

Unlocking the potential of TAs

We're getting better at making sure teaching assistants' talents do not go to waste, but there's more to be done, say **Rob Webster** and **Peter Blatchford**...

A year ago, schools were advised to get rid of teaching assistants (TAs). Now it seems we cannot do without them!

The recent positive results from studies funded by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), showing that interventions carried out by TAs help improve children's results in the 3Rs, are a welcome response to last summer's media stories on a report by the Reform thinktank, which recommended schools phase out TAs on the basis they have a negligible impact on learning.

The EEF's randomised control trials are consistent with earlier research, going back many years, which evaluated the use of TAs for specific 'pull-out' programmes to help pupils develop their literacy and numeracy 'basics'.

The findings are also welcome, given the troubling results from our large-scale Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project, the main research cited in the Reform report.

Our study, involving 8,200 pupils, found clear evidence that the more support pupils received from TAs over the school year, the less progress they made. This was the case even when we controlled for 'pupil factors', such as prior attainment and their level of special educational need (SEN).

We have often been asked how we can reconcile the two sets of seemingly contradictory results: the negative findings

from the DISS project, and the positive ones from specific interventions. We think the explanation is clear. While the intervention studies relate to specific outcomes from a targeted programme, in which TAs have (usually) been trained for the job, the DISS study was concerned with how TAs were used on a daily basis across the whole curriculum and school day.

It is no surprise that TAs, when appropriately trained, can produce positive effects. But the DISS study was also clear that, for the most part, TAs are not used in this fashion. We found they were typically used in a less

structured way, supporting lower attaining pupils and those with SEN. This support was an alternative to teacher input, not additional to it; so TA-supported pupils missed out on interactions with their teachers.

We also found that TAs were very often under-prepared for their role – going into lessons 'blind', as they put it – and they had received little guidance, induction or training.

In more recent studies, we have found this deployment of TAs remains commonplace. The problem, then, is not TAs as such, but the ways in which TAs are used in schools.

The bigger picture

Although the results of the EEF trials are good news, there are issues with pull-out interventions that need to be carefully considered when TAs are used to deliver them away from the classroom.

Studies of this nature vary in their design, and as such, can limit wider claims about TA impact. Firstly, not all studies decouple the effects of individual TA support and of the intervention itself. So we are often unaware to what extent progress is attributable to the programme or to TA support. Secondly, many of these studies do not address whether the effects found would have been greater had the programme had been delivered by a teacher.

Studies of TA-led interventions generally measure impact using standardised tests that assess the specific curriculum topics covered in the intervention, so we do not know to what extent these gains feed into wider annual attainment.

Pupils withdrawn from the class for catch-up programmes become detached from the teacher and the curriculum they would have been otherwise covering. Therefore, gains made via interventions may be at the expense of lost curriculum coverage, and time with the teacher, so we must also account for these opportunity costs.

There have been no research studies that have examined this specifically. For now at least though, we might logically conclude that gains made in TA-led interventions away from the

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class do not translate into end-of-year attainment.

A wholesale rethink

Despite the difficulty in isolating the myriad factors that contribute to attainment (e.g. family background, SEN, prior attainment), it seems the reasonable, and largely proven, assumptions about TA impact with respect to catch-up programmes – no doubt informed by schools' own data on this – has fuelled belief in a wider corollary between TA support in the classroom and pupil progress more generally. Sadly, the DISS project results suggest this is a mirage.

Training TAs for interventions is essential, but even more so is dealing with the issues of their deployment in the less structured contexts in which they spend most of their school day. This has been overlooked in the narrow and selective interpretations of the research, such as that made by Reform, which often serve economic, rather than educational, agendas, and result in unhelpful and misleading headlines.

Thankfully, it seems parents' and practitioners' personal experiences of TAs remain roundly positive, and they seem impervious to the suggestions that schools should dramatically reduce TA numbers. Rightly, they do not blame TAs for the situation in which we find ourselves.

But absolution only gets us so far. Understanding what is at

the root of ineffective TA use leads us to some fairly clear suggestions about what schools can do to turn the situation around.

The first concerns the place of curriculum interventions in the learning experiences of lower attaining pupils and those with SEN. Our recent Making a Statement study has shown that when interventions are something of an adjunct to the curriculum, it is left to pupils themselves to make the links between learning from interventions outside the classroom and the curriculum coverage back in class. This somewhat devalues the valuable contribution of TAs. We believe that schools must be more deliberate in making interventions part of a coherent, integrated package of learning for those falling behind.

We have set out strategies in our book, *Maximising the Impact of Teaching Assistants*, to help schools rethink how they use TAs, and ensure they add value to teachers, not replace them. For us, there are three areas that require attention.

Firstly, we need to rethink the deployment of TAs, so they are not given primary responsibility for pupils in most need, and are used in ways to allow teachers to spend more time with these pupils. Allied to this is the need to develop better practice, or what we might call a 'pedagogy for TAs': a way of interacting with pupils using effective styles of questioning to promote and support

MAXIMISING TA IMPACT

Schools that took part in the authors' Effective Deployment of Teaching Assistants (EDTA) research project experienced a number of positive changes as a result. These included:

- > The quality and clarity of teachers' lesson plans improved over the year, and reduced instances of TAs going into lessons blind or relying on picking up information via teachers' whole class delivery.
- > Involvement in the project had the effect of instigating a rigorous performance management process for TAs.
- > TAs did more roving, creating the opportunity for teachers to spend more time working with low attaining pupils and those with SEN.
- > Alternative models of deployment reduced pupil-teacher/pupil-peer separation; pupils spent more time in the mainstream classroom.

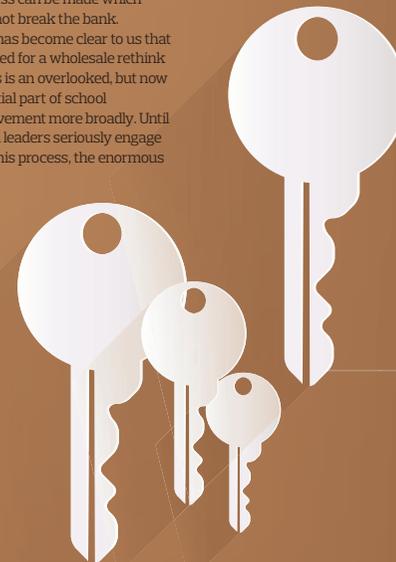
independent learning. Finally, we need to rethink TAs' preparedness, so they have more time to liaise with teachers and for professional development.

We do not underestimate the challenge facing schools, not least at a time when they face ever-closer scrutiny from Ofsted and have constraints on their budget. Yet we have found in our work with schools that significant and transformative progress can be made which need not break the bank.

It has become clear to us that the need for a wholesale rethink on TAs is an overlooked, but now essential part of school improvement more broadly. Until school leaders seriously engage with this process, the enormous

potential of TAs, in terms of their contribution to and impact on teaching and learning, will not be fully realised.

For more on the authors' research, visit teachingassistantresearch.co.uk. For information on training and consultancy services, visit maximisingtheimpactofTAs.co.uk



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