

Teaching assistants: their role in the inclusion, education and achievement of pupils with special educational needs

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The long-term, international drive towards the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools has been accompanied and enabled by an increase in the employment and deployment of a paraprofessional workforce, known variously as teaching assistants, teacher aides and paraeducators. Australia, Italy, Sweden, Canada, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong, Iceland, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, the United States and the United Kingdom have all experienced large increases in this section of their education workforce (Giangreco, Doyle, and Suter 2014). We are aware of territories in south-east Europe that are in the stages of initiating programmes to create the first cadres of teaching assistants (as we refer to them hereon¹) to be employed and deployed in schools in the Balkan states.

This increase is part of a broader trend: the rise in paraprofessionals in the delivery of public services, including education, health, social work, law, the police. It is claimed that policies of inclusion and provision for pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools in many countries rely heavily on this 'non-teaching' workforce (Masdeu Navarro, 2015).

The intertwining of inclusion and teaching assistants (TAs) reinforces the view that TAs have become 'the mortar in the brickwork . . . hold[ing] schools together in numerous and sometimes unnoticed ways' (Webster et al. 2021, 2). In this reading, the ubiquity of TAs could be viewed as a shorthand for the success of inclusion. Furthermore, its relative intuitiveness – more individualised support for pupils that struggle most – is arguably why it is *the* model of choice for education systems and schools striving for inclusion, and why it has replicated itself more successfully than just about any other model.

Though we cannot put an exact date on when (and where) this field of research began, peer-reviewed papers on TAs started to noticeably pepper the literature from the early 1990s, appearing mainly in US journals. The growing prevalence and prominence of TAs in schools and classrooms that occurred in the 1990s attracted attention from researchers. Ever since, they have been keen to characterise effective models of TA deployment and to identify and measure the impact of TAs in various forms (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2012; Sharma and Salend 2016).

The employment, deployment and impact of TAs is an area of contestability. While there is evidence to show that TAs can have a positive impact on learning outcomes, effects vary by the types of deployment (that is, how they are utilised by schools). Large-scale research examining the impact of TAs providing general classroom support suggests that pupils, particularly those with special educational needs and/or low prior attainment, perform worse (relative to their peers) in classes with a TA present (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2012). However, results from trials where TAs are trained to deliver structured curriculum intervention programmes to individual pupils or small groups, on average, show moderate positive benefits (Alborz et al. 2009; Sharples 2016; Slavin 2016, 2018; Nickow, Oreopoulos, and Quan 2020).

Opportunities for teachers and TAs to plan and work together effectively, and the nature and quality of preparation and training for both roles, are associated with pupils' learning outcomes (Webster et al. 2011). While positive effects have been found in terms of teacher workload and reduced stress (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2012), the evidence that

TAs can improve pupils' so-called 'soft' skills and wellbeing is mixed. For example, facilitating the inclusion of pupils with learning difficulties has unintended consequences in terms of reducing interactions with teachers and peers, and creating dependencies on TA support.

The model of inclusion to which many education systems have drifted – or may drift – has, therefore, an opportunity cost hardwired into it. This is the most contentious aspect of the TA issue. Despite policymakers' claims to the contrary (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2012; Zhao, Rose, and Shevlin 2021), TAs engage daily in pedagogical activities. Perpetuating the notion that there is a supposedly clear demarcation – that teachers teach and TA support – leads us to repeatedly sidestep two longstanding and unresolved questions. Firstly, how do we characterise the 'support' that TAs provide? If, as this dichotomisation implies, what TAs do is *not* teaching, then what *is* it, and how is it distinct from teaching? The second and more fundamental question – the one within which the attention-absorbing debates about TAs roil – is this: how can we best include and teach pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools?

In many schools and classrooms across the globe, inclusion has become ostensibly contingent on the creation and utilisation of a relatively new type of educator: the TA. It is perhaps surprising then that this special issue is only the second on this topic of which we are aware. A special issue of the *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps* (JASH) was published in 1999², at a fairly early juncture in the evolution of TAs. The pre-eminence of papers in that special issue from researchers in the US is perhaps an indication of how much more established TAs were in the American education system at the time, compared with the rest of the world.

Over 20 years on, with many more jurisdictions having established (or establishing) their own paraprofessional education workforce – together with the increasing amount of research interest and activity this draws – the time is right for a more internationally representative collection of writing on TAs. This special issue then, draws together research and perspectives on the role, deployment and impact of TAs from various countries. It intends to serve as both an indicative summary of the research and thinking in the field to date, and as a point of departure for future research and development.

The call for papers for this special issue generated a truly international response. We received 48 abstracts from authors in 17 countries, across five continents. The selection and review process has resulted in the publication of seven papers, which describe findings from new empirical research conducted in six European countries.

Each paper offers an insight into the liminal space between educator, care-giver, behaviour manager, and facilitator of learning and of peer relations, which characterises the TA role in both mainstream and special schools. Östlund et al. and Jardí et al. consider the features of team-working and cooperation between TAs and teachers, while Haakma et al., Zhao et al. and Vogt et al. explore the role of the TA as a facilitator of (respectively) peer interactions, personal care, and instructional support for pupils with special educational needs. Papers by Pinkard and Griffin and Blatchford focus on the pupils' perspective of TA support and the implications for social inclusion and the development of independence.

The special issue ends with a specially-commissioned article from one of the foremost researchers on paraprofessional issues, and the editor of the 1999 JASH special issue, Michael Giangreco. Drawing on more than 40 years' experience of working with TAs and their colleagues, principally in the US, he provides a worldly perspective on the state of the field. Giangreco reflects on the persistent predicament regarding the systemic reliance on TAs to facilitate inclusion, and what classroom practitioners can do to address this. His

article concludes with a challenge to journal editors and reviewers concerning research papers on TAs, plus some recommendations for future research, which have the potential to move the field on. In the final paper, as the editors of this special issue, we provide our response to Giangreco's challenge, and look up and out, with a call for a more collaborative, internationalist approach to addressing the research challenges of today and tomorrow.

This special issue showcases a sample of recent empirical work conducted on the topic of TAs, and stands as evidence of what is still a maturing field of study and thought in education research. However, research activity has been comprehensively outpaced by policy and practice. The rapid acceleration of the employment and deployment of TAs in schools across every inhabited continent on the planet has proceeded with seemingly scant regard to the available evidence. This has led to unintended consequences and a hard-to-resolve dilemma, which is at serious risk of *undermining* inclusion (Giangreco 2021).

The process and experience of compiling this special issue left us in little doubt that the research community is at its most effective and impactful when researchers work directly and in partnership with schools to address the strategic and operational challenges connected to TA deployment. In the post-pandemic world, as educators tackle the severe disruption to learning that children have endured because of Covid-19, we can point (as we did above) to the promise of evidence from TA-led one-to-one and small group (so-called) 'catch-up' programmes.³ This is one clear and encouraging way in which the field can contribute in the immediate term. But a long-term strategy – capable of harnessing and building on this potential impact – will be essential.

A central aim of this special issue, therefore, is to initiate a debate about constructing a relevant and purposeful research agenda on TAs, which is responsive to the challenges of the current decade, and beyond. As we point out in our closing paper, this should involve efforts to agree key concepts, such as, a reliable and consistent characterisation of the TA role, and appropriately calibrated and distinct definitions of impact (Webster and de Boer 2021). In all, we hope to inspire innovative ideas and to generate interest and action on how we might move forward together.

Notes

1. For the purposes of the authors' papers in this special issue, the commonly understood term 'teaching assistants' (TAs) is used to refer to school staff in pupil-based and classroom-based support roles who work mainly with pupils with special educational needs. Included in this definition are school staff known, among other titles, as teacher assistants, teacher aides, teaching aides, classroom assistants, learning support assistants, special needs assistants, paraeducators, paraprofessionals and pedagogogue assistants. This definition excludes teachers.
2. *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps* (now, *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*), Vol 24, Issue 4.
3. We note that the first drafts of the manuscripts for this special issue were submitted in the very early stages of what would become a global pandemic (January 2020). This, in case the reader wonders, is why the papers in this special issue make no reference to the pandemic and its effects on education.

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