

A help or a hindrance?

As the role of teaching assistants continues to grow, **Rob Webster**, **Anthony Russell** and **Peter Blatchford** introduce some alarming research into the outcomes for pupils

A quarter of the school workforce in England is now made up of teaching assistants.¹ The number of TAs and their roles and responsibilities in schools have increased in line with policies and initiatives, specifically national literacy and numeracy strategies, the mainstream inclusion of pupils with special educational needs (SEN), and workforce reforms aimed at tackling teachers' workload.

TAs have become integral to enacting policy, but research to date provides only limited information on their impact² and the processes through which



this is maximised or inhibited. The Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project set out to describe and measure, in a systematic way, the deployment of TAs and their impact on teachers and teaching, pupils' learning and behaviour, and on how their impact is affected by school management and communications.

We have found a clear and worrying picture in relation to the use of TAs and its effect on pupils' academic progress. Our results from the DISS project³ have important implications for teaching, school management, and the education of pupils with SEN. We believe that how TAs are routinely deployed needs significant attention.

The five-year DISS study (2003-08) was carried out in England and Wales, and was funded by the DCSF and Welsh Assembly Government.⁴ It is the largest study of school support staff deployment conducted in the UK and, we believe, the world. In more than 150 primary and secondary schools we collected data on the progress of more than 8,000 pupils. Through a pioneering methodology, we have developed a coherent story constructed from careful integration of the various sources of data.

On the positive side, we found that TAs brought positive benefits in terms of teachers' workload, stress and job satisfaction, and their teaching, by providing individualised attention to specific pupils, allowing more teaching, and minimising disruptive or 'off-task' behaviour.

However, we also found that pupils who received the most support from TAs made less progress than similar pupils with less TA support. The result was based on careful analysis of the progress of nearly 5,000 pupils in English, mathematics and science across two cohorts and seven year groups across primary and secondary education. Space prevents us from discussing these findings in detail, but our analyses strongly suggest that the individual characteristics of TAs and pupils are unlikely to account for such systemic results. Sophisticated statistical modelling techniques controlled for possible confounding pupil variables (such as SEN, prior attainment or deprivation). Much more on these findings and our explanations for what might account for them can be found in Blatchford et al (2009).

We conclude that these negative findings are more likely to be the effect of the ways in which TAs are used in primary and secondary schools. Decisions about the use of TAs relate to how their roles are perceived, and this has been, and remains, the subject of debate within schools: given that this is where teachers' and TAs' roles meet, what is the appropriate role for assistants? Ambiguity remains about whether TAs should have only an 'indirect' role in relation to pupils' standards; for example, by taking on teachers' non-teaching tasks so that teachers can focus more on their core teaching responsibilities. Alternatively, a 'direct' role is seen as appropriate by some in helping to raise standards⁵. We now turn to findings that provide a description of how TAs are actually deployed in primary and secondary schools.

What do TAs do?

Our findings showed that TAs spent more than half their day (3.8 hours) in a capacity that 'directly' impacted pupils' learning. This is far more than any other type of support staff. Together with data from other sources, we found that assistants have a distinct pedagogical role and instructional interactions with pupils – they are teaching pupils. While teachers' interactions with pupils are weighted towards the whole class level (in 80 per cent to 90 per cent of observations they led or roved the class), secondary TAs spent a majority of their time supporting individual pupils (63 per cent of observations), and primary TAs predominantly supported groups (62 per cent).

This trend was also true for support given away from the classroom. Primary TAs worked with groups (73 per cent) and secondary TAs worked with pupils one-to-one (72 per cent). Our data shows that TAs work with individuals or groups more often than teachers do.

Which pupils are supported? We found that teachers concentrated on pupils who did not have special educational needs (55 per cent of observations), while TAs concentrated on pupils on School Action or School Action Plus or who had an SEN statement (73 per cent).

In summary, then:

- TAs interact with pupils more, and teachers interact less, as pupils show greater need for support.
- Most TA support both in, and especially out of, the classroom is for pupils with low ability or SEN, especially in secondary schools.
- Support from TAs for high- and middle-ability primary and secondary pupils was almost non-existent.

We also found that pupils with School Action Plus/SEN had far more active and more sustained interactions with TAs than they did with teachers. So we can conclude that the pupils with the most need of adult support for their learning have more and longer focused attention with TAs – and as we show below, this has a cost.

In terms of separation from teachers and the curriculum, we found that:

- Support from TAs reduces the overall amount of interaction pupils have with the teacher.
- Secondary school teachers' interaction with individual pupils is almost halved, and pupils' active interaction with the teacher (where two-way interaction is initiated and sustained) is also nearly halved.
- TA-supported pupils tend to miss out on everyday teacher-to-pupil interactions, as TAs are handed responsibility for teaching and learning tasks (in particular, literacy and numeracy interventions for which pupils are withdrawn from the class).



Our study shows that the characteristics of the teaching role in which assistants are deployed have a consequence: the neediest pupils are in most danger of becoming regularly cut off from their teachers. We conclude that TA support is alternative, not additional, to teacher input.

Furthermore, we found much differentiation in tasks for supported pupils: 61 per cent of our observations in primary schools, and 87 per cent in secondary, showed that supported pupils worked on a different task from the one the majority of the class were doing (often it was an intervention programme). So, in addition to being cut off from the teacher, the way TAs are currently deployed means that supported pupils can be separated from the coverage of mainstream curriculum topics experienced by the rest of the class, and coverage can be interrupted.

At the point of actual talk with pupils, even more detail about the pedagogical role of TAs is revealed.⁶ We found that teachers spent more time explaining concepts to pupils, providing feedback, making links to pupils' prior knowledge, and promoting pupil thinking and cognitive engagement in the tasks. TAs, conversely, sometimes gave inaccurate or confusing explanations, were more likely to prompt pupils and supply them with answers, and were more concerned with tasks being completed than pupils understanding learning points.

Support from assistants, then, clearly has negative features, which we see as a direct consequence of the demands made upon them when deployed in teaching roles. We question whether TAs are adequately prepared to take on the role, and in our final report for the DCSF we made the following recommendations to policymakers.

- Schools should examine the deployment of classroom or pupil-based support staff to ensure that they do not routinely support lower-attaining pupils and pupils with SEN.
- Pupils in most need should get more, not less, of teachers' time.
- Teachers should take responsibility for the lesson-by-lesson curriculum and pedagogical planning for all pupils in the class, including those pupils being supported by support staff.

Recommendations

But how do school leaders who have seen the DISS findings feel assistants should be used in the future? Within weeks of the findings entering the public domain, we convened three working groups to discuss our conclusions and recommendations with school leaders, teachers, SENCOs, trainers and advisors. We asked for their recommendations on the effective use of TAs.

In the light of the findings that using TAs to routinely support pupils with low ability or SEN is questionable, participants in our groups suggested that needier pupils should receive more of the teacher's attention. Where classes are taught in ability groups, teachers should spend at least as much time with lowest ability group as they do with other groups.

Also, more frequent (perhaps termly) reviews of pupils' progress and TA use in relation to achieving progress would allow teachers to adjust levels of additional support before there can be any negative effects of TA support on learning. Once a supported pupil has met their targets, the TA can be deployed to work with another pupil identified as 'falling

behind', and teachers can provide more direct one-to-one or group teaching to those who need it most.

Some participants said that pupils should not be withdrawn from core lessons to take part in TA-led literacy and numeracy interventions. This seems sensible given that pupils on these programmes must have the opportunity to apply their learning from interventions in the context of whole class learning.

To this end, it is essential that – as our participants suggested – TAs are not passed the responsibility for planning tasks for interventions. This should remain with the teacher; it is their legal duty, after all. Teachers must take full responsibility for planning interventions and sharing and imparting their detailed plans to assistants.

A couple of participants described the integrated approach to delivering interventions and boosters they operated at their schools, which involved teams of teachers, advanced skills teachers and TAs. The TA's role in this team is clearly defined to avoid placing them in positions where they have to make pedagogical decisions beyond their expertise. Further, TAs must be appropriately trained and prepared for leading intervention sessions.

In this article we have given a flavour of how the DISS project findings are currently being used as the starting point for developing effective models of TA deployment. We have presented the first fruits of our collaborations with practitioners, work that we are presently developing for publication in the near future.

Dialogue with professionals is central to this ongoing work, which is why we encourage senior leaders and teachers to share with us innovative practice that they have developed to make best use of TAs, by emailing us at the addresses below.

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Notes

1. DCSF (2009) Statistical First Release (SFR 09/2009): School workforce in England, January 2009 (provisional).
2. See, for example, Howes et al (2003), Finn et al (2000), Giangreco et al (1997) and Reynolds and Muijs (2003).
3. We would encourage readers who wish to find out more about the DISS project and findings to download our research summary from www.ioe.ac.uk/study/departments/phd/5619.html
4. The ideas in this paper come from the authors and are not necessarily in agreement with those of the DCSF or the Welsh Assembly Government.
5. Government has also proposed that support staff should have a direct impact on pupil attainment, through overtly pedagogical input (DfES 2002).
6. Much more detail on adult-pupil interactions can be found in the Strand 2 Wave 2 report (Blatchford et al 2009).



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