

International Literacy Centre

The Role of Teaching and Classroom Assistants during the COVID-19 Crisis

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What just happened?



- 1.6 billion students affected by school closures in 188 countries (UNICEF, 2020).
- Rolling closures and reopening.
- Impacted academic achievement and social and emotional wellbeing (Harmey, 2021)

How might this impact children?

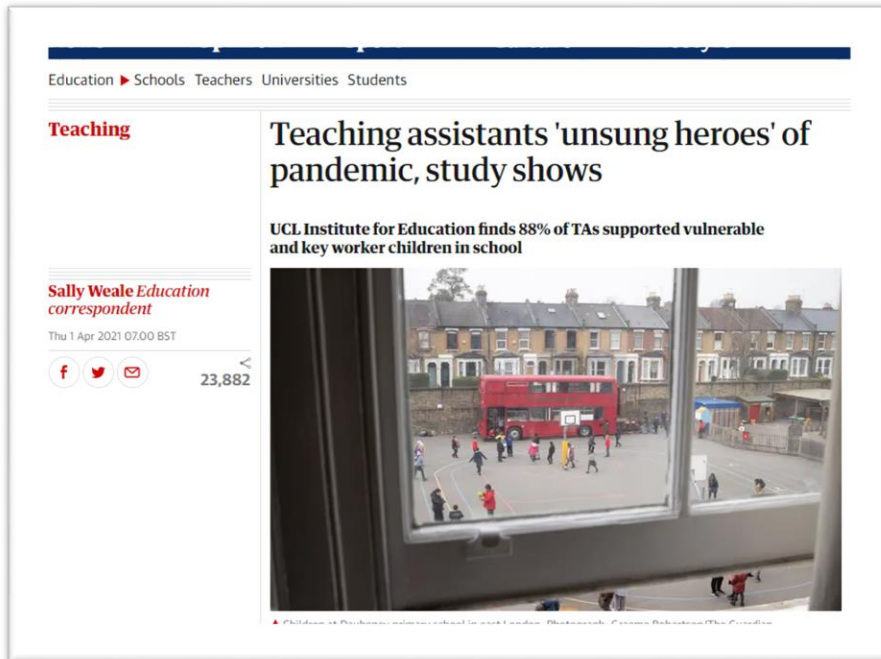


- Projections of impact based on literature on normal school closures (summer holidays).
- Good but not perfect estimates of loss (see Harmey and Moss, 2020)

For example...

- Kuhfeld et al. (2020) *projected* children would start school in Autumn with 63-68% of typical reading gains.
- Johnson et al. (2021) *found* children started school with 86-107% of typical reading gains.
- Some children will be impacted more than others.

Emerging field of research



- This is not the same as learning loss (e.g summer holidays)
- It is more like other pandemics and disasters
- Our research demonstrated that was most important in these circumstances is:
 - Care
 - Community
 - Curriculum
- It is very important to document how education system has responded to this crisis.
- Our work:
 - Duty of Care and Duty to Teach (ESRC)
 - Role of Teaching Assistants and Classroom Assistants during Lockdown (UNISON)

Unsung heroes: Role of Teaching and Classroom Assistants

- Commissioned by UNISON
- Gemma Moss, Rob Webster, Sinead Harmey, Alice Bradbury
- 9055 respondents from England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland
- Survey conducted in Winter 2021
- 70% Primary or early years
- 12% secondary
- 13% special schools
- 93% UNISON members



Unsung heroes
Key finding

TA/CAs have been pivotal in allowing schools to function

- 49% covered staff absences
- 88% supported vulnerable or key worker children
- 51% managed a whole class or bubble
- 26% led larger classes

I work in a specialist primary school which has been 'at FULL capacity' pretty much throughout the pandemic

TA/CAs have played a vital role in supporting learning

- Leading classes, and the rest
 - Half providing differentiated support
 - 1/3 delivered targeted interventions
 - 1/3 running 1 to 1 or small group support
 - 1/3 involved in bespoke support (e.g Health and Care Plan)
 - Expanding support AND sustaining role
- 1 in 4 reported having less opportunity to support those they are most concerned about.

TA/CAs on the frontline felt vulnerable

- They continued to work in school during lockdown – risking exposure to COVID-19
- 84% involved in cleaning to minimise transmission
- 83% reminding students to maintain social distance

We have put our lives at risk more than any school staff during the pandemic

At our school, TAs are in five days a week whilst teachers are only in for two. TAs are planning, teaching, supporting pupil wellbeing, reporting back to parents, dealing with all classroom stresses without support of the teachers.

TA/CAs played an important role in supporting learning at home

- Preparing hard copy learning packs (39%)
- Checking work set remotely (31%)
- Offering support to pupils having difficulty with home learning (27%)
- Half of TA/CAs reported home learning worked well for some pupils
- Issues with training:
 - 44% gained skills
 - 20% had training to support mental health
 - 1 in 4 asked to do new things without training

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Helping pupils readjust at the forefront

- 46% thought that biggest impact of disruption would fall on pupils they typically support
- Addressing pastoral care, pupil wellbeing and rebuilding school routines very important
- Providing a safe and secure environment matters in rebuilding pupils' capacity to learn.

Helping pupils readjust at the forefront

The mental health of children is essential to enable them to achieve and learn. Less emphasis needs to be placed on high academic achievement and more emphasis on the importance of managing and maintaining good mental health. Children need to be taught skills to self-regulate and recognise changes in their mental health.

The pressure being put on schools and pupils about reassurance to parents they will catch-up needs to be realistic. Some children have large gaps. The expectation that they will be caught up and on target in a short period of time is unrealistic. This is going to have an impact for time to come, and needs to be recognised and acknowledged accordingly.

COVID-19 underlined value of TA/CA contribution to schools

- 89% TA/CAs agreed that the impact of COVID-19 on schools has been underestimated.
- Only 27% felt that school was more aware of role

Teaching assistants and support staff need to be recognised as important role in the community. Lots of people are thanking teachers and overlooking the support staff. We attend school every day too!

The future of education

- Schools should have a bigger say in what happens next (44%)
- Less emphasis on testing (40%)
- Investing in training for online teaching (18%)
- Appreciation of role reflected in pay

TAs who have led bubbles/groups on a full-time basis, for weeks/months should receive a higher pay grade for the duration of that time, in recognition that their role has changed to one of teaching, as the sole adult in the classroom, and therefore taking on much of the responsibility and status, in all but salary, of teacher colleagues.

Recommendations

1. Consider staff wellbeing as well as pupil wellbeing
2. Invest in TA/CAs' local knowledge
3. All staff, whatever the roll, need to be part of build-back planning

Questions or comments



- https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10125467/1/Unsung%20Heroes_Final.pdf
- <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/apr/01/teaching-assistants-unsung-heroes-of-pandemic-study-shows>
- International Literacy Centre
- <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/international-literacy-centre>