



*Report by the
Education and Training
Inspectorate*



On The Making a Good Start Initiative

Inspected 1996-98

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report draws on evidence from over 400 general and focused inspections (GIs and FIs) carried out in primary schools during the period September 1996 to May 1998. In addition to the findings of these inspections, evidence was gathered from visits to a sample of 36 schools in the year following formal inspection.
- 1.2 During the inspections, members of the Education and Training Inspectorate (the Inspectorate) evaluated the contribution made to the quality of the children's educational experiences by the classroom assistants employed under the Making A Good Start (MAGS) Initiative. They considered, among other things, the ways in which the schools deployed the classroom assistants and how effective these arrangements were in ensuring that the assistants worked alongside and learned from the teachers, supported the children's learning in practical activities, and maintained a balance between involvement with the children and the preparation and organisation of materials.
- 1.3 In addition, the Inspectorate evaluated the quality of the support provided by the classroom assistants for the children's learning, in particular for their social, emotional, and language development.
- 1.4 Evidence was also gathered on the use made by the schools of the funding within the MAGS Initiative to provide additional books and equipment for year 1 classes, on the effectiveness of the vocational training given to the assistants, and on the range of the in-service training (INSET) provided by the Curriculum Advisory and Support Services (CASS) of the Education and Library Boards (the Boards).
- 1.5 A number of quantitative terms are used in the report to present the findings. These terms should be interpreted as follows:-

- almost/nearly all - more than 90%
- most - 75%-90%
- a majority - 50%-74%
- a significant minority - 30%-49%
- a minority - 10%-29%
- very few/a small number - less than 10%

BACKGROUND TO THE INITIATIVE

- 1.6 On 15 December 1994, the then Minister of Education, Michael Ancram, announced that additional resources were being made available to improve the quality of the educational provision for children in year 1. The announcement recognised the importance of the foundation laid in the early years for the child's future success in education. Every primary school was allocated funding to employ one or more classroom assistants and, in addition, extra resources were allocated to improve the quality and range of books and equipment for year 1 classes. The preparatory departments of grammar schools were not included in the MAGS Initiative. The hours of classroom assistant support and the amount of extra resources funded through the Initiative varied in proportion to the numbers of year 1 children enrolled in each school. The funding allocated to the smallest schools facilitated the employment of an assistant for ten hours per week; appointments generally commenced from September 1995.
- 1.7 Some schools, and officers from the CASS, reported that many year 1 teachers were initially apprehensive about the Initiative. Very few teachers had prior experience of working with classroom assistants and there was some confusion over the roles these assistants should play in the classroom. Although, for a variety of reasons, a very few schools did not immediately appoint assistants, the Initiative has increased the provision for some of the children in every grant-aided primary school in Northern Ireland.

2. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

- 2.1 In over 90% of the schools, the overall effectiveness of the MAGS Initiative was entirely satisfactory or better; in nearly 60% it was good or excellent. Significant weaknesses were found in a very small number of schools.
- 2.2 The deployment of the classroom assistants and the management of their duties within the schools were the most important factors in the overall success of the Initiative.
- 2.3 Effective deployment ensured that routine tasks such as the preparation of materials were balanced appropriately by the practical involvement of the assistants in supporting the children's learning; successful management of the classroom assistants' duties was typified by the good use of their skills and expertise. The most effective practice seen occurred where the assistants were also involved with the teachers in the planning of work.
- 2.4 Poor deployment often arose from the assistants working for much of their time with children in year groups other than year 1 or from their involvement mainly in supervisory activities. Further INSET is needed to help some teachers utilise more fully the skills and expertise of the classroom assistants. In a few instances the assistants lacked sufficient expertise to support the teachers effectively.
- 2.5 Improvements resulting from involvement in the MAGS Initiative included the more effective targeting of individual children's learning needs, additional support for those who were slower to learn, and the enhancement of learning through structured play. A faster rate of progress was reported in some aspects of the children's learning in particular areas of the curriculum.
- 2.6 With very few exceptions, the schools made appropriate use of the additional funding for books and equipment for year 1 classes; some did not have an explicit strategy for monitoring, or accounting for, the use of the funding.

- 2.7 Over 70% of the classroom assistants received training as part of the Initiative. In three of the Boards, over 85% of the assistants now hold appropriate National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) at level 2 or 3, or the equivalent; in the other two Boards over 60% of the assistants hold similar NVQ qualifications. Difficulties with aspects of the vocational training were experienced by a significant minority of schools and classroom assistants; these difficulties were associated mainly with the suitability of some of the NVQ course content and with the arrangements for course attendance or assessment.
- 2.8 The CASS officers of the five Boards collaborated effectively over the induction training for classroom assistants and the preparatory training given to principals and year 1 teachers. There was considerable variation, however, in the approaches taken by different Boards to the vocational training of the assistants and to providing them with further Board-based training and development opportunities.
- 2.9 The quality of the schools' management of the Initiative also varied considerably; in a minority of schools there were effective strategies for monitoring and evaluating both the effects of the Initiative on the children's learning and the use made of the funding for additional resources.

3. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE INITIATIVE

- 3.1 In evaluating the Initiative, the Inspectorate accorded the greatest importance to the contribution made by the assistants to the children's learning in terms of the quality of the work in the classrooms and to the factors which contributed to this quality; these factors included the relationships between staff and between staff and children, the skills and expertise of the assistants, the opportunities for planning with, and briefing, the assistants, and the ways in which the schools deployed the assistants. In addition, account was taken of the use made by the schools of the extra funding for books and equipment and of

the effects of the training provided for the assistants.

3.2 In over 90% of the schools, the overall effectiveness of the MAGS Initiative was entirely satisfactory or better; in nearly 60% it was good or excellent. In 1% of the schools there were significant weaknesses, generally in the quality of the assistants' work or in the use made of their skills by the schools.

THE QUALITY OF THE WORK IN THE CLASSROOMS

3.3 In nearly all the schools, the assistants interacted skilfully with the children; they were sensitive to the children's needs for support and encouragement, and contributed effectively to promoting their social skills. In most of the classrooms, the assistants made a good or excellent contribution to the quality of the children's educational experiences through working with individual children and groups during structured play, practical mathematics, and reading and writing activities. Evidence from physical education (PE), music, and art and design lessons indicated that the practical contribution of the assistants to routine tasks, for example, in helping with changing clothing, often enabled a wider range of work to be undertaken by the teachers.

3.4 In those schools where the assistants were making very effective contributions to the quality of the children's educational experiences there was evidence of the following features:-

- good relationships between the staff;
- a strong sense that the staff were working as a team;
- a clear understanding by all the staff of the objectives of the lessons;
- suitable briefing of the assistants, including a clear definition of their roles;
- high standards of teaching providing models of good practice for the assistants;

- scope for the assistants to use their initiative and expertise;

- involvement of the assistants in the planning and evaluation of the children's work.

3.5 Particular strengths in the work of the classroom assistants were noted by Inspectors; these strengths included the ability to:-

- participate sensitively in structured play activities, extending the children's language, understanding and social skills;

- read to the children in ways which promoted the children's interest and encouraged attentive listening;

- support the children's own reading and writing skills;

- foster the language of mathematics and the understanding of appropriate concepts during practical mathematical activities;

- provide sensitive and effective support for individual children who were slower to learn;

- ensure that the class teachers had the opportunity to work with specific children without interruption by the rest of the class; and

- use their musical or other skills to enrich the year 1 programme.

3.6 Weaknesses noted in the overall effectiveness of the Initiative were usually associated with:-

- poor deployment of the classroom assistants;

- a lack of clear direction from the teachers;

- insufficient involvement of the assistants in planning the work; and

- limitations in the assistants' skills and abilities.

3.7 The deployment of the classroom assistants and the management of their duties within the schools were the most important factors in the overall success of the Initiative and usually reflected the abilities of the teachers to utilise fully the skills and expertise of the assistants. Effective deployment ensured that the assistants were allocated an appropriate range of tasks and responsibilities which reflected their skills and expertise. Activities such as the preparation of materials were balanced appropriately by the practical involvement of the assistants in supporting the children's learning; the deployment made good use of the assistants' abilities, for example, to provide additional opportunities for children to listen to stories or to support the children's independence in writing. Less effective deployment often assigned too much of the assistants' time to organising and preparing materials, to merely supervising routine activities, or to working mainly with reception groups; sometimes the assistants were unsure of the objectives of lessons or their responsibilities during activities. In a very few classes the assistants were given no purposeful role during lessons and, in one or two instances, poor standards of teaching were reflected in significant weaknesses in the assistants' work.

3.8 In the small number of schools where important weaknesses were noted in the effectiveness of the Initiative, the poor deployment of the classroom assistant by the class teacher was the most common issue; however, in a few instances, the assistants lacked expertise in interacting effectively with young children or showed little initiative in supporting the work of the teachers.

3.9 Where the schools deployed their classroom assistants in work directly with the children during all of the hours allocated by the Initiative, there was little or no time available for planning with, or briefing by, the teachers. Some schools ensured that the hours worked included a period of time for planning; some paid their assistants for an extra period of time to facilitate planning. Although the larger schools found it easier to ensure that time was available for these

important activities, not all of them recognised the value of involving the assistants in this way. However, even where the time available for collaboration between the teachers and the assistants was short, or occurred on a monthly or termly basis, the schools reported benefits from these planning and review sessions. Evidence from inspections indicated that the most effective involvement of the classroom assistants in supporting the children's learning was associated with appropriate opportunities for collaboration and planning, involving all of the staff.

3.10 Improvements in the educational provision for children in year 1, and in their learning, were noted during inspections and other visits. In most of the schools, the staff were able to meet more effectively the individual needs of the children. In particular, there was time for the teacher or the assistant to provide the support needed for the less able children to gain skills and independence, or for the more able to undertake a challenging task. A few schools reported a reduction in the numbers of children with special needs, or in the severity of their needs, by the time they reached years 2 and 3. During inspections the skilled participation of the classroom assistants often contributed to the children's learning during structured play. A minority of schools identified some improvements in the standards being reached by the children in year 1, for example, in reading or practical mathematics. In one school, the teachers had to revise the assessment methods they used in order to take account of the higher standards being reached by the end of year 1; in another, more children than previously had begun to write independently when they entered year 2. Evidence from inspections identified some very effective lessons where the classroom assistants had modelled their approaches on the teachers' excellent practice, clearly contributing to the overall high quality of the children's educational experiences. In a significant minority of the schools, the teachers reported that the assistants contributed effectively to the baseline assessment of the children in year 1; this support eased considerably the additional duties related to assessment.

FUNDING FOR ADDITIONAL BOOKS AND EQUIPMENT

3.11 As part of the Initiative, all the schools employing classroom assistants received extra funding to purchase books and equipment for the year 1 classes; this funding was additional to the normal allocation for these classes. The amounts varied somewhat from year to year, but on average the annual amount received by each school was approximately £23 per pupil in year 1. Very small schools received a minimum of £280 over the three years. With very few exceptions, the schools reported that the full allocation was spent directly on improving the resources for year 1 classes; some had detailed records of the resources purchased. Where the resources were not allocated exclusively to year 1 classes, they were diverted to other year groups in key stage 1 (KS1) or elsewhere in the schools, usually to support whole-school curriculum development or in response to restrictions in the schools' budgets. Some schools did not have an explicit strategy for monitoring, or accounting for, the allocation of the funding.

3.12 All of the induction courses provided by the Boards included some advice for principals and year 1 teachers on the purchase of appropriate equipment; one Board produced a helpful leaflet of guidance for schools; in other Boards, the appropriate CASS officers generally responded positively to the few schools which sought individual advice. Where the schools were receiving INSET in structured play, the CASS officers included a consideration of how funding from the Initiative could be used most effectively to enhance the play equipment. A few schools displayed particularly good practice through carrying out a systematic audit of their provision prior to making purchasing decisions, sometimes with valuable support from a CASS officer. In most of the schools, however, advice on this aspect of the Initiative was not sought or received.

3.13 In general, the funding was used by the schools to purchase a range of appropriate resources. Equipment for structured play

and practical mathematics was often a priority and many schools enhanced the stock of books available to broaden or supplement the reading programme; in particular, large books were acquired which were used to facilitate shared reading activities. In a significant minority of schools, the funding was targeted effectively towards enhancing resources as part of planned whole-school curricular development; for example, a school which was developing investigative mathematics, had allocated the Initiative funding to games and practical equipment to support the teaching approaches in year 1. A similar proportion of schools targeted the funding towards the provision of library facilities.

3.14 All the schools regarded the additional funding for books and equipment as an important aspect of the Initiative; almost all identified specific benefits from the resources which they purchased; often they were able to redress longstanding deficiencies. Most frequently, the schools reported that the funding enabled the enrichment of the structured play programme, of the activities provided for practical mathematics, and of the breadth of the reading programme. The Inspectors found that the supply and quality of equipment and books in most of the year 1 classrooms had been improved recently through the Initiative and were satisfactory or better.

TRAINING FOR ASSISTANTS AND SCHOOLS

3.15 The Initiative placed a high priority on ensuring that the classroom assistants were suitably qualified. The Boards reached agreement on the appropriate level and types of vocational qualifications needed for assistants to be regarded as having "qualified" status; where assistants had gained relevant qualifications at a lower level, the designation of "recognised" status was also agreed.

3.16 Given the large number of posts which became available in a short time, the isolated location of some schools, and the limited hours of work some could offer,

many schools were not able to appoint qualified assistants. The allocation of funding within the Initiative included an element to pay for the necessary training and assessment of assistants. Nearly all the Boards made the holding or gaining of qualifications a requirement of appointment; they set differing standards, however, for the levels of qualification to be gained. Four of the Boards decided that classroom assistants should be trained to NVQ level 3; one Board trained the assistants to NVQ level 2, a qualification which gave assistants “recognised” status only.

3.17 Nearly all the Boards reported that a substantial proportion of the assistants appointed required NVQ training; in one Board this amounted to around 80% of the initial appointments. Some of the institutions of further education were able to meet readily the significantly increased demand for NVQ training and assessment; others were not. In some instances, the assessment procedures were slow to be established. Consequently, some assistants experienced delays in gaining their qualifications. A small percentage of assistants are still undertaking training or are awaiting assessment. To date, over 70% of the classroom assistants appointed have received vocational training as part of the Initiative. In three of the Boards, over 85% of the assistants now hold appropriate NVQs at level 2 or 3, or the equivalent; in the other two Boards over 60% of the assistants hold similar NVQ qualifications. The proportion of assistants who remain without qualifications varies from Board to Board; the Boards report that unqualified staff may be recently appointed or have yet to acquire qualifications because of absence; in addition, some staff experience difficulty in completing the courses or withdraw from training for personal reasons. In a few schools, the assistants, with the encouragement and support of the teachers, are undertaking training at a higher level, often at their own expense.

3.18 At the outset, there was unease among principals and some Board personnel over the appropriateness of the NVQ in Childcare and Education to the needs of

assistants employed for year 1 classes. Although the schools gradually gained a better understanding of the NVQ course, they reported varying levels of benefit from the training undertaken by the assistants, and continued to differ in their views of the quality and appropriateness of the course content. A majority found the training to be well organised and generally appropriate; a few reported significant benefit from the contact they had with the course assessors who visited the assistants in the schools. A significant minority, however, found that aspects of the training were irrelevant or unsuitable for assistants working in year 1 classes; a few schools reported some difficulties with the assessment arrangements which staff found to be inflexible or intrusive. A few assistants reported that the course content and its presentation did not take sufficient account of their maturity and experience. There was some evidence that the training offered in some areas was viewed more favourably by the schools and assistants than that offered in other areas. Most of the schools did not evaluate systematically the influence of the training on their assistants' work; of those which did, a majority considered that the assistants gained in confidence, in their abilities to organise and relate to children, and in their understanding of how children develop and learn.

3.19 A variety of approaches was taken by the Boards to address the concerns of the schools and the classroom assistants about aspects of the NVQ training. One Board established a Training Committee comprising school principals, year 1 teachers and classroom assistants to promote and oversee the training. This committee identified appropriate qualifications, liaised with the institutions of further education, provided information to schools, monitored the uptake of training and identified difficulties and further training needs. Another Board reported excellent co-operation from the institutions of further education, who set up co-ordinating committees and endeavoured to meet the needs of the schools. CASS officers met with staff from the institutions to discuss difficulties over the course

content, the approach taken to mature trainees, and the arrangements for assessment. There was evidence that these liaison activities resolved or eased difficulties reported by the schools and were linked to more favourable perceptions in the schools of the value of the NVQ training. There was, however, inconsistency across the Boards in the emphasis given to liaison with the training providers.

3.20 In two of the Boards, the assistants attended the institutions of further education on a day-release basis to undertake the underpinning knowledge component of the NVQ; in the other three Boards, the course attendance was arranged outside of working hours. In the Boards where the assistants had day-release, inspection evidence from some small schools highlighted the loss of the assistants' services for up to a third of the total working hours. The training of these assistants usually continued over a two-year period. In the other Board areas, the arrangements ensured that schools did not experience the disadvantage of losing the assistants' support for teaching and learning. The smaller schools often reported difficulties in attracting qualified applicants and were more disadvantaged by the day-release arrangements. A few small schools, having supported their assistants through their training and noted the benefits in increased expertise, were disappointed when these staff sought full-time posts elsewhere.

3.21 All of the Boards, through their officers with Early Years responsibilities, collaborated effectively over the planning and implementation of the induction training for the classroom assistants; the training sessions were conducted within Boards by their own personnel and were arranged at an appropriate stage of the Initiative. INSET was also provided for the principals and year 1 teachers, although there was less consistency in the content of these courses. The induction training, and the preparation of teachers and principals, were successful in providing relevant information and guidance, in allaying fears and in promoting a positive attitude to the role of the classroom assistants.

3.22 The provision of additional Board-based training for classroom assistants varied widely. One Board carried out a training needs analysis at the end of the 1995/96 year and continued to provide courses for assistants each year to meet the needs identified by the schools; recent courses involved training in child protection and in the approaches used within the Read to Succeed programme. Another Board provided some training in structured play and First Aid. In the remaining Board areas, there was no structured provision of training for assistants beyond the induction courses. Most of the schools reported a need for additional training opportunities for their assistants, particularly where the NVQ course did not focus sufficiently on the nature of the educational programme in year 1 classes.

3.23 Within individual schools, the quality of the provision made for the staff development needs of the classroom assistants varied considerably; only a very few schools planned systematically to address these needs. In small schools, where assistants often worked only two hours each day, there was limited scope for including these staff in relevant aspects of the staff development activities. A few small schools had, however, extended the assistants' hours occasionally to allow them to participate in school-based training sessions. In all the Boards, officers from the CASS encouraged the schools to include their assistants in school-based INSET for structured play and sometimes for other areas of the curriculum relevant to year 1 classes. A few large schools regularly included their assistants in development activities involving the whole staff. Examples of this good practice included the involvement of the assistants in whole-school team-building sessions and their inclusion in school-based INSET focused on child protection issues. Individual teachers often provided very appropriate development opportunities for their assistants; examples of good practice included careful preparation for the reading of stories by the assistant, with useful notes provided by the teacher to help the assistant to formulate questions and prompt discussion.

3.24 A very few schools reported that aspects of the NVQ training required the assistant to undertake activities which the teachers regarded as encroaching on their role; these aspects included the assessment of children's progress, planning PE lessons, and designing worksheets. The unease of these schools reflected a more general difficulty among teachers in determining the extent to which the assistants should be involved in activities which might be regarded as teaching. In a very few instances, teachers reported that they felt their professional role undermined. Especially where the teacher was newly qualified, a lack of experience or confidence sometimes resulted in poor deployment of the assistants and an under-use of their skills. The evidence from inspections indicated that the vast majority of teachers gained confidence in deploying the classroom assistants and extended appropriately the range of the children's learning activities in which they were involved. Additional INSET is, however, needed for some teachers to help them deploy their classroom assistants more effectively and to develop the assistants' abilities to support children's learning.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1 This report confirms that the MAGS Initiative was a significant success, making an important contribution to the children's learning and development in their first year of compulsory education. All the schools inspected regarded the Initiative very favourably. A significant minority reported that, because of the benefits they had identified, they had extended the classroom assistants' hours as part of their overall management of school budgets. The management of the Initiative by schools was, however, uneven: some schools planned effectively for the development of the assistants as full members of staff and had clear systems of accounting for the use of the additional funding for resources; other schools did not have a firm basis for monitoring the effectiveness of the assistants' deployment or for evaluating the

impact of the resources or training; a very few, despite the priorities of the Initiative, diverted the funding to other areas or deployed the assistants for significant periods with year groups other than year 1. A major factor in the success of the Initiative was the clear targeting of the funding; this focused attention on the importance of developing a sound foundation for children's education in year 1. The arrangements for the future funding of the Initiative need to ensure that this focus is maintained and that the schools are sufficiently accountable for their use of the resources.

4.2 There was good evidence that the collaborative work of the inter-Board Early Years group was effective in establishing a consistent and successful approach to the induction of assistants and the provision of information to schools. This collaboration needs to be extended to achieve greater consistency in the INSET and staff development opportunities provided for the assistants.

4.3 There are many examples in this report of the good practice established by schools and individual teachers; much of this good practice stems from a recognition of the classroom assistants' skills and expertise and from a willingness to develop these abilities fully to enhance the children's learning. Classroom assistants vary in their abilities to support learning; in the most effective year 1 classrooms, however, they are perceived as important members of staff, are involved in the planning and evaluation of activities, and are given appropriate opportunities to continue their training and development. Where year 1 teachers initially had reservations about the value of support staff, these views have, in almost every instance, changed; with few exceptions, the teachers recognise the improved learning opportunities which can be provided where their teaching skills are enhanced by the support of a qualified and competent classroom assistant.