
THE ROLE AND EFFECTS OF TEACHING ASSISTANTS IN ENGLISH PRIMARY SCHOOLS (YEARS 4 TO 6) 2000 - 2003: RESULTS FROM THE CLASS SIZE AND PUPIL ADULT RATIOS (CSPAR) KS2 PROJECT

*Peter Blatchford, Anthony Russell, Paul Bassett, Penelope Brown and Clare Martin
Institute of Education, University of London*

Background

This is part of a longitudinal study looking at the impact of class size and pupil adult ratios on pupil's educational progress. Findings presented here are based on part of the study that was designed to describe the deployment of Teaching Assistants (TAs) in English schools in Key Stage 2 (years 4-6), and in particular their role in classrooms and how this is perceived by the key parties involved - pupils, TAs themselves, teachers and head teachers. It also, on the basis of systematic observations and case studies, explored the effect the presence of TAs had on interactions involving pupils and teachers in the same classrooms. The study also assessed the impact of the presence of TAs on pupil attainments.

Key findings

- The majority of TAs are satisfied or very satisfied with their work.
- The most common reasons for satisfaction with their jobs are a good relationship with the teacher, working as a team and being partners, and satisfaction from progress made by pupils.
- TAs are viewed by teachers as a very welcome feature of classroom life, with positive comments far outweighing negative.
- The TA role in relation to pupils can be seen in two ways: direct, in the sense of interacting directly with pupils, and indirect, in the sense of aiding the teacher. This study found that the TA's role is predominantly a direct interactive one, for example involving helping pupils with reinforcing teaching points, and in this sense their role is predominantly pedagogical. However, many TAs were not specifically trained for this.
- The main way that the direct role of TAs is exercised is through the support of certain children, in particular, those with Special Educational Needs (SEN), low ability or difficult behaviour. Only rarely were TAs used to work with children of all abilities or high ability children.
- This study found little evidence that the presence of TAs, or any characteristic of TAs, such as training or experience, had a measurable statistical effect on pupil attainment in the school class where they were deployed. This is in line with results from the KS1 phase of the project.
- However, results from classroom observations were clear in showing that TAs have an indirect effect on teaching, in the sense that the presence of a TA in the classroom helped maximise pupils' engagement and ensure teachers focus on teaching. With a TA present, pupils had a more active form of interaction with the teacher and there was more individualised teacher attention. This supported teachers' views that TAs are effective in supporting them in this indirect way.
- There were a number of concerns about the time TAs had for planning and feedback, the consistency of deployment of TAs, the training of TAs, the status of TAs, and their professional satisfaction. More attention needs to be paid to what we call the pedagogical role of TAs.

Introduction

This study, which started in 2000, is part of a longitudinal project which aimed to look, for the first time, at the educational effects of class size and pupil adult ratios over the whole of primary school years, i.e. reception, KS1 and KS2. Results from the Reception and KS1 study have been reported previously (e.g. Blatchford, Bassett, Goldstein and Martin, 2003). This research brief reports on the effects of pupil adult ratios, in particular TAs, on pupil attainment, teachers and classroom processes over the school years of KS2 when pupils are aged 7 to 11 years.

The fieldwork for this study was carried out between 2000 and 2003 and it therefore pre-dates recent Government initiatives to increase the levels and training of TAs in schools. The rapid pace of change in this area means that results will not necessarily reflect recent changes and improvements in provision. In particular, it is important to note the current context of the 'National Agreement on Raising Standards and Tackling Workload' signed by Government, employers and school workforce unions in January 2003, which aims to remodel the school workforce and free teachers to focus on teaching and learning. Within this it is envisaged that there will be further increases in the number of support staff in schools and a commitment to developing the roles of support staff in schools.

However, despite these changes there is still debate about the educational consequences of increasing the number of adults in the classroom and the research evidence to date is limited about many aspects of the impact and effectiveness of TAs. Although many studies paint a largely positive picture, for the most part evidence is based on teachers' reports. Lee (2002) has concluded that "relatively few studies provided good evidence on which to base conclusions about impact." And a number of studies show difficulties concerning the deployment of TAs in schools, for example, regarding the boundaries between the roles of teachers and TAs.

Aims

The main aims of this study were to describe the deployment of TAs in English schools in Years 4-6, and in particular their role in classrooms and how this is perceived by the key parties involved - pupils, TAs themselves, teachers and head

teachers. We wanted to establish the extent and ways in which TAs supported pupils directly, thereby having a direct role in their learning, and the extent and ways in which they supported pupils indirectly through administrative and other support for the teacher. We also wanted, on the basis of systematic observations and case studies, to explore the effect the presence of TAs had on interactions involving pupils and teachers in the same classrooms. Finally, we wanted to assess the impact of the presence of TAs on pupil attainments.

The Research Approach

In line with the reception and KS1 study, the KS2 study had several features:

- It was longitudinal, with baseline measures and follow-up of the same pupils from Y4-6.
- It employed a multi-method approach. We collected quantitative information that would enable us to address basic questions on relationships between the presence of TAs, on the one hand, and teacher and pupil behaviour in class and children's school attainments, on the other hand. But we also wanted a more qualitative assessment of the contribution of Teaching Assistants, through the use of methods that captured practitioners' experiences, and through detailed case studies.
- It obtained information every year from the key participants: TAs themselves, teachers and head teachers.
- It employed sophisticated statistical techniques, including multi-level modelling to capture the complex nature of educational data.

Sample

The KS2 phase of the research followed for three years a large cohort of pupils who entered Year 4 during 2000-2001. There were 75 Schools who were part of the KS1 phase of the study, 17 Schools not previously part of the research, but now attended by pupils who were part of the KS1 study, and 110 schools new to the study. Characteristics of the KS2 Sample, in terms of numbers of schools, classes and pupils, are shown in the following table:

Year	Number of Schools	Number of Classes	Number of Pupils
Year 4	202	332	8728
Year 5	173	261	6607
Year 6	153	224	5755

Data collection

There were a number of forms of data collected in the study.

For the whole sample:

1. *Data on class size, pupil-adult ratios and TAs:* this came from (termly) questionnaires completed by teachers.
2. *Data on teacher activities:* information on teacher activities at given times and days were drawn from the same teacher completed questionnaires.
3. *Teacher questionnaires* which asked for information on biographical details and views and experiences on a range of issues, e.g., effect support from TAs has had on teaching and learning.
4. *Head teacher questionnaires* which asked for information on a number of issues including allocation of teachers and TAs to classrooms, and policies on training of TAs.
5. *Teaching Assistant questionnaires* which asked for biographical details, the nature of their work in schools and deployment in classrooms, the extent to which they have allocated time for planning tasks and activities, and feedback and discussion with teachers, and their professional satisfaction.
6. *Assessments of pupils* each year in maths and literacy.
7. *Pupil background details* including age, sex, free school meal entitlement.

For a sub-sample of schools:

8. *Case Studies* of a sub-sample of small and large classes in Y5 and Y6: these aimed to provide a more grounded analysis of factors related to deployment of TAs.
9. *Systematic observations:* the observation component involved a sub sample of small and large Y6 classes.

Results

Positive view

The majority of TAs are satisfied or very satisfied with their work. The most common reason for satisfaction with their jobs is having a good relationship with the teacher, working as a team and being partners, followed by seeing progress made by pupils. TAs are also viewed by teachers as a very welcome feature of classroom life, with

positive comments far outweighing negative. Interviews conducted for the case studies indicated that pupils were generally happy with the support they got from TAs.

The role of TAs

The results in this study point to a clear conclusion about the TA's role in schools. It is predominantly a direct one in relation to pupils, that is, they mainly interacting directly with pupils in classrooms and in this sense their role is predominantly pedagogical. Most TAs in this study were untrained for their pedagogical role and their present status, in terms of conditions of employment, did not reflect the kind of work which they do. The research shows clearly that there is confusion concerning the exact specification of the work of TAs when interacting with pupils. The results also show that the main way that the direct role of TAs is exercised is through the support of certain children, in particular, those with SEN, low ability or difficult behaviour. Only rarely were TAs used to work with children of all abilities, or high ability children.

The effects of Teaching Assistants on pupil learning and attainment

This study was not set up to examine the content or quality of TA and pupil interactions and so it is not possible to say whether or not the longer bouts of interaction, found between TAs and pupils, were different educationally to those between teachers and pupils. Despite the generally positive view of teachers about their TAs, there was little articulation of the academic benefits that pupils gain through working with them. For their part, a number of TAs, when giving reasons for their level of satisfaction, cited reasons stemming from helping pupils make progress and pleasure in working with them. But we were struck with how rarely teachers, head teachers, and TAs addressed specific ways in which this might work and be observed. However, some teachers' comments indicate that reiteration, repetition and 'drilling' is one way that TAs contribute to pupil learning and that this suggests one way that TAs' interactive role in relation to pupils might complement that of the teacher.

The statistical analyses conducted for this study found no evidence that the presence of TAs, or any characteristic of TAs, such as training or experience, had a measurable statistical effect on pupil attainment. This is in line with results from the KS1 stage of the project (Blatchford et al, 2002). Moreover, we found no measurable differences in pupil

attainment between classes where the TA works with individual pupils, groups of pupils or the whole class. However, it is important to note that a limitation of the analyses is that they examined relationships between TAs and the academic outcomes for the whole class, and future research will need to target more precisely the connections between TAs and the specific pupils they support. This, however, will not be an easy task; for example, TAs might be assigned to a particular pupil but sometimes work with other pupils who happen to be in the same group or nearby.

The indirect effect of TAs: benefits to teachers

The systematic observation results were clear in showing an indirect effect, in terms of a beneficial effect on the teacher's interactions with pupils, and the pupils' interactions with teachers. With a TA present in the classroom, pupils had a more active form of interaction with the teacher, initiating contact, responding, or being involved in sustained interaction, pupils were more likely to be the focus of the teacher's attention, that is, there was more individualised teacher attention. Furthermore, we also found more interactions between teacher and pupils involving the task or work at hand. There was also more pupil on task behaviour when working on their own. The presence of TAs therefore helped maximise pupils' and teachers' attention to work. The results also indicated that TAs can have a beneficial effect when there are a large number of children in a class, e.g., in a large class the presence of TAs can increase individualised and sustained teaching between teacher and pupils.

This supports the overwhelming opinion of teachers that TAs are very effective in supporting them in this indirect way. Teachers therefore benefit from being able to focus more of their attention on the rest of the class whilst TAs support the work of specific groups of pupils e.g. those with SEN.

Another way in which the indirect role of TAs on pupils might be manifest is through assistance to teachers in other ways. However, in the study we found that references to support, such as the preparation of materials, administration and classroom organization, are relatively few, again indicating that teachers see the effectiveness of their TAs much more in terms of what they do in pedagogical interactions with pupils.

Other issues

There were a number of other findings which replicate those from the KS1 phase of the research, and which are mirrored in other research. The lack of joint planning and feedback time for TAs means that teachers were not always able to find the time to discuss individual pupils or the selection of follow-up tasks, with TAs. In line with results from KS1, a number of questions were also raised about the consistency of the deployment of TAs in different classrooms. Whilst most TAs are allocated on the basis of the needs of pupils or support for particular subjects, some heads (about 10%) try to share TA time out amongst all classes, in an attempt to be fair to all teachers. This practice raises some questions.

In line with previous research, which does not take account of recent initiatives, training of TAs appeared patchy and take-up not extensive. There appeared to be a clear mismatch between the way TAs are deployed and their professional preparation for their most common role - that is, the support of pupils' learning. Less than half of TAs report having qualifications which are relevant to their work. Head teachers are aware of the changing nature of the TAs role and are clear about the importance of training for TAs. However, head teachers felt that training courses can only make a person a successful TA if they build on the foundation of essential personal aptitudes; training cannot substitute for such features. Some schools seemed to be limiting the opportunity for TAs to take courses outside the school. There was a strong feeling that though their role as supporters of pupils' learning has increased dramatically, their standing and status within schools is lagging far behind.

Conclusion

This study found that the TA's role predominantly involves face-to-face direct interactions with pupils, often those pupils in most need. This was the main way that they provided support for teachers. The study showed a mainly positive view about the TAs contribution, from teachers, head teachers, pupils and TAs themselves, but it also raised some concerns about their preparation for the direct interactive role, in terms of training and qualifications, consistency of deployment between classrooms, and time for planning and feedback. This study found little quantitative evidence that the presence of TAs, or any characteristic of TAs, such as training or experience, had a measurable effect on pupil attainment in the school class where they were deployed. However, results were clear in showing that TAs have an indirect effect on teaching, in the sense that the presence of a

TA in the classroom helped maximise pupils' and teachers' attention to work. With a TA present, pupils had a more active form of interaction with the teacher and there was more individualised teacher attention. This supported teachers' views that TAs are effective in supporting them in this way.

Overall, we conclude that even more precise studies are needed that address the impact of TAs on the specific pupils they support, and that more attention needs to be paid to what we call the pedagogical role of TAs. This is important in order that we can get more insight into effective interactions between TAs and pupils and ways in which TAs can successfully augment and support the teacher's contribution. The Institute of Education, University of London, were commissioned earlier this year, by DfES, to explore some of these issues further.

Additional Information

Copies of the full report (RR605) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

Cheques should be made payable to "DfES Priced Publications".

Copies of this Research Brief (RB605) are available free of charge from the above address (Tel: 0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at www.dfes.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Rebecca Rylatt, 6C, DfES, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.

Email: Rebecca.rylatt@dfes.gsi.gov.uk

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education and Skills