that she could not teach happily with another adult in the classroom, therefore her class was not assigned a teacher-aide.

(d) Differences in experience, attitude, style

Throughout, we have worked with 16 teachers who exemplify a cross section of age, teaching style and experience found throughout the schools. For instance, in one class a teacher was a first year probationer, in another class the school's deputy headteacher was involved. As age, experience and style have varied between the non-volunteer teachers, so have motivation, enthusiasm about the approach and sensitivity to the children's difficulties. After the initial seminars with teachers and subsequent meetings some differences were still apparent. One notable difference between teachers was the extent to which they used our guidelines of management — particularly in relation to contingent praise and ignoring inappropriate behaviour (Becker et al., 1967).

(e) Continuity of contact with aide

As the project spanned five school terms there was the possibility that the children would be dispersed when changing class and would lose continuity of contact with the aide. This was prevented by negotiating with the school for the target children to remain together and the aide with them. Thus during the duration of the study each group of children had at least two teachers but only one aide.

The other problem associated with the change of class was the difficulty for the new class teacher to establish a rapport with her class whilst the well known figure of the aide was present. We decided after discussion that the best solution was to exclude the aide from the classroom, at the teacher's discretion, during the first two weeks of the new term, and thus allow the new teacher to get to know her class.

(f) Relationship between teacher and aide

We believed that the development of a partnership between the teacher and teacher-aide needed to evolve naturally. Generally this occurred, with the pair creating their own distinct pattern of cooperation and work. On the few occasions that problems arose these were, for the most part, sorted out by the project team who ensured that they were always available for consultation. We mostly avoided the demarcation disputes which beset the Rochester research by ensuring that the defined roles and functions of the teacher-aides and any subsequent modifications of these were acceptable to the teachers.

(g) Space and timetabling problems

As we were working in schools in deprived areas, space was inevitably at a premium. This required the cooperation of staff and aides in using any available space such as corridors and medical rooms for individual work with children. In practice, the completion of the scheme depended on the goodwill of other staff whose cooperation had not originally been sought or envisaged. Other teaching staff in the school were asked through the headteacher if they would help by 'standing in' for the nurture work teacher during discussion time. Invariably the staff were extremely helpful and covered for the project teachers during the fortnightly discussions.

(h) Other children's responses

The confines of the research design made it necessary, as far as practicable, for the aide to concentrate on the target children in particular. Such restriction at first created considerable anxiety among certain teachers (which did not entirely disappear) as to the possible 'labelling' of children and consequently being stigmatised. This is always likely to be a problem when additional help is provided for some children. A survey of both teachers and aides at the end of the research revealed that three quarters of them considered that some of the other children appeared to feel 'left out' of an interesting experience.

How to improve the programme

We believe that this sort of programme could be improved if the teachers were volunteers, if they were given longer training programmes both at the beginning and during the project (which implies the use of paid supernumeraries to 'stand in' for the teacher while he or she attends discussion), and if motivation could be maintained at a steady level by the awarding of some form of recognition by the education authorities. We would like

to stress that none of these suggestions implies a radical organisational or administrative change nor would the financial costs be excessive.

Above all, we believe greater attention needs to be paid in colleges of education to the identification and handling of psychological problems of children in the classroom.

Final comment

Our initial impressions based on the attitudes of the teachers, aides and school staff are favourable both in relation to subjective impressions of change in the 'target' children and the viability of running such a project in schools (Wolstenholme et al., in preparation).

We accept that there are still many people who are of the opinion that schools should not be involved in developing mental health projects — that mental health should be the domain of existing traditional agencies. However, we believe that a preventive approach in schools constitutes a unique opportunity to reach large numbers of children experiencing difficulties. In addition, our experiences with this project lead us to believe that there are many people in the community, both lay and professional, who, allied with school personnel, can make an important contribution to prevention. Such beliefs need to be confirmed by careful evaluation.

Our evaluation will include objective assessments of the changes in the target children in educational, behavioural and emotional functioning and more subjective assessments of the acceptance and advantages of this scheme as perceived by parents and teachers. In order to ensure that any changes which occurred in the children's functioning are not transient in nature a longer term evaluation is essential and this will be undertaken in 1977. We hope to be reporting on the evaluation of our programme in 1978.

An important question is whether or not our approach could be adopted and adapted for use by schools elsewhere. We consider that the only expense that need be incurred is the salary of the teacher-aides as it is our impression that the appropriate professional expertise is already available in the health services, social services and educational services of the different areas of the country. The overlapping and unique contributions of the professionals in these services could be harnessed to organise and direct similar school based schemes. Guidelines are now widely available from work in the United States (Cowen et al., 1966 and 1969), south east England (Boxall, 1973) and now north east England.

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