

Research for Teachers

The impact of classroom support: new evidence

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How does classroom support affect teaching and learning?

The number of teaching assistants (TAs) in schools has increased dramatically in recent years. At the same time there has been a large increase in the number of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools, and increased numbers of pupils identified as in need of support by school staff.

In 2003 Peter Blatchford and his research team explored the way TAs were deployed at that time and the impact they had on teaching and learning. This new Research for Teachers updates the picture presented by the earlier research findings, by summarising more recent research by a team led by the same principal researcher.

Blatchford's later research provides a wide range of data including, for example, support staff characteristics, conditions of employment, training and experience, as well as an analysis of the impact of TA support in the classroom, in what amounts to the largest study yet undertaken on support staff. This summary is focused on those aspects of Blatchford's research relating most directly to teaching and learning. It includes evidence about the impact of TAs on pupil engagement and the individual attention pupils received in class, as well as pupils' academic progress over a school year.

This Research for Teachers is based mainly on The Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS)* project which covered primary, secondary and special schools in England and Wales. We have also included some data from a recent EPPI review* by Alborz et al (2009) that systematically analysed 232 studies for evidence about the impact of adult support staff on the participation and learning of pupils and on mainstream schools. This review provides additional detail about the work and impact of TAs, and the processes that support learning. Whilst Blatchford's research constitutes an analysis based on the way TAs are routinely deployed, the Alborz review provides a focus on TAs as they are used during targeted interventions.

Blatchford's recent study found that whilst the use of TAs was linked with a positive effect on pupils' engagement with their learning, there was a consistent negative relationship between the amount of TA support and pupils' academic progress. Whilst the involvement of TAs led to greater individual attention for pupils,

particularly those with SEN or in need of additional support, the researchers also found that classroom support from TAs had the unintentional consequence that the amount of teacher-pupil contact declined if a TA was present. In other words, support provided by TAs was inversely related to the amount of support from teachers.

This Research for Teachers will be helpful to school leaders involved in deploying TAs and to teachers who work with TAs in the classroom. The findings from the research could help schools focus on what to do to make the use of TAs more effective for both teachers and pupils. They also point to a need for schools to query the balance of attention, of teachers and TAs, towards those children most in need of support for their learning.

*The research reports used for this RfT were:

Blatchford, P., Bassett, P., Brown, P., Koutsoubou, M., Martin, P., Russell, A. & Webster, R. with Rubie-Davies, C. (2009) *The Impact of Support Staff in Schools. Results from the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project. Strand 2 Wave 2.* DCSF.

The authors have also developed a Wider Pedagogical Role (WPR) model to summarise and explain their findings. You'll find more information about this and their other TA related projects in the Further Reading section.

Alborz, A., Pearson, D., Farrell, P. & Howes, A. (2009) The impact of adult support staff on pupils and mainstream schools. Technical Report. In: *Research Evidence in Education Library*. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.

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Overview

Why is the issue important?

The number of teaching assistants (TAs) in schools has increased dramatically in recent years. At the same time there has been a large increase in the number of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools, and increased numbers of pupils identified as in need of support by school staff. But just how much of an impact do TAs have on teaching and learning? All those concerned with the use of TAs in the classroom will be interested to know more about the ways in which TAs interact with pupils and what teachers can do to help them become more effective.

What did the research find out?

The study found that whilst the use of TAs was linked with a positive effect on pupils' engagement with their learning there was no positive impact of TA support on pupils' attainment. Specifically the findings showed that TA support helped teaching and learning in a number of ways, including:

- providing pupils with increased individual attention
- prompting pupils' more active role in interaction with adults
- helping to increase classroom engagement of pupils, and
- helping to make classroom control easier.

Other surprising findings seem contradictory. For example, whilst the involvement of TAs led to greater individual attention for pupils, particularly those with SEN or in need of additional support, the researchers also found that classroom support had the unintentional consequence that the amount of teacher-pupil contact declined if support staff were present.

What types of support did TAs provide for teaching and learning?

The study found that TAs' activities covered the following areas:

- delivering learning interventions to improve literacy and numeracy skills
- providing in-class support for individuals or groups of pupils
- providing out-of-class support for individuals or groups of pupils
- taking over day-to-day responsibility for an individual or small group of pupils, and
- pupil assessment and marking.

How was the research designed to be trustworthy?

This was a longitudinal study with data collection occurring over a period of time. In summary data collection included:

- a number of questionnaires for teachers and support staff which provided data about support staff characteristics, conditions of employment, training and experience, and
- a multi-method approach which explored the effect of support on teachers, teaching and pupils' learning and academic progress, and to find out about school and classroom processes connected to deployment and impact.

The approach included:

- assessment test results
- systematic and structured observations and lesson transcripts
- two pupil surveys, and
- case studies.

What are the implications?

The research showed the importance of:

- TA-teacher collaborating and sharing planning
- schools and teachers helping TAs to acquire the knowledge and understanding they need to make their support of the pupils' learning more effective, and
- open-ended questioning by teachers and TAs in probing pupils' understanding and for promoting pupils' further learning.

What do the case studies illustrate?

The case studies included in the RfT show, for example, how:

- a secondary school built up and trained a team of TAs and other support staff to promote learning
- a primary school re-shaped the roles of TAs to include teaching children social and emotional learning skills (SEAL), and
- TAs were engaged on a specific targeted curriculum project to support children's literacy learning, and undertook appropriate professional development to prepare them for the intervention.

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Study

The study

The study has been divided into nine sections:

- What did earlier research tell us about the impact of classroom support and what does the later research tell us?
- What types of support did TAs provide for teaching and learning?
- How did TAs help to improve teaching?
- How did TAs interact with pupils?
- How prepared were TAs for supporting learning?
- What kind of TA support appears to make a difference to pupils' attainment?
- How was the evidence gathered?
- What are the implications?
- Gaps in the research

What is your experience?

Do you have any evidence regarding strategies for developing the curriculum in ways that are particularly effective in meeting the needs of your pupils? Do you have action research or enquiry based school strategies/experiences or programmes that are designed to explore new ways of presenting the curriculum? We would be interested to hear about examples of effective approaches, which we could perhaps feature in our case study section.

You can contact us by clicking on the 'Tell us what you think' link or emailing research@gfce.org.uk.

Earlier research

What did earlier research tell us about the impact of classroom support and what does the later research tell us?

In 2003, research into classroom support by a team led by Peter Blatchford and his team provided limited information on the deployment and impact of support staff in schools, and the processes involved in classroom support. This research was carried out before the Government's major investment in TAs and their training. Altogether it involved around 11,000 pupils from 300 schools in fifteen LAs. The researchers also surveyed around 650 teachers to find out their perceptions of the effectiveness of classroom support. In brief the earlier research study findings included the following:

- statistical analysis showed that, overall, TAs did not have a measurable impact on pupils' attainment, and
- many teachers reported they felt that TAs had a positive effect on teaching and learning processes in their classrooms.

Twenty-four case studies from the study helped explain the discrepancy between the teachers' positive views of the contribution of TAs and the lack of overall statistical evidence. Whilst some support staff were effective in the classroom and were used effectively by teachers, it was clear that this was not always the case.

The study highlighted effective practice shown by the TAs and by the teachers who supported and worked with them. Shared planning between teachers and TAs and the use teachers made of TAs' time were important, as was training and professional development.

Blatchford and team's more recent research comprised a five-year longitudinal study (2003-8) that aimed to:

- provide an accurate, systematic and representative description of the types of support staff in schools, their characteristics and deployment in schools, and how these have changed over time
- analyse the impact or effect of support staff on teachers and teaching, pupil learning and behaviour, and
- examine how impact is affected by school management and communications, and how this has changed over time.

Whilst the findings from the earlier research showed that TAs had little overall impact on pupils' attainment, the more recent study found a consistent negative relationship, continuing over time, between the amount of TA support a pupil received and the progress they made. This finding applied to English and mathematics, and later in science, even after controlling for variables such as pupil characteristics like prior attainment and SEN status. It appeared that the more TA support pupils received, the less progress they made.

The research also provided greater detail about the way TAs worked in classrooms and about the impact of TAs on teaching and learning. The researchers found that the main areas in which support staff had a positive effect included:

- increased individual attention
- pupils' more active role in interaction with adults
- increased classroom engagement of pupils, and
- easier classroom control.

The later study included close observation of classroom interactions between teachers and TAs and the pupils.

The observation data showed that the use of TAs had a significant unintended consequence - the amount of contact/interaction pupils had with teachers tended to decline when TAs were present. In particular, the pupils with most need missed out on interactions with the teacher (and also contact with the mainstream class).

Typically, SEN pupils were supported in lessons and at times in pull-out sessions by TAs, while the teacher taught the rest of the class. The researchers felt that this was a 'less than positive consequence and one that might hinder pupils' academic progress'. They recommended that schools should query the way in which children in most need get less of the teacher's attention. As teachers have a higher level of subject and pedagogic knowledge (given their level of qualifications and training), the researchers argued that those most in need should receive more rather than less of their time.

Types of TA support

What types of support did TAs provide for teaching and learning?

Teachers were responsible for class level factors over which TAs had little control such as lesson planning and delivery. The study found that TAs' activities in relation to pupils covered the following areas:

- delivering learning interventions to improve literacy and numeracy skills
- providing in-class support for individuals or groups of pupils
- providing out-of-class support for individuals or groups of pupils
- taking over day-to-day responsibility for an individual or small group of pupils, and
- pupil assessment and marking.

TAs in primary schools tended to support children in small groups, while TAs in secondary schools were more likely to support individual students. Most in-class support provided by TAs was for low attaining or SEN pupils, and this was found to be more common in secondary schools than in primary schools. Support for high and middle attaining pupils was rare in both primary and secondary schools.

TAs offered pupils a very different type of contact from the connections they had with teachers. Pupils tended to receive more individual attention and to have more active and sustained interactions with TAs. TAs responded to the needs of pupils spontaneously, providing personalised and immediate support in the shape of differentiation and scaffolding. The higher the need, the greater the level of attention pupils received. As pupils had more contact with TAs they had less interaction with teachers; in this sense TAs provided alternative, rather than additional, support.

Most of the schools involved in the study used TAs to work with pupils in whole class contexts, and to a lesser extent to run a specialist unit (e.g. inclusion centre) or lead a booster group, for which pupils were withdrawn from timetabled lessons. Many low ability/ SEN pupils were supported in at least one intervention strategy aimed at supporting them in a key area of learning. Those in secondary schools in particular were often withdrawn from non-core subjects to work on their basic literacy and numeracy skills. TAs also helped teachers provide differentiated input, for example by repeating and reframing material and instructions for pupils, as this comment showed:

'The direction becomes much more pinpointed to their needs, whereas the teacher is talking generally. So the differentiation there comes much more from me than from the teacher.' (Secondary TA)

In many cases TAs had considerable autonomy. In primary schools TAs were responsible for some pupil assessment and marking, ranging from ticking answers to simple mathematics questions in class, to assessing and reviewing pupil progress in intervention programmes.

You might like to read case study 1 which illustrates how a school planned the deployment of support staff in order to foster inclusion.

How did TAs improve teaching?

How did TAs help to improve teaching?

Findings from teacher surveys showed that teachers believed classroom support by TAs had a positive impact in terms of:

- offering specialist help (e.g. providing technology skills, counseling, or careers advice, offering advice about literacy learning of pupils who don't speak English)
- allowing more teaching by the teachers by helping with classroom management
- increasing the range of curriculum, tasks and activities offered, such as giving small groups of children one-to-one support on reading and spelling, and
- creating more teacher time for planning lessons by taking responsibility for dealing with resources and practical equipment.

Observations and case studies highlighted the positive effect of TAs on individual attention for pupils and on classroom control. Both of these were highly valued by teachers, especially those working under challenging conditions. The following were typical of many comments by teachers:

'Enables me to teach without interruption.'

'Offers teaching support to groups of students within each lesson, effectively increasing "teacher contact time" with individual students.'

TAs helped to make more time for teaching available generally. They made more time available for teachers to teach more pupils or different pupils than would otherwise be possible. Teachers felt TAs enhanced pupils' learning and achievement - they helped them achieve lesson objectives and learn at a faster pace. They believed that they were able to focus more on planning and preparation, as well as teaching, as these teacher comments suggest:

'Enables me to spend more time planning and marking instead of setting up the practicals and tidying them away.'

'More time to allocate to planning lessons and teaching in the classroom.'

TAs contributed to meeting the needs of all the pupils in the class, by ensuring that particular pupils were supported:

'I know that speaking and listening needs are being catered for these children with this extra "input".'

Many teachers also felt that the personal qualities and skills of the TAs, such as technical expertise and attitudes to their work, were important:

'I have a very competent TA who is able to use her initiative and has a good manner with the children and therefore I feel that my teaching is reinforced.'

You might like to read case study 2 which illustrates how a secondary school built up and trained a team of TAs to promote learning.

How did TAs interact with pupils?

How did TAs interact with pupils?

Classroom observation data showed that the nature of pupils' exchanges with teachers and TAs were very different. The results showed that the most frequent types of talk for both teachers and TAs were using questions and bringing pupils' attention to their tasks. However, both teachers and TAs responded similarly to pupils' responses, such as praising pupils when they gave a correct answer. Other responses included repeating pupils' responses, rephrasing questions when

responses were incorrect, or asking other pupils.

A key difference between the interactions was that teachers used prompts and open questions to encourage thinking and check understanding, but TAs often supplied pupils with answers and used closed questions. Whilst feedback to pupils from TAs was usually about task completion, teachers tended to use feedback to encourage learning. Teachers spent more time explaining concepts than TAs and TA explanations were sometimes inaccurate or confusing.

You might also like to read an earlier RfT Raising achievement through group work, which describes approaches to effective dialogue and group work.

What did pupils gain from classroom support?

School staff believed support from TAs had an indirect effect on learning by facilitating pupil engagement and ensuring on-task behavior. Specifically teachers felt that TAs affected the learning and behaviour of pupils mainly through:

- supporting particular pupils
- allowing individualisation/differentiation
- improving pupils' attitudes and motivation to work, and
- having general positive effects on learning and behaviour.

Headteachers and teachers commented that TA support helped to ensure pupils in most need were engaged in learning:

'Gives one to one support with three children on reading and spelling three times a week. Big impact on their participation and completion of tasks.'

Whilst it appeared that the more TA support pupils received, the less progress they made, individual teachers believed that TAs had a general positive effect on pupil learning and behaviour, including improvements in progress:

'I have my TA for 2 mornings and one afternoon a week. During the mornings when she works with pupils I use her to support my lower ability groups in literacy and mathematics and she has a positive support [sic] on the learning and behaviour of the group.'

Regarding what the researchers called 'Positive Approaches to Learning' (covering, for example, the extents of distractibility, motivation and disruptive behaviour) for Year 9 pupils, the study found that the more TA support these pupils received, the less distraction and disruption occurred. Their relationships with peers were better, and they were more independent and better at following instructions. However, these results were not found for pupils in other years.

You might like to read case study 3 which describes how TAs led a Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) intervention.

How prepared were TAs?

How prepared were TAs for supporting learning?

The study identified a number of key factors the researchers believed influenced the effectiveness of TA support, including:

- induction and staff training
- knowledge and training in relation to school subjects and pedagogy
- lesson planning and feedback, and
- communication with teachers.

Fewer than half the TAs involved in the study reported that they developed subject and pedagogical knowledge by undertaking formal and informal training or through pre-lesson instruction from teachers. The TAs mainly picked up important information about learning tasks, for example, from teachers' whole class input. TAs in post for several years were often thought to need less guidance from the teacher because they had their experience to draw on.

Overall the study authors found that opportunities for TAs and teachers to communicate and plan, prepare for and feed back on lessons and intervention sessions were limited. Many teachers and TAs found it difficult to make time for sharing and communication was often limited to brief exchanges during lesson changeovers or at break or lunch times. This was common among primary and secondary staff, but more so at secondary level:

'The problem is always, for teachers, it's time. They haven't got time at the end of the lesson necessarily to spend ten minutes discussing something with the LSA. And then a lot of our staff are part-time, so finding people can be a difficulty. And as we know, staff are busy at lunchtime and after school.'

A few schools gave some TAs non-contact time of their own or scheduled specific meetings to which they were invited. Few schools had timetabled slots within the school day for teachers and TAs to meet. In some cases teachers and their TAs used written communications as this comment showed:

'...I'll comment...and that's [teacher's] feedback. If we don't get the chance at the end of the day to feedback, she's got it written...It's beneficial obviously, and the more communication there is between the teacher and their support staff, I think the easier it is for the children...So I benefit from this a lot.'

Particularly effective instances occurred where teachers made a specific point of including TAs in their planning, and this was seen as necessary for TAs and pupils, rather than just beneficial.

In general, TAs in secondary schools were much less involved in lesson planning and their feedback used less, compared with those in primary schools, although there were variations within schools in the same phase. One secondary teacher commented:

'[TA will] let me know if they struggle with a particular aspect of it, so I can think, "Well, next time round, let's see if I can do it in a different way".' (Secondary teacher)

You might like to read case study 4 which describes how TAs were trained for a specific Reading Recovery intervention.

Pupil attainment

What kind of TA support appears to make a difference to pupils' attainment?

Statistical evidence in Blatchford's study found that the negative impact of much of the support of the type currently offered by TA on pupils' attainment was widespread: it appeared across different measures of support and different year groups. The researchers believed it was unlikely to be a failure to include all the relevant pupil characteristics such as prior attainment and SEN status, as they had been careful to ensure all relevant factors were controlled for. (See the DISS report in Further Reading for more discussion of why and how).

They concluded that the most likely explanation for the negative effect is the way that TAs have inadvertently become the primary educators of pupils in most need, and such pupils become separated from the teacher and the curriculum. Also important are differences between teachers and TAs in the quality of their talk to pupils. The researchers developed what they call a 'Wider Pedagogical Role' (WPR) model, to summarise results from their study concerning the 'preparedness', 'deployment' and 'practice' of TAs, and to provide likely explanations for the results on pupil progress.

It follows from this that if we have a better understanding of what makes TA support successful it might help us to uncover what might have been the reasons for the negative relationship between the type of support offered most frequently by TAs and pupil attainment found in Blatchford's research. The DISS research, which is the main focus of this summary, explored the impact of TA support as it is usually deployed in schools. The researchers suggest that a recent systematic review by Alborz et al (2009) may shed further light on the issue of TAs' negative impact on pupils' attainment. Alborz et al's review featured research on targeted interventions which involved appropriate training and guidance for TAs. Review findings which complement and take further the findings in Blatchford's research included:

- Trained and supported teaching assistants (TAs) can have a positive impact on the progress of individual or small groups of children, in the development of basic literacy skills.
- 'Sensitive' TA support can facilitate pupil engagement in learning and social activities, with the class teacher and their peers.
- Use of TA support allows teachers to engage pupils in more creative and practical activities and to spend more time working with small groups or individuals.
- 'Team' teaching styles involving TAs and work with small groups, can promote learning support as a routine activity and part of an 'inclusive' environment in which all children are supported.

Overall, the review findings suggest the key factors underlying the effectiveness of TAs are:

- appropriate training, for example, for activities undertaken within or outside the classroom to support the learning of individual or small groups of pupils in the development of basic literacy skills
- collaboration with teachers, such as the availability of allocated time for teachers and TAs to plan programmes of work together, and
- professional inclusion, by being part of the staff team, having their contribution to whole school decision-making valued, and by clear delineation of the complementary roles of teachers and TAs.

One study from the review provided the following detail:

'...The authors suggest that it was the collaboration between the teachers and assistant which was associated with each model, and not the model itself, that contributed to increases in on-task behaviour.' (EPPI review, The impact of adult support staff on pupils and mainstream schools, Technical report, p24)

The review authors commented that:

'Within the school environment, TAs are more effective if they are part of the staff team, where their contribution to whole school decision-making is valued, and where the complementary roles of teachers and TAs are more clearly delineated to the benefit of these professionals, parents and pupils alike.' (EPPI review The impact of adult support staff on pupils and mainstream schools, Technical report, p45, see Further Reading)

How was the evidence gathered?

How was the evidence gathered?

The DISS study was designed to systematically address the deployment and impact of all categories of support staff across all school sectors (primary, secondary and special). The study was not restricted to pupils with SEN or on School Action, etc, but covered all pupils who received support.

Data collection was structured around two strands.

Strand 1 provided data about support staff characteristics, conditions of employment, training and experience obtained through three biennial national surveys:

- Main School Questionnaire (MSQ)
- Support Staff Questionnaire (SSQ)
- Teacher Questionnaire (TQ)

There was a total of around 20,000 completed questionnaires. The SSQ also collected 1,600 time logs completed by support staff to show the type and extent of their various activities over a school day.

Strand 2 used a multi-method approach to explore the effect of support on teachers, teaching and pupils' learning and academic progress, and to find out about school and classroom processes connected to deployment and impact. Strand 2 data collection included:

- assessment data
- systematic and structured observations and audio transcripts of teacher and TA talk to pupils
- two waves of the Main Pupil Support Surveys (MPSS), and
- case studies.

The assessment data were collected from around 2,500 pupils in years 1, 3, 7 and 10, and around 5,000 pupils in years 2, 6 and 9 at the start and end of academic years. Altogether the pupil surveys involved 2,528 pupils across Years 1, 3, 7 and 10 in 76 schools, and 5,672 pupils across Years 2, 6 and 9 in 77 schools. The case studies were based on interviews with teachers, TAs and pupils in 65 schools, systematic and semi-structured observations, and documentary evidence.

The EPPI systematic review by Alborz et al identified 232 studies, of which 35 were selected for in-depth review.

What are the implications?

What are the implications?

Teachers may like to consider the following implications of the findings of this research:

- The research suggests that TA-teacher collaboration and shared planning helped increase the effectiveness of TA support. Within the time available can you agree a focus to discuss with your TA, such as, for example, questioning, or other teaching and learning approaches relevant to the particular lessons?
- The study suggests that teachers tend to have fewer interactions with pupils in greatest need, when TAs are present, whilst TAs appear to be more involved in doing so. Would it be helpful for your TA to work with a greater range of pupils in order to give you the opportunity to work more with SEN pupils? How far do the desired learning objectives for pupils in different situations and the level of skills available from TAs enable you to make this judgement?
- TAs involved in the study commented that they sometimes found there were few opportunities for them to acquire the knowledge and understanding they need to make their support of the pupils' learning more effective. Would it be possible for you to provide your TA with an overall view of the programme of study for a topic as well as lesson plans that you annotated in order to make the knowledge involved clear?

School leaders might like to consider the following implications:

- The researchers found that when TAs were present the amount of teaching increased but the amount of interaction between teachers and individual pupils, especially when the pupils were supported by a TA, decreased. Would it be possible to make teachers' individual engagement with pupils, particularly those most in need of support, a focus for teacher development?
- Teachers and TAs were both found to engage pupils in on-task talk but teachers were more likely to use open questions to probe pupils' understanding, whereas TAs tended to use closed questions. Could you improve this situation further by offering TAs professional development opportunities based on using questions effectively to promote pupils' learning?
- The EPPI review highlighted the advantages of collaboration between teachers and TAs. How might you help teachers to make the best use of any time you give them to plan and prepare with TAs? Could teachers and TAs undertake training together during PPA time for example?

Gaps in the research

Gaps in the research

Gaps that are uncovered in a piece of research have a useful role in making sure that future research builds cumulatively on what is known. But research also needs to inform practice, so practitioners' interpretation of the gaps and follow-up questions are crucial. We think the following kinds of studies would usefully supplement the findings of the summary:

- Explorations of the relationship between the preparedness of support staff, for example, in terms of training and allocated time to plan with teachers, and their practice, across a range of subjects including science and mathematics as well as literacy.
- Detailed analyses of the impact of support staff, based on measures other than SATs or other annual attainment tests, perhaps involving more qualitative data and/or shorter time periods that may capture information about changes in learning attainment that may not surface in annual tests.
- Case studies of teacher/TA collaboration in different subjects.
- Research which systematically develops and evaluates alternative ways of deploying and preparing TAs.
- Research which provides a much more detailed picture of the day to day support experienced by pupils with statements of SEN.

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Case studies

Case Studies

We have included four teacher case studies to illustrate key features of the findings highlighted in the main summary. The case studies show how:

- a 11 - 16 secondary school planned the deployment of support staff in order to foster inclusion
- a secondary school built up and trained a team of TAs and other support staff to promote learning
- a primary school re-shaped the roles of TAs to include, in this case, teaching children social and emotional learning skills (SEAL), and
- TAs were engaged on a specific targeted curriculum project to support children's literacy learning, and undertook appropriate professional development to prepare them for the intervention.

Case study 1: Developing support roles to improve inclusion

Case study 1: Developing support roles to improve inclusion

The Research for Teachers team chose this case study because it illustrates how a secondary school used TAs to promote inclusion in learning. Key features of this work were managing pupil discipline and supporting individual pupils and their families. The case study was based on a 11-16 school which works with pupils in very challenging circumstances and who came from the fifth most deprived urban area in this country. The exclusion rate in recent years had been high and the school identified a need to develop teaching and learning whilst supporting challenging children. The school leaders believed teaching staff could not achieve both of these core functions without help from other adults and hence placed a high priority on the development of support roles.

How did support staff help to manage pupil discipline?

Three support staff were appointed to manage the pupil discipline system. This was based on two rooms catering for:

- short-term withdrawal of pupils for up to three hours with support staff providing appropriate and differentiated work, and
- longer-term withdrawal where a small group of pupils could spend extended periods of time following normal schemes of work under the supervision of the support team.

The support staff also handled correspondence with parents and monitored pupils' discipline records.

What support was provided for pupils and their families?

The school built up a support team to reach out to the parents by helping them with parenting skills as well as advising them about supporting their child's learning. The team included three staff who provided counselling for parents and pupils. It also contained two mentors who offered one-to-one help, worked with small groups and worked with other agencies to provide appropriate support.

What impact did the project have?

The school believes that support staff have helped to enable teachers to focus more of their time on teaching. Staff have also identified a number of other benefits, such as:

- more pupils were included in learning
- pupils applied themselves better to learning
- creation of a very positive atmosphere, and
- higher staff morale.

Some support staff have achieved qualified teacher status as a result of the support and developmental opportunities provided by the school.

Key messages from the project

It was important to involve teaching staff in the discussion and development of the support staff roles and to gain their full support. Jobs were advertised with outline job descriptions and the school ran induction periods for appointed staff. The main barriers were cost and the time needed to organise and deliver the activities.

Reference

[Teachernet: Developing support roles](#)

Case study 2: Empowering TAs

Case study 2: Empowering TAs

We selected this case study to show how a secondary school built up and trained a team of TAs and other support staff to promote learning. In September 2000 only two TAs were in post and school leaders were building up the team gradually, assisted by a part-time teacher (0.4) with expertise in literacy. A key feature of the case study is the high priority given by the support team to building teamwork, planning and establishing good working relationships with teachers. The school has been careful to recruit as TAs people committed to making a difference to the lives of young people, who accepted that these young people had the right to be educated in their local school and who were committed to undertaking training to be sufficiently skilled to make their intervention effective. Once recruited, the school has nurtured its TAs through training and spending time with them. This ensured they remained positive and inclusive in their attitude.

How was the strategy planned?

The learning support coordinator, existing TAs, link governor, link member of the senior leadership team (SLT) and the manager of the learning resource centre, met fortnightly. They articulated a vision, defined purpose, clarified roles, and identified staffing and training needs. The learning support coordinator believed this process was key to arriving at a consensus and 'building up a sense of belonging to a team'.

The strategy was structured around a working agreement that was designed to avoid any reference to 'special' because the staff believed 'We should not look at pupils' difficulties in terms of some deficit within the student and instead accept that a number of young people would experience barriers to learning in some contexts during their time at the school. Our job would be to minimise these barriers'. The team decided not to attach TAs to specific students because they did not want to develop a 'support lifestyle' among the students.

Each of the six TAs initially appointed was assigned to support a specific subject area. This allowed them to become familiar with the subject content in that particular area, its assessment procedures and coursework demands. It also enabled the TA to develop working relationships with one subject team rather than with a wide variety of teachers.

What key roles did the TAs undertake to support teachers and students?

TAs were deployed to cover a variety of tasks, including:

- running homework drop-ins at lunchtime
- administering marking, and scoring of reading and spelling tests
- in-class support
- acting as readers/scribes for students with special arrangements for exams
- supporting key stage 4 students with aspects of coursework, and
- working with students whose progress may have been delayed by their peers.

The support team also established a safe place where students could be allowed 'chill-out' time that was staffed by a rotation of TAs. All students with a statement for emotional, behavioural and social difficulties (EBSO), plus some other pupils who were identified as possibly benefiting from this, had a time-out card or could be referred directly, and at any time, by a teacher.

How did the support team promote good working relationships with teachers?

Good working relationships between teachers and TAs were fostered in a number of ways, including:

- offering good induction to new TAs
- establishing which teachers wanted TA support
- being responsive to teachers' and students' needs, and
- limiting the number of teachers with whom TAs worked to allow time for relationships to develop.

These steps helped both the TAs and teachers to be clear about the role of TAs. Effective training of the TAs helped ensure that the support offered was of a good quality. The support team spent most of its breaks and lunchtimes together, and so was able to respond quickly to many day-to-day queries. Good communication was seen as the key to the success of the partnership between TA and teacher.

Further development of the support team

By October 2004, a number of teaching assistants had completed Level 1 of the foundation degree. The team discussed how it could best use the increasing skills and knowledge base of the TAs who were studying at Level 2 of the degree, as well as increasing their job satisfaction and remuneration. Retaining well-trained and well-qualified TAs became an issue.

By this time higher level teacher assistant (HLTA) status had been introduced and the college's policies and practices had been validated by Ofsted. The Local Authority (LA) had undertaken a review of its SEN provision and the college was designated as the enhanced resource for secondary students with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD). This led to an expansion in staff numbers and available premises, as well as an expectation of meeting the needs of a wider range of students.

At the time of the case study the learning support team was led, on a day-to-day basis, by two HLTAs. One HLTA supported students with moderate learning difficulties, the other supported students with sensory or physical impairment. In addition to the tasks for TAs listed above they also have responsibilities for:

- liaising with parents
- liaising with external agencies
- attending cluster and LA-wide special educational needs coordinator meetings and conferences, and
- representing the team at staff meetings.

How were the TAs trained?

The learning support coordinator believed training to be key to the development of the team. The LA

provided four-day induction courses for TAs, covering the role and context of the job, inclusion, literacy and numeracy. Plymouth University subsidised 50% of the costs for its foundation degree for TAs, provided they completed the six end-of-module assignments. When the college interviewed candidates for TA vacancies, it made a commitment to this training as part of the appointment process. Once TAs were in post the school offered guidance and study time for completing assignments.

Examples of effective support for students

The first example is of an initiative which began in the summer term of 2005, when teachers identified six boys who were disaffected, seriously underachieving and unlikely to leave with at least five passes at GCSE. These students often interfered with the learning of other students. The support team created a package for them made up of a mix of work placement, continuing to follow some of their option subjects, a GCSE photography course, and support for GCSE English and maths in two groups of three by HLTAs. This maintained their education, kept them as part of the college community, and provided teaching tailored to their needs. They received the individual attention they needed and were also supported by Connexions.

All six students maintained their attendance and left with at least five GCSE passes. All progressed to further education, work or training.

The second example arose when the lift used by students with physical disabilities was out of use for two terms during building improvements work. In order to enable students who used wheelchairs to access some specialist subjects, the school's ICT team purchased and installed cameras in history, geography and science rooms.

The cameras were equipped with sound and could zoom in and out. They were controlled by the student working with the TA. The cameras were of sufficient quality so that even teacher notes on a whiteboard could be easily read. Often, rather than the student working in isolation, they would be joined by a group of their peers.

The camera technology is now being used with ASD students who find attending mainstream lessons difficult, with students who have attendance difficulties to ease them back into learning, and with students who present challenging behaviours in certain contexts.

What were the main benefits arising from the deployment of the learning support team?

Teachers appreciated the additional support for students, the curriculum and their teaching, and often asked for extra student support. Students were also very positive about in-class support. For TAs the opportunity to undertake training linked to a higher qualification, while employed, has brought a number of adults back into education. Most of these TAs have achieved further qualifications and come to perceive themselves as successful learners.

Reference

Muriel Thomson, Director, Continuing Professional Development and Self-evaluation, Brixham College, Devon.

[Teaching expertise: Empowering teaching assistants to raise standards](#)

Case study 3: Expanding the role of TAs to deliver SEAL

Case study 3: Expanding the role of TAs to deliver SEAL

We chose this case study because it illustrates the extent to which schools have re-shaped the roles of TAs to include, in this case, teaching children social and emotional learning skills (SEAL). As the headteacher at this primary school explained, with support and guidance from teachers:

'TAs at the school are now leading and delivering a whole-school initiative to deliver the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) curriculum. In the process they are providing teachers with their PPA time.'

How was programme delivered and supported?

TAs worked with pupils in pairs. A HLTA led the sessions and assessed their effectiveness. Another highly qualified TA had responsibility for overall planning, liaising with the headteacher, leading team meetings and arranging timetables and displays. She was supported by another TA in some of these tasks.

The school supported the programme in a number of ways, including:

- integrating it with the school assemblies
- encouraging teacher input
- holding parent open evenings
- publication of a newsletter
- linking it in with the Healthy Schools project, and
- recognising pupils' success through the school reward systems.

What training was provided for the TAs?

The headteacher commented that although the TAs initially lacked confidence, this was overcome with: '... preparation, planning and support from staff'. The school provided training in areas such as:

- assessment
- behavior
- planning, and
- delivery.

The TAs were also supported by a behaviour support worker from the local authority.

What data did teachers and TAs collect?

Evidence about the impact of the scheme was collected through children's surveys, based on the Healthy Schools Well-being survey. This was administered through an online learning platform and the results were shared with all the school community.

What were the benefits of the programme for the school and pupils?

The TAs believe the work 'got through to most children and the group work focused those in more need'. They reported that they found the SEAL calming down techniques particularly useful at playtimes. The headteacher believed that the programme had contributed to a shared emotional language in the school, and had helped to foster parental support and involvement. Children had gained specific tools and skills to deal with emotional issues and behavioural problems.

The TAs involved in the programme had developed to become a flexible group with each being able to stand in for others.

Whilst teachers had lost some classroom support time they could see the 'long-term benefits in terms of improved behaviour and more confident, effective TAs.' (Headteacher)

How did TAs benefit?

TAs benefited in a number of ways, including:

- defining and developing new specific roles for TAs, such as counselling
- increased confidence, and
- raised status in the eyes of staff, children, themselves and parents.

Messages from the project

Teamwork was essential, as was support from the school. It was important to give TAs sufficient time to become familiar with the materials and to offer them time to prepare and plan. Another key point was to help TAs develop the confidence to adapt the lessons to meet the needs of the pupils. The school recognised that

hard work, professionalism and dedication of the TAs all played a part and that it was important for the school to promote this ethos.

What's next?

The school was in the process of exploring the possibilities of developing a network with TAs from another school involved in similar work. It was expected that this would involve mutual support, observations and sharing of resources via the school's online learning platform, all of which the school was planning for.

Reference

[Teachernet: Expanding the role of teaching assistants](#)

Case study 4: Every child a reader - the wider impact

Case study 4: Every child a reader - the wider impact

The Research for Teachers team included this case study as a means of showing how TAs were engaged on a specific targeted curriculum project to support children's literacy learning. It also illustrates the kind of professional development they undertook to prepare themselves for the intervention.

The case study was based on Reading Recovery (RR). The RR teachers worked directly with the hardest to teach children and used their literacy expertise to support and mentor TAs who delivered 'lighter-touch' interventions. The work took place within the Every Child a Reader (ECaR) initiative. It initially involved nine primary schools and was supported by the National Strategies Primary Consultant Team and the Institute of Education, London.

The study set out to explore if a RR teacher could have an impact on children with literacy difficulties in schools in the wider local learning community, beyond the teacher's own school. The key feature of the programme was using experienced RR teachers to train and support TAs to work one-to-one with children with literacy difficulties. The study focused on improving pupils' reading and writing and their independent learning skills.

What data were collected?

The participants in the study collected data from a number of sources, including

- pupil progress data
- test results
- observations
- pupils' work
- logs, and
- interviews.

Pupil progress data related mainly to changes in reading age. Pre- and post-test assessment tasks were used to inform teaching and measure progress. The other data concerned the effects of TA support for pupils via a one-to-one programme.

How was the project implemented?

Each trained TA worked one-to-one with at least one child for twenty minutes, at least four times each week, over a period of about ten weeks or forty-fifty lessons. Most of the TAs worked with children from Key Stage 1 (aged six to seven years) whilst a few worked with children from Key Stage 2 (aged eight to ten years). The pupils selected for the intervention were low-attaining in literacy but not as low-attaining as those who met the criteria for entry into Reading Recovery early literacy intervention.

How were the TAs trained?

12 TAs initially took part in the Professional Development (PD) programme. The training was rolled out over three years. At the end of that time, each school in the local area had the opportunity to take part in the PD. As more RR teachers in the LA were trained, more TAs were supported to deliver the intervention.

The main PD programme included:

- Year 1 - the teacher leader (PNS Consultant responsible for ECaR) delivered five days of training based on the Fischer Family Trust (FFT) Wave Three Literacy Intervention to 12 TAs. The teacher leader visited each TA in their school
- Year 2 - the teacher leader delivered five days of training to sixty TAs in five local schools and the RR teachers visited the TAs in their schools
- Year 3 - the RR teachers delivered five days of training in their local schools and visited the TAs later

In addition during Years 2 and 3 the teacher leader and RR teachers ran termly professional development for TAs who had completed the training to keep their skills up-to-date and to ensure fidelity to the project.

The PD sessions included:

- coaching and mentoring
- modelling and demonstration, and
- lesson observation.

The trainers adopted an inquiry model as opposed to an instructional one. They encouraged the TAs to believe that all children can achieve if given the right tuition. The PD sessions included time for reflection and evaluation.

TAs were consistent in what they identified as factors which contributed to effective professional development. They identified challenging their assumptions about how children learn and how they themselves learn as key to the success of the PD. The PD programme had a number of aims of which the main ones were:

- ensuring that theory and practice were linked (the five days were spread out across the term to facilitate theory-practice links)
- develop subject knowledge, pedagogical expertise and confidence
- challenging TAs' assumptions about how children learn, and
- empowering participants to enable them to tailor the intervention to meet the individual child's needs.

What was the overall impact on pupil learning?

Target pupils were reported to have made progress in both reading and writing that went beyond teachers' expectations. Class teachers and TAs reported a rise in self-esteem of all pupils who took part. All children were reported to have a more positive attitude to literacy. TAs, for example, reported:

'My class teacher has really noticed an improvement in (child's name) reading and writing. He is more able to cope with work in class now too!'

'The children I work with are much more independent in class now.'

For the year 2006-7 selected tasks based on early literacy development showed that over the course of four to five months (13 teaching weeks), children made an average book level gain of eight Reading Recovery levels (e.g. from Bookband Pink to Yellow or from Bookband Red to Blue), with similar gains in writing.

Word reading test results showed an average gain in word reading-age of 12 months over the period of the intervention which suggesting progress in word-reading at more than twice the expected rate.

A year later (2007-8) the average book level gain for pupils was ten Reading Recovery book levels (from Bookband yellow to orange) in 45 lessons.

Feedback from participants in schools suggested that data collected on children's progress were persuasive in

encouraging headteachers and governors to invest in one-to-one tuition.

How did the TAs benefit?

Comments from TAs suggested that they had benefited from the professional development in a number of ways, including:

- increased confidence: *'The PD has really given me confidence to work with children who are struggling. I have a much better idea of how to help them now!'*
- effective use of data: *'I now know how to use the running records to analyse reading behaviour and to use that analysis to inform my teaching for the next day'*
- using reflection: *'Time with colleagues talking about the lessons we observe has helped me to reflect on my lesson',* and
- understanding how literacy support works: *'I now know why I am doing the things I do!'*

What messages did the findings suggest?

The findings of the research identified a number of factors teachers and TAs believed helped to make the project successful, including when:

- senior management valued the work of the TAs, and offered them opportunities to discuss the pupils' progress with the class teacher
- the intervention involved consultation with a literacy expert
- the intervention was part of whole school provision to raise standards, so that pupils involved in the intervention also have quality class teaching to complement their learning
- measures were in place to support the TAs in delivering the intervention accurately, for example, ongoing professional development and visits by experts, and
- the impact of the intervention was continually evaluated and monitored at both school and LA level.

Reference

Janet Ferris, Every child a reader - the wider impact

- [Read the full case study](#)

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Further reading

Blatchford, P., Bassett, P., Brown, P., Koutsoubou, M., Martin, P., Russell, A. & Webster, R with Rubie-Davies, C. (2009) *The Impact of Support Staff in Schools. Results from the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project. Strand 2 Wave 2*. London: DCSF

- [Report and research brief](#)
- [DISS project: The research team's follow up work](#)

Alborz, A., Pearson, D., Farrell, P. & Howes, A. (2009) The impact of adult support staff on pupils and mainstream schools. Technical Report. In: *Research Evidence in Education Library*. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.

- [EPPI Centre: Online report](#)

Blatchford, P., Martin, C., Moriarty, V., Bassett, P. & Goldstein, H. (2002) *Pupil adult ratio differences and educational progress over reception and Key Stage 1*, Institute of Education, University of London DfES Research Report 335.

Wilson, Valerie; Schlapp, Ursula and Davidson, Julia: An 'extra pair of hands'? Managing Classroom Assistants in Scottish Primary Schools. In: *Educational Management and Administration*, Vol 31, No 2 (2003)

- [The Standards Site: Research digest](#)

Blatchford, P., Basset, P., Brown, P. & Webster, R. (2009) The effect of support staff on pupil engagement and individual attention. In: *British Education Research Journal*, 35(5), pp.661-686.

Cremin, H., Thomas, G. & Vincett, K. (2003) Learning zones: An evaluation of three models for improving learning through teacher/teaching assistant teamwork. In: *Support for Learning*, 18(4), pp.154-161.

Savage, R. & Carless, S. (2005) Learning support assistants and effective reading interventions for 'at-risk' children. In: *Educational Research*, 47(1), pp.45-61.

- [The Standards Site: Research digest](#)

Research for Teachers

[RFT summary: Raising achievement through group work](#)

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Appraisal

The Research for Teachers summary is based primarily on:

Blatchford, P., Bassett, P., Brown, P., Koutsoubou, M., Martin, P., Russell, A & Webster, R. with Rubie-Davies, C. (2009) Deployment and impact of support staff (DISS) in schools.

The summary also refers to the following complementary research:

Alborz, A., Pearson, D., Farrell, P. & Howes, A. (2009) The impact of adult support staff on pupils and mainstream schools. Technical Report. In: Research Evidence in Education Library. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.

Robustness

The DISS study (Blatchford et al 2009) set out to:

- provide an accurate, systematic and representative description of the types of support staff in school, and their characteristics and deployment in schools, and
- assess the impact of support staff on teaching and learning, and management and administration in schools.

The study covered primary, secondary and special schools in England and Wales and covered all pupils who received support.

The research was split into two main parts. Strand 1 addressed the first main aim and involved three biennial questionnaire surveys:

- the Main School Questionnaire (MSQ)
- the Support Staff Questionnaire (SSQ), and
- the Teacher Questionnaire (TQ).

Around 20, 000 questionnaires were completed altogether. In addition, 1,500 detailed time logs were completed by support staff to show the type and extent of their various activities over a school day.

Strand 2 combined quantitative and qualitative methods to find out the impact of support staff on teachers, teaching and pupils' learning and academic progress, and the classroom processes connected to deployment and impact. Data collection included:

- two pupil support surveys conducted in consecutive academic years. The surveys involved a sample of 2,528 pupils across years 1,3,7, and 10 in 76 schools followed by a sample of 5,672 pupils across years 2,6 and 9 in 77 schools
- test results from more than 8,000 pupils in 153 primary and secondary schools in England and Wales
- systematic and structured observations of interactions between teachers and pupils and between teaching assistants and pupils in the same classrooms (1,502 observations), and
- case studies focused on school processes connected to the deployment of support staff based on observations and interviews with 500 staff and pupils in 47 schools.

The study by Alborz et al (2009) was a systematic review for which the researchers searched for relevant literature, filtered it according to specified inclusion criteria, evaluated the quality of the filtered studies and data extracted them before producing an in-depth synthesis. From an initial 232 studies, 35 were selected for inclusion in the review.

Relevance

The number of teaching assistants has risen by almost 200% in the last decade, from 61,000 to 177,000. This is due to a variety of reasons including the greater freedoms concerning school budgets for heads and governors, arising out of the 1988 Education Reform Act and Local Management of Schools and the delegation of funding for Special Educational Needs (SEN), accompanied by increased provision of learning support assistants for pupils with statements of special educational needs. The research has wide significance in the context of concern with the lack of progress made by some pupils in school. Classroom based support staff may offer huge potential to help teachers and pupils, but given that it is the lower attaining pupils who are more likely to be given extra support in schools, it is vital to understand how schools can ensure the support is well organised and effective.

Applicability

The DISS research found that support staff help teachers feel more positive about their work; the assistance they give teachers and pupils leads to reduced teacher workloads and greater job satisfaction. Support staff also have a positive effect on pupils, who are more on-task when working with them and more likely to receive one-to-one help, and secondary pupils are less disruptive and distractible. As a result, teachers are able to spend more time with the rest of the class without interruptions.

But although TAs have made teachers' jobs more productive and provided invaluable personal contact for struggling pupils, there was no evidence that their support had helped pupils make better progress in English, mathematics and science in any of the seven year groups surveyed. The study also showed that pupils supported by TAs make less progress on average than those of similar ability, social class and gender who do not receive such assistance. In general, the more support they receive, the fewer gains they make.

Reasons for these findings noted by the researchers included: teachers being insufficiently trained to manage TAs and lack of allocated planning or feedback time with TAs. The research showed that less than a quarter of teachers had been trained to manage TAs, even though more than half of teachers did so and only around a quarter of the teachers had allocated planning or feedback time with TAs. The researchers also noted how the more time pupils spend with TAs, the less time they spend being taught by the teacher. As TAs are normally assigned to the pupils who require the most help (those with special educational needs or those with the lowest attainment), pupils with the most need can become separated from the teacher and the curriculum. Consequently, the researchers suggested that in order to maximize their huge potential to help, schools should rethink the way TAs are used in classrooms and prepared for the tasks they are expected to undertake.

The complementary systematic review showed that trained and supported TAs can have a positive impact on the progress of individual or small groups of children, in the development of basic literacy skills. In addition, 'sensitive' TA support can facilitate pupil engagement in learning and social activities, with the class teacher and their peers.

Writing

Though detailed and comprehensive, both reports also helpfully provide summaries of the key points and signpost the main findings through the use of subheadings etc, which helps to make them accessible to practitioners.

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