Rethinking
the TA role

Are schools getting the best use out of their teaching assistants? Rob Webster and Peter Blatchford urge school leaders to look more closely at the way they prepare and deploy these vital support staff

Teaching assistants (TAs) are an integral part of classroom life. We have seen the number of TAs increase significantly over the last 15 or so years. Government figures on the school workforce show that for every three teachers, there are two TAs working in mainstream primary and secondary schools (in terms of full-time equivalent personnel).

What is more, the role that TAs perform in schools has grown too. This was shown in results from our Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project at the Institute of Education, which found that TAs have a direct instructional role, very often working with lower attaining pupils and those with SEN.

The general sense is that using TAs to provide one-to-one and small group support to struggling pupils works well,

and an Ofsted survey from September last year found that schools are seeking to extend this through the pupil premium.

However, other troubling findings from the DISS project found that the amount of TA support pupils receive has a negative effect on their academic progress. We measured the progress of 8,200 pupils in seven year groups, in English, maths and science, and found that those who received the most support from TAs made less progress over the year compared with similar pupils who received little or no TA support.

An intuitive explanation for this finding might be that TAs support pupils who find learning difficult anyway, so surely this was to be expected? However, we controlled for the key factors – like SEN, prior attainment and eligibility for free

school meals – that are known to be factors in pupil attainment.

Our analyses of many hours of classroom observations and interviews with school staff revealed an interconnected set of circumstances, which offers a compelling alternative explanation.

We cannot go any further, however, without making one point absolutely clear: the results we found in the DISS project are not the fault of TAs. To attribute the negative impact that their support has on pupils to them misses the crucial organisational and structural factors within which TAs work, but have little control over. In other words, it is not decisions made by the TAs, but decisions made by school leaders and teachers about how TAs are used and prepared which best explain these provocative results.

It is *people* that make the difference in education, but their effectiveness can be constrained by factors beyond their control. We might, then, say that the effectiveness of TAs cannot exceed the quality of their deployment and preparation.

The results from the DISS project have been strengthened by findings from a smaller scale study we conducted recently, called the Making a Statement (MaSt) project. Results from this descriptive study of the moment-by-moment experiences of pupils with a statement in mainstream primary schools show that these pupils spend a quarter of their week away from the classroom and their teacher and classmates. Small wonder, then, that pupils with the highest level of SEN were found in the DISS project to do *even less* well academically as a result of TA support, which replaces opportunities for teacher and peer interactions.

On the basis of this work, we argue strongly that schools must rethink how they deploy and prepare TAs if they are to get the best use from them in helping pupils. This is a conceptual as well as a practical task. To suggest that a few 'quick classroom fixes' are all that is required to remedy the situation misses the point. Let us put this starkly – a sizeable section of the school workforce

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has been found to have no provable impact on pupils' year-on-year attainment. Putting this right requires some fundamental soul-searching on the behalf of headteachers and school leaders.

Our collaborative work with schools following the DISS project shows three key areas for development: school and classroom organisation; TAs' interactions with pupils; and lesson preparation. Attend to these, and schools will give themselves a good

chance of avoiding the ineffective practice that underpinned the DISS project results.

The first action, however, is to conduct an audit. Only once school leaders have obtained a full picture of current practice can they be certain of what works and what requires change. An audit allows good practice to be identified and built on, and, crucially, it helps to verify if views at the top about the effectiveness of existing practice are shared by those working in classrooms.

School and classroom organisation

The point from which all decisions about TAs flow is deployment, which speaks to the school's philosophy about the role and purpose of TAs and how this is reflected in the way schools and classrooms are organised.

There is little doubt that the absence of a strong steer from the Government during the phases of policies and initiatives that increased the number of TAs working schools has not helped schools in this endeavor. The 'hands-off' approach – sensible though it is in many ways – led to the kinds of deployment patterns that we described in detail in the DISS project, and has contributed to the unintentional outcomes we outlined above.

Schools have been failed by this approach, but all is not lost. If schools address the 'hard' questions about how to conceptualise the role of TAs in their school, and what contribution they should make to pupil outcomes, a broad framework can be developed that establishes what TAs are expected do and what they are not expected to do.

Clarity, consistency and common understanding are key. Every teacher and every TA in school should know the boundaries of the TA role; we recommend setting this out in a whole-school policy, following consultation with staff.

In both the DISS and MaSt projects, we found that TAs had assumed much of the responsibility for planning and teaching pupils with high levels of SEN – from devising and delivering an alternative curriculum and interventions, to differentiating the teachers' tasks and instructions in the moment. These are demanding responsibilities for TAs

untrained in pedagogical decision making, regardless of how well intentioned their choice of activities and interactions is.

Nasen's Every Teacher campaign reminds us that every teacher is responsible for understanding the needs of every pupil in their class, and is accountable for their progress – whoever else is also involved in their learning, and wherever it takes place. Teachers, then, need to be reminded that the 'other world' of interventions and 'catch-up' programmes that exists outside their classroom is their world too.

Consider who has the primary responsibility for making sense of instructional input delivered in the library or SEN room by a TA, when back in front of the teacher in the classroom: it is pupils who struggle with learning. Teachers must engage with the valuable data on progress that TAs often collate and use it to inform their differentiation and classroom interactions.

One final point to make about TA deployment comes from the 'time and motion' component of our recent MaSt study. We found that TAs spent a third of their time listening to teachers teach. Understandably, we are often told that as there is no opportunity to meet before lessons, this is the time that TAs find out about lesson content and tasks.

This, we argue, is defendable up to a point, but think about the huge amount of time that TAs spend, term after term, as part of the class audience. If we are >

> serious about making TAs look more professional, we need find ways that they can add value to what teachers do, rather than unintentionally undermine it by increasing pupil dependence or 'stereo-teaching': repeating teacher talk word-for-word to supported pupils.

Some things we have seen schools do to address this issue include using TAs to model equipment or scribe on the whiteboard, allowing the teacher to remain facing the class. Inevitably, some TA time will still be spent listening to teachers teach, but some effort to 'fine tune' what TAs should be listening for in their whole-class delivery (questioning styles, key words, and so on) means that TAs have greater confidence when supporting pupils.

Interactions with pupils

Stereo-teaching is just one example of the second key area of development that schools must attend to: TAs' interactions with pupils. Our analysis also found that TAs too readily focused on task completion and 'closed down' the talk (ie supplied answers), rather than opening it up, as teachers did.

Just to re-emphasise, we cannot blame TAs for this; many feel that their effectiveness is judged based on the quality of work produced by the pupils they support. Unless they have been told otherwise, is it any surprise that their interactions with pupils lean towards spoon-feeding struggling pupils who have higher than average levels of dependence?

A cultural revolution is required in schools. TAs should be set free from the patterns of thought that underpin these ineffective types of talk. School leaders must ensure that TAs know that the value of their role is not in task completion, but in helping and prompting pupils to work things out for themselves. Schools should train TAs in the forms of questioning that can help undo the dependence culture. Given the opportunity that TAs have for quality interactions with pupils, one way in which they can add value to the classroom is through a form of questioning we call 'knowing what to do when you don't know what to do'. This encourages pupils to draw on their own knowledge and understanding to find things out for themselves using the resources in the classroom, and it facilitates peer discussion. We have found that this leads to TAs becoming more reflective about their practice, as well as promoting the kind of independence and habits of mind that pupils will need in an increasingly uncertain future.

Preparation

The final area of development is that of preparedness and, in particular, trying to avoid TAs 'going into lessons blind'. We understand that creating time for teachers and TAs to meet is tricky – and could be costly. However, schools we have worked with have put in place different strategies to improve TAs' capacity to provide effective support in lessons. For example, challenging the notion that in order to get the best value from TAs, they should spend all their time working with pupils, some headteachers amended TAs' contracts so that they started and finished half an hour earlier each day. This created up to two-and-a-half valuable hours of meeting time per week, and meant that TAs were more effective in the times they were working with pupils.

Another successful strategy is to develop a lesson plan that explicitly sets out what teachers require TAs to do in lessons. Vitally, what is needed on these plans is a sense of what *outcomes* are required; what is it that TAs should be working towards? As we have seen, if left unguided, TAs mistakenly put the emphasis on task completion, not learning.

Feedback from TAs is useful for further lesson planning, so teachers should be equally clear about what they want TAs to feed back on at the end of the lesson. This will be connected to the intended outcomes and can also be set out on the lesson plan.

As you might predict, TAs working in schools that use these two strategies report feeling more informed and confident about their role in lessons.

Our collaborative work with schools led to the development of guidance for school leaders and teachers, which is set out in our new book, *Maximising the Impact of Teaching Assistants*. The evidence from schools suggests that it is possible to get better value for money from TAs, and that there are many things schools can do differently in order to maximise their impact.

However, perhaps the strongest message from the research has been the absolute necessity for school leaders to lead this process of change. TAs are such an intrinsic part of what goes on in schools, it is inconceivable that they should not be part of the overall drive to school improvement. Where school leaders have acknowledged this and begun to challenge and change the ways TAs are deployed and prepared, and how they interact with pupils, we have seen their undoubted potential unleashed.

For more information on our research on TAs and the final report on the Making a Statement project visit www.schoolsupportstaff.net/

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Catch more on this topic

Rob Webster will be expanding on the Institute of Education's ground-breaking research into the deployment of teaching assistants in his seminar on Wednesday 22 May from 2–3pm. Before working at the IoE, Rob worked for six years as a teaching assistant in schools in London and the south east. He also delivers in-service training to school leaders, SENCOs and teachers on making better use of TAs.