Case Study: Teaching Assistant - Tracy

What do you do?

I'm a learning support assistant for special educational needs at a primary school on the outskirts of Loughborough. It has about 400 students, between the ages of 4 and 11.

What is your background?

I became interested in how children learn when I had my own children, so I went into school as a volunteer, to find out about what went on.

I enjoyed it so much, I decided to do some training to become a teaching assistant as a career. I've taken two qualifications and while I was training a job came up, which I got.

What characteristics do you need to be successful in your job?

You need to like children and enjoy working with them, as well as understand how they learn. Obviously, being a parent helps as you might have more strategies for understanding how children are thinking.

You need to be flexible, versatile and able to communicate with children of different ages and abilities. You also need to be able to talk to adults from different backgrounds, such as teachers, parents and so on. You need to be able to work as part of a team.

It's also important to have a sense of humour and be patient, fair and consistent.

What other jobs could you do using the skills from this job?

I could take what I've learnt about how people learn and I could work with different age groups. For instance, I could go and work with adult learners who have learning difficulties, or I could go younger and work with foundation stage children.

I could take a teaching qualification as well, if I wanted to go into teaching.

Also, because I work with children with visual impairment (that's my specialism), I could take what I've learnt and apply for a job at a college for blind people, for example.

What changes will there be in the future?

The job of the teaching assistant has changed in the last ten years. It used to be more a case of washing paint pots and making cups of tea and being on playground duty.

But since more children with special educational needs have been educated in mainstream schools, the job has become more professional and more supportive of the teacher. So, it's becoming more of a professional career, with more responsibility and opportunities for development.

What are the biggest challenges in your job?

I found it difficult when I first started the job because you are thrown in at the deep end. It's very different from what I've done before, which was office work, and there's such a lot to learn.

There is not always as much time as you would like to have with the teachers for any explanations you might need before a lesson. So, you have to be patient and get on with it, and if you've got any problems, discuss it after the teaching session you've been in.

Are there many opportunities to enter this career?
Well, I think you need basic maths and English qualifications.

But, if you've got the right personal qualities, it could be very easy to get into this profession because there are always adverts for teaching assistants. There aren't enough people taking up these sort of posts.

**What do you like about your job?**

I like the fact that I'm making a difference to the children that I help. I can see the results of where I'm helping and, if you like children, it's a great, fun job to have.

**What do you dislike about your job?**

Well, you do have bad days as well as good days!

Sometimes you might be working with a child who is in a bad mood or not responsive to learning, and sometimes it can feel like you are banging your head against a brick wall, but then it's not like that all the time.

**What are your ambitions?**

I'm happy doing this for the time being because I've got primary-aged children myself, so I don't want to do anything much more demanding at the moment. But when they get older, I might do a teaching qualification.

**What advice would you give to someone interested in your career?**

I would suggest that they ask if they could volunteer to help in a school, to see what it was like, and be willing to learn and train to take qualifications. And if they do do the job, to ask lots of questions and be quite assertive and proactive.

**A day in the life**

I work part-time Monday and Thursday afternoons, and all day Tuesday and Wednesday, so I could be:

- accompanying a child to assembly with the rest of the class
- explaining something to a child who might need extra help
- checking to make sure a child understands what he or she needs to know to complete a task
- sitting with a child and helping them copy something down from the whiteboard
- using ‘magnification’ equipment to enlarge information such as worksheets for children with visual impairment
- going around the classroom assisting children with their work
- encouraging children to work on their own
- helping to keep the classroom neat and tidy, putting things away and preparing materials and resources for the next lesson.

During the day we will also have one hour of numeracy and one hour of literacy.

During break time, I will keep an eye on the children in the playground.

After break, we might go into the IT suite, where I would sit with a child with visual impairment and check that they can use the software ok.

We might then have a PE lesson. I would normally work one-to-one with children with visual impairment, for example, using techniques to help them throw and catch a ball.