

Report on the impact of teaching assistants on pupils' learning during Key Stage 2

Abstract

Recent studies have found no evidence that teaching assistants (TAs) have a measurable positive effect on pupils' learning at Key Stage 2 (KS2). The role of the TA at KS2 is predominantly a direct one, in the sense that TAs interact closely with certain pupils, often those children who have been identified with additional learning needs (Blatchford et al., 2004). This report highlights the research findings which indicate that the reason for the lack of impact is not due to any characteristics attributable to the TAs themselves. Evidence suggests that it is the ways in which primary schools deploy TAs that is frustrating the potential impact TAs could otherwise have on pupils' learning. Due to the importance of TAs' pedagogical roles in primary schools, two main recommendations are made which would facilitate effective teaching and learning: the wider use of structured intervention programs, delivered by TAs, and; adjustments to TAs' working hours which would enable them to spend more time discussing and planning work with teachers.

1 Research Findings

1.1 The Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) Project

The Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project was conducted in UK schools between 2003 and 2008 and is the largest study of its kind to date. One of its aims was to analyse the impact of support staff on pupil learning and academic achievement. The study concluded that there were no positive effects of TA support for any subject at KS2 (Blatchford et al., 2009). Pupils who received the most support from TAs made significantly less progress in English, mathematics and science when compared to their similar peers who had not received such support.

One critique levelled at these findings was that there was no way of knowing what level of progress an individual would have made *without* the TA support, especially since it is likely that a child will be receiving support because of a reason which pre-disposes them to make less progress (Chilton, 2012). A further problem is that the comparison between the supported and non-supported pupils is subject to so many other variables that it is unscientific to conclude that the slower progress in the TA-supported group is solely attributable to the additional support. Although the DISS project controlled for pupil variables such as age, gender, SEN, prior attainment, eligibility for free school meals, English as an additional language, ethnicity (grouped as white, or other than white), and deprivation (Sharples et al., 2015), other pupil variables are numerous, and are not just

limited to the group receiving TA support. There may be characteristics of both the supported and the unsupported children which impact on the comparative academic outcomes. Characteristics such as specific ethnicity, cultural norms, undiagnosed conditions, or classroom dynamics, such as whether a child is being bullied, may also impact learning.

1.2 TA characteristics

The studies where it was possible to conduct an analysis of the backgrounds of support staff found no evidence to suggest that TA characteristics may impact on pupil progress. Blatchford et al., (2004) collated the following data on the TAs they studied: number of hours worked; whether working with a statemented pupil; whether they had planning time and/or feedback time; whether they were satisfied; whether a current parent of a child in the school; whether they had been a parent; whether they were a volunteer; their qualification level; whether they had a TA qualification; whether they had attended an induction course or INSET, or been paid to attend INSET; and, amount of experience. None of these were found to affect pupils' academic outcomes at KS2. However, one limitation noted by this study is that academic outcomes were assessed on a whole-class basis and did not examine the academic outcomes of the specific pupils with whom TAs worked (Blatchford et al., 2004).

Concerning personal pedagogical styles, when compared with teachers, TAs: are more concerned with task completion rather than with learning (Rubie-Davies et al., 2010; Radford et al., 2011); ask closed questions (Radford et al., 2011); and, supply answers (Radford et al., 2011). One explanation offered by TAs themselves to these critiques is that these types of reactive interactions will necessarily arise due to inadequate preparation coupled with the expectation of school leaders and teachers that TAs can work "on the hoof" (Webster and Blatchford, 2013, p.2).

1.3 Deployment of TAs

Research states clearly that the fault does not lie with individual TAs (Webster et al., 2016). Rather, it is the way in which the TAs are used by schools which is the problem (Webster et al., 2016). Although TA deployment is determined by school factors such as management and culture (Symes and Humphrey, 2011), it is often the case that TAs are assigned to groups of pupils with SEN rather than to non-SEN groups (Blatchford et al., 2004). However, there is no theoretical justification for assigning TAs to pupils who have the most complex learning needs (Giangreco, 2010). There is even some evidence to suggest that assigning TAs to work with individual pupils may create an unhealthy dependency and that the pupil may not develop a sense of ownership regarding responsibility for work (Giangreco, 2010). Furthermore, contrary to what school leaders

believed were effective ways of using TAs (Webster et al., 2016) it has been found that assigning a pedagogical role to TAs who work with SEN pupils is an ineffective method of supporting those children academically (Saddler, 2014).

The role of teaching assistants in a KS2 classroom is predominantly a direct one, with most of the time being spent interacting with pupils, rather than indirectly supporting teachers and pupils through administration or general duties such as photocopying (Blatchford et al., 2004). As such, it is appropriate to report on the pedagogical function TAs serve (Blatchford et al., 2004). Firstly, if TAs are predominantly working with children who have special learning or behavioural needs, their physical location within the KS2 classroom will be much more static than the classroom teacher who may move from whole-class teaching to interaction with several groups and individuals around the classroom (Blatchford et al., 2004). This can result in the paradoxical situation where the most educationally needy pupils are continually being supported by the least qualified staff (Blatchford et al., 2004). There tends to be an assumption that longer periods of interaction with an adult will lead to better academic outcomes for those children who are identified as needing TA support (Blatchford et al., 2004), yet through being assigned a TA, the school may inadvertently be denying the pupil access to teacher-pupil interaction because of the TA-pupil relationship which has been established (Blatchford et al., 2011).

Secondly, research has shown that when TAs deliver structured interventions in literacy and numeracy to either individual pupils in a one-to-one setting, or to small groups, there is consistent impact on the children's attainment (Higgins et al., 2013). It is suggested that it is when TAs are used in more informal ways, where they are not given structured programs to deliver, and where they are not made part of the planning and feedback process, that pedagogical failings can occur (Sharples et al., 2015). TAs do not receive the same level of salary as qualified teachers, nor should they be expected to plan learning activities in their own time when their working hours are usually aligned to school hours of '8:30 am to 3.15pm or 4:15pm' (National Careers Service, 2018, n.p.). Therefore, any planning and discussion about individual children must occur during the school day. With teachers reporting the lack of time available in a primary school for such activities when children are not present (Wilson et al., 2003), and where TAs are increasingly being expected to carry out playground duties (Wilson et al., 2003), it seems that there are systemic barriers which are preventing TAs in making a more positive impact on children's academic progress.

2 Recommendations

In terms of addressing the pedagogical demands that are placed on TAs, recent research recommends two methods of improving the impact they could have on pupils' learning

at KS2. The DISS project offers a framework which is based on the wider pedagogical role attributed to TAs, and which accounts for the situational factors which appear to be inhibiting TA effectiveness. Firstly, because a positive correlation has been found between structured intervention programs and individual academic progress, it is recommended that TAs should be used to deliver high-quality one-to-one and small group support, more through structured interventions and less through ad-hoc means (Sharples et al., 2015). Secondly, to be effective pedagogues, extra time should be allocated for classroom teachers and TAs to discuss and plan their work together (Wilson et al., 2003). To achieve this, it has been suggested that TAs' working hours could be adjusted so that they could meet with teachers earlier in the morning, or during assembly time, or during teachers' Planning, Preparation and Assessment (PPA) time (Sharples et al., 2015). Ultimately, the findings of the DISS project offer 'a clear case for challenging the status quo regarding teaching assistant deployment' (Webster and Blatchford, 2013, p.4).