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Schools and academies

# Teaching assistants: role, contribution and value for money

## Rob Webster and Peter Blatchford

Opinion piece

**Resource**

# Teaching assistants: role, contribution and value for money

Rob Webster and Peter Blatchford, Institute of Education,  
University of London

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Teaching assistants are an unignorable presence in the education workforce. They make up a quarter of this workforce in England, costing £2.2 billion annually (Audit Commission, 2011).

In 2011, the Audit Commission – the taxpayers' watchdog – examined school spending in England. Against a backdrop of ever-tightening school budgets, the timeliness of its report *Better value for money in schools* was hardly surprising.

In a report that also considered the effects of class size and teacher utilisation (for example, time spent teaching), it concluded that 'reviewing the use of [teaching assistants] (TAs) may hold the greatest potential for efficiency savings' without compromising educational attainment (Audit Commission, 2011, p10).

Perhaps having read media headlines, such as 'Teaching assistants blamed for poor results' (Paton, 2009), 'Teaching assistants impair pupil performance' (Marley & Bloom, 2009) and 'Teaching assistants do not help improve grades' (Anon, 2011), you might think 'reviewing the use' of teaching assistants is a euphemism for 'getting rid of'. The Audit Commission, however, suggests no such thing.

But if research shows that teaching assistants harm pupil progress, why does the independent protector of the public purse recommend that they are the key to achieving value for money? To understand this, we have to get behind the headlines.

## Behind the headlines

The findings reported under such worrying headlines were from our *Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS)* project, the largest ever study of teaching assistants which was set up to describe the characteristics and deployment of teaching assistants (and other school support staff), and to address, for the first time, their impact on teachers, teaching and pupils (Blatchford, Russell & Webster, 2012).

Our analysis studied the effects of teaching assistant support on the academic progress of 8,200 pupils in core subjects under normal classroom conditions. We tracked two cohorts in seven age groups in mainstream schools over one year each and found, to our surprise, that pupils receiving the most support from teaching assistants made less progress than similar pupils who received little or no support from teaching assistants, even after controlling for pupil factors related to attainment and having teaching assistant support (eg prior attainment and special educational needs (SEN) status).

These results were at variance with long-held assumptions about the effects of teaching assistant support that, until the DISS project, had not been fully tested. The aforementioned headlines prompted another potentially damaging assumption, which we also dispel: the negative relationship between teaching assistant support and pupil progress is not the fault of teaching assistants.

## Why do teaching assistants have a negative impact on pupil progress?

Indeed, other findings from the DISS project show that it is the organisational factors governing teaching assistants' employment and deployment – and over which they have little or no control – that explain the impact findings. In other words, it is the decisions made by school leaders and teachers about teaching assistants, not by teaching assistants, that best explain the counterintuitive effect.

We identified three key areas where this kind of decision-making was a factor, and these are described below.

### Preparedness

Preparedness concerns the DISS study's findings about the lack of training and professional development of teaching assistants and teachers, day-to-day aspects of planning and preparation before lessons, and feedback afterwards which have a bearing on learning outcomes for pupils. For example, our survey of over 4,000 teachers found that 75 per cent had no training to help them work with teaching assistants, and 75 per cent had no allocated planning or feedback time with them.

### Deployment

Our study found that teaching assistants have a direct pedagogical role, interacting with pupils, usually in one-to-one and group contexts, and predominantly with lower-attaining pupils and those with special educational needs and /or disability (SEND). We found that the more severe a pupil's needs, the more interaction they had with teaching assistants, at the expense of interactions with teachers. Pupils also had much more sustained and active interaction with teaching assistants than they had with teachers. This might seem pedagogically valuable, but it means that pupils supported by a teaching assistant become separated from the teacher, missing out on everyday teacher-to-pupil interactions and mainstream curriculum coverage (especially where teaching assistants have responsibility for leading interventions away from the classroom).

### Practice

We found that pupils' interactions with teaching assistants are much lower in quality than those they have with teachers. Teaching assistants are more concerned with task completion than learning, and inadequate preparation leads to their interactions being reactive – or as they described it to us – working “on the hoof”. We also discovered that teachers generally “open up” pupil talk, whereas teaching assistants “close down” talk, both linguistically and cognitively. Teaching assistants, therefore, do not at present know how to make the best use of the extended, more frequent interactions they have with pupils.

- To what extent do the findings from the DISS project reflect the situation in your school?

## Rethinking the use of teaching assistants

We agree with the Audit Commission that rethinking the use of teaching assistants is far preferable to getting rid of them (Webster & Blatchford, online). After all, could your school manage without them? If it is anything like those of the senior leaders we meet, the answer is probably not. But what is to be done if schools are to get the best use from teaching assistants – and help pupils? One starting point is this: given what we now know about its ineffectiveness, should teaching assistants have a pedagogical role?

Evidence from the DISS project and other studies have shown teaching assistants to have a limited or detrimental effect on pupil progress (Downer, 2007; Gray et al, 2007; Klassen, 2001; Reynolds & Muijs, 2003). Schools may therefore decide that a pedagogical role for teaching assistants is inappropriate. Valid alternatives must be carefully considered. We found that the presence of teaching assistants limits low-level disruption, so they might be more effective in terms of having an indirect effect on learning by limiting off-task behaviour and ensuring lessons run smoothly.

The DISS project found some evidence that teaching assistants support the development of ‘soft’ skills such as confidence, motivation and dispositions toward learning. Further research on this is required, but other studies on pupils’ perceptions of teaching assistant attributes suggest that they have the requisite qualities associated with nurturing such skills: patience, sensitivity, empathy, approachability, attentiveness and a sense of humour (Dunne, Goddard & Woodhouse, 2008; Fraser & Meadows, 2008).

However, if we take the opposite view that teaching assistants do have a potentially valuable contribution to make to pupils’ academic development, and can be deployed in face-to-face pedagogical interactions, then our findings make it clear that we need more clarity over what schools expect of them.

Reviews show that studies which examined the effect of teaching assistants who have a pedagogical role delivering specific curricular interventions (mostly for literacy), tend to report a direct positive impact on pupil progress when teaching assistants are prepared and trained, and have appropriate support and guidance (Alborz et al, 2009; Slavin et al, 2009).

For us, positioning the evidence on pupil progress in teaching assistant-led interventions alongside the results for the DISS study, which examined the effects of teaching assistant support in everyday classroom contexts, gives school leaders a misleading message. The Audit Commission report is just one of several recent summaries of the research literature to conclude that teaching assistants’ impact on pupils is inconclusive (Audit Commission, 2011). A report by an analyst at the Department for Education concluded that ‘the evidence presents a mixed picture’ (Whitehorn, 2010); and a popular toolkit of strategies for spending the Pupil Premium, commissioned by the Sutton Trust, rated the overall cost–benefit of teaching assistants as ‘very low/no impact for high cost’ (Higgins, Kokotsaki & Coe, 2011).

But the amount of time teaching assistants spend leading interventions and supporting in classrooms does not have equal weight. Leading interventions accounted for only around 40 minutes of their day (Blatchford, Russell & Webster, 2012; Farrell et al, 2010). For the majority of the time (four hours), teaching assistant support in classrooms, where their pedagogical role is less structured, is less precise, largely unmonitored and exposes weaknesses in their subject and pedagogical knowledge.

Therefore, if teaching assistants are to have a pedagogical role, perhaps it should be limited to delivering structured and well-planned interventions for which they are properly trained and prepared, and which teachers ensure link into their class teaching.

- Is it reasonable to expect teaching assistants to be as effective as teachers when teaching pupils, given that they do not have the same levels of training?
- Where is the appropriate boundary between the teaching roles of teachers and teaching assistants?

## Making positive changes in schools

Following the DISS project, there was a clear case for challenging the status quo regarding teaching assistant deployment. So we used this as the basis for a collaborative research project with 10 primary and secondary schools, which addressed the main effects of the widespread and problematic models of teaching assistant employment and usage by developing and evaluating alternative models of deployment and preparedness.

The Effective Deployment of Teaching Assistants (EDTA) project consisted of a year-long intervention (2010–11) in which small groups of teachers and teaching assistants worked through the key components of the preparedness, deployment and practice in a series of three termly trials. We compared practice before and after the introduction of the trials to evaluate whether the intervention led to the more effective use and preparation of teaching assistants.

The evaluation showed that the trials conducted by each school had the overwhelming effect of improving the way school leaders and teachers thought about and deployed teaching assistants. The prevailing refrain from the participants was one of “no going back to the way things were done before”. Whilst the EDTA project did not measure the effects of the changes on pupil outcomes, the findings showed that when schools clearly understood and fully engaged with the main problems associated with the widespread and problematic models of teaching assistant preparation, deployment and practice, the true value of teaching assistants became evident.

Not only did the project trials help raise the status of teaching assistants and greatly improve their confidence, but the process of developing alternative models of teaching assistant deployment prompted teachers to evaluate the impact of their own practice and develop a meaningful understanding of the teaching assistant role.

That the schools involved in the study were able to make positive, and in some cases fundamental, changes to teaching assistant deployment without additional resources is also significant, given the well-known concerns about public spending cuts. We have captured the innovative models, strategies and techniques developed by schools involved in the study in a new book of guidance aimed at senior school leaders, called *Maximising the impact of teaching assistants* (Russell, Webster & Blatchford, 2013).

At a time when budgets are narrowing ever further, the Audit Commission’s conclusion that rethinking the teaching assistant role can help schools to make the best use of the money spent on teaching assistants and teachers, to us, makes good sense.

Taking action to improve day-to-day lesson planning, decision-making about the appropriate roles of adults in the classroom – especially with regard to meeting the needs of pupils with SEND – and a clearer purpose to teaching assistant–pupil interaction is, we feel, likely to not only provide better value for money, but also lead to a demonstrable, positive impact on learning outcomes.

- Any process of change should begin from a position of clarity in terms of how things are presently. How much do you know about the nature and quality of teaching assistant deployment, preparation and interactions with pupils in your school?

For more on our research, visit [www.schoolsupportstaff.net](http://www.schoolsupportstaff.net).

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Triumph Road  
Nottingham NG8 10H  
T 0845 609 0009  
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