

# **Should teaching assistants have a pedagogical role?: lessons following the DISS project**

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## ***Introduction***

The continued growth in teaching assistants<sup>2</sup> (TAs) over the last decade has proceeded on the basis that positive learning outcomes flow from the ‘additional’ support that they provide to pupils. Findings from research into the role and impact of TAs challenge this assumption and demonstrate a clear need for re-evaluating the deployment of TAs in mainstream schools. To this end, the views of practitioners are useful for orientating researchers and identifying ways forward for future research and practice.

This paper does not report new research findings, but rather presents reflections on discussions with groups of education professionals in light of findings from the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project. Work with practitioners following the DISS project has been useful informing a critical standpoint, presented here, concerning the appropriate role of TAs. Two pieces of further research are prefigured, both of which have been informed by, and are underpinned by, this standpoint.

## ***Background***

The Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project was the largest study of support staff ever undertaken<sup>3</sup> (see Blatchford *et al.*, 2009). The researchers analysed the effects of TA support on 8,200 pupils, across seven year groups in England and Wales, and found that those who received the most support from TAs made less progress than similar pupils with less TA support, even after controlling for pupil factors that might confound the relationship, such as prior attainment and level of special educational need (SEN).

The longitudinal DISS study, funded by the English and Welsh Governments, was conducted following the implementation of the workforce remodelling reforms to which support staff were key. As well as the study of pupil progress, the project involved analyses of data from around 20,000 questionnaire responses from schools, teachers and support staff, and extensive classroom observations and interviews.

The findings were explained primarily in terms of the decisions made about TA deployment and role preparation, over which TAs have very little control. On the basis of evidence from the DISS study, it is clear that TAs now have a predominantly instructional role, supporting lower-attaining pupils and those with SEN. There has been a drift toward TAs becoming, in effect, the primary educators of such pupils. Teachers like this arrangement, because they can then teach the rest of the class, in the knowledge that the children in most need get more individual attention. But the more support pupils get from TAs, the less they get from teachers.

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<sup>2</sup> In line with common usage, we use the term ‘teaching assistant’ to cover equivalent classroom-based support roles, such as ‘learning support assistant’ and ‘classroom assistant’. We also include ‘higher level teaching assistants’ in this definition.

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Furthermore, TA-to-pupil interactions were found to be less effective and less educationally valuable compared with teacher-to-pupil interactions. Perhaps then it is unsurprising that the negative effects of TA support on academic progress was more marked for pupils with the highest levels of SEN (e.g. those on School Action Plus or with a statement of SEN) (see Webster *et al.*, forthcoming).

We have been careful to stress that this situation is not the fault of TAs. Instead, it is attributable to decisions made – often with the best of intentions – about them, together with inadequate training for teachers on how to work with TAs, and a lack of opportunities for them to properly brief TAs before lessons.

The DISS findings have provided the ‘wake-up call’, but there remain important problems concerning the decision-making behind TA deployment that have not been given sufficient consideration. The present default position, in which pupils get *alternative* – not additional – support by TAs, lets down the most disadvantaged children. As Michael Giangreco (2009) in the USA has argued, we would not accept a situation in which children without SEN are routinely taught by TAs instead of teachers. So, it is vital we take this issue seriously.

### ***The views of practitioners***

The views of practitioners are useful for making sense of the DISS project findings and identifying directions for further research. Therefore, within weeks of the findings entering the public domain, we convened three working groups to discuss the research and begin to explore possible ways forward for more effective TA deployment. The groups were comprised of school leaders, teachers, SENCos, trainers and local authority advisors. We wanted these professionals to consider the future of TA deployment. The suggestions that were made were much in line with the recommendations from the DISS project (Blatchford *et al.*, 2009):

- Where classes are taught in ability groups, the teacher should spend at least as much time with lowest ability group as she does with other groups
- The main focus of the teachers’ whole class teaching should be on pupils at Wave 2 (i.e. those identified as not making the expected level of progress)
- Reviews of pupil progress and TA deployment in relation to achieving progress, should be more frequent (e.g. termly) and used as a proxy measure of TA effectiveness
- Pupils should not be withdrawn from core lessons for TA-led interventions, as pupils must have the opportunity to apply their learning from these interventions in whole class contexts
- Teachers must take full responsibility for planning interventions and sharing and imparting their detailed plans to TAs. This responsibility should not be discharged to TAs
- TAs must be appropriately trained and prepared for leading intervention sessions.

Our discussions with practitioners helped us to get to grips with what underpins and what follows from specific decisions made about TAs. However, to us, many of these suggestions, whilst helpful, were only partial responses to what we feel is needed. Some of the suggestions above presuppose that TAs continue to act as the default providers of teaching to pupils with learning needs (e.g. in terms of leading interventions for literacy and numeracy).

It seemed that practitioners avoided the more difficult, but fundamental, question about TA deployment that perhaps needs to be raised explicitly and unambiguously answered in light of the DISS findings on pupils’ academic progress: *should* TAs have a pedagogical role? Our reflections on the working group discussions prompted us to consider this question and some potential responses.

### ***Getting to the heart of the matter: should TAs have a pedagogical role?***

If the answer is yes – TAs should have a pedagogical role – then we need to carefully consider what this appropriate pedagogical role should be. If we take the view that TAs should not have a pedagogical role, then we must decide what instead an appropriate role is.

Let us consider this last issue first. Given the evidence from the DISS project and other studies that have shown TAs have a limited or detrimental effect on pupil progress (see Gray *et al.*, 2007; Klassen, 2001; Reynolds & Muijs, 2003), what might we consider to be a valid alternative to the pedagogical role? Giangreco (2009) argues that any instruction delivered by TAs should be ‘supplemental, rather than primary or exclusive’, so that they are not required to make pedagogical decisions. TAs may be more effective in terms of having an indirect effect on pupil learning by helping with classroom organisation, limiting negative and off-task behaviour, and ensuring lessons run more smoothly. TAs might be better deployed to support pupils’ development of the ‘soft’ skills – confidence and motivation, dispositions toward learning, and facilitating collaborating between pupils – that many now see as important for work in school, but also beyond.

There is some evidence in the DISS project to support this view; the impact of TAs on some of these soft skills (or, as we called them, Positive Approaches to Learning), were measured in our study, and a consistently positive effect of TA support was found for pupils in Year 9. Further research is required to describe the practice that produced these outcomes, which can in turn inform TA development. Encouragingly, research on TAs’ and pupils’ perceptions of the suitable attributes suggests that TAs have the requisite dispositions one associates with nurturing soft skills: adaptability; patience; sensitivity; approachability; supportiveness; empathy; responsiveness; attentiveness; and a sense of humour (Dunne *et al.*, 2008; Fraser & Meadows, 2008).

As the DISS project showed, TAs have become the primary educators of pupils they support, and it is likely that many headteachers will continue to deploy TA in a pedagogical role. Headteachers on the working groups who deployed TAs in this way justified this decision by citing positive effects on pupil progress; but like their colleagues interviewed as part of the DISS study, evidence of TA impact is mostly impressionistic.

TA-supported pupils are often those whose learning needs necessitate professional input, so it seems unreasonable to expect TAs to produce similar learning outcomes as teachers. So, if we take the view that TAs *do* have a potentially valuable contribution to make to pupils’ academic development, and that they *can* be deployed in face-to-face pedagogical interactions, then the DISS findings make it clear that we need more clarity over just what it is expected of them and how the impact of TA support might be more appropriately measured.

The potential of TAs to directly impact pupil learning positively can be seen in several studies that collected systematic data on the impact of TAs on pupil progress in learning interventions (something that the DISS project was not designed to do). Reviews by Alborz *et al.* (2009) and Slavin *et al.* (2009) show that studies which examined the effect of TAs who have a pedagogical role delivering specific curricular interventions (mostly for literacy), tend to have a direct positive impact on pupil progress when TAs are prepared and trained, and have support and guidance from the teacher and school about practice. Such practice could position the TA as a ‘secondary’ educator: a role complementary – not an alternative – to teacher-led teaching, which is more prescribed and closely-monitored. Causton-Theoharis, Giangreco *et al.* (2007) have used the interesting analogy of TAs as sous-chefs.

The development of a pedagogical role must be grounded in good evidence derived from further research. One key consideration will be the extent to which TAs will need to become pedagogical experts in order to overcome the instinctive, but mistaken assumption that less pedagogical skill is required when teaching pupils with SEN; if anything, a higher level of skill is needed.

The DISS findings on TAs' interactions with pupils show how TAs, for the most part, operate in the moment, largely due to lack of pre-lesson preparation and, arguably, with gaps in their own subject and pedagogical knowledge. Therefore, teachers are obligated to fully brief the TAs who work in their place. Radford, Blatchford and Webster (in preparation) suggest that one relatively straightforward way in which teachers can help to improve TAs' practice is by 'sharing their own higher order skills and knowledge and helping TAs to develop questioning techniques that open up interactions with pupils and to know how to provide quality feedback'.

### ***Next steps: further research***

Over and over, headteachers and teachers have told us that their schools would struggle to function without TAs, but practitioners find it tricky to demonstrate where TA support has improved pupil outcomes. We agree with practitioners that TAs could make a huge contribution to schools, but our view is that progress can only be made if we first recognise the problems with the current widespread forms of TA deployment, and then take steps to develop and evaluate alternative ways of utilising them.

To this end, we have embarked on a project (funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation) that will begin to develop, and then evaluate, alternative school-based strategies to TA deployment and preparation. We are working in collaboration with schools to use their existing resources to develop creative solutions and capture these in a Handbook. The ideas that these schools develop will be valuable to headteachers who have recently seen Government funding for TA training cut.

One of our starting points for this new research is to engage in the fundamental rethink of the appropriate pedagogical role of TAs outlined above. The findings from this study will help policymakers and school leaders on diminished funds to seriously consider what is the 'value' that they want to derive from expenditure on TAs: improved test scores?; more confident and motivated young people?

We have also secured funding for a second piece of research (funded by the Nuffield Foundation) which will provide the most detailed description yet of the educational experiences of pupils with a Statement of SEN in mainstream schools. The teaching, instruction, support, therapies and other provisions that make up the hours attached to a Statement of SEN have never before been systematically unpacked and documented. The DISS project revealed a particularly interesting relationship between adult support and pupil need: TA interaction with pupils increased, and teacher interaction decreased, as pupil level of SEN increased. This follow-up study will be able to answer the question: 'which adults provide what inputs/provisions, and in what proportions, to pupils with a Statement of SEN in mainstream schools'?

### ***Conclusion***

Through the DISS project, the education world has, for perhaps the first time, the making of a theoretically defensible foundation and substantive evidence base, which has been largely absent from the models of TA deployment that have evolved over the last 20 years – not just in the UK, but internationally (Giangreco, 2009).

The further research projects described here, informed by reflections on valuable discussions with practitioners, aim to make a significant contribution to changing the way schools think about preparing and deploying TAs in relation to *all* children – not just those with SEN. It is a primary aim of both studies to inform and improve the way the SEN support system operates, and more broadly, to reduce long-term problems for vulnerable young people and society.

We acknowledge that schools will have to engage fully with the questions that our critical standpoint raises, which, having been made more explicit, provides a framework for practitioners to explore potential responses suited to the needs of the pupils they serve.

*Our website: [www.schoolsupportstaff.net](http://www.schoolsupportstaff.net).*

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