

The impact of teaching assistants on pupils

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Introduction

The growth of TAs worldwide

Since the early-to-mid 1990s, there has been a phenomenal growth in classroom- or pupil-based support staff. These adults are known in different countries by different names: ‘teaching assistant’, ‘classroom assistant’ and ‘learning support assistant’ are common in the UK; ‘paraprofessional’ and ‘paraeducator’ in the USA; and ‘teacher aide’ in Australia. In line with the UK Government, in this paper, we use the generic term ‘teaching Assistant’ (TA) to cover these equivalent roles.

A recent international survey reports a general increase in TAs employed in schools in the USA, Australia, Italy, Sweden, Canada, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong, Iceland, Ireland, Malta and South Africa (Giangreco & Doyle, 2007). We are also aware of increases in use of TAs in New Zealand. The growth and numbers of TAs seem most pronounced in the UK. In 2011, TAs comprised a quarter of the total school workforce in state schools in England, and over half of all support staff. TAs are therefore now a sizeable part of the school workforce. It also seems numbers of TAs have been increasing at a faster rate than teachers. These data aside, it is difficult to obtain exact figures on the number of TAs and their proportion in the school workforce. There is an urgent need for international data on TA employment.

One principal reason for the growth in TAs worldwide is the way inclusion into mainstream schools has become the favoured means of educating children with special educational needs and disabilities. TAs are seen as integral to this process. Another reason, in the UK at least, was to help deal with problems with teacher workloads – a main contributory factor to the crisis in teacher retention during the 2000s. The English and Welsh Governments in 2003 implemented *The National Agreement*, as it was called, to raise pupil standards and tackle excessive teacher workload, in large part via new and expanded support roles and responsibilities for TAs and other support staff.

There is much debate about the appropriate role of TAs. There is ambiguity because in one sense TAs can help pupils *indirectly* by assisting the school to enhance teaching (e.g. by taking on teachers’ administrative duties), but many TAs have a *direct* teaching role, interacting daily with pupils (mainly those with learning and behavioural needs), supplementing teacher input, and providing opportunities for one-to-one and small group work. This direct instructional role affects boundaries between teaching and non-teaching roles and has been controversial in the UK (Bach et al., 2004) and elsewhere (e.g. Finland (Takala, 2007) and the USA (Giangreco et al., 2010)).

Given the scale of the increase in TAs, and their direct, educational role, it is vital to ask about the impact of TAs on pupils' educational progress. Worryingly, such evidence is very thin. This chapter, therefore, makes heavy use of the largest study yet conducted on TAs – the UK five-year Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project – which was set up to describe the characteristics and deployment of TAs and other school support staff, and to address, for the first time, their impact on teachers, teaching and pupils.

Research Findings

i. Impact of TAs On academic outcomes.

Reviews by Alborz et al., (2009) and Slavin et al., (2009) show that experimental studies that examined the effect of TAs who deliver specific curricular interventions (mostly in literacy), tend to have a positive impact on pupil progress when TAs are prepared and trained, and have support and guidance from the teacher and school about practice.

However, other experimental studies report negative results. Klassen (2001), in a study of 67 pupils who had a statement of special educational needs (SEN) for a specific literacy difficulty or dyslexia, and who were assigned additional support for literacy, found they made less progress than their unsupported peers. Finn et al., (2000) found that there was no compensatory effect of having TAs (extra to teachers) in larger ('regular') classes.

Curricular interventions led by TAs take up only a small part of pupils' school days, and a main limitation of research in this field is the lack of rigorous empirical studies of the impact of TAs when judged in relation to normal forms of deployment under everyday conditions over the school year. Such results were provided by the DISS study (see Blatchford et al., 2011; 2012). This used an alternative, longitudinal and naturalistic design within which the analysis studied effects of TA support (based on teacher estimates and measures from systematic observation) on 8,200 pupils' academic progress in English, mathematics and science under normal classroom conditions. Two cohorts of pupils in seven age groups in mainstream schools were tracked over one year each. Multi-level regression methods were used to address the independent effect of TA support on pupil outcomes, controlling for factors known to affect progress (and TA support), such as pupils' SEN status, prior attainment, eligibility for free school meals, English as additional language, deprivation, gender and ethnicity¹.

The results were striking: 16 of the 21 results were in a negative direction and there were no positive effects of TA support for any subject or for any year group. Those pupils receiving the most support from TAs made less progress than similar pupils who received little or no support from TAs, even after controlling for factors likely to be related to more TA support (e.g. prior attainment and SEN status). Furthermore, there is evidence from the DISS study that learning outcomes for pupils with the highest levels of need, who are typically those receive the most

¹ Further details on the rationale for this approach and further justification for claims about the causal role of TAs on pupil outcomes can be found in (Blatchford et al., 2011).

support from TAs, are worse (Webster et al., 2010). These results are troubling, and we turn to likely explanations once we have looked at other effects.

ii. Impact of TAs on pupils' behaviour, motivation and approaches to learning

It would seem to follow from reports of teachers (Blatchford et al., 2011; 2012) that assigning TAs to particular pupils, usually those with problems connected to learning, behaviour or attention, would give these pupils more individual attention and help them develop confidence and motivation, good working habits and the willingness to finish tasks. Schlapp et al., (2003) identify the benefits of classroom assistants more in terms of the range of learning experiences provided and effects on pupil motivation, confidence and self-esteem, and less in terms of pupil progress. The DISS study found the presence of TAs helped maintain classroom focus and discipline through an ‘extra pair of eyes’.

On the other hand, there are concerns that TAs can encourage dependency, because they prioritise outcomes of activities rather than encouraging pupils to think for themselves (Moyles & Suschitsky, 1997). Giangreco (2010) has argued that over-reliance on one-to-one paraprofessional support leads to a wide range of detrimental effects on pupils (e.g. in terms of interference with ownership and responsibility, and separation from classmates).

The DISS study examined the effect of the amount of TA support on eight scales representing so called ‘Positive Approaches to Learning’ (PAL) (see Blatchford et al, 2011; 2012), that is: distractibility; task confidence; motivation; disruptiveness; independence; relationships with other pupils; completion of assigned work; and follows instructions from adults. The results showed little evidence that the amount of support pupils received from TAs over a school year improved these dimensions, except for those in Year 9 (13-14 year-olds), where there was a clear positive effect of TA support across all eight PAL outcomes.

iii. Impact of TAs on teachers and teaching

Although effects of TAs on pupils’ academic learning is worrying, it is worth noting that the DISS study consistently showed that TAs and other support staff had a strong positive effect on teachers’ job satisfaction, levels of stress and workload – chiefly by relieving teachers of many of their administrative duties (Blatchford et al, 20011; 2012). Results from systematic observations also confirmed teachers’ views that TAs had a positive effect in terms of reducing disruption and allowing more time for the teacher to teach.

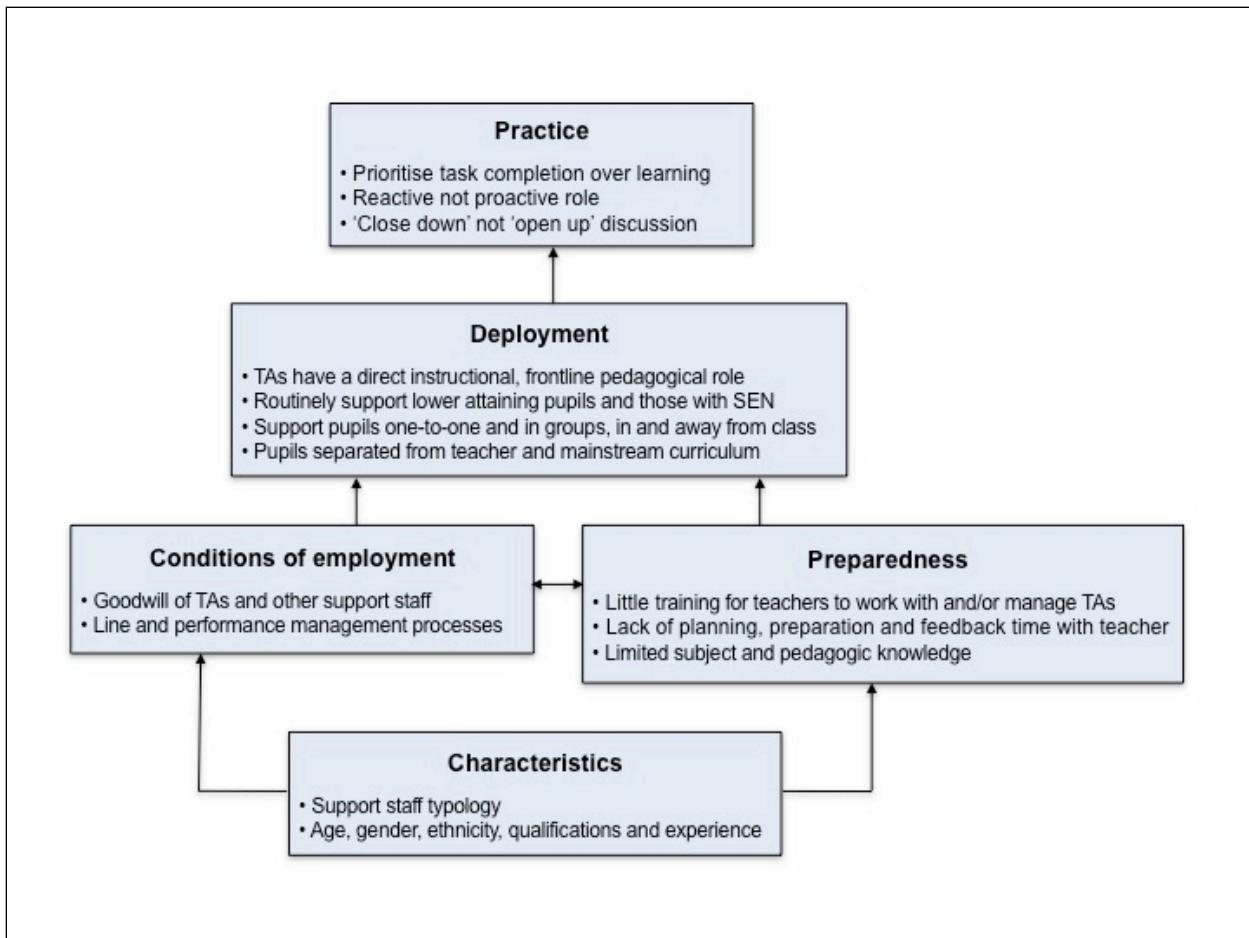
Summary and recommendations

How do we account for these negative results found by the UK DISS project? One obvious explanation might be that pupils given most TA support would in any case have been likely to make less progress. However, such explanations, in terms of pre-existing characteristics of pupils, are unlikely because key pupil characteristics that typically affect progress (and TA support), such as SEN status, prior attainment and measures of deprivation, were controlled for

in the statistical analyses. To be of any consequence, any potential factor would need to be systemic across all year groups and subjects, and related to *both* attainment and TA support.

So, if pupil factors do not appear to be explaining the negative relationship between TA support and pupil progress, what is? The ‘Wider Pedagogical Role’ model (presented in Figure 1) was developed to summarise and interpret other results from the DISS study concerning the broader context within which TAs work, and which are likely to maximise or inhibit their effectiveness.

Figure 1. The Wider Pedagogical Role model.



The WPR model has three key concepts:

i. Preparedness

Preparedness concerns the lack of training and professional development of TAs and teachers, and day-to-day aspects of planning and preparation before lessons, and feedback afterwards, which are likely to have a bearing on learning outcomes for pupils.

ii. Deployment

The DISS study found TAs have 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 increases, and interaction with a teacher decreases. Pupils' interactions with TAs are much more sustained and interactive than those they have with teachers. This might seem pedagogically valuable, but it also means that TA-supported pupils become separated from the teacher, missing out on everyday teacher-to-pupil interactions and mainstream curriculum coverage (especially where TAs are given responsibility for leading interventions away from the classroom).

iii. Practice

The DISS findings show that pupils' interactions with TAs are much lower in quality than those with teachers (Rubie-Davis et al., 2010). TAs are more concerned with task completion than learning; and inadequate preparation leads to TAs' interactions being reactive. In addition, teachers generally 'open up' pupil talk, whereas TAs 'close down' talk, both linguistically and cognitively (Radford et al., 2011).

Conclusions

Though data are limited, there are signs of a huge increase in the use of paraprofessionals working in education, many with front line educational roles. The largest study to date of the impact of TAs on pupils' academic progress has shown that there is a negative relationship between the amount of support from TAs and pupils' academic progress. The findings from DISS, and the work of Giangreco, show that TAs in the UK and the USA have a predominantly remedial role, supporting lower-attaining pupils and those with SEN. Teachers like this arrangement because they can then teach the rest of the class in the knowledge that the children in most need get more individual adult attention. But the more support pupils get from TAs, the less they get from teachers. It is perhaps unsurprising then that these pupils make less progress.

The WPR model summarises the most likely explanations for the DISS study findings. There are likely to be similarities with the ways in which TAs are deployed and prepared in other countries apart from the UK (e.g. Takala, 2007; Giangreco et al., 2010), although only the DISS project has so far been able to produce data on the effect of TA support on pupil attainment in such a large scale and systematic way.

Future research needs to examine the possible explanatory factors of preparedness, deployment and practice of TAs in different countries, where TAs may have different characteristics and different systems for deploying TAs may operate.

It is the lowest achieving pupils who benefit most from high-quality teaching. As Giangreco (2010) has argued, we would not accept a situation in which children without SEN are routinely taught by TAs instead of teachers. The present remedial role of TAs lets down the most disadvantaged children. There needs to be a reconsideration of the use of TAs in the context of the inclusion of pupils with SEN.

We have been careful to stress that these effects are not the fault of TAs. Instead, these effects are attributable to decisions made – often with the best of intentions – about them, together with inadequate training for teachers on how to work with TAs, and a lack of opportunities for them to properly brief TAs before lessons. There is a clear need for a fundamental rethink of the appropriate pedagogical role of TAs. It is important to address untested assumptions that they help to raise standards. Should TAs have a primary, frontline instructional role? If so, what should this consist of? If not, what would a secondary non-pedagogical role consist of? It also means re-examining the role of teachers to ensure they adopt an inclusive pedagogy, are not reliant on TAs teaching on pupils with SEN.

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