

# **Worlds apart? The nature and quality of the educational experiences of pupils with a statement for special educational needs in mainstream primary schools**

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Findings from the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project showed that support from teaching assistants (TAs) had a strong negative impact on the academic progress of pupils, and this applied particularly to pupils with a statement of special educational needs (SEN). Although the DISS project found that such pupils experienced less contact with teachers, little is known about school- and classroom-level decision-making relating to provision. This paper addresses the nature and quality of the educational experiences of pupils with statements, and who has responsibility for putting in place and delivering provision for these pupils within schools. Results come from the Making a Statement (MAST) project, which tracked the educational experiences of 48 9- and 10-year-old pupils with the highest level of SEN, attending mainstream primary schools in England. The study involved the thematic analysis of 48 detailed pupil case studies, drawing on interview, documentation and field note data. Results are presented in terms of four key themes: (1) the explicit and subtle forms of separation these pupils experience daily; (2) the high level of pedagogical decision-making TAs have for pupils with statements; (3) the impoverished pedagogical diet pupils with statements receive, compared to their peers; and (4) the gaps in teachers' and TAs' knowledge concerning meeting the needs of pupils with statements. The findings have particular implications for the deployment of TAs and for provision for pupils with SEN, with and without statements.

## **Background**

In line with international trends, the number of children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) educated in mainstream UK schools has greatly increased over the last 30 years (Thomas & Vaughan, 2004). The 1981 Education Act introduced a system of statutory assessment for pupils in England with the highest levels of SEN,<sup>1</sup> leading to a 'statement' setting out a pupil's SEN alongside the additional provision required to meet those needs. Since 2009, the proportion of pupils with statements has remained stable at 1.4% of the school population (DfE, 2013).

The long term increase in the number of pupils with SEN being included in mainstream schools has been accompanied and assisted by an increase in the number of paraprofessional support staff, referred to in this paper as teaching assistants (TAs<sup>2</sup>).

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The number of full-time equivalent TAs in mainstream schools in England has almost doubled since 2000 to 199,000, and TAs now comprise 32% of the primary school workforce<sup>3</sup> (DfE, 2012a). The use of paraprofessionals in education appears to be a growing trend in many different countries (Giangreco & Doyle, 2007), though compared to other education systems globally, no country has gone as far in its use of such staff as the UK.

Primary head teachers report that a main advantage of having these additional adults in schools is that including pupils with high-level SEN in mainstream settings would be impossible to implement without them (Blatchford *et al.*, 2012). However, results from the longitudinal Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project, which was designed to provide much needed information on the use and impact of TAs, raised serious questions about the way TAs have become inextricably linked to processes of inclusion.

Results from the DISS project showed that TAs have a predominantly pedagogical role, spending most of their time supporting lower-attaining pupils and those with SEN (Blatchford *et al.*, 2012). Teachers favour this arrangement: it allows them to teach the rest of the class, whilst struggling pupils receive much-needed individual attention from TAs. But there are serious unintended consequences to this arrangement. The DISS project also found a negative relationship between the amount of TA support received and the progress made by pupils. The most profound effects were experienced by those with the highest level of SEN, who are allocated TA support as a key part of their provision (Webster *et al.*, 2010).

These results were not explainable in terms of pupil characteristics (e.g., prior attainment, SEN status or income deprivation). Instead, the main explanation appears to be the way pupils with high-level SEN receiving a high amount of TA support consequently spend less time interacting with the teacher and become separated from the teacher and curriculum; an experience at variance with that of their peers. The extent of this separation is evident in results from systematic observation studies (Blatchford *et al.*, 2012; Webster & Blatchford, 2013). Whilst instructive, these data are unable to tell us anything about the quality of the educational experience pupils with statements receive.

There are concerns that with this separation, TAs end up taking on the responsibility for teaching pupils with SEN, and that the quality of instruction pupils receive from TAs is inferior to that provided by the teacher. An earlier survey of 48 primary schools found concerns with the 'quality of support provided to children [with SEN] by classroom assistants and learning support assistants', and the way in which the pupils 'who most needed a teacher's support were spending a lot of their time in class with someone who was not a trained teacher' (Croll & Moses, 2000).

One expression of this concern can be seen in findings from analyses of pupils' interactions with TAs, which tend to be qualitatively different to those involving teachers. TAs are more concerned with task completion than learning, and act reactively rather than proactively (Rubie-Davies *et al.*, 2010; Radford *et al.*, 2011). There remains, however, little information on the overall nature of interactions experienced by pupils with statements, and in particular the mediation of information and instructions by TAs in moment-by-moment interactions.

The English school inspectorate, Ofsted (2006) note ‘pupils in mainstream schools where support from TAs was the main type of provision were less likely to make good academic progress than those who had access to specialist teaching in those schools’. Compared to their non-SEN peers then, there are genuine concerns that the support given to pupils with SEN represents an unintentional form of discrimination. As Giangreco *et al.* (2005) have argued, we would not permit such an educational regime for pupils without SEN.

A key factor relating to the effectiveness of the widespread model of SEN provision, which is heavily reliant on direct pupil support from TAs, concerns the quality of training and level of knowledge TAs have about SEN and how to teach pupils with SEN. A number of studies have reported concerns about the discrepancy between the predominantly instructional nature of the TAs’ role and the low level of training they receive to support their practice (Moran & Abbot, 2002; Mistry *et al.*, 2004; Teeman *et al.*, 2008; Farrell *et al.*, 2010; Blatchford *et al.*, 2012).

Results from other research attest to the inadequate quality and level of training relating to SEN available to trainee teachers (Hodkinson, 2005, 2009; Anderson & Finney, 2008; Lamb, 2009). Taken together, findings from the available research suggest the existence of a knowledge deficit when it comes to successfully educating pupils with SEN in mainstream settings. What is less well understood is how this relates specifically to pupils with the highest level of SEN: those with statements.

## **This paper**

There has been much interest in the effective inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream settings (Ainscow, 2007), teachers’ attitudes to inclusion (de Boer *et al.*, 2011), and the existence and relative forms of pedagogy for those with SEN (Norwich & Lewis, 2001; Gersten & Edwards Santoro, 2007). There is, however, less information on the way schools are organised to deliver provision for pupils with SEN, and in particular, how this work and the management of this work is distributed across the school workforce.

The DISS project showed that pupils with statements tend to have a high level of support from TAs and this impacted in a negative way on their attainment. The particular relationship between the award of a statement, the allocation of TA hours and the educational experiences of statemented pupils was also highlighted in qualitative data from the DISS project (Blatchford *et al.*, 2012), but much more is needed on the factors connected to the planning and delivery of provision for pupils with a statement of SEN.

This paper addresses two questions. The first question concerns the nature and quality of the educational experiences of pupils with statements, relative to their peers. The second question relates to who has responsibility for putting in place and delivering the appropriate provision for these pupils within schools.

At the time of writing, the function of the statement is being reformed as part of the English government’s plan to bring about ‘the biggest shake up of SEN in 30 years’ (Ward & Vaughan, 2011). However, over and above any current policy changes, a justification for the research reported in this paper is that there is always likely to be a group of pupils who will have difficulties in accessing everyday learning in mainstream

settings. Therefore, obtaining a detailed understanding of what such pupils experience and how schools organise to plan and deliver provision to meet their needs is essential to making effective judgments about which provisions work best, and which structural and classroom processes and arrangements are required to deliver them.

The issues we explore in relation to the use of education paraprofessionals are likely to be generalisable to SEN systems in other UK territories and overseas. Education systems in the US (Giangreco *et al.*, 2005), New Zealand (Rutherford, 2012) and Cyprus (Angelides *et al.*, 2009), to name a few, adopt a broadly similar approach to SEN provision in mainstream settings.

The results reported in this paper are drawn from the Making a Statement (MAST) project, which was set up to investigate the everyday educational experiences of primary-aged pupils with statements in mainstream schools. The main purpose of this paper is to present findings from the analysis of the qualitative data collected as part of the study. Systematic observations conducted as part of the research showed the moment-by-moment experiences of pupils with statements, compared with those of average-attaining (control) pupils, in terms of the locations and social contexts within which they are taught, the frequency of their interactions with adults and peers, and the extent of task differentiation (see Webster & Blatchford, 2013). This paper complements and adds depth to these descriptive findings, by reflecting the perceptions of some of the main stakeholders in the SEN system on the structures, delivery and effectiveness of provision.

## **Methodology**

To answer the research questions, detailed case studies were compiled on 48 pupils who were the subject of the observations. These pupils were in Year 5 (9 and 10-year-olds) and had a statement for either moderate learning difficulties<sup>4</sup> (MLD) or behaviour, emotional and social difficulties (BESD). These categories of SEN were selected as they are commonly occurring, and were also likely to detect school support factors connected to problems with learning and classroom engagement. Other categories of SEN (e.g., hearing or visual impairment) were more likely to be affected by, and be seen by schools in terms of, within-pupil factors.<sup>5</sup>

The research team, in collaboration with staff in six local authorities (LAs), identified pupils who met the above selection criteria. With the help of the LAs, we approached the head teachers of the schools these pupils attended to recruit them for the study. We followed up expressions of interest from head teachers, who then facilitated the process of securing permission from parents/carers and obtaining the necessary consents and ethical clearances. The school visits were carried out in the 2011–2012 school year.

A researcher shadowed a statemented pupil for a school week, collecting data using an extended version of the data collection tools used in the DISS project (Blatchford *et al.*, 2009, 2012). The MAST study's multi-method approach combined quantitative systematic observations from the pupil's perspective, with contextual data drawn from interviews and general qualitative observations drawn together in the shape of a detailed pupil-based case study. The tools formed part of a tested methodology, adapted to serve the purposes of the study.

### Sample

*Pupils.* Of the 48 statemented pupils we tracked, five had a more complex composition of difficulties, of which one of the main presenting needs was either MLD or BESD. A breakdown of the pupil sample is shown in Table 1.

Data from the Department for Education on pupils in English schools collected during the school year the MAST study was conducted (DfE, 2012b) show that over this period, there were 58,535 primary school-aged pupils (5- to 11-year-olds) with statements (1.4% of all pupils attending state-funded primary schools). Just under 10,000 pupils (17%) were in Year 5. Of these Year 5s, 74% were boys, whilst 78% of all primary pupils with statements were white British. As can be seen from the data in Table 1, our sample was consistent with this national picture. Primary-aged pupils with statements known to be eligible for free school meals were over-represented in our sample (46% *vs.* 29% nationally).

As our aim was to track pupils with statements for particular categories of SEN, our sample cannot be seen as representative of all pupils with statements. We note, however, that MLD and BESD are two of the most commonly occurring categories of SEN under which statements are awarded. Nationally, pupils with statements for MLD and BESD comprise, respectively, 11% and 13% of all primary-aged pupils with statements.

*Schools.* Researchers visited a total of 45 schools in six LAs in the south and east of England. Thirty schools were located in two large LAs (17 in one; 13 in the other), and 15 schools were located across four London boroughs (the most schools visited in any one borough was five). The majority of schools in the two large LAs were situated in urban areas, with seven in rural or semi-rural areas. Schools in all six LAs served communities in deprived/low socio-economic status areas, and mid- to high-socioeconomic status areas. Twenty-two schools were two-form entry. There were nine single-form entry schools and nine with three- or four-form entry. Five schools had an additional resource provision for SEN (ARP) attached, which the statemented pupil attended for at least part of the week.

### The MAST case study approach

We drew together data from several sources (described below) to produce a case study report on each of the 48 statemented pupils. The reports provided a substantive

Table 1. Pupils with statements

	Statement type		Gender				Ethnicity				Eligible for free school meals	
			Boy		Girl		White British		Other			
MLD	29	60%	18	50%	11	92%	24	65%	5	45%	10	45%
BESD	14	29%	14	39%	0	0%	12	32%	2	18%	8	36%
Composite	5	10%	4	11%	1	8%	1	3%	4	36%	4	18%
Total	48	100%	36	75%	12	25%	37	77%	11	23%	22	46%

picture of their educational experiences and covered the organisational factors at the school and classroom level that determined decision-making about provision, the respective roles of teachers and TAs in this provision, and the nature of the provision itself; that is, the choice of curriculum tasks, differentiation and interaction, and to what degree this differed from the provision in place for the majority of (non-SEN) pupils. The data from each method of data collection were informed by and organised in terms of themes drawing on the earlier DISS project, the literature and pilot work.

*Interviews.* Semi-structured interviews with SENCOs, teachers, TAs and each pupil's parents/carers enabled us to describe the perceptions and expectations that different stakeholders had of the structures, delivery and effectiveness of provision. The same questions were put to all interviewees, with SENCOs and teachers asked some additional questions relating to their respective positions and responsibilities. Interviews lasted between 20 minutes and an hour, depending on the time available. Interviews were typically arranged to take place from the third day of the visit, as by this time, the researcher was more acquainted with the situation in school and was able to nuance the questions to reflect his/her observations. Nearly 200 interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed. These transcripts formed the basis of the case study reports. A breakdown of interviewees is shown in Table 2.

*Documentation.* With the help of the LAs and schools, researchers had access to documentary evidence, notably the pupils' statement and latest annual review, which detailed any updates to the statement. These documents provided details of each pupil's current SEN (and non-educational needs), together with the provisions that should have been in place to meet these needs. The allocation of TA support hours was also recorded on these documents.

*Field notes.* Finally, researchers kept on-going field notes of qualitative, open-ended observations, contextual details, thoughts and impressions on the pupil experience being observed. These notes supplemented and assisted the interpretation of the data from other sources. Field notes were organised in relation to a set of headings, which were developed to reflect and complement the main systematic observation categories and the questions in the interview schedule. The headings were:

- The pupil: background; history of needs; any clinical/medical diagnosis.
- The support: deployment of and interaction with adults; pupil work context (e.g., one-to-one); differentiation; interventions.

Table 2. Case study interviews

SENCOs/inclusion managers	40	21%
Teachers	56	29%
Teaching assistants	66	34%
Parents/carers	33	17%
Total	195	100%

- The statement: stakeholders' familiarisation with the statement and individual education plan (IEP); hours of support; the value/utility of the statement.
- Other issues: for example, pupil's progress and development over time.

### *Case study reports*

An often-cited challenge of working with qualitative data is that they are 'strong in reality', but difficult to organise (Cohen & Manion, 1994). To organise the considerable volume of qualitative data, researchers drew together data from the interviews, documentation and field notes relating to each pupil into a case study report, organised in terms of a shared framework of themes, as described above.

Citing Becker (1958), Walker (1993) writes that the case study researcher frequently gravitates toward quantitative analyses of qualitative data in order to establish the main foci of research, by identifying the typicality and frequency of particular events, and how they are distributed among categories of people and organisational units. Very much in line with developing an efficient form of analysis, we arranged the data in the case study reports thematically for the purposes of interrogation. This allowed us to make plausible and credible generalisations, whilst retaining the individuality of particular cases to serve as illustrative examples of specific points of interest. The prevalence of key and recurring features contained in the data were coded and later used to develop a set of emergent overarching themes. These were refined to produce four overarching themes, which we use to organise the presentation of results in this paper.

## **Results**

Our initial analyses of the quantitative (see Webster & Blatchford, 2013) and qualitative data found very few differences between the results for the pupils with statements for MLD and BESD, so the results reported here treat these groups as one. The presentation of results provides an indication of the prevalence of findings, by stating the number of case studies in which a particular characteristic or issue was identified as  $n = x$ , where  $x$  equals the number of cases out of a maximum of 48. Prevalence was only counted when it was unequivocally evident in a case study report. It is possible, therefore, that *actual* prevalence may exceed *stated* prevalence. In other words, there may be more cases to which a particular characteristic or issue applies, but it was not possible to draw them out conclusively from the case study report. In this sense, prevalence data may appear to understate the significance or predominance of a particular issue; we suggest where we feel this might be the case.

### *Theme 1. Degree of separation*

The extent to which pupils with statements experienced a high degree of separation from the classroom, teachers and peers was evident in the results from the systematic observations (Webster & Blatchford, 2013). A brief summary of these results is helpful for contextualising the case study findings presented in this paper.

We found that pupils with statements spent over a quarter of their time physically away from the mainstream class, class teacher and their peers. One in five observations involving statemented pupils was a one-to-one interaction with a TA. Average-attaining control pupils hardly ever interacted with TAs. For pupils with statements, interactions with TAs seemed to be at the expense of interactions with the teacher and, more so, with peers. Overall, compared with control pupils, statemented pupils had far fewer peer interactions and were less likely to not interact with anyone when in-class.

The results from the systematic observations make it clear that the educational experiences of pupils with statements are strongly associated with the almost constant accompanying presence of a TA. The consequences of the most obvious forms of separation this practice led to were referred to by some of the school staff we interviewed.

When you have a child on a statement, it can be very alienating if they're always working with one LSA. That's not healthy. . . no one would want to work solely, 20 hours a week with one person, singularly; without any personal involvement in the school community.  
(TA)

Beyond the broad-brush findings from the systematic observations, our analysis of the case study data found that pupils with statements experienced more subtle forms of separation that other pupils do not typically experience. Firstly, the high degree of one-to-one interaction with TAs occurs at the expense of interactions with the teacher in whole-class contexts. A particular expression of this is something we have identified elsewhere as 'stereo teaching': where TAs were heard to repeat the teacher's talk to the pupils they supported (often verbatim) directly after the teacher had spoken (Blatchford *et al.*, 2012). This practice was in evidence across the pupils in the MAST project: from the pupil's point of view, the TA's talk cuts across interaction with the teacher.

The second subtle form of segregation, within the more obviously inclusive environment of the classroom, was the use of a workstation: a desk positioned at the side or back of the classroom, away from peers, at which the pupil with the statement could work relatively distraction-free. This constituted a clear form of separation from the rest of the class, and—with the presence of TA—a separation from the teacher. However, in at least one case, the needs of the pupil (and indeed the collective needs of the class) were such that the use of a workstation appeared to represent the best possible arrangement: distractions were minimised for all, and the pupil's own anxieties about sitting for long periods with other children were alleviated.

### *Theme 2. Degree of responsibility for pupils with statements*

One key way of organising the case study data in this theme was in terms of a scale expressing the degree of responsibility the teacher had for the education of the pupil with a statement (as far as it was possible to determine). At one end of the scale, teachers were found to have a strong and full responsibility for the education of such pupils ( $n = 6$  out of 48 cases), whilst at the other end, they were seen to have little or no responsibility ( $n = 13$ ).

David<sup>6</sup> is there on my plan, but he's not big on my radar, to be honest. (Teacher)

Often the situation in a school was not at one extreme or the other; the most common approach across the case studies fell at the mid-point of the scale, where the teacher was seen to have overall responsibility for planning the curriculum and general teaching strategies, whilst the TA effectively took on the actual teaching of the statemented pupil, in terms of the delivery of the curriculum (n = 20).

I don't have the main role; I see the main role as actually being [the TA's]. I have the overview as to what's going on. (Teacher)

Interestingly, the legal status of the statement—and in particular, the widespread practice of providing a specified number of hours of TA support for the pupils (determined by the LA)—seemed to exert a particular influence over how provision was organised. In the minds of many of the staff and parents/carers, the hours indicated on the statement and the employment and deployment of TAs were inextricably connected: 'It is there in black and white', as it was often put. Thus, TAs were seen as necessary, indispensable and directly linked to the provision for pupils with statements.

She would be nowhere near where she is now if we hadn't gone through and the local authority hadn't agreed to do an assessment of her needs... Because you've got a person there that can take charge of what Mica does. (SENCo)

We asked interviewees to what extent they felt the provision that is listed on the statement matched the provision the pupil actually received. Interestingly, in almost half of cases (n = 21), school staff expressed their answer in terms of the match between the hours attached to the statement and the hours of TA support the pupil received: 'He gets his hours'. Very little was offered in terms of how the provision met the objectives set out in the statement.

*The role of TAs.* School staff used a rich array of metaphors to characterise the TA role. TAs were described, and described themselves, variously as a 'crutch', 'mediator', 'conduit', 'advocate' and 'keyworker'. In a few cases, the nurturing role as a mother was reflected in how TAs were viewed.

I'm not the class teacher and I'm not her mum—so I'm that person in between. (TA)

TAs described their role with varying degrees of clarity. In the main, views reflected the extent to which TAs had, for the pupil they supported, taken on or been given responsibility for: pedagogical planning and decision-making (n = 34); monitoring behaviour (n = 33); pastoral/emotional support (n = 18); and promoting the pupil's independence (n = 16).

*Pedagogical planning and decision-making.* With regard to statemented pupils, TAs took on much of the responsibility for the planning and the delivery of teaching. Responsibility for planning ranged from devising an alternative curriculum, through to preparing intervention programmes, to augmenting or modifying teachers' lesson plans. Often TAs had the main responsibility for adapting tasks for the statemented pupil, with decisions made on the basis of what the TA thought the pupil would be able to access or achieve.

Amy doesn't understand the language that the class teacher will say. So [TA] will just pick out the important words and just say, 'Right, you've just got to go and do this, and put that there and there and there'. (SENCo)

One obvious expression of the pedagogical planning and decision-making undertaken by TAs is in terms of curriculum interventions. Results from the systematic observations showed that in 17% of all observations, pupils with statements were engaged in an intervention, mainly away from the classroom (Webster & Blatchford, 2013). Interventions were most common in English, then mathematics, with a small portion relating to the development of social skills or motor skills.

Our analysis of the case study data found that in the majority of cases ( $n = 34$ ), TAs were responsible for the delivery of at least one intervention; in seven cases, the SENCo or a teacher was responsible for delivering at least one intervention. Where it was possible to discern, 'off-the-shelf' programmes were used ( $n = 15$ ), but most interventions were 'homemade' ( $n = 22$ ); that is, they were put together using existing resources. In most cases, homemade interventions were put together by TAs ( $n = 12$ ).

Quite a lot I do at home. . . Trawling on the internet, trying to find worksheets and activities that I think would be suitable for her. (TA)

*Monitoring behaviour.* Just under half of the pupils included in the study had specific needs around attention and concentration, with many described as being 'easily distracted'. A further seven pupils were described as having behavioural needs rooted in low self-esteem and low self-confidence. Behavioural issues were not restricted to pupils with BESD. In a number of cases, TAs had a role in managing and monitoring the stated pupil's behaviour ( $n = 13$ ). In a greater number of cases, TAs had a role in 'helping to keep the pupil on task' and 'focussed' ( $n = 20$ ). In the majority of cases, intensive TA support was seen as essential for keeping the pupil on task during lessons.

My role really is to help him to focus, understand the learning objective [and] clarify anything he doesn't understand. (TA)

It is worth noting that the observation results showed that pupils with statements did not differ greatly from control pupils in terms of the amount of time they were off task (e.g., fiddling or daydreaming) (Webster & Blatchford, 2013). Therefore, the work that TAs do to keep pupils on-task seems to be effective.

*Emotional/pastoral support and promoting independence.* TAs were described as having a role supporting other areas of pupil development in terms of their emotional/pastoral needs and in promoting their independence and building their self-confidence. However, in only a minority of cases did TAs seem to work in ways that would seem to support this objective: as a 'guide on the side', prompting and coaxing pupils in a pedagogically meaningful way.

[TAs] guide him and, rather than telling him, they will suggest things so that he's got to use his own mind to move forward with things. (Parent/carer)

TAs were unable to articulate their pastoral role in any specific detail, and tended to describe such support as ‘being there’ for the pupil. This cast the TAs as being ‘on standby’, ready to respond when the pupil signalled struggle. For many pupils, one-to-one, and often intensive, TA support had become a way of life since the early years. It is hard to reconcile, therefore, how a pupil’s independence and self-confidence could be raised by putting in place adult support on the basis that the pupil is unable to do things by him/herself.

He needed somebody there to be able to explain things when [the class have] had an input, to reinforce things afterwards... to boost his self-esteem... because he cannot do it for himself. (SENCo)

### *Theme 3. Appropriateness and quality of pedagogy*

TAs who planned lessons and interventions for pupils with statements also had a high level of involvement in teaching them. But even TAs who had a low- to mid-level of responsibility for planning were found to have a high level of responsibility for teaching and moment-by-moment pedagogical decision-making. This has implications for the quality of pedagogy that pupils with statements received.

*Differentiation.* As we report in Webster and Blatchford (2013), many of the physical tasks undertaken by pupils with statements in the classroom were not differentiated. These pupils were observed in 81% of observations to be doing the same task as the control pupils. However, our systematic observation schedule was unable to pick up more nuanced expressions of differentiation, and so the extent of differentiation overall is likely to be underestimated in the observation results.

Consistent with what we have already described in relation to the TA role, overall, what emerges from the analysis of the case study data is the extent to which TAs took on the primary responsibility for creating or modifying lesson content and material in the moment to make teaching accessible. The following comments were typical of the situation we found across schools.

I often find that teachers are very busy and they can’t think about differentiation all the time. (SENCo)

I don’t plan specifically for Greg. I kind of say [to the TA], ‘This is what the class are doing; this is what my more able and less able are doing... Use your judgement to figure out what he can access or not’. (Teacher)

Four expressions of differentiation emerged across the case studies. Often more than one form of differentiation was described in relation to a particular pupil. Firstly, in a quarter of cases ( $n = 13$ ) the organisation of the school, year group or class was described as the ‘first level of differentiation’ (e.g., allocating the statemented pupil to an ARP or to the literacy and/or numeracy class for the lowest attaining pupils). Grouping by attainment within literacy and numeracy classes was described by some school staff as the ‘second level of differentiation’. The second expression of

differentiation was by outcome; that is, statemented pupils were expected to produce less work than others ( $n = 23$ ). The third expression was in terms of the task ( $n = 43$ ). For almost every pupil, there was evidence of TAs frequently differentiating the physical tasks set by the teacher in order to make them accessible for the statemented pupil. This was in spite of most teachers differentiating tasks three ways: for higher, average and lower attaining pupils.

Some of the poetry [the class have] done, I've just said, 'There's no point trying to get Helen to do that. She won't get anything out of it'. So I then go away and I will do something that maybe the Year 2s would do for poetry; so a much, much lower level but still a similar task. (TA)

The fourth and most common form of differentiation to be found in almost every case study was in the form of TA support ( $n = 46$ ); that is, the presence of a TA and, in particular, the way in which they provided differentiation verbally. Teachers and TAs described two particular features of TA-to-pupil interaction: (i) modification of language (e.g., simplification, breaking it down) ( $n = 37$ ); and (ii) repetition ( $n = 11$ ). Several of the 46 case studies in which this form of differentiation was noted referred to both features.

Many of the pupils we tracked were described as having poor information retention skills, so a high degree of TA talk concerned repetition. The majority of comments, however, described how TAs tailored their language in ways that made curriculum content, tasks and instructions more accessible. It was interesting to note that SEN-Cos and teachers recognised that modifying talk in this way is a considerable skill.

Just very simple language... Try and break it down into information chunks. (TA)

It's very difficult and it takes a lot of skill to pitch down what you want those children to do, so that you're helping them to move on to the next step. And that's a real skill. (SEN-Co)

When taken together with the findings presented above on TAs' responsibility for selecting tasks for statemented pupils, we see there are clear implications for the quality of pedagogy that these pupils experience. The issue of which tasks constituted an appropriate or effective pedagogical choice was highlighted in researchers' field notes, which described numerous instances of unengaging and repetitive work, and in some cases, tasks with no pedagogical content (e.g., colouring-in).

#### *Theme 4. Extent of knowledge about pupils with statements*

Many of the teachers and TAs we interviewed were unsure how to deal with the challenges and sometimes complex difficulties posed by pupils with statements. Nineteen TAs and 24 teachers—over a third of all teachers and TAs interviewed<sup>7</sup>—said that they had received no specific training to help them support the needs of the statemented pupil they supported/had in their class. Most teachers reported having had no training or only scant, general training on SEN by way of preparation for their role. Perhaps unsurprisingly, teachers felt disadvantaged.

I think sometimes I personally don't really know what to do with Chloe. I don't know if I don't understand her statement. . . And when I'm thinking about bringing stuff down to her level, sometimes I just don't know how to do it. (Teacher)

There was little opportunity for teachers and TAs to meet prior to lessons. In only six out of the 48 cases did we find that school staff had allocated time for teacher-TA meetings. In half of all cases ( $n = 24$ ), TAs and teachers described having only ad hoc meetings before and/or after school and during break and lunch times. Consequently, such arrangements relied on the goodwill of TAs. Moreover, the lack of liaison time was often described as an obstacle to effective practice, and had a knock-on effect on TAs' confidence and feelings of competence.

I sometimes question myself: am I doing the right thing? . . . You don't have time to talk to teachers. You don't have time to sit down and say, 'Actually, what shall we do with him today? I've tried this' . . . And there's no time to prepare anything, so it's a case of, 'Right, what are we going to do now? OK, we'll get the books. . . and we just go over the same thing'. (TA)

Despite such concerns expressed by TAs, it was interesting how teachers positioned TAs as the 'expert' on the statemented pupil, possessing much more knowledge about them, despite TAs having had little more than general training on SEN and curriculum interventions. This was often as a result of TAs' experience of working with a particular pupil over several terms, if not years. TAs were seen as capable of making teachers' teaching, interactions and tasks accessible for pupils with statements, and this seemed to legitimise teachers' decisions to devolve responsibility for the education of these pupils to TAs.

I'll give them a general idea of the topic we're working on this week. . . They're very good; they're very proactive. . . If I give them a topic. . . they've got such a good bank of resources that they'll be able to go and find things to use. (Teacher)

## **Discussion**

Four particular findings emerged from our analysis of the case study data from the MAST study. Firstly, we found that statemented pupils experienced segregation within the classroom by having an individual workstation away from others, and also as a result of 'stereo-teaching'; where interactions with TAs cut across, replaced and reduced opportunities for statemented pupils to interact with the teacher and their peers. It is safe to say that this is not something that non-SEN pupils experience to anywhere near the same extent.

Secondly, we found that TAs assumed much of the responsibility for planning and teaching pupils with statements, making decisions on the basis of what the TA thought the pupil would be able to access or achieve. It was rare for the teacher to have as high a level of involvement. In almost every case, we found that TAs had a high level of responsibility for moment-by-moment pedagogical decision-making.

Building on the findings of our systematic observations, we found that the high involvement of TAs in the school life of statemented pupils stems from an organisational reliance on TAs to provide the means by which pupils with high-level SEN are

included in mainstream settings. A key factor appears to be the particular power invested in the statement itself and the way in which the specification of TA hours contributed to the way in which the responsibility for pupils with statements rested with TAs, rather than with teachers. This calls to mind what Sikes *et al.* (2007) referred to as the ‘yes buts’ of inclusion; whereby the inclusion of pupils with SEN is conceived as being contingent on available resources, somewhat undermining its power as an educational principle.

Thirdly, we found that pupils with statements received a high amount of verbal differentiation from TAs. As was previously found in the DISS project, when compared to the experiences of pupils without SEN, pupils receiving a high amount of TA support have a different—and less effective—pedagogical diet. TAs’ contributions to the support of pupils with statements were clearly well intentioned, but the appropriateness and quality of what they provided in terms of their pedagogical input (in terms of tasks and interactions) was questionable. We found that tasks (including interventions) were often inappropriately targeted, repetitive or undemanding. TAs were very often left to work within the gaps left by teachers.

Finally, we found that there were considerable gaps in teachers’ and TAs’ knowledge concerning meeting the needs of pupils with statements. Many staff were unsure how to best deal with the challenges and sometimes complex difficulties posed by such pupils. Teachers reported having had no training on meeting the specific needs of pupils with statements. This lack of knowledge would seem to be a contributing factor in teachers’ lesson and task preparation; their planning rarely extended to cover the learning needs of pupils with a statement.

It is worth noting that in 1978, Mary Warnock acknowledged that ‘some 40 years will need to elapse’ before the English education system is at a point where all teachers had undertaken adequate SEN training as part of their initial training, and thereby have the requisite skills to teach pupils with SEN effectively (DfES, 1978). This comment was made 36 years ago. Ever since, the commonly held view among researchers and professionals about the inadequate quality and level of training in SEN offered to pre-service teachers, and successive governments’ commitment to providing such training, has remained unchanged (Hodkinson, 2009). The findings from the MAST study do little to challenge this position.

We found that teachers often positioned TAs as the ‘expert’ on the statemented pupil, possessing much more knowledge about pupils with statements, despite TAs having only a general level of training. TAs were seen as capable of making teachers’ teaching and instructions accessible for pupils with statements, and this essentially validated organisational decisions that gave TAs a high level of responsibility for these pupils. The situation was compounded by the fact that—similar to what was found in the DISS project (Blatchford *et al.*, 2012)—there was little opportunity for teachers and TAs to meet prior to lessons.

The findings and conclusions presented in this paper are based on data collected on a particular sample: pupils in Year 5 with statements for MLD and BESD attending mainstream primary schools in England. But on the basis of our other research in the DISS project and the Effective Deployment of TAs project (Webster *et al.*, 2013), there was little to suggest that practice is significantly different in other primary years, or indeed, that practice differs by geographical (e.g., LA) area. Replica-

tion studies involving pupils in secondary schools or with other forms of SEN (e.g. speech and language difficulties; autistic spectrum conditions) might produce different results, and are clear candidates for further research<sup>8</sup>.

Results from systematic observations conducted as part of the MAST study show that the educational experiences of pupils with statements are strongly characterised by a high degree of separation from the classroom and a high involvement of TAs (Webster & Blatchford, 2013). What we describe in this paper can be seen as further evidence of the unintentional drift toward a model of TA deployment found in the DISS project, which, while conducted with the best of intentions, has resulted in unintended consequences. Since the introduction of TAs into mainstream settings, they have become an essential way in which teachers deal with problems connected to the inclusion of pupils with statements, their workloads and job satisfaction, and challenges posed by curriculum initiatives and behaviour in school (Blatchford *et al.*, 2012). Thus, whilst the drift we describe is understandable, significant concerns are raised about the support given to pupils with statements and about a form of educational discrimination that applies only to them.

Having said that, the opportunity to observe at close quarters and talk with practitioners and parents/carers brought home the challenges schools face in successfully including pupils with high levels of learning and/or emotional and behavioural difficulties. Many teachers described the demands associated with meeting the needs of one, or sometimes, two pupils whose educational needs are significantly more demanding than the other 28 or so pupils in the class. It should not be forgotten that the MAST study was conducted at a time when the maintained school system in England was in an intense period of flux. New, more stringent, funding arrangements, increasing levels of school accountability (e.g., in terms of school inspection and examination results) and more-or-less wholesale reform of the primary curriculum were factors that appeared to conspire to lower the priority schools gave to meeting the needs of pupils with statements.

A stark conclusion drawn from the MAST study is that across the schools, we found little evidence of an effective and theoretically-grounded pedagogy for pupils with statements of SEN in the instructional approaches used by either teachers or TAs.

### **Implications for policy and practice**

In September 2014, far-reaching changes to the statutory assessment process and the form and function of statements come into force in England. The results presented in this paper have implications for the way in which support for pupils with high-level SEN is specified and quantified in the documents that will replace statements: education, health and care plans (EHCP).

At the time of writing, the established practice of expressing support for the provision outlined in a statement, in terms of a set number of hours, seems likely to be retained when the transition is made to EHCPs. Again, it is likely that schools will continue to convert the hours specified on the EHCP into hours of support from a TA. Therefore, the particular power that statements seem to exert over provision, which we found in the MAST study, is unlikely to diminish when they become EHCPs.

There appears to be very little up-to-date information from other countries on the ways in which children with high-level SEN secure specialist provision (particularly in mainstream settings), and the extent to which this is provided in the shape of paraprofessional support. Cross-national data would be very helpful.

In terms of the English system, we have argued that the main expression of support (e.g., TA hours) seems to get in the way of schools thinking through an appropriate pedagogy for pupils with the most pronounced learning difficulties in mainstream primary schools (Webster & Blatchford, 2013). Alternative and convenient expressions of support—such as in terms of financial sum—would do little to change the fundamental problems that stem from failing to identify the pedagogical processes and strategies required to meet carefully defined educational outcomes. A key conclusion from the MAST study is that the principal means by which support is specified and quantified in EHCPs should be in terms of pedagogy, not hours.

A broader issue to arise from our research concerns how schools make effective provision for all pupils with SEN—not just those whose needs are severe enough to meet the criteria for a statement. Another key message from the MAST study, in terms of practice, is that schools need to attend to the structural and organisational processes that facilitate the way support for pupils with SEN is provided. In particular, schools need to fundamentally rethink the role of TAs, so that they are not routinely deployed to support such pupils.

We know enough from the findings of the DISS project and the present study to appreciate the negative (but intended) consequences of maintaining such models of practice as a matter of course. For example, the wider pedagogical role (WPR) model, developed on the basis of the DISS project results, provides a framework for structuring and describing key facets of TAs' work and accounts for the wider contextual and organisational factors within which they work, and which seem strongly correlated to their effectiveness (Webster *et al.*, 2011).

Moreover, we know enough about the alternative and more effective models that schools can adopt. Again, the WPR model can be used to reconceptualise the work and role of TAs, and inform models of educational effectiveness. For example, practical guidance we have published shows how teachers can organise the classroom in ways that enable them to work with pupils with SEN, whilst the TA works with other groups (Russell *et al.*, 2013). Our work with colleagues (Radford *et al.*, 2014) puts forward a potentially valuable model of TA-to-pupil interaction, which seeks to foster pupil independence, thereby mitigating some of the known problems associated with high levels of TA support (e.g., spoon-feeding and dependency).

Whilst teachers must assume the primary responsibility for planning and teaching pupils with high-level SEN, more is certainly needed by way of research into effective pedagogical approaches for such pupils, and mechanisms to disseminate this via the various forms of teacher training and professional development. As we write, the government in England has just closed its consultation on a new Code of Practice for SEN. We are encouraged that the draft Code emphasises the use of high quality teaching to meet the needs of pupils with SEN over the default forms of support we have described in our research: 'Special education provision is underpinned by high quality teaching and is compromised by anything less' (DFE & DOH, 2013).

Even in the face of speculation about the future of TAs (Stevens, 2013; Woolf & Griffiths, 2013), we frequently hear from school leaders and teachers who strongly oppose suggestions that they should reduce their TA workforce. This too is encouraging; we have consistently argued that TAs themselves are not the problem (Webster *et al.*, 2011; Blatchford *et al.*, 2012). However, many schools are not making the most of this valuable resource. Our view is that schools need to widen their models of SEN provision and reconfigure overall pedagogical supports, in the context of which TAs are one, potentially vital component.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> At the present time, there are three levels of SEN. They are, in increasing level of severity: school action; school action plus; and statements. The key test for progression between these levels is whether a pupil is making adequate progress.
- <sup>2</sup> In line with common usage, we use the term 'teaching assistant' to cover equivalent classroom based paraprofessional roles, such as 'learning support assistant', 'special needs assistant' and 'classroom assistant'. We also include 'higher level teaching assistants' in this definition.
- <sup>3</sup> All full-time equivalent teachers and support staff in publicly funded schools, including all local authority maintained schools and academies.
- <sup>4</sup> Pupils with moderate learning difficulties have much greater difficulty than their peers in acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills and in understanding concepts. They may also have associated speech and language delay, lower self-esteem, lower levels of concentration and under-developed social skills, compared to pupils without SEN.
- <sup>5</sup> It is noted that whilst the same can be said for pupils with a statement for BESD, effort was made to select pupils whose statement also covered learning difficulties connected to BESD, and whose needs resembled, or were consistent with, those defined as having MLD.
- <sup>6</sup> In order to retain the anonymity of pupils, we have used fictitious names.
- <sup>7</sup> Here, prevalence is expressed at the respondent level. Therefore, the denominator is the total number of teachers interviewed (n = 56) and the total number of TAs interviewed (n = 66).
- <sup>8</sup> We are delighted that the Nuffield Foundation has recently agreed to fund a replication study that will focus on the educational experiences of statemented pupils in mainstream secondary schools. Data collection will take place over the 2015/16 school year.

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