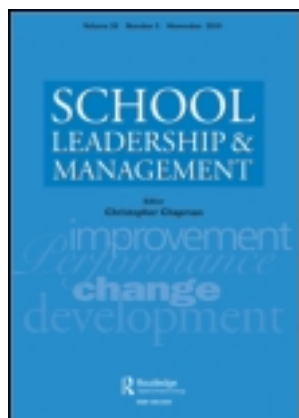


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### Challenging and changing how schools use teaching assistants: findings from the Effective Deployment of Teaching Assistants project

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## **Challenging and changing how schools use teaching assistants: findings from the Effective Deployment of Teaching Assistants project**

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Following research on the negative impact of support from teaching assistants (TAs) on pupils' academic progress, there was a clear need for schools to fundamentally reassess the way they use TAs. This article reports on findings from a collaborative project aimed at developing and evaluating alternative strategies to using TAs. Practitioner-led development trials were structured using a coherent and empirically sound model. Over the year of the intervention, schools made marked improvements to the ways TAs were deployed in classrooms, prepared for lessons and interacted with pupils. The study led to much-needed guidance on how to review current practice and make substantive changes to TA use, as part of wider school improvement.

**Keywords:** teaching assistants; school improvement; classroom organisation; special educational needs; collaborative research

### **Introduction**

This article reports findings from the Effective Deployment of Teaching Assistants (EDTA) project, which was designed to address the troubling results from the large-scale Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project: pupils who received the most support from teaching assistants (TAs) had less engagement with a qualified teacher and were found to make significantly less academic progress than similar pupils who received less TA support (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2012). The DISS project explained this surprising finding in terms of the decisions made about TAs' employment, deployment and preparedness – all factors outside TAs' control. The EDTA project – a collaborative project involving 10 schools, conducted over 2010–2011 – was a response to the DISS project conclusions that a fundamental reassessment is required of the way TAs are used.

The EDTA project was structured using the Wider Pedagogical Role (WPR): a coherent and empirically grounded explanatory model devised in the DISS project (Webster et al. 2011). The model gave the EDTA study a strong degree of veracity and a clear rationale for action. The aim of the EDTA project was to develop and evaluate alternative strategies to the three main components of the WPR model: TA preparedness, deployment and practice. Over the school year, schools achieved marked and productive changes to the ways in which TAs were deployed in classrooms and prepared prior to lessons. TAs' interactions with pupils were also examined and improved in ways that supported learning more effectively.

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The EDTA project findings extend the messages from the DISS project and give fresh impetus to the need for policy change. The DISS project called for the crucial issue of TA deployment to be addressed at the national level, to clarify once and for all what the broad role of TAs should be, and what it should *not* be. This is essential if schools are to establish consistency and avoid ‘role ambiguity’, which has been a major consequence of the continued failure to fully address this issue.

## Background

Recent research has addressed a vital, but largely neglected, feature of modern classroom life – the huge increase in classroom support staff, commonly called TAs.<sup>1</sup> In the UK, this unprecedented increase has resulted in profound changes, with TAs comprising a quarter of the workforce in mainstream schools: 32% and 15% of the nursery/primary and secondary school workforces, respectively (Department for Education [DfE] 2012; Statistics for Wales 2011; The Scottish Government 2011).

TAs have become an essential component of practice (if not policy) with regard to the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools and the delivery of curriculum interventions for low-attaining pupils. Both in the UK and internationally, there is ambiguity about the TA role in relation to teachers and teaching, and the inclusion of pupils with SEN. For a summary of these debates, see Blatchford, Russell, and Webster (2012) and Giangreco (2003, 2009). Commonsense views might reasonably predict positive effects on pupil learning as a result of more intensive adult support, and this would be supported by research on specific interventions (mostly for literacy) delivered by TAs (see Alborz et al. 2009; Slavin et al. 2009). However, delivering interventions accounts for around 30–40 minutes of the TAs’ day (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2012; Farrell et al. 2010), which leads to questions about what TAs do for the rest of the day, and what impact it has. Such questions were emphatically addressed by the multi-method DISS project. The UK government-funded study was set up to describe the characteristics and deployment of support staff and, for the first time, measure their impact on teachers, teaching and pupils.

The DISS project was the largest study yet undertaken on education paraprofessionals, and included a detailed analysis of the effect of TA support on the academic progress of 8200 pupils. The results of this analysis were clear, but surprising: pupils who received the most support from TAs made less progress in core subjects over a school year than similar pupils who received less support from TAs, even when controlling for characteristics that can affect progress and the allocation of TA support, such as prior attainment and level of SEN (Blatchford et al. 2009; Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2012). Other results from the DISS study were able to explain these results in terms of the effects of systemic, structural factors within which TAs operate and over which they have little or no control. The clear message, therefore, was that TAs were not to blame. In particular, three main explanations were suggested and conceptualised in the form of the WPR model (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2012; Webster et al. 2011).

The first explanation concerns the *deployment* of TAs. The DISS study found that TAs had a direct pedagogical role, interacting with pupils, usually in one-to-one and group contexts, and predominantly with pupils with SEN. The more severe a pupil’s needs, the more interaction with a TA increased, and interaction with a teacher decreased. Pupils’ interactions with TAs were much more sustained and interactive

than those they had with teachers. This might seem pedagogically valuable, but it also meant that TA-supported pupils became separated from the teacher, missing out on everyday teacher-to-pupil interactions and mainstream curriculum coverage. The second explanation concerns the nature of the interactions between TAs and pupils – or what the DISS project referred to as *practice*. Detailed analysis of audio transcripts showed that TAs' interactions with pupils, compared with teachers, were: less academically demanding; had a greater stress on completing tasks; and tended to 'close down' rather than 'open up' talk linguistically and cognitively (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2012; Radford, Blatchford, and Webster 2011; Rubie-Davies et al. 2010). The third explanation, *preparedness*, concerns the widespread lack of both training and professional development of TAs and teachers, and day-to-day aspects of planning and preparation before lessons, and feedback afterwards, which were found in the DISS study, and are highly likely to have a bearing on learning.

As Michael Giangreco in the USA has argued (Giangreco et al. 2005), an implicit form of discrimination has developed as a result of the commonplace models of TA usage: the least able and most disadvantaged pupils receive less educational input from teachers than other pupils. The default position, in which pupils get *alternative* – not additional – support by TAs, lets down the most disadvantaged children. The DISS project findings led us to conclude that retaining the status quo regarding TA deployment is no longer an option. Strong views have been expressed about the appropriateness of retaining 'cost-ineffective' TAs following the present austerity measures affecting public finances (e.g. Bassett et al. 2010). Given that the full extent of the problem is now known, unless schools are provided with strong guidance on how to prepare and deploy TAs more effectively, it will be hard to defend against further accusations that TAs represent wasteful public spending.

### The EDTA project

Despite the troubling findings from the DISS study on their impact, TAs have untapped potential. We have already mentioned summaries of evidence that show TAs have a positive impact on progress when they are specifically trained and prepared for curricular interventions (Alborz et al. 2009; Slavin et al. 2009), and we can add to this more positive findings from the DISS project on TAs' impact on teacher workload, classroom discipline, and the quality and amount of teaching teachers are able to achieve with a TA present (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2012). Furthermore, evidence from the analysis of TA impact on pupils' 'positive approaches to learning' (e.g. confidence, motivation) showed a clear positive effect in Year 9 (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2012).

In the absence of any substantive response from government agencies, the EDTA project was set up to respond to the urgent challenges raised by the DISS study. The EDTA project was based on the view that problems have arisen from assuming that TA support will lead to positive outcomes for pupils, yet there has been a failure to develop strategies to ensure this happens. Therefore, there was a pressing need for clear, well-informed guidance on effective ways of deploying and preparing TAs and teachers – and the DISS study clearly suggested where changes were needed, in the form of the conceptually and empirically robust framework of the WPR model.

## Method

The EDTA study was a collaborative research project, in which the authors worked with school leaders, class teachers and TAs to develop strategies for effective TA preparation, deployment and practice, under normal circumstances and funding arrangements. The strategies and the processes by which they were developed and implemented were evaluated in terms of a descriptive pre–post evaluation using mixed methods. The main research question was whether involvement in the intervention (i.e. the process of collaboration, action-planning, conducting trials, reflection and review schools engaged in, and structured using the WPR model, over the school year) led to more effective deployment, preparation and practice of TAs. In particular, the evaluation focused on the extent to which the following changed in each school:

- Teachers' deployment of TAs, in terms of which pupils were supported (e.g. pupil ability) and in which contexts (e.g. one-to-one; in groups).
- Teachers' role relative to TAs (which pupils were supported and in which contexts).
- The time for and quality of TAs' pre-lesson preparation and feedback.
- TAs' subject and instructional knowledge.
- The nature and quality of TAs' interactions with pupils.

The study did not measure the impact on pupil outcomes because sufficient time was needed to define, develop and test better models of practice. Such conditions would not have been conducive to a fair test. A further aim of the project was to produce a book of guidance based on the strategies developed by schools.<sup>2</sup>

The EDTA project had two integrated phases of development and evaluation. Full details can be found in the project final report available online (Blatchford, Webster, and Russell 2012).

### *Development phase*

The main strategy was to involve schools in the examination of the conceptual and practical aspects of TA deployment and – in collaboration with the authors and through small, local, authority-level communities of practice – develop and evaluate strategies for improving TA effectiveness. The three core components of the WPR model provided the focal points for the work conducted each term, beginning with preparedness, then deployment, then practice. Participants developed trials best suited to their own context and staffing structures. This work was then supported in schools by the authors. At the end of each term, participants in each local authority (LA) attended a debriefing meeting. In this way, there was a collaborative and incremental building of practices, informed by a general research framework, tested locally, and which led to the development of strong suggestions about effective methods of TA preparation and deployment.

### *Evaluation phase*

The school visits served a dual purpose: in addition to being the mechanism for the authors to work directly with teachers and TAs on the development trials, they

provided the opportunity to collect the data required to formatively evaluate them. The project evaluation adopted a within-school comparative approach, seeking to compare new models developed through the collaborative work with schools with existing models of TA deployment and working arrangements (as observed in pre-intervention visits and based on the results of the DISS study). The evaluation was based on the synthesis of data collected from multiple sources (described below).

### *Sample*

The intervention took place over 2010/2011 in 10 schools (six primary, four secondary) in two LAs in England. An open call was made to schools in two LAs (via a central LA contact) for expressions of interest to take part in the study. Participating schools were then selected from the interested schools with the assistance of the LA contact to achieve as representative a sample as possible, in terms of schools serving affluent and less affluent communities, small rural and large inner-city schools.

Two pairs of teachers and TAs, plus at least one member of senior staff (e.g. head teacher, deputy head teacher or SEN coordinator), were enlisted from each school. There were 50 participants overall: 12 primary teachers and 12 primary TAs; 8 secondary teachers and 8 secondary TAs; and 10 senior leaders.

The TAs involved broadly fitted the profile of TAs nationally, in terms of their gender, age and qualifications (see Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2012). They were predominantly women aged 35 and over, and the majority of TAs (72%) had qualifications at or below GCSE level. At the start of the project (September 2010), three-quarters of TAs had at least four years' experience in post.

### *Sources of data collection*

The project evaluation was based on the collection of information from audits, structured observations, semi-structured interviews and researchers' notes. The aim was to compare the situation at the beginning and end of the year through numerical data from the audits and observations, and to augment this with information on the processes that inhibited or enabled successful practice from the interviews and researchers' notes. More detail on the data collection tools (e.g. the audit scales) can be found in Blatchford, Webster, and Russell (2012).

### *Audits*

Participants completed audits at the start and end of the project. They were asked to assess teacher/TA preparation and TA deployment and practice. School leaders' evaluations were at the school level; teachers' and TAs' evaluations were at the classroom level. Assessments were made according to a series of scales on:

- The opportunity for, and quality of, pre-lesson planning and post-lesson feedback between teachers and TAs.
- TAs' subject and instructional knowledge.
- TAs' performance management.

Points at the lower end of the scales (scores of one or two) were associated with the least effective practice, and the points further up (four or five, in most cases) were associated with effective practice. The audits also invited open-ended comments, which were analysed according to the themes provided by the scales.

### *Structured observations*

The effects of the trials on TA deployment were objectively evaluated through quantitative observation data collected before and after the intervention. The structured observations schedule was a slightly amended version of that used in the DISS project, and so had proven reliability (Blatchford et al. 2009). Researchers observed at least one lesson per teacher–TA pair and summarised classroom activity within two-minute blocks. These data provide a systematic account of the work of teachers and TAs, in terms of:

- Their work context (e.g. with an individual pupil, with a group, leading the class; in or away from the classroom).
- The pupils they worked with (e.g. high-, middle- and low-attaining pupils and those with SEN).

In total, there were 1353 discrete observations (962 at primary; 391 at secondary).

### *Interviews*

Following the observations, one-to-one interviews were conducted with participants. Researchers explored audit responses and obtained more detailed information arising from the observations. The post-test interviews additionally asked participants for their overall experiences of taking part in the project. Interviews were recorded, then transcribed and analysed in terms of the broad structuring themes provided by the audits (e.g. TAs' subject and instructional knowledge) and observations (e.g. teachers' and TAs' work contexts).

### *TA-to-pupil talk*

Data on TA-to-pupil interactions were collected through qualitative notes made during the lesson observations and from interviews. These data helped determine the extent to which key features of TA-to-pupil talk, which we know from the DISS project are ineffective (e.g. emphasising task completion over learning), had been replaced with more productive types of talk.

### *Researchers' notes*

In addition to the formal evaluation, researchers asked teacher–TA pairs to evaluate the trials they had undertaken during half-termly discussions. Based on this and their own judgements from school visits, researchers drew together a document describing the main conclusions from the trials, and the nature of any facilitative or inhibiting factors to their success.

### *A note on potential researcher influence*

The success of collaborative research may have as much to do with the presence of researchers as with the work achieved as a part of the intervention, so it is important to comment on this before our presentation of results. In the early stages of the project, consideration was given to the sustainability and replicability of the intervention. As the research team could not be involved in collaborating with schools if the programme were to be rolled out widely in future, it made sense to adopt a relatively light-touch approach, with the team remaining at arm's length over the duration of the study and restricting our role to discussions about approaches adopted and recording what went on in schools. As such, the research team adopted an 'outsider' position throughout. As such, the findings of the study can be seen very much as a result of the hard work undertaken by schools, not as a consequence of following the specific directions of the research team.

## **Results**

The structured observations and audits were analysed numerically with appropriate statistical procedures and tests. Given the relatively small sample size, audit responses from all schools were combined in the analysis. Noteworthy differences between results for school phases are highlighted. Results are presented thematically; analysis of data from the audits, observations and interviews is organised in terms of the three main components of the WPR model (preparedness, deployment and practice), and designed to show the changes that took place as a result of the work conducted in each term, and cumulatively over the school year.

### *Preparedness*

The vast majority of the trials conducted relating to preparedness concerned the day-to-day aspects of preparing TAs for lessons. Here we report on findings from the audit scales concerning the opportunity for, and quality of, pre-lesson planning and post-lesson feedback between teachers and TAs, plus TAs' subject and instructional knowledge.

### *Planning and feedback time*

There were five scales covering the planning and feedback. The responses, shown in Table 1, were aggregated and the criteria for each scale collapsed into two categories, reflecting more and less effective practice. At the pre-intervention stage, the majority of school leaders (82%), two-thirds of teachers and three-quarters of TAs characterised lesson preparation and feedback as less effective. Interviews revealed the lack of opportunity for teacher-TA communication, and the extent to which time to meet relied on TAs' goodwill (e.g. working beyond their contracted hours).

At the post-intervention stage, participants said that preparation and feedback systems had improved. The audit scores suggested a modest impact: half of participants reported a positive view of TA preparedness. Whilst there was room for improvement, these results somewhat underplay the impact of the trials. The interviews revealed how primary schools had found time within the school day or



Table 1. Audit responses to scales on planning and feedback.

	School leader view		Teacher view		TA view	
	Pre-intervention (%)	Post-intervention (%)	Pre-intervention (%)	Post-intervention (%)	Pre-intervention (%)	Post-intervention (%)
Little or no opportunity to meet, limited information shared	40 (82)	22 (50)	64 (67)	38 (49)	73 (75)	41 (54)
Allocated time to meet, detailed information shared	9 (18)	22 (50)	32 (33)	40 (51)	24 (25)	35 (46)
Total	49 (100)	44 (100)	96 (100)	78 (100)	97 (100)	76 (100)

modified TAs' hours of work in order to create teacher–TA liaison time. Secondary schools found it harder to implement and sustain similar changes, due to the greater number of classes and teachers that TAs worked with across the week. Creating time to meet remains a perennial problem for schools, tied to TAs' contracts and, moreover, salaries; creating liaison time was associated with extending TAs' hours and increasing their pay. The goodwill of TAs remained, in a number of cases, integral. However, as one primary school leader explained, reconfiguring, rather than expanding, existing hours may contribute to improving TAs' effectiveness:

With money at a premium, you employ TAs for direct contact with children. But if that's not having an effect, maybe then taking quarter of an hour off that and giving them a quarter of an hour at the beginning of the day to talk to teachers about what they want them to do, might have a better impact. I think that's something we've learnt from doing it. (Primary school leader)

### *Quality of lesson preparation*

The development trials on preparedness also addressed the quality of information shared with TAs (e.g. teachers' lesson plans). Results from the pre-intervention audits showed that the quality of lesson planning was a greater issue for TAs than for teachers. Consistent with what we have already stated, a lack of time was cited in interviews as the reason why TAs found themselves 'under-prepared'. The situation seemed most acute in secondary schools, where TAs (much as they did in the DISS project) described going into lessons 'blind' (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2012).

At the end of the project, the view expressed by participants was that the quality of lesson preparation and feedback had improved. TAs in both phases had benefited from teachers providing more detailed lesson plans and, in some cases, additional material in advance of lessons. Teachers, through their lesson plans, not only made their expectations of TAs clearer, but avoided situations where TAs went into lessons blind. Any concerns that having to give greater thought to the TA's role in the lesson created extra work were offset by the advantages teachers noticed as a result of making this effort:

I think the benefits outweigh any extra work . . . I think to start with, it's a short-term steep learning curve, and then when you actually see the benefit, you think, 'How could I ever go back?' No way. I couldn't at all actually! (Primary teacher)

The effect such improvements had on TAs was profound. The following comment was typical:

I feel more confident . . . sharing the learning objectives and what needs to be achieved and who to focus on, just means I'm just much more aware of where to be. (Primary TA)

### *TAs' subject and instructional knowledge*

The audit asked respondents to describe the main ways in which TAs obtained subject knowledge, general instructional techniques and strategies for supporting pupils with SEN (referred to collectively here as 'knowledge'). Four options were provided, ranging from picking information up from teachers' whole class delivery (considered least effective practice), through reading lesson plans (if provided), to

informal and formal types of training (considered most effective). The pre-intervention results (which collated data from three scales) showed that 70% of school leaders' responses suggested that TAs' preparation was at the more effective end of the scale, with knowledge being gained from discussions with teachers and SEN specialists and targeted training. However, this was not completely shared by teachers and TAs, whose responses were fairly evenly split. Responses from teachers and TAs suggest that 'tuning in' to the teacher's classroom talk was the common means of knowledge transfer (teachers: 34%; TAs: 27%). A similar picture was found in the DISS study (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2012).

The post-intervention audit responses from teachers and TAs gave the clearest and most reliable indication of the impact of the trials aimed at improving this situation. Encouragingly, responses suggested that TAs relied less on tuning in to whole class input (teachers: 15%; TAs: 20%), and instead got the information they needed from quality lesson plans and conversations with teachers.

### ***Deployment***

Here, we report on how, over the school year, school leaders challenged the existing models of TA deployment and the rationales that underpinned these decisions, and how teachers changed the ways in which they used TAs in the classroom. We do this by drawing on the interview data and open-ended audit comments, but our explanation of changes at the classroom level also makes use of findings from the structured observations of teachers and TAs.

#### *School level deployment*

In line with results from the DISS project, comments from the pre-intervention interviews revealed a lack of a school-wide agreement on the role of TAs, which led to inconsistency and variation in the way teachers deployed TAs. The situation was most acute in secondary schools. In the minds of many secondary teachers, the purpose of the TA role was inextricably connected with meeting the needs of pupils with SEN, under the auspices of the Learning Support (LS) department (the base in and from which TAs worked, and where these pupils were withdrawn for interventions). Where pupils with a statement of SEN were allocated TA support, teachers shifted their responsibility for these pupils to TAs. Consequently, teachers increased both their distance from such pupils and their reliance on TAs:

I am hearing things and seeing things from teachers who are essentially giving up and just saying, 'I don't know what to do with them. That child is your responsibility. I don't know how to include them in my lesson'. (Secondary TA)

There had been no significant challenge to the fundamental nature and purpose of TA deployment, which was raised as part of the intervention: TAs retained a pedagogical role. But it was clear that participation in the project had a profound effect on school leaders and teachers in terms of the ways in which they conceptualised TA deployment in service of learning. Senior leadership teams initiated review processes and began thinking more strategically about the purpose of the TA role and expectations in terms of pupil outcomes.

Based largely on the successes of the classroom trials (see below), at the end of the project, schools were preparing to roll out the practices developed through the trials across the school in the forthcoming academic year. TAs were being used as advocates among the workforce for the benefits of the changes brought about by the project. However, there remained a sense amongst TAs that they were needed to work with low-attaining pupils and those with SEN. As one primary school leader described it, TAs are ‘genetically hard-wired to help them’. Participants acknowledged that altering such entrenched attitudes will take time, but involvement in the project had at least brought these issues into the open, and schools must be given considerable credit for beginning to think through ways to address sensitive and complex issues associated with teachers’ separation from, and (at worst) abdication of responsibility for, pupils with SEN.

### *Classroom-level deployment*

Data from the structured observations describe the key ways in which the roles of teachers and TAs in the classroom changed as a result of involvement in the project. We illuminate these results with comments from the interviews and open-ended audit questions to show the extent and effect of the changes introduced.

The most significant change to the way in which TAs were deployed concerned the way in which TAs were more active in lessons. The observation system used in the EDTA project was based on one used in the DISS study, but was refined in such a way that it could capture more reliably instances where TAs were ‘passive’ – that is, when they were part of the class audience, listening to the teacher. The pre-intervention observations revealed that TAs were passive for half the time they were in the classroom. This is largely explainable in terms of the extent to which teachers spent more than half of their time leading the whole class (60%). In such circumstances, the TA’s role is restricted:

You’re just kind of not doing anything, and the teacher’s stood there reading from a book . . . you know you can’t really do an awful lot, can you? If that goes on for near enough the whole lesson, what can you do? (Secondary TA)

The post-intervention observations revealed far fewer instances of TAs being passive (18% vs. 31% at the pre-intervention stage). This was significant, as teachers had reduced – from almost a third to less than a fifth – the proportion of time in which TAs were essentially unused during lessons. This was in part helped, in secondary schools, by teachers spending less time leading the whole class and creating more time for adults to work with small groups. Another promising model of classroom organisation, observed in wider use at the post-intervention stage, was for the teacher to work with an individual or group while the TA kept order by roving around the classroom:

The teacher works with a small focus group and the TA roves the classroom, addressing general needs and ensuring children are on task. This has taken time to embed, but it works well. (Primary teacher)

In terms of *which* pupils adults worked with, the pre-intervention observations were very much in line with findings from the DISS project. As the data in Table 2 show,

Table 2. Results from structured observations on the pupils supported by TAs.

	Primary TAs		Secondary TAs		Total	
	Pre-intervention (%)	Post-intervention (%)	Pre-intervention (%)	Post-intervention (%)	Pre-intervention (%)	Post-intervention (%)
High attainment	24 (7)	51 (26)	0 (0)	0 (0)	24 (5)	51 (18)
Middle attainment	118 (34)	64 (33)	2 (2)	0 (0)	120 (26)	64 (22)
Low attainment/ SEN	191 (54)	68 (35)	98 (82)	46 (47)	289 (61)	114 (39)
Mixed attainment	18 (5)	10 (5)	19 (16)	51 (53)	37 (8)	61 (21)
Total	351 (100)	193 (100)	119 (100)	97 (100)	470 (100)	290 (100)

TAs tended to work with low-attaining pupils and those with SEN (primary: 54%; secondary: 82%). Perhaps one of the most significant findings from the EDTA project was that by the post-intervention stage, TAs were spending much less time with low-attaining pupils and those with SEN (primary: 35%; secondary: 47%). Primary TAs switched to spending over half their time working with middle and high-attaining pupils (59%). We note that setting was used in all secondary schools, and TAs were rarely deployed to work in sets other than those containing low-attaining pupils and those with SEN. However, as in primary classrooms, secondary TAs were far more likely to work with a mix of pupils in these classes (53%), and not just with those who struggled most.

Indeed, as TAs were deployed to work with other pupils, teachers spent more time working with low-attaining pupils and those with SEN. Involvement in the project prompted teachers to challenge their own practice and consider how the classroom could be organised more effectively in order to ensure that pupils receive equal amounts of teacher time across the school week, and thereby mitigate some of the negative effects of having too much adult support (e.g. dependence). Working more often with the needier pupils greatly improved and enriched teachers' understanding of their learning needs and progress:

I've really enjoyed sitting with specific groups through either literacy or maths... because I get so much more feedback... That's been so great, so beneficial.  
(Primary teacher)

### ***Practice***

The audit data were not particularly instructive in terms of describing the changes to TA practice (i.e. their interactions with pupils) that took place over the year, which may indicate problems with the clarity and/or validity of this particular section of the audit instrument. A somewhat more accurate, though admittedly less systematic, picture of TA practice emerged through analysis of qualitative observation notes on TAs' interactions with pupils, which were made at the same time as the structured observations. We were interested in determining the extent to which key features of TA-to-pupil talk, which we know from the DISS project are ineffective (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2012; Radford, Blatchford, and Webster 2011; Rubie-Davies et al. 2010), had been replaced with more productive types of talk. The types of talk of interest were:

- Closing down talk (e.g. closed questions and leading statements; supplying answers).
- Emphasising task completion rather than learning and understanding.
- 'Stereo teaching' (e.g. repeating, more or less exactly, teacher talk, moments after teacher has spoken).
- Providing inaccurate or vague explanations of instructions, processes and concepts.

The impression obtained from observation notes was that TA-to-pupil talk typically reflected two of the main findings found in the DISS project analyses: firstly, that TAs tend to 'close down' the talk to pupils, rather than open it up; and secondly, that

TAs tend to prioritise task completion over learning and understanding. The interview data revealed that compared with TAs, school leaders were more aware of TAs' tendency to provide answers or heavy prompts, rather than making the most of opportunities for learning. As found in the DISS project, such talk was often characteristic of TAs' emphasising task completion rather than learning:

The teacher's trying to see if they've learnt anything, whereas the TA's trying to see if they've done anything. (Secondary SENCo)

In primary schools, the tendency towards 'stereo teaching' was particularly noticeable, most likely as a result of the TA sitting next to pupils during the teachers' class input. In such instances, the pupil was in effect hearing the voices of two adults talking simultaneously, very often about the same thing. In secondary schools, TAs tended to situate themselves at the side of the room whilst the teacher addressed the class, and so were often too far away to have such interactions. Observations revealed few attempts overall to open up pupil talk by TAs, though TAs had fewer opportunities than teachers to engage in this sort of talk (e.g. when the teacher is addressing the whole class, of which the TA is part, this type of more expansive talk is less appropriate). Therefore, interactions with pupils – typically those with SEN and low-attaining pupils – tended to consist of simplifying language and making the teacher's talk more accessible. There were no instances of TAs providing inaccurate or vague explanations of instructions, processes and concepts.

The trials relating to practice were introduced during the last term of the project, and so had the least time to bed in. The difficulty of identifying substantive change is likely to have been compounded by the fact that changing TAs' talk to pupils is particularly challenging. Evidence from the interviews suggested that there could be resistance to change, because TAs' practice was so ingrained or 'hard-wired':

TAs aren't likely to leave their comfort zone of behaviour, motivation and repeating of chunks of instructions. (Secondary SENCo)

In the pre-intervention observations, TAs were observed promoting pupil independence by withdrawing more often and using prompts to remind pupils of alternative strategies for self-help (e.g. checking that they had thoroughly read the question, or asking a peer for help). Schools sought to build on these features of talk through their trials:

We've looked at the importance of questioning. Every TA has been given a selection of prompt questioning words and what might be appropriate, what might not be so appropriate, and how we can broaden – depending on the topic or the theme that we're looking at – to stimulate the children; not to give them answers. (Primary TA)

Encouragingly, by the end of the project, there was evidence that these trials were beginning to pay dividends, in terms of improving the quality of TAs' questioning skills:

I've picked up improved language and support and independence of pupils... [TA] has just come on in leaps and bounds with her confidence with her questioning. Because

she'll often listen to how I question the children and then I notice then she'll use that with the groups and individual children. (Primary teacher)

Many of the school trials also looked at how TAs' talk could be improved to promote pupil independence, thereby reducing the well-known problem of pupil dependency. These practices led TAs to consider when *not* to talk, giving pupils time to respond:

A lot of the time, because the kids that I'm working with often struggle, you just want them to feel like they're progressing or achieving. But actually when you think about it, for that minute or second when you've virtually given them the answer they might be feeling a bit better, but if you look at the big picture, it's not helping their progress. (Secondary TA)

Our analysis of the changes made as part of the project is more impressionistic than systematic, relying on self-report and qualitative observations. However, the general sense was that although the practice trials needed time to bed in, positive change was detectable.

### *The impact of the project on teachers and TAs*

Challenging existing models of TA deployment, then thinking through and implementing alternative models, prompted teachers to evaluate the impact of their own practice. The opportunity to reflect, which the EDTA project allowed, enabled teachers to develop a meaningful understanding of the TA role and of how their own practice constrains or facilitates the effect TAs can have:

I hadn't really thought before how difficult it must be for a TA to go between subject to subject, teacher to teacher, and sit in a classroom not really knowing what's going on... That's the big thing that's probably come out of it for me really: awareness. (Secondary teacher)

The impact the project had on TAs was also significant, in terms of raising their profile and status, and increasing their confidence; all as a result of improving their preparation and clarifying their role, tasks and expectations:

I've got a clearer understanding of what my role is. And how wasted I can be if I'm not used properly... There's a lot more discussion of what's expected of us and how we should be consistent... which I feel has really helped. (Secondary TA)

Having that time to know exactly what is expected of me every day, within the classroom, with different groups, with different individuals... it's just turned my job, my role, upside down – for the better; it really has. (Primary TA)

### **Discussion**

The EDTA project was prompted by the clear and consistent message coming out of the DISS project that a fundamental rethink was required if schools are going to get the best use from their TAs – and help pupils. The robust framework of the WPR model provided a structure for a year-long iterative process of research-led development trials, followed by reflection and further strengthening of key



conclusions. This work led to firm, ground-tested strategies, thematically linked and connected to overall pedagogical aims and policy.

The authors worked in collaboration with school leaders, teachers and TAs to develop (using existing resources) and evaluate alternative strategies for effective TA preparation, deployment and practice. The main research question was whether involvement in the intervention improved teacher and TA deployment, the time for and quality of TAs' pre-lesson preparation and feedback, TAs' subject and instructional knowledge, and the nature and quality of TA–pupil interactions.

Over the intervention year, schools made marked and productive changes to the ways in which TAs were prepared before lessons. Primary schools found creative ways of arranging the school day or TAs' working hours in order to create time with teachers. Where creating time remained problematic (in secondary schools), improving the quality and clarity of lesson plans went some way towards remediating the effects of TAs going into lessons blind.

Careful thought had been given to less productive uses of TAs, and teachers deployed TAs and themselves differently: TAs worked across the attainment range, enabling teachers to spend quality time with pupils who struggled most. This went some way to reversing the deployment patterns found in the DISS project. There were also improvements to the ways in which TAs interacted with pupils. Having raised awareness of the general trend found in the DISS project (TAs emphasise task completion over learning), participants developed more effective models of practice aimed at reducing adult dependency.

As a result of involvement in the EDTA project, schools increased the productive uses of teaching and support staff. The experience was professionally important for all staff involved. There was a constant refrain among participants that there would be 'no going back to how things were'. Successful change in the project seemed more likely when the head teacher drove the process and was able to validate, sanction and encourage the review process. Leadership is vital to the change process, and in this sense, reassessing the use of TAs can be seen as part of the broader processes of school improvement.

A central mechanism for achieving this is our book of guidance, which is designed to help school leaders and teachers improve management policies and classroom practices based on the most effective practice developed through the study. As mentioned previously, the issue of sustainability was considered at the inception of the project, and the guidance we have produced gives the EDTA project life beyond the work described in this article.

We have argued that the WPR model can inform adaptations to existing models of educational effectiveness (e.g. Creemers and Kyriakides 2008), in order to take account of the direct impact TAs have on pupil achievement, and how it can frame future decisions about the intentions and expected outcomes of TA deployment (Webster et al. 2011). The EDTA project provided the first opportunity to test, albeit on a small scale, the WPR model in such a way. The results of the study extend the messages arising out of the DISS project and give fresh impetus to the need for policy change.

In a sense, a limitation of the study was that we were unable to fully test the impact of the WPR model and the processes and strategies it gave rise to in terms of pupil outcomes. To do this would have required a second year. A clear direction for future research will be to rigorously test the alternative ways of preparing and

deploying TAs, as set out in the book of guidance, in terms of the impact on pupils' academic progress and behaviour.

Whilst the EDTA project did not ask schools to examine their SEN provision per se, some school leaders, in light of the known concerns about TA cost-effectiveness, questioned choices relating to how existing service delivery for SEN relies heavily on the employment and use of TAs. The government's Green Paper on SEN states – rightly in our view – that school leaders are best placed to make decisions about: (1) how pupils with SEN receive 'the best quality teaching' (DfE 2011); and (2) TA deployment and responsibilities. Local problems required locally derived solutions. But if the government is serious about this, then it must address the crucial issue of TA deployment at the national level, and clarify once and for all what the broad role of TAs should be, and what it should *not* be. This is essential if schools are going to derive value for money from TAs in their efforts to raise standards. Therefore, the findings from the EDTA study, and the guidance that has been produced following it, are particularly timely in the absence of a clear vision articulated by policy-makers.

The contribution of the EDTA project allows us to go beyond identification of the problem concerning TA deployment, towards clear and valuable recommendations concerning how schools can change practice. In the current political climate, change seems ever more likely to be delegated to individual schools, and so the process of review, reflection and action accomplished through the EDTA project provides school leaders with good evidence of the positive changes that are possible.

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### Notes

1. 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. This definition also includes higher level teaching assistants.
2. *Maximising the Impact of Teaching Assistants: Guidance for School Leaders and Teachers* by Russell, Webster, and Blatchford will be published by Routledge in February 2013.

### Notes on contributors

Rob Webster was a researcher on the DISS project and its follow-up study, the EDTA project. He is currently co-directing the Making a Statement project, which is investigating the educational experiences of pupils with a statement for SEN in primary schools. Before his research career, Rob worked for six years as a TA in schools in London and the south-east.

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a programme to improve the effectiveness of pupil group work in primary and secondary classrooms (SPRinG project).

Anthony Russell was a researcher on the EDTA, DISS and CSPAR projects, and worked on the 2009 Lamb Inquiry into parental confidence in the SEN statementing system. He has worked as a primary deputy head teacher and a local authority science adviser, teacher trainer and curriculum developer overseas.

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