

Research Briefing N° 88

Support staff: the role and effective deployment of teaching assistants in schools in England and Wales

These three studies address the deployment and impact of support staff – teaching assistants – in primary, secondary and special schools in England and Wales. The research challenges assumptions on the positive impact of support staff on pupil progress, including those with special educational needs. It also, on the basis of collaboration with schools, looks at alternative ways of deploying and preparing support staff to support positive impact.

Key words: support staff; teaching assistants; primary schools; secondary schools; special schools; deployment; impact



Key findings

Findings are of particular interest to school leaders, teachers and teaching assistants in mainstream and special schools, to parents of children with special educational needs (SEN) statements, and those (policy makers and practitioners) involved in school effectiveness and the professional development of school support staff. For more details on the findings and research methods for each study see the link at the end of this document.

DISS (Deployment and Impact of Support Staff)

- An overarching finding from the study was that the more support pupils received from support staff, the less progress they made, i.e. a consistent negative relationship was found between the amount of support pupils received and their progress in maths, science and English, even after controlling for pupil characteristics, like SEN status and prior attainment, likely to influence the amount of support and progress.
- Teaching Assistants (TAs) tended to focus more on completing tasks than on pupils' learning and understanding. In contrast, teachers were more concerned with the latter.
- Teachers felt that support staff increased the amount of one-to-one attention for pupils in need, reduced teachers' workload and stress levels, and increased their job satisfaction.

- While the TAs surveyed were dedicated to their work, the problem was their routine deployment to those pupils who needed most help. As a result these pupils became cut off from the curriculum and the teacher.

Effective Deployment of Teaching Assistants (EDTA) project – through working collaboratively with schools, the study found:

- **Preparedness** – creating time for teachers and TAs to meet had a positive effect on the quality of TA input and helped to make their roles more explicit.
- **Deployment** – senior leadership teams, as well as teachers thought more strategically about the role and purpose of TAs and expected outcomes for pupils. Attention turned to how TAs could ‘add-value’ to, rather than replace, the teacher’s role.
- **Practice** – TAs roles developed to support changes in their talk with pupils (e.g. in terms of the effectiveness of questions to increase pupil independence); their role in supporting pupils’ learning and understanding of tasks; and in formative assessment (ongoing, real-time assessment of pupils’ learning).

Making a Statement Project (MaSt) project

- Pupils in mainstream with SEN statements spent over a quarter of their time away from the mainstream class, the teacher and their peers compared to average attainment pupils.
- TAs had more responsibility for pupils with SEN statements than teachers – TAs devised curricula, planned lessons and made moment-to-moment teaching and learning decisions.
- The quality of pedagogical experiences (approaches to teaching and learning) was less appropriate and of a lower quality than for average attaining pupils. This was despite good intentions on the part of TAs.
- Gaps were found in the knowledge of both teachers and TAs in meeting the needs of pupils with statements – teachers felt unprepared and often saw TAs as experts despite their similar gaps in training and knowledge.
- Schools lacked an effective and theoretically-grounded pedagogy for teaching pupils with statements in mainstream schools – a reliance on TA support exasperated the problem making schools less likely to think through appropriate approaches.

What we did

In recent years, there has been a huge growth in the range and number of support staff in schools due to policy and curriculum changes, for example, the delegation of funding for SEN accompanied by increased provision of TAs for pupils with statements of special educational needs.

Despite the growth, research up to 2003 provided only limited information on the deployment and impact of support staff in schools, and the processes through which impact is maximised or inhibited.

The DISS project, funded by the English and Welsh Governments (2003-9), was designed to fill the gaps in information. The two main aims of the project were:

- to provide an accurate, systematic and representative description of the types of support staff in schools; their characteristics and deployment in schools, and how these have changed over time; and
- to analyse the impact or effect of support staff on teachers and teaching, pupil learning and behaviour.

Following on from DISS and building on its conclusions was the EDTA project (2010-11), funded by Esmee Fairbairn; and the MaSt project (2011-13), funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

EDTA aimed to develop and evaluate school based strategies for the effective deployment of TAs in supporting pupils.

MaST was designed to address a lack of systematic information on what is known about the overall support experienced by pupils with Statements of SEN in mainstream schools. It sought to answer the question: 'Which adults provide what inputs and provisions, and in what proportions, to pupils with a Statement of SEN in mainstream primary schools?'

How we did it

DISS - Strand 1 involved three biennial questionnaire surveys: the Main School Questionnaire (MSQ), the Support Staff Questionnaire (SSQ), and the Teacher Questionnaire (TQ). Over the three 'waves' there were a total of around 20,000 completed questionnaires. The Wave 2 SSQ also collected 1,500 detailed time-logs completed by support staff to show the type and extent of their various activities over a school day. **Strand 2** had two waves adopting a multi-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods. It included the Main Pupil Support Survey (MPSS) involving a sample of over 8,000 pupils across 7 different age groups: Years 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 9 and 10, across primary and secondary schools.

EDTA – involved 40 teachers and TAs in 10 schools in two local authorities (LAs). The 'Wider Pedagogical Role' (WPR) model, developed in the DISS project to explain the findings on impact, was used to support collaboration and evaluation in schools. The model comprises three main components: TA preparedness, deployment and practice.

MaST– extensive systematic observations were carried out and detailed case studies involving 48 pupils with statements of SEN for moderate

learning difficulties or behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. Observations of 151 average attaining 'control' pupils provided a reference point for comparison. Case studies were based largely on interviews with nearly 200 teachers, TAs, SEN Co-ordinators (SENCOs) and parents/carers. All data were collected over the 2011/12 school year, and involved researchers shadowing pupils in Year 5.

Implications and impact

Findings from the DISS study signalled a clear need for change in the way TAs are commonly deployed in schools. DISS has influenced government policy-makers, education bodies, inspectors, LAs and schools to reconsider not only the deployment of support staff but provision for lower-attaining pupils and those with SEN. Many LAs have issued staff guidance that refers to our findings. The team has given many presentations and in-service sessions for LAs and schools, conferences and other bodies. There have been many journal papers and other publications and sales of the book of guidance based on the EDTA project (Maximising the Impact of Teaching Assistants by Russell, Webster and Blatchford, Routledge, 2013) are impressive (see website below).

Further information

For final project reports, Routledge publication and further information on all three projects see ['Teaching Assistant Research'](#) website.

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