

# 'The role of TAs is not clearly defined and there is little consensus about how their support is used'

## TA time by Carol Frankl

### What is the key to effective management of additional adults in the classroom?

The growth in the number of paraprofessionals working in the classroom alongside teachers has been phenomenal. From 1998 to 2008 there was a 200% increase in teaching assistants (TAs) working in the classroom alongside teachers and pupils in both primary and secondary schools. These paraprofessionals have a variety of titles, decided by schools and tailored to the roles they undertake. The rise in the numbers of TAs coincided with increased delegation of funds to schools and with workforce reform aimed at reducing the bureaucratic load for teachers.

### The role of TAs

The role of TAs is not clearly defined and there is little consensus about how their support is used. The fact that they have many titles, such as LSAs, SSAs and co-educators, suggests there is a wide range of tasks undertaken which varies both from class to class and across schools. The DfEE guide *Supporting the Teaching Assistant – A good practice guide* (2000) suggests the following four areas of TA work:

- > Support for the school – being part of a team whose remit includes translating school policies into practice.
- > Support for the curriculum – differentiating the curriculum, or becoming experts in a particular curriculum area.
- > Support for the teacher – carrying out non-teaching tasks such as photocopying.
- > Support for the pupil – on either an individual or group basis to support learning.

This helpful management guide develops all of these themes on the basis of the construction of an agreed and effective TA job description that is

regularly reviewed through performance management. This ideal approach to managing and developing teaching assistants paves the way to good practice in the classroom. It is important that senior leaders debate the roles and responsibilities of both teachers and TAs to maximise the learning experiences of all children.

It is common practice in schools to deploy TAs with pupils with the greatest needs, to give them extra support and a 'boost'. The reality, however, is often different, as the least able children work with the least qualified adults who may have very little training in child development and understanding how children learn.

A 2010 study by Peter Blatchford and colleagues found that most TAs have a predominantly instructional role with pupils, supporting low attaining pupils or those with SEN. There is a 'drift towards' TAs becoming the primary educators of these children.

### Measuring TA effectiveness

The Institute of Education carried out the largest ever study of the impact of teaching assistants in the classroom. The study took place between 2003 and 2008 and consulted with 20,000 teachers. The report was published in 2009 as the *Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS)* report (2009). Its findings are summarised below:

- > Teaching assistants reduce teachers' stress levels and improve classroom discipline.
- > They do not boost pupils' progress.
- > TAs have a positive impact on pupils' behaviour; pupils remain more on task when working with them and are more likely to receive one-to-one support.
- > Secondary pupils are likely to be less

disruptive and distractible. This means that teachers can spend more time with the rest of the class.

The study showed that primary and secondary pupils supported by TAs make less progress on average than those of similar ability, social class and gender who do not receive such assistance. In general, the more support they receive, the fewer gains they make.

The report stressed that this is not the responsibility of TAs. 'Policy makers and school staff need to rethink the way TAs are used in the classroom and how they are prepared for the tasks teachers give them. This will help maximise their huge potential to help teachers and pupils.'

### Barriers to effective working

Peter Blatchford, who led the DISS research, believes that one of the main barriers to TA effectiveness is that less than 25% of teachers have been trained to manage TAs, although more than 50% of teachers have TA support in their classrooms. Additionally, only 25% of the teachers surveyed – only one in 20 in secondary schools – have allocated planning or feedback time with TAs. If all adults in the classroom are to work effectively as a team to support pupils' learning, a shared understanding of planning and TA deployment is vital.

A second major barrier is the tendency to allocate TAs to the most vulnerable pupils – those with the greatest learning or behaviour needs or pupils with autism. Despite many of the TA workforce being very experienced, competent, willing and hardworking, they will not have received any training in how children learn or develop from babies through childhood and adolescence to

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adulthood. This understanding is critical to knowing what a pupil's level is, how to assess it and when to move on.

## Views of practitioners

In a follow-up study by Blatchford and colleagues in 2010 looking at the pedagogical role of TAs, the views of school leaders, teachers, SENCOs and local authority advisers were sought and they agreed the following:

- > Where classes are taught in ability groups, the teacher should spend as much time with the lowest ability group as he/she does with others.
- > The main focus of teachers' whole-class teaching should be on Wave 2 – those who are not making expected progress.
- > Reviews of pupil progress and TA deployment should be more frequent (for example, termly) and could be used as a proxy measure of TA effectiveness.
- > Pupils should not be withdrawn from core lessons for TA-led interventions as pupils must have the opportunity to apply their learning from these interventions in whole-class settings.
- > Teachers must take full responsibility for planning interventions and sharing and imparting their detailed plans to TAs. This responsibility should not be discharged to TAs.
- > TAs must be appropriately trained and prepared to lead intervention sessions.

## Effective management of TAs

Perhaps the most important feature of effective TA management is recognition that mutual respect between teacher and TA is essential. Effective collaboration and an understanding of the differing but equally important roles of all the adults in the classroom are the keys to ensuring effective learning for pupils.

A commitment by senior managers to fund liaison time between teachers and TAs will ensure that the learning needs

of all pupils will be kept in mind. The teacher is the classroom leader and manager of learning and is required to guide the support provided by TAs.

It is important to agree how behaviour will be managed in the classroom. If a TA is assigned an individual pupil to work with, what will their role be in maintaining good behaviour among the whole class? What sanctions can be given by TAs and have they been trained in the use of positive behaviour management strategies, particularly the use of positive language?

An agreed strategy for measuring pupil progress between teacher and TA is essential. An understanding of expected progress – two levels per Key Stage in Key Stages 1 and 2 and three levels across Key Stages 3 and 4 – is a prerequisite. TAs can then see how this is broken down to expected progress over each term. This framework makes sense of the bewildering and often subjective notion of 'progress'. Alongside an explanation of how interventions are designed to improve pupil performance, this helps TAs to understand the broader picture of pupils' learning and the part they perform.

Offering meaningful training and career progression to enable TAs to learn and apply knowledge about how children grow and learn is essential. There are many ways to enable TAs to enrol in NVQ level 2 and 3 training which complement practical experience in the classroom.

Finally, a regular TA team meeting chaired by the SENCO, subject leader or inclusion manager, where TAs have the opportunity to explore aspects of their work, learn from each other and consult an 'expert', is an effective way to support TAs. Ideally these meetings would be for half an hour weekly, or longer, each half term. They offer TAs the opportunity to reinforce and share their own good practice and refine the process of good collaborative working. Teachers, too,


need the opportunity to explore effective models of working with and managing TAs to support pupils' learning.

Teaching assistants are a wonderful resource in the classroom and across the school. Both teachers and teaching assistants deserve the best support possible to make these partnerships dynamic, resourceful and effective.

## Further information

*Deployment and Impact of Support Staff project* by Peter Blatchford and colleagues, London Institute of Education (2009).

*Supporting the Teaching Assistant – A good practice guide*, DfEE (2000).

*Should teaching assistants have a pedagogical role?: lessons following the DISS project* by Rob Webster, Peter Blatchford and Anthony Russell (2010). 

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### More resources

'A duty to support' by Elizabeth Cowne in *Special* October 2008. Available to download in SENCO Essentials on the nasen website (requires members to log on) – [www.nasen.org.uk/senco-essentials/](http://www.nasen.org.uk/senco-essentials/)

Nasen policy on support staff (requires members to log on) – [www.nasen.org.uk/policy-documents/](http://www.nasen.org.uk/policy-documents/)

*The SEN Handbook for Trainee Teachers, NQTs and Teaching Assistants* by Wendy Spooner (David Fulton/nasen, 2010).