The deployment of teaching assistants

DISS project briefing note 3

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This briefing note summarises findings from the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project on the deployment of teaching assistants (TAs). TAs make up around a quarter of the school workforce, but there remains much debate about their appropriate role. There is ambiguity, because in one sense, TAs can help pupils indirectly by assisting the school in order to enhance teaching (e.g. by doing teachers' clerical tasks). But many TAs have a *direct* role supporting pupils (e.g. leading literacy interventions). Here we draw on the DISS data to show what do TAs do, and the effects of their deployment.

Aim of the DISS project

To provide an accurate, systematic and representative description of the deployment of TAs and other support staff in schools

Deployment:	data collection methods and responses

1,670 responses from individual support staff Timelogs (19% of responses from TAs)

observations of teachers, TAs and pupils

Case studies

interaction

65 schools; 591 interviews with school leaders, teachers, support staff and pupils

67 schools; 221 hours of systematic and structured Adult-to-pupil 32 lesson-length transcripts of teacher-to-pupil and TA-to-pupil talk (recorded simultaneously)

Key findings on TA deployment

Timelogs: general activities of TAs

- Support staff recorded which of 91 tasks they did every 20 minutes for one working day in the academic year 2005/06
- · Respondents recorded duration of each task per 20 min slot
- The 91 tasks were grouped into six categories for analysis

Main findings

Observations

- · TAs spent over half their day in a direct pedagogical/ instructional role, supporting and interacting with pupils
- · Administrative support staff spent 6.5 hours a day carrying out admin/communications support for the school

Timelog results for TAs (time spent on tasks)				
Direct learning support for pupils	3.8 hours			
Support teachers/curriculum	1.4 hours			
Direct pastoral support for pupils	0.3 hours			
Indirect support for pupils	0.3 hours			
Support for the school site	0.3 hours			
Admin/comms support for the school	0 hours			
Total	6.1 hours			

Structured observations of TAs and teachers

- 27 TAs in nine primary and nine secondary schools were shadowed for one day each. Over 1,500 observations took place in 140 lessons, both in and away from the classroom
- Predominant activities of teachers and TAs were recorded at five minute intervals, along with the context and task TAsupported pupils carried out

Main findings

- Teachers' interactions with pupils were weighted towards whole class contexts in both primary and secondary schools
- TA-to-pupil interactions occurred at group level (particularly in primary) or individual level (particularly in secondary)

Contout of our north	Primary		Secondary	
Context of support	Teacher	TA	Teacher	TA
One-to-one	2%	19%	11%	63%
Group work	8%	67%	8%	18%
Roving classroom	23%	7%	28%	19%
Leading whole class	67%	7%	52%	0%

Systematic observations of pupils

- 686 pupils in Years 1, 3, 7 & 10 were observed for two days in English, mathematics and science lessons
- 49 schools (27 primary and 22 secondary) were involved
- Over 34,400 observations were made in ten second intervals

Main findings

- · Majority of support provided by TAs, both in and away from the classroom, was for low ability/SEN pupils
- Teachers provided less support to low ability/SEN pupils than TAs
- TA interaction with pupils increased, and teacher interaction decreased, as pupil level of SEN increased

Interaction by pupil level of SEN	Teacher	TA
Non-SEN	55%	27%
School Action	24%	32%
School Action Plus or SEN statement	21%	41%

- Pupils were nine times more likely to have sustained interaction with TAs than with teachers (63% vs. 11%) (e.g. where pupil was the focus of TA attention for more than ten seconds)
- Pupils were six times more likely to be actively involved with TAs than with teachers (44% vs. 5%) (e.g. interaction was begun, responded to and sustained for at least ten seconds)

Pupil role in interaction with adult	Teacher	TA
Pupil focus of adult – short (≤10 seconds)	6%	19%
Pupil focus of adult – long (>10 seconds)	5%	44%
Pupil part of group audience	2%	17%
Pupil part of class audience	85%	19%

Conclusions: TA support can lead to pupil separation

- Pupils tend to miss out on everyday teacher-to-pupil interactions
- TA support is an 'alternative', not 'additional', to teacher input
- TAs are given responsibility for pupil tasks and interventions
- With TAs, pupils do differentiated or different tasks when away from the class, so spend less time in mainstream curriculum coverage

Recommendations: improving TA deployment

- Pupils in most need should not be routinely supported by TAs
- · Teachers to take responsibility for lesson-by-lesson curriculum and pedagogical planning (including interventions) for all pupils

All DISS project research reports and summaries, and briefing notes, are available to download from www.schoolsupportstaff.net/DISS.html The DISS project was funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Welsh Assembly Government