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Paper title

The deployment of teacher aides/assistants and their impact on students' academic progress

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Abstract

Teacher Aides/Assistants (TAs) make up almost a quarter of the school workforce in the UK, but research on their impact is limited and the results mixed. This paper reports on the largest UK study on the impact of TAs on pupil outcomes, involving nearly 8,000 pupils across seven year groups, five measures of support, and pupil attainment measured by National Curriculum levels/Key Stage tests. There was a consistent negative effect of TA support on the academic progress of pupils, even after controlling for prior attainment and special educational needs (SEN). The more support provided, the less progress made.

This paper explores this negative effect in terms of TA deployment and practice. TAs have a direct pedagogical role, interacting with pupils – principally those with SEN – who become increasingly separated from the curriculum and interaction with the teacher the more they are supported by TAs. We argue that TAs have become the primary educators of pupils with the greatest needs. This is of concern as unique data from transcripts showed that TAs' interactions with pupils tended to be concerned with task completion at the expense of teaching for understanding. The paper explores the main explanations for the effects on attainment, ways to alleviate the negative facets of TA support, and addresses implications for school and teacher effectiveness.

Presentation format

We would prefer the format of the presentation to be a paper, but would be willing to do a round table if this is not possible.

Keywords

Teacher Aides; Paraeducators; Special Educational Needs; School/Teacher Effectiveness

The deployment of teacher aides/assistants and their impact on students' academic progress

Purpose

This paper reports findings from the largest study in the UK to systematically address the deployment and impact of classroom-based support staff in everyday classrooms on pupil's learning and academic progress. In line with recent research, and common usage, we use the generic term 'Teaching Assistant' (TA) to cover similar classroom-based post titles which engage in similar activities (equivalent to 'Teacher Aide' and 'Paraeducator' in the USA; and terms like 'Learning Support Assistant' in the UK).

Background

The numbers of TAs in UK classrooms trebled between 1997 and 2009, as a result of a number of Government initiatives on curriculum, workforce remodelling and policies regarding the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools (general education). In 2009, TAs comprised 23% of the overall school workforce. It is part of a growing trend in some countries toward paraprofessionals working in different professional areas (e.g., education, health, welfare services).

Studies in the UK, USA, Finland, and Australia have called attention to the deployment of TAs and the ambiguity in their supposed benefitsⁱ. Concern about recruitment and retention of teachers meant that TAs have taken on routine tasks from teachers, but TAs are also seen to have a role in improving pupil achievementⁱⁱ. The limited research that exists on the impact of TAs shows mixed results. This means it is vitally important to establish how TAs are being deployed in schools and what effects this kind of support in everyday classrooms is having on pupils.

This paper will position findings in the context of research and theory on teaching effectiveness, and national and school policy on the deployment of TAs. The study is provocative in showing the need for updating models of teacher and school effectiveness, and classroom environments, which are now limited in relation to meeting the changed reality of schools today (at least in the UK) which involves large numbers of classroom-based support staff.

This paper reports on a large scale systematic analysis of effects of support staff on academic progress and analyses of TA deployment and practice.

Academic progress

There is little systematic research worldwide on the impact of support staff on pupils' learning and academic progress. Such evidence as exists does not show a clear trend. Reports on the views of teachers, TAs and headteachers on the perceived effects of TAs on learningⁱⁱⁱ tend to suggest positive effects. There have also been positive findings from studies of the effectiveness of specific curriculum interventions delivered by support staff^{iv}. However, other studies have found minimal or no effect^v. But a main limitation of research on pupil outcomes is the lack of high quality, rigorous studies of the impact of support staff on pupils working in everyday classroom conditions^{vi}. There is also limited systematic data on the activities of TAs and their relationships with pupils, including the amount and types of interactions. The main research questions were:

1. What are the main activities of TAs and what kinds of interactions do they have with pupils?
2. Does the level of TA support provided for pupils affect pupil attitudes to learning and academic progress?

Methods

This paper reports data from the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project. This examined the deployment and impact of support staff on pupil outcomes and teacher workloads over an important five year period (2003-08). The study covered mainstream and special schools in England and Wales and involved large scale surveys (Strand 1), followed by a multi-method and multi-informant approach (Strand 2). It was funded by the English and Welsh Governments. This paper reports results from the Main Pupil Support Survey, one component of Strand 2. A naturalistic longitudinal design was used that measured the amount of support received by pupils under typical circumstances and then examined relationships with academic and behaviour outcomes, controlling for pupil characteristics, like prior attainment and SEN status, likely to influence the relationship

Samples

There were two cohorts of pupils. Strand 2 Wave 1 took place in 2005/06 and focused on 1,158 pupils in Years 1 (n=363), 3 (n=285), 7 (n=220) and 10 (n=290) in a sample of 76 schools. Strand 2 Wave 2 took place in 2007/08 in a sample of 77 schools and involved an increased sample of pupils (n=5,672). It focused on pupils in Years 2 (n=1,036), 6 (n=1,148) and 9 (n=1,374). The study was not restricted to pupils with SEN, but covered all pupils in mainstream classes. Data on pupil characteristics controlled for included: prior (i.e., start-of-year) attainment, SEN status, gender, pupil family income (indexed by eligibility for free school meals), income deprivation, ethnic group, pupil age, and English as an additional language.

Data collection

Amount of support

In Wave 1 we collected five different measures of the level of support provided by a member of support staff (typically TAs), not by a teacher. The main measure was teacher estimates in terms of six categories: 0%, 1-10%, 11-25%, 26-50%, 51-75%, and 76%+. There were also four other measures of support staff contact with pupils taken from a systematic observation study, ranging from the presence of support staff through to individual pupil attention. For each pupil, the percentage of observations was used. At Wave 2 just the teacher estimate was used.

Academic attainment

Progress was assessed by analysing effects on end-of-year attainment controlling for start-of-year scores. For Wave 1, start-of-year attainment scores came from standardised test scores (SATs) from the previous year. End-of-year attainment scores came from teacher-rated National Curriculum levels and for Year 10 predicted GCSE grades. For Wave 2 start-of-year (baseline) scores came from optional tests and teacher assessments from the previous year, in terms of National Curriculum levels. End-of-year pupil attainment came from end-of-year SATs tests. All test results were converted into a numerical score.

Deployment and practice of TAs

There were several sources of data which can only be briefly described here^{vii}:

1. 1,500 detailed timelogs completed by support staff to show the type and extent of their various activities over a school day
2. A systematic 10-second time interval observation component, resulting in 34,420 separate data points on the nature and contexts of TA-pupil interactions^{viii}
3. Structured observations (1,502 observations) and transcripts of the interactions between teachers and pupils (5,226 utterances) and TAs and pupils (2,295) utterances in the same classrooms.

Statistical methods

The effect of support on pupil attainment was examined by five successive two-level multi-level regression models, with pupils contained within schools. The first involved no adjustments for other variables, while the last controlled for all variables. In the final model the size of the interaction between SEN status and level of support staff support was examined. Deployment and practice were analysed using a variety of statistical analyses, including innovative multi-level analyses of observation data, which modelled multiple observations within pupils.

Results

Impact of support staff on pupil attainment

Overall we found a consistent negative effect of support provided by TAs on the academic attainment of pupils in English, mathematics and science. This result still stood after having controlled for other pupil characteristics which might potentially confound the relationship. The negative relationship between support and academic progress was therefore replicated across two different cohorts (Waves 1 and 2) and seven different year groups altogether. The more support, the less progress made. There was some evidence that the effect was more marked for pupils with a higher level of SEN but the effect was still generally evident for pupils without SEN.

For the other four measures of support used at Wave 1, drawn from the systematic observations, we again found a general trend towards a negative effect of support staff contact on pupils' academic progress.

These results were unexpected, and it is important to seek to account for them. Perhaps the most obvious explanation is that they are attributable to the pupil rather than the support they receive; that is, pupils are likely to receive support *because* they are performing less well or have a particular learning or behavioural need, and it is this that explains the relationship between support and attainment. However, it is very unlikely that this explanation holds, because the pupil characteristics that are likely to be the basis for the provision of extra support, and also related to attainment, were included in the statistical analysis. We therefore examined the *independent* effect of support provided by support staff over and above these child characteristics. Overall it is worrying that this 'extra' support seems to have no beneficial effect at all.

This paper explores explanation for the effect on attainment in terms of support staff deployment and practice. In brief it was found that TAs now predominantly have a direct pedagogical role, supporting and interacting with pupils (principally, but not exclusively, those with learning needs), and this exceeds time spent assisting the teacher or the school. One consequence is that supported pupils become separated from teachers and the curriculum. Observation results showed that pupils supported by TAs had *less* interaction with teachers. Inadvertently, TAs have in effect become the primary educators for supported pupils. Data on transcripts showed that TAs interactions tended to be concerned with task completion at the expense of teaching for understanding.

Conclusions

We have developed a model of what we call the 'Wider Pedagogical Role' of pupil-based support staff which helps summarise findings from the project, and shows that the effectiveness of support staff should not be personalised or individualised just to properties of support staff because this would seriously underplay the situational and structural factors within which they work and have impact. Given the investment in support staff in the UK, the findings have important implications for national and school policy. There are also implications for knowledge and conceptualisations of classroom pedagogy. This paper will end by arguing that models of teacher and school effectiveness need to be modified to include support staff, and models of effectiveness when applied to teachers will also need to be applied to TAs. It is argued that we need imaginative and informed ways of positioning the pedagogical role of TAs relative to teachers.

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