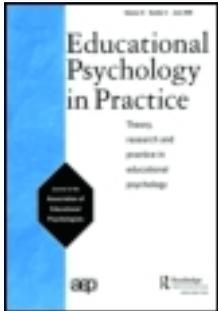


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2014 Code of Practice: how research evidence on the role and impact of teaching assistants can inform professional practice

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In this article, the author reflects on findings from research on the role and impact of teaching assistants and experience of working as a special educational needs (SEN) officer. Research evidence suggests the reliance on teaching assistants to include pupils with Statements of SEN in mainstream settings masks a collective, though unintentional, failure of educationalists to articulate and provide schools and families of children with SEN with appropriate and pedagogically sound models of inclusive provision. In light of the forthcoming reforms to the SEN system in England, key implications for educational psychologists (EPs) are drawn out, with particular reference to their role in parent liaison during the statutory assessment process.

Keywords: Code of Practice 2014; inclusion; parent liaison; statutory assessment; Statements; teaching assistants

The forthcoming reforms to the English special educational needs (SEN) system have been trailed as the most significant in 30 years (Ward & Vaughn, 2011). From September, a new Code of Practice comes into force, and the three-and-a-half year process of phasing out Statements and replacing them with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) begins in earnest (Department for Education, 2013). By now, the challenges the reforms present, such as reducing the statutory assessment process from 26 weeks to 20, will be familiar to educational psychologists (EPs) and local authority (LA) staff involved in the Statementing process.

The new Code has implications for practitioners at the school level too. It makes repeated statements about the significance of “high quality teaching” and gives a coded warning about how “special education provision ... is compromised by anything less” (Department for Education/Department of Health (DfE/DOH), 2014). It would seem that behind this message are findings from recent research on the day-to-day teaching and support for pupils with Statements. The Making a Statement (MAST) study (Webster & Blatchford, 2013, 2014), conducted over 2011/2012, described the teaching, support and interactions experienced by pupils with Statements attending mainstream primary schools. The study shadowed 48 pupils in Year 5 with Statements for moderate learning difficulties or behavioural, emotional and social difficulties.¹

Each pupil was tracked for a full school week, with systematic observations made on a minute-by-minute basis. Observations of 151 average-attaining “control” pupils were also collected to provide a point for comparison. In addition, the study

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produced detailed case studies on each of the Statemented pupils, based mainly on interviews with 195 teachers, teaching assistants² (TAs), special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) and parents/carers. Quantitative and qualitative analyses of these data (Webster & Blatchford, 2013, 2014) produced five key findings.

Firstly, it was found that pupils with Statements spent the equivalent of just over a day a week away from the classroom, and that their educational experiences were strongly characterised by the almost constant presence of a TA. Compared to average-attaining pupils, those with Statements spent less time in lessons with teachers and peers, and were more than three times more likely to interact with TAs than teachers. This predominantly one-to-one interaction with TAs was often at the expense of interactions not only with teachers, but also peers. Pupils with Statements had almost half as many interactions with their classmates compared with other pupils.

The second main finding was that TAs were found to have the main responsibility for teaching Statemented pupils. Many TAs planned and delivered alternative programmes and interventions. Almost all TAs had a high level of responsibility for moment-by-moment pedagogical decision-making, explaining and modifying tasks set at a more general level by the teacher. Teachers rarely had as high a level of involvement with these pupils. The third finding was that compared to average-attaining pupils, those with Statements received a lower quality pedagogical diet. Support provided by TAs was clearly well intentioned, but it eclipsed focussed input from teachers.

The fourth finding revealed how teachers' confidence to teach pupils with SEN was a precipitating factor in the model of provision described above. Teachers positioned TAs as the "expert on the child and their SEN", despite TAs often having similar weaknesses in their knowledge and training. Finally, the study found little evidence of an effective and theoretically-grounded pedagogy for Statemented pupils and SEN broadly. For pupils with Statements, the common practice of specifying a set number of hours of TA support tended to get in the way of thinking through appropriate approaches for pupils with learning difficulties.

These findings raise questions about the appropriateness of these arrangements for pupils with SEN, and in particular, signal a clear need to address the "Statement = hours = TA = one-to-one support = pupil's needs met" equation that seems to underpin and sustain practice in many mainstream settings. Furthermore, when put together with results from the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project (Blatchford, Russell, & Webster, 2012), the assumption that more TA support for pupils who struggle will help them to progress academically is exposed as a something of a fallacy.

The DISS project found that pupils receiving the most TA support made less progress than similar pupils who received little or no TA support, even after controlling for factors such as prior attainment and SEN status. This relationship was found consistently in seven year groups across English, mathematics and science, in a sample of 8200 pupils in 153 mainstream primary and secondary schools. Moreover, evidence was found that the effect of TA support on pupils' academic progress was more marked for pupils with Statements (Webster et al., 2010). Put simply, the effects of TA support are compounded for pupils with high-level SEN. For these pupils, TA support is a near-permanent fixture in their school life, largely because having a Statement enforces it.

Ask parents of a child with high-level SEN what they want to achieve from the statutory assessment process and, if they have a mainstream school in mind, the answer will most likely entail one-to-one support from a TA. In the experience of the author, as an SEN officer responsible for overseeing statutory assessment, annual reviews and school placements, the majority of parents perceive TA hours as a desired outcome, and they tend to want a significant amount: 20 hours a week minimum. Following changes to schools' SEN funding formula, some head teachers will, not unreasonably, support this: more hours means more funding. Moreover, a greater number of hours mean schools and parents feel more confident about being able to successfully include the child in a mainstream setting. In this sense, organisational arrangements are emphasised over pedagogical processes.

This attitude is entirely understandable for one other reason: families are offered little by way of an alternative. The practice of TA-led provision has been encouraged and sustained, sometimes out of convenience or for fear of upsetting the *status quo*. Professionals in education have apparently created a self-supporting logic rule that states a high amount of TA support is a prerequisite for inclusion, and the view that "TA hours" are the accepted currency of Statements. Little consideration appears to have been given to the consequences for the child of near-constant TA support. But now, the unintended negative effects of this dominant model of support for pupils with Statements in mainstream schools have been revealed by the DISS and MAST studies, and by others; notably Michael Giangreco and colleagues in the United States (see Giangreco, Yuan, McKenzie, Cameron, & Fialka, 2005).

Although it is not possible to prove to what extent, if any, such evidence has fed into the drafting of the new Code of Practice, the role of TAs does appear to have been played down somewhat. The 253-page document contains fewer than a dozen references to TAs, classroom assistants and learning support staff. As noted, the emphasis is on reinforcing teachers' responsibility and accountability for "the progress and development of the pupils in their class, including where pupils access support from teaching assistants or specialist staff" (DfE/DOH, 2014, p. 86, emphasis added). Research suggests this ought to be the case especially where pupils receive TA support.

In this sense, the draft Code is encouraging; it should prompt school leaders and teachers to think more inclusively about pupils with SEN, ensure their learning needs are not met principally by TAs, and to address the separation that characterises their day-to-day experiences. The key challenge facing those at the LA-level, however, is how to counter the likely resistance from parents concerned that with up to 30 other children in the class, near full-time TA support is the most pragmatic arrangement for their child, the teacher and the class. Addressing this misperception is necessarily about managing expectations early in the assessment process.

One ought to consider the wider context here, as it puts this challenge into perspective. Some online resources aimed at helping parents through the statutory assessment process portray LAs as predestined to deny families the provision they want, or hope they give up along the way (<http://www.specialneedsjungle.com/get-prepared>). The assessment process is too often referred to as a battle of David versus Goliath proportions (<http://senminefield.blog.com/2013/07/19/where-to-start>). The names of some of these websites and blogs are revealing. "Jungle" and "minefield" suggest the authors had less than satisfactory or straightforward experiences of formal assessment. One possible reason for the preponderance of such websites is due

to a form of negativity bias: the tendency to share one's negative experiences (on and offline) rather than experiences that simply met one's expectations.

Other websites, such as the Independent Parental Special Educational Advice's site (<http://www.ipsea.org.uk>), offer more measured guidance. Yet, one is left with the impression that even this advice seems to bypass the reality that LAs do not agree every request they receive for statutory assessment. Parents new to the SEN process instinctively turn to the internet for support and advice. So it is perhaps inevitable that by the time EPs and, in particular the LA staff who oversee and moderate requests for assessment get involved, the battle lines have been drawn in parents' minds. They are reluctant to consider alternatives to a Statement once they are convinced their child has an inalienable right to one, and with it, precious one-to-one TA support. Redress via tribunal also casts a long shadow over what ought to be a collaborative and consultative process between families and professionals.

In the debates about the draft Code and the responses to the Department for Education's consultation, we have seen stakeholders and critics give attention to structures, definitions and aspects of case law. All of this is important, but the case against the Statement-sanctioned, "Velcro TA" model of SEN provision, as the flip-side of the case for greater teacher involvement, has got lost.

With regard to the educational aspects of EHCPs, the research evidence suggests that parents and schools ought to be more concerned with the quality of support for pupils with learning difficulties (in terms of who provides pedagogical input and how) than with the quantity of support (for example, lots of TA hours). Being among the first professionals with whom parents engage, EPs have a critical role to play in not only managing expectations prior to and during the statutory assessment process, but also in making recommendations in their evidence (Appendix D) that, where appropriate, steer away from TA-led provision towards more inclusive, teacher-led practices. The emphasis the Code places on EHCPs to define outcomes in terms of learning and developmental milestones can be helpful in this aim. EPs might debate the evidence with parents and encourage them to consider and articulate meaningful outcomes and indicators, such as the progression to independent working or the ability to tolerate uncertainty and failure when presented with learning challenges. For this approach to be effective, EPs and SEN officers responsible for writing EHCPs need to work in partnership.

EPs can also use the Code to remind school leaders that it is for them, "as part of their normal budget planning, to determine their approach to using their resources to support the progress of pupils with SEN" (DFE/DOH, 2014, p. 96). Leaving aside how parent-controlled budgets might affect arrangements, the message is that resources need not automatically be spent on TAs to work directly with pupils with Statements. "It is for the school to provide high quality appropriate [SEN] support from the whole of its budget" (DFE/DOH, 2014, p. 96). Elsewhere, it has been argued there is a clear need for fundamentally rethinking the role of TAs in line with this aim: for example, rotating groups to allow teachers to spend more time with pupils with SEN, whilst the TA monitors the rest of the class; ensuring TAs and teachers have more time to communicate and more professional development, especially in relation to working with pupils with SEN (Russell, Webster, & Blatchford, 2013). Furthermore, there is a strong case for developing more effective ways in which TAs interact with pupils, such as developing effective styles of questioning in support of independent learning (Radford, Bosanquet, Webster, Blatchford, & Rubie-Davies, 2013).

Another group of practitioners with a role to play in early parent liaison are the 1800 independent supporters from voluntary, community and private organisations who will, from September 2014, assist parents through the SEN process. The training for these “champions” must reflect the warning, provided by the evidence, of what can happen if the “business as usual” model of SEN provision persists. EPs could consider contributing to champions’ training locally.

The evidence is clear about the direction in which practice ought to be headed. Uppermost in the minds of EPs and other professionals with a frontline role liaising with parents should be avoiding at all costs satisfying demands for simplistic and easily auditable quantifications of support, which have relatively little pedagogical value, and ensuring schools put a clear and emphatic focus of meeting the needs of pupils with SEN through high quality teacher-led teaching.

Statutory assessment is a rigorous and evidence-based process. The new SEN reforms make it incumbent on all educationalists to approach SEN provision in the same manner.

Notes

1. The Nuffield Foundation, which funded the Making a Statement study, has agreed to fund a replication study in which the MAST cohort will be tracked when they reach Year 9. Data collection will take place over 2015/2016.
2. In line with common usage, the term “teaching assistant” is used to cover equivalent classroom- or pupil-based roles, such as “learning support assistant”, “classroom assistant” and “special needs assistant”. “Higher level teaching assistant” is also included in this definition.

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